

Christine Stevens: Drumming for Health

By Rick Mattingly

Christine Stevens practices what she preaches. “I start my day with a drum,” she says. “I drum before my mind wakes up and gets busy. It’s a meditation that puts me in touch with my own creativity. I’m not playing any pattern I’ve learned; I’m improvising. I often chant to the drum or sing songs that I’ve learned from my teachers from world cultural sacred music traditions. The practice puts me in touch with the lineage of sacred drumming.”



PHOTO BY CONSTANTINE AMZAS

For Stevens, drumming is not just a morning exercise, nor does she drum just for the spiritual and meditational benefits. “The drum is part of my whole life,” Christine says. “I travel with my drum. If I’m upset, I play my drum. If I’m joyful, I play my drum. I get a workout when I play the drum and facilitate, so it’s a big part of my personal health journey.”

Stevens holds masters degrees in social work and music therapy. She is author of *Music Medicine*, *The Healing Drum Kit*, and *The Art and Heart of Drum Circles*, she is featured in the DVD *Discover the Gift*, and is the founder of UpBeat Drum Circles. She has trained over 2,000 facilitators from more than twenty-five countries in the Remo *HealthRHYTHMS*™ program. Christine has worked with many Fortune 500 companies, survivors of Katrina, and students at Ground Zero, and she led the first drum-circle training in a war zone in northern Iraq.

But she wasn’t trained as a drummer. “I don’t think I chose this path; it really chose me,” she explains. “I was a trained saxophonist and piano player. One day in 1992 I was walking towards a seminar at a music therapy conference, and on the way I heard drumming. I was pulled into the rhythm and entered the class. Turns out it was the first training class that Arthur Hull ever taught, and right away I just ‘got it.’ I became very excited about the idea and the application of drumming as such an immediate tool of

engagement. So I brought it back to my music therapy practice. I had been playing saxophone with a Santana cover band, so I had already been exposed to a lot of percussion and had access to percussion instruments.”

Very soon, however, she changed her focus to a different area. “I moved from clinical music therapy—treating psychiatric patients and drug and alcohol addictions—to the area we call ‘wellness,’” she explains. “Based on his beliefs in the application of drumming as a lifestyle tool, in 2000, Remo Belli hired me and launched the first music therapy and wellness division inside a drum manufacturer. From there I expanded into *HealthRHYTHMS* training and even into global peacemaking with the power of drumming as a tool for wellness.”

Christine says that the level of credibility for using drums as tools for wellness has grown significantly over the past several years. “We’ve gone from ‘drum circle’ as a term that conjures up images like hippies, the beach, and tie-dyed clothes to having drum circles in medical centers like Kaiser Permanente and universities like Arizona State University, where the first *HealthRHYTHMS* college course is now taught by Frank Thompson. Since the ground-breaking study was first published by Dr. Barry Bittman and percussionist/music therapist Mike Marcinetti on group drumming and immune system improvement, there have been five more studies published in peer-reviewed medical journals. Dr.



PHOTO BY HELENE BARBARA

The Art and Heart of Drum Circles DVD

Bittman and his team have demonstrated significant evidence of group drumming for social emotional health, reducing employee burnout, and reducing anger in adolescents, to name a few. There is an unprecedented scientific foundation that speaks in a credible way to why and how drumming is a tool for wellness. We can now credibly say that we have created evidence-based applications of drum circles. Having that level of credibility has created a very big shift.

“So in terms of research trends, we are now at a launching pad for a greater proliferation of group drumming,” Stevens continues. “It used to be that we knocked on doors to get people interested in this; now people are knocking on *our* doors. I see a time coming—and it has already started—when medical centers and institutions will be Googling to find a trained facilitator in their area.”

Drumming has not always been viewed as a wellness tool, or even as a particularly big part of music therapy. Even today, the only exposure many college music-therapy majors receive is the same percussion methods class that is designed for music-education majors.

