

# ARTHUR HULL AND THE DRUM CIRCLE EXPERIENCE

BY RICK MATTINGLY

Arthur Hull has been called the father of the modern-day community drum circle movement. He is a facilitation trainer, motivational speaker, experiential keynote presenter, and a master at facilitating groups of people through music and rhythm. Through his Village Music Circles he has trained thousands of drum circle facilitators, and he has led rhythm-based team building and leadership events for such organizations as Apple Computer, Silicon Graphics, Microsoft, The Wall Street Journal, Sony, and Toyota, among many others.

When Arthur began leading drum circles and training facilitators over 20 years ago, many people thought drum circles would prove to be just another passing fad. But in addition to the recreational and community-building aspects of drum circles, they have also proven to be of benefit to music therapists working with Alzheimer's patients and the well-elderly population, with counselors working with kids at risk, with corporations doing team-building activities, in schools, and in a variety of other ways.

"This group drumming phenomena has expanded into everything from pre-natal to hospice,

and everything in between," Hull says. "Twenty years ago, there certainly were people in the indus-

try who thought it was a fad. But Remo Belli saw that it was worth investing time and energy into. He



supported a lot of people in that community, and I was one of them. He got me out there internationally.”

Indeed, drumming is happening around the world, and more world-drumming influences are finding their way into typical American drum circles.

“West African djembe drumming has been the entry-level, culturally specific drumming experience for a lot of people,” Hull says. “Of course, djembes are the loudest and some of the most powerful drums. But a lot of other kinds of culturally specific drumming are coming into our community. Congolese drumming is becoming big, the Brazilian samba and batucada have been around for a long time and have a large community, Shona marimba music from Zimbabwe is becoming more popular, Afro-Cuban percussion is alive and well, and Haitian vodun drumming is becoming popular, as well as bugarabu drumming from Mali, which uses drums that look a little like djembes called bugarabus. There is a culturally specific style of drumming that goes along with that, which is now starting to be recognized and taught in the United States.

“You’re talking to a guy who spends more time outside the United States than in it,” Arthur adds. “Between now and PASIC [Percussive Arts Society International Convention] in November, I will have been in about 15 countries doing mostly drum facilitation workshops. So I’m seeing the world market rather than just the

U.S. market. There is a movement within the drum circle community that is bringing in small-timbre instruments like frame drums, doumbeks, and talking drums, which are small drums that can’t compete with a drum circle that has a hundred djembes in it. But a good drum circle facilitator is facilitating dynamics and listening so that everyone gets a chance to hear and be a part of the experience, whether you have a loud drum or a soft drum. The Remo Recreation Center has a regular Tuesday night community drum circle where you get 120–150 people. Then on Thursday night they have “Groove Lounge” for deep listening. That’s the kind of drumming that I’m finding internationally. That kind of development, new within the last five years, has been growing in the international community and in

the American community. You will find specific drum circles that are advertised as ‘deep listening, small-drum, groove experiences.’”

That very experience takes place at PASIC where, in addition to the regular late-night drum circles, there is a “Rhythm Lounge” in which people bring instruments on the softer side of the sound spectrum. It’s not as loud, but the rhythmic drive is often just as intense.

“We’ve gone through a learning process at PAS, and we are focusing more and more on what we, as a professional percussion organization, can do to serve people who are generating and developing that job description called a ‘rhythm-event facilitator,’” Hull says. “When you become a facilitator, all of a sudden you find yourself in many kinds of situations that you need to

 Tap to play video



Basic drum circle facilitation techniques.

From the DVD *Drum Circle Facilitation* by Arthur Hull.

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educate yourself about and that go above and beyond the ability to do stop cuts and tell people ‘1, 2, let’s all play!’ It takes a deep kind of listening and understanding of the constituency that you’re serving, and it takes more expertise than just being a good drummer and a good facilitator with charisma.

“Bringing everyone to the ‘now’ is the key to a successful rhythm-based event. It doesn’t even have to be drumming—everyone can be playing shakers— and it is not necessarily about making the best music you can with this group of people in front of you. It might be about getting the people in the circle to consciously participate, expanding their attention, creating a space for them to explore and express their rhythmical spirit without judgment—without thinking that they have to perform for somebody.”

