which he squirts water (or turpentine, for oil-based paint) at the top edge of the canvas and lets it trickle down, taking paint with it and creating a vertical line on the surface. “I use water to paint water,” he explains. Generally, he fills the frame with many parallel drips that, depending on the subject, can suggest raindrops on a window, wooden blinds, hanging vegetation, tree trunks, or the fabric of silk saris. His technique differs from the drippings of “action painter” Jackson Pollock, whose work “doesn’t speak to me,” Oommen says. Instead, he cites the influence of the celebrated British artist Sir Howard Hodgkins, who “paints feelings. That’s very tough to do,” says Oommen. “I tried to see if I could paint my feelings. I went back to the things I remember most—my first girlfriend, first kiss, first love. You start with a feeling, and when the feeling comes back to you by looking at the painting, the painting is finished.”

All the paintings in the Vladivostok show are two feet square; he has recently experimented with printing some pictures on metal sheets, using a giclée process—making ink-jet prints from a digital source—and mounting them with magnets. He can even print different works on both sides of the metal. Images on metal might, in the future, prove an economical way to ship and display art, he notes: just to pack, ship, insure, and shepherd his paintings through customs to Vladivostok cost $10,000.

Oommen says he spends half his time lately on the business end of art. (His works typically sell for $3,000 to $4,000.) He is used to budgets. Trained in both architecture and urban design, he supervised much of the construction across the Harvard campus in the past few decades (“from fundraising to ribbon cutting”). Including the Murr Center, the Bright Hockey Center, and the Tanner Fountain, with all its boulders, in front of the Science Center.

As a young architecture student in India, he once met Le Corbusier, who designed much of the city of Chandigarh, and the great architect remarked, “You’re a student? You should always be a student.” And, Oommen says, “I’ve always been a student after that. It’s kept me young, kept me open to new techniques.” Indeed, for 20 years he has studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where a fellow student once suggested a way to stop his drips from running off the bottom edge of the canvas: “Have you tried shaving cream? It absorbs all the color and then it evaporates.” Oommen has used the method ever since: “At the school, I’m known as the guy with shaving cream and a beard.”

Afropolitans
Musical “food for the soul”

I

n their version of the classic West African song, “Sweet Mother,” the band Soulfège sings in English, Jamaican patois, and the African languages Ga and Twi in one verse. “There are very few people around who will understand everything said in that verse,” says Soulfège co-founder Derrick N. “DNA” Ashong ’97. “But everyone can kind of feel the joy and vibe and the love in it.” Indeed, last January the band (www.soulfege.com) played in Laramie, Wyoming—about as far from Ashong’s Ghanaian roots as you can get. Yet “the kids were bobbing their heads...
T. Berry Brazelton, clinical professor of pediatrics emeritus, has been the guide for recent generations who find themselves in possession of newborns in the process of growing up. Preparing for his ninetieth birthday, in May 2008, colleagues began assembling a guide to the research frontiers Brazelton’s work had opened. The result, 

The Neonatal Behavioral Assessment Scale (1973), often referred to as the Brazelton scale, forever changed the way we see, think about, and understand babies. In the sense of a true Kuhnian revolution, the data, the facts that came to be known from research with the Brazelton scale, no longer fit the existing paradigm and we could no longer view the baby as a tabula rasa. There are literally hundreds of studies that have used the Brazelton scale to document the extraordinary behavioral repertoire of the newborn, the baby as part of an interactive process, and the baby with self-regulatory capacities.

One key contribution that came out of this work was the study of individual differences in newborn behavior. In Infants and Mothers (1969), Brazelton described three different kinds of babies: “quiet,” “active,” and “middle of the road.” These differences were described as “constitutional” and Brazelton pointed out that parents need to learn to adjust to these differences, thus opening the door to the idea that newborn infant behavior affects parenting. . . . The fact that there are individual differences at birth also helped shatter the myth of the baby as tabula rasa. But it did more than that because the research also showed that these individual differences shape the mother-infant reaction. So the infant emerges as shaping his or her own development and this phenomenon can be observed all over the world. Showing that these individual differences affect parenting—that they alter the caregiving environment—may very well have been the coup de grâce that cemented the paradigm shift.

The Brazelton scale changed the field of temperament. Use of the term “temperament” had previously been reserved for older infants and children. With the advent of the Brazelton scale, temperament could now be described along the lines of individual differences in newborn behavior. The “quiet” baby became the child with “easy” temperament. Also, most temperament researchers claimed that temperament was biologically based. The fact that temperament could now be described in the newborn, before postnatal environmental factors came into play, gave strong support to the biological basis of temperament. In addition, temperament is thought of as what later becomes personality in the older child. So by extension, the newborn was seen as entering the world with a personality. A far cry from the tabula rasa!
doctoral program in ethnomusicology for four years, but eventually chose to make music rather than study it.

Now based in Los Angeles, Ashong also does a good deal of public speaking as a committed advocate for social change who worked for the Obama campaign. Soulfege’s *Take Back the Mic* is not only a CD but a project that aims to “teach a new generation to speak for itself, with art and technology,” Ashong explains. “Similar issues of identity and expression, and feeling empowered to have an impact on things, are being felt by kids around the world.” The band conveys, according to VanityFair.com, “a spirit of promise and hope and harmony, a spirit that denies dissonance. Soulfege lets us dream such sweet dreams, in vibrant colors.”

Ashong puts it this way: “Our music is naturally calibrated to get in you, to pass seamlessly through the pores of the human spirit. A lot of music is negative, not aspirational, not beautiful. It should be flavorful, and express things that encompass the flavor of human life. People say, ‘The world has all these issues, all these problems—who’s going to come and fix them?’ Nobody’s coming to save you; it is for you to save yourself. In order to do so, you’ve got to have two things. One, the belief that you have the power to save yourself, and two, the understanding that you have something worth saving. These are not necessarily things you hear me say directly in my music, but that’s the philosophy that underpins what I’m doing. So whenever we create something, it’s designed to give the individual food for the soul. When you come to a Soulfege concert, even if you don’t listen to a single lyric—maybe you just dance your ass off—when you go home, you should feel better than when you came in. And if you do, I think I did my job.”

—CRAIG LAMBERT