“My music therapy training involved a four-year degree and a six-month internship,” Stevens explains. “During that time I had almost no exposure to hand drumming. We were required to take a semester of class percussion, which had to do with sticking techniques, and that was it. Even now, most of the academic institutions are based on classical percussion, which is great training in terms of rhythmic foundation, but trends are changing and the ideas of world percussion are slowly integrating and becoming more available. I hope that academic percussion programs and music therapy programs will more fully embrace hand drumming, world percussion, and drum circles.”

“I have seen a big revolution in the music therapy profession,” she says. “Ten years ago, there would maybe be one workshop on drumming at a music therapy convention; now, there is one dur-



ing every breakout session. There has been such a proliferation of knowledge of how drumming is an important tool for a music therapist.”

Stevens is quick to point out that the use of drum circles for health and wellness is different than those used for recreation. “This is the specific application of group drumming for health and therapy,” she stresses. “Music therapy is defined as ‘music for a non-musical outcome,’ so in that tone I would say that I am involved with ‘drumming for a non-performance outcome.’”

“The drum awakens people,” Christine says. “It engages people. It creates such a common, equal playing field. As a music therapist, I see people who typically are resistant get pulled into the rhythm without much work on my part. Rhythm creates a magnetic force that engages people. So the excitement, the immediacy, the cultural application of it—and now the credible scientific documentation—makes drum circle facilitation an important, essential skill.”

“Wellness is defined as ‘the active pursuit of health,’” Stevens adds. “When we say ‘health care,’ it doesn’t just mean a hospital. It’s how people care for their health—mind, body, and spirit: holistic health. Drumming has an application for prevention, treatment, and after-care. The exciting thing about drumming in health and wellness is that it’s not happening in one, standard-formula way. It’s very different depending on the community, the health-care institution, the specific needs, the facilitator, and the local schools and institutions. It could be a facilitator running a group in a community that advertises for a health program. It could be a four-week employee wellness program at a hospital. Sometimes people pay individually; sometimes it’s part of people’s treatment that is provided by their health insurance through the offerings of their medical center. I’m seeing a great flowering of a variety of different ways this is being delivered.”

“The five components of a program are the same, yet the application is unique,” Christine explains. “The five components are: a trained facilitator, a location to hold it, the instruments, a clearly defined intention based upon the purpose and need, and the participants, which is the population you are going to serve. In *HealthRHYTHMS* we call it creating the perfect fit—making sure that it’s a collaboration that serves the community.”

Stevens says that the instruments Remo has created have been

5 Research Findings on Group Drumming

1. Group drumming strengthens immune system: Composite Effects of Group Drumming Music Therapy on Modulation of Neuroendocrine-Immune Parameters in Normal Subjects (Bittman et al, 2001).
2. Group drumming reduces employee burnout: Recreational Music-Making: A Cost-Effective Group Interdisciplinary Strategy for Reducing Burnout and Improving Mood States in Long-Term Care Workers (Bittman et al, 2003).
3. Group drumming reduces nursing student burnout: Recreational Music Making: An Integrative Group Intervention for Reducing Burnout and Improving Mood States in First-Year Associate Degree Nursing Students: Insights and Economic Impact (Bittman et al, 2004).
4. Group drumming strengthens immune system in Japanese employees: Recreational Music Making Modulates Natural Killer Cell Activity, Cytokines, and Mood States in Corporate Employees (Wachi, Bittman et al, 2007).
5. Group drumming reduces instrumental anger in adolescents: Creative Musical Expression as a Catalyst for Quality of Life Improvement in Inner-city Adolescents Places in a Court-referred Residential Treatment Program (Bittman et al, 2009).

vital to the success of drumming programs related to health and wellness. “Remo makes instruments that are lightweight, they sound good, and you can sterilize them—which is *really* important to the medical world,” she says.

Christine says that the concept of drumming for meditation, spirituality, and health is on the rise and becoming more and more accepted. “Just like people think of diet and exercise as health-promoting strategies, people are going to begin to drum,” she predicts. “More people will be thinking such things as, ‘I have to drum because it’s healthy; I have to wake up this morning and play my drum; I’m going to get together with my family tonight and play drums.’ Drumming is starting to proliferate as a societal health-promoting strategy.”

In her book *Music Medicine: The Science and Spirit of Healing Yourself with Sound*, Stevens devotes a chapter to rhythm. In researching that chapter, she discovered something interesting. “I found that it’s not what rhythm *does* for us that’s so important, it’s what it *undoes*. We tend to overlook the power of rhythm and drumming as a tool to *undo* stress. It *undoes* the sense of separation. It *undoes* some of the body’s stress responses. When I looked at the research, I found two big trends that indicate that our bodies are really wired for rhythm. Entrainment studies by Dr. Michael Thaut at Colorado State University, where I received my masters degree, showed that an external rhythm cue in a metronome or embedded in music immediately improves the walking patterns of Parkinson’s patients or individuals who’ve had a stroke and who are limping or unbalanced in their gait. And these people are not putting forth any effort; they are just walking to the beat in the music. It’s because of the connection of rhythm to the body. The rhythm seems to immediately *undo* the negative effects of the disorder.



PHOTO BY CONSTANTINE ALATZAS

Christine in Iraq

“Another interesting trend is in the area of fitness research. Studies have shown that we actually put out 15 percent less effort when we exercise to rhythm that matches our movement. I’d like to have 15 percent more energy! Rhythm inspires people’s bodies to move, so we have that on our side.

“One of the biggest advantages of rhythm is the way we are wired as rhythmical beings. We are polyrhythmic human beings—*humana rhythmica*. We have five rhythms: the circadian rhythm, which is our sleeping/waking cycle; the pulmonary rhythm, our breathing; the cardiac rhythm, which is our heartbeat; the brain rhythm, referred to as alpha, delta, theta, and beta waves; and the

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hormonal rhythms, seen in women's menstrual cycles. We have all these rhythms in us. So it's a natural connection of rhythm and the body."

Christine cites another research trend that involves the spiritual tradition of the drum as a tool for prayer, personal growth, and transformation. "This gets into what I did in Iraq and how amazing it was to see people in a war zone who were potential enemies and who didn't even speak the same language come together and

drum together, and actually create relationships through that process. The drum shows up when people are transforming. In 2007, I led a team to do the first-ever drum-circle training in a war zone in northern Iraq. NAMM, Remo, and the Rex Foundation, which is the foundation of the Grateful Dead, supported the project. The goal was to develop a specific protocol and application of drum circle techniques to create peace building and conflict resolution. And it was successful! The 40 people we trained from across Iraq rated the experience at a 92-percent satisfaction level, which is unheard of for conflicting groups with different languages to come together like that. Individuals shared things like, 'It was the first time I could let go of my grief,' 'Drumming helps you find your hope,' and 'It was the best five days of my life.' The real result is that we started drum circles in Kurdistan Save the Children youth-activity centers and in a children's rehabilitation center.

"The drum circles had to be adapted to the cultural music form of Arabic music," she explains. "We began with a *taxim*—a rubato solo played on a melodic instrument or sung. Then we featured one individual starting a rhythm. This led to an invitation for the group to join and improvise together, led by a facilitator within the group. It concluded with a powerful stop cut and an honoring of the silence that follows the music."

Stevens says she learned two important things from that experience. "Words communicate thoughts, and rhythm communicates energy," she explains. "Thoughts and words can be confusing and lead to arguments, but when you create sound and rhythm to-

Facilitating Drum Circles with Non-Drummers

Percussionists whose first training in facilitating a drum circle comes at a PASIC or an MENC convention generally come away confident that they are ready to lead a drum circle. The problem is, everyone at PASIC or the MENC conference is a musician, but when you get out in the real world—whether it's in a school, a wellness center, a retirement home, or whatever—most of the people will have never touched a drum before or had any experience playing music, so the result can resemble the sound of someone dumping a large sack of potatoes down a flight of stairs—plenty of sound but no "groove."

"A drum teacher will want to correct people who are playing off the beat," Christine Stevens says. "That would make total, logical sense. You've developed a reflex. But a *facilitator* has to learn to override that reflex. In a health situation, the number-one goal is participation, and when you correct someone's playing, that person feels rejected and disempowered. So you have to develop a new archetype in which the facilitator is more of a coach than a critic—more of an encouraging voice. You can come in *overpowering* or *empowering*. If you come in as the showoff drummer, you're going to overpower your group. But if you're *empowering* your group, you're going to hold back your chops in order to allow them to show theirs. So the word 'facilitator' is great because it means 'to make it easy,' not difficult, for people. The drum is the tool but it's not the outcome. The outcome is transformation, empowerment, feeling joy, promoting health, building community. We must keep that in mind."

Following are Christine's guidelines for facilitating a drum circle made up of non-drummers, and for making the transition from performer to facilitator.

1. Know your audience and your intention. Keep their needs in mind.
2. Don't start with drums. There's so much creativity we can do without even passing out drums. Start with the rhythm of breathing or do some body percussion. Lead the group in stretching.
3. Don't teach and don't count "1 e & a 2 e & a..." Use vocal drum syllables and call-and-response to teach rhythms instead of counting.
4. Use rumbles (drum rolls) and drum games to engage people and gear them up towards ensemble playing and self-expression that is encouraging and empowering.
5. Play down. Become a REformer instead of a PERformer. Your great drumming can intimidate participants and cause them to hold back.
6. Maintain a playful demeanor. Be a coach, not a critic.
7. Don't single anybody out. Think of creative ways to keep the beat going. When someone can't keep a beat, have everyone do a rumble. When someone is loudly playing off the beat on a bell, have everyone trade instruments. When someone can't play a drum, give that person a rainstick or wind chimes—an ambient percussion instrument—so they feel at ease.
8. If the beat falls apart, use a rumble, stop cut, and start a new groove. Help the group entrain by using a strong beat keeper or playing the bass drum rhythm yourself.
9. Ask for comments along the way. Involve their feedback in your program. Validate their comments. Remember, there is no wrong comment and no wrong note.
10. Check in. Build in moments of asking the group how they feel. It's music to their ears! This is the non-musical outcome. This is the non-performance goal. Celebrate the responses!

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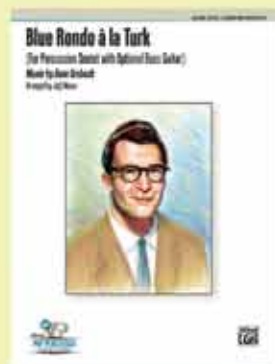
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gether, it creates sacred space. The advantage of the drum is that anyone can do it. So we could bring together people in northern Iraq who had had drum training and were extraordinary percussionists who played these wonderful Kurdish and Arabic rhythms, but we also had people who had never touched a drum before, and they were all part of our training. What's really important in peace making is having everyone feel included and co-creating art together."

One of Christine's favorite memories from the project involved a "conversation" she had with one of the participants. "There was a young man who came to the training, who spoke Kurdish," she recalls. "He ran into me in the hallway and wanted to talk to me, but there were no translators in sight. So he said, 'Doom, doom, taka taka doom.' And we started talking to each other using vocal and body percussion in a rhythm dialogue without words; we were jamming! When I got home from Iraq, he messaged me on Yahoo Instant Messenger, and said, 'Doom, doom, taka doom doom,' and I messaged back, 'Doom doom [space] doom doom,' like a heart-beat, and he got it! So I wonder why are we not doing more of this world-wide for peace-making? This is what I call 'performers becoming reformers.'"

Stevens stresses that music alone is not the answer to peace building and conflict resolution. "We included dialog groups in the protocol," she explains. "We always asked people to share their feelings, in their native language. I'm not trying to send a message that just playing drums together makes peace. There is a lot that goes into the process. But in my twenty-five years as a music therapist, drumming offers *the* most immediate, successful, engaging access to music making."

One of the many benefits Stevens has seen from the use of drumming to promote wellness is that more women are getting involved with drums. "When you talk about wellness, the primary consumer is female," Christine says. "This requires a different style of delivery—a more feminine-empowering perspective. Since I published *The Healing Drum Kit* in 2005, it has sold over 25,000 copies—not many of them in music stores. It sells in yoga stores, in Whole Foods—it was the first drum ever sold in a grocery store. So when you talk about the commerce of health-related

drumming, it's a very successful product, just like a yoga kit or a Pilates kit; there is a drum kit, and it's being bought primarily by women who are interested in their health and well being.

"When I was growing up, I never touched a drum during my whole childhood," Stevens recalls. "It's my hope that kids these days are having a different experience of music as they are growing up, like the World Music Drumming programs developed by Will Schmid that are now in 20,000 schools. Many school counselors are using drumming in their work. People are going to get exposed to the drum one way or another. Statistics show that only 15 percent of drummers are women, which is not the percentage of girls who are in schools. So it's exciting to me to see all these girls and women going to drum circles. It's definitely a growing trend."

Many of the people using drumming as a wellness tool are, like Stevens, licensed music therapists. But Christine says that as the awareness of how drumming can be used for health and wellness grows, opportunities for drummers and drum teachers who are not music therapists are also growing. "We call this field *Rhythmology*. We have percussionists, therapists, teachers, researchers, and medical professionals, so it's a very interesting interdisciplinary field," she says, "and that's what it takes to grow something



On stage at the Sounds True Wake Up Festival



HealthRHYTHMS group drum circle at Planetree Medical Conference

in this new millennium. It's about interdisciplinary collaboration. Drumming to create wellness and health application is the leading edge of where drum circles have brought us.

"This has great vocational potential for anyone who is a percussionist and who has an interest in human services and wellness," Stevens continues. "If you've got the drum skills and you have a desire to serve and help people, this is a great career. In the Remo HealthRHYTHMS program, we're hearing more and more from people who have quit their 'day job' to do this full time. They go to senior centers or they offer it through their church or their community.

"We are in a time of great health crisis in America. Diabetes is on the rise. We have a whole health-care reform happening, and people are interested in evidence-based strategies for wellness. We have lots of hospitals and lots of people who need health-promoting strategies. We have the many veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and medical professionals are looking for ways to improve people's lives with drumming. At Lewis & Clark Community College, an associate professor named Peter Hussey gives drumming workshops using HealthRHYTHMS to the occupational therapy department every semester. What a great collaboration of a percussion and therapy program. Given our recent problems with school violence in America, schools are looking for programs to help reduce school tension, and they are embracing ideas like group drumming. So it's a viable career option."

RESOURCES

Websites

Christine Stevens' UpBeat Drum Circles: <http://ubdrumcircles.com>
 Remo HealthRHYTHMS program: <http://www.remo.com/portal/hr/index.html>
 10 tips on how to facilitate a drum circle: www.ubdrumcircles.com/article_yourown.html

Video links

Highlights on how to facilitate a drum circle: www.youtube.com/watch?v=0bsBiRjgd2M
 Highlights of Christine Stevens' career: www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4m90PHX4wE
 Beat for Peace, highlights of project in Iraq: www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRiNMGdXWkE
 PBS *Healing Quest* TV show with Olivia Newton John, "Drumming for Healing": www.youtube.com/watch?v=PL3xA4uk-NM
 Information on Stevens' book *Music Medicine*: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUGTmeDh8Es
 How to do a drum massage: www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKx4rzMUUQc

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