As popular as drum circles have become around the world, many people have misconceptions about what a “drum circle” really is. Part of the problem is that

so many different types of events are labeled as drum circles—and some of them have little to do with drumming or music.

“Some people’s general concept of a drum circle is what they see on the news,” Hull says. “And what gets on the news is stories about free-form, anarchist drum circles causing a police riot. A lot of people don’t even use the term ‘drum circle’ any more because of the misconceptions of what a drum circle is—a bunch of hippies and anarchists in the park, not family friendly, possibly with drugs being consumed. As a result, many people in our community use the term ‘facilitated rhythm-based event’ instead of ‘drum circle.’

“A facilitated event is not that much different than a free-form event,” Hull explains. “You are still playing in-the-moment music; the facilitator is not telling you what to play. It’s not about ‘We’re going to do “Kuku” from West Africa, and here are the parts you are going to play.’ It’s about encouraging people to share their rhythmical spirit in

such a way that they can freely explore and express it, and do improvisation in such a way that if they make a mistake, it’s okay. But it is facilitated by someone who wants to keep a safe space for free-form expression, and at the same time listen to the whole group’s energy and help it get to where it wants to go. There is still a ‘hippy thunder drumming’ aspect, except that we bring the volume down so there is listening involved. It’s free form in the sense that you can play what you want, but instead of just banging on a drum, you also listen to the people around you, and when you make space for other people’s creativity, you will find space for your own. So the difference between a facilitated rhythm-based event and an anarchist drum circle is small, but the result is big.”

Hull stresses that a good facilitator is not running a drum circle the way an educator would conduct a percussion class. “We call it ‘teaching without teaching,’” Hull explains. “It’s about leading a bunch of individuals to group consciousness: *Wow, we’re playing together; it’s not me, it’s us; it’s not ‘How am I doing?’ but ‘How are we doing?’* Then the facilitator moves the group by using interactive, experiential training.

“Here’s an example of how a good facilitator increases awareness of the low drums,” Hull says. “Let’s say a grandma brings her grandson to a facilitated community drum circle. She doesn’t really want to be there; it’s just a bunch of noise to her. But she gets handed a drum and starts playing,



and she happens to be hitting a low drum with a beater. At some point the facilitator stops everyone in the group except the low drums, and everyone is able to hear the low drum song inside that circle. And grandma finds out that she's part of an interactive dialog among all the other low drummers in the circle. She experiences this while she's playing. The facilitator counts the rest of the group back in, and the music improves because everyone got to listen to the foundation, and grandma will never *not* hear the low-drum song again during that program.

"You can take the exact same scenario, but this time have grandma play a shaker. Everyone is making a joyful noise while the facilitator is scoping out the low drums. Once again the facilitator stops everyone but the low drums. Grandma stops shaking her shaker, and she hears this low-drum song. The facilitator calls the group back in, and she plays her shaker again, but now she is hearing the low drums. This is 'teaching without teaching'—creating an experiential moment that teaches the whole group. The facilitator doesn't say, 'Here are the low drums, and you should listen to them because they are the foundation of the music we are going to make.' All the facilitator has to do is showcase the low drums and let everyone have the experience of discovering them.

"That's just one experience that educates the group about itself—about the makeup of the group, the timbres of the group, the pitches of the group, the drum

types of the group. When the group members become conscious of all these aspects, it relieves the facilitator of the responsibility of holding it all together. Because that's what people in a drum circle want to do: play with each other and create something magic; something that's in the moment; something that never stops evolving. So by 'teaching without teaching,' you move the group from being a bunch of individuals to an exciting, dynamic, interactive, orchestral, musical drum circle. A group consciousness is created through the magic of the music.

"The most important piece is that the facilitators aren't standing in the middle of the circle the whole time," Hull emphasizes. "They come in when the group needs them and leave when the group doesn't. They do what they need to do to adjust the group's music, and then they get out of the way, because the main objective of these people coming together is to share rhythmical spirit, not be told what to do."

This year at PASIC in Indianapolis (Nov. 19–22), Arthur will be presenting a clinic on drum circle games. Percussionists, music educators, and anyone seeking to use rhythm-based activities to engage people in the art of music making using percussion instruments will have an opportunity to learn interactive rhythm games and activities applicable to a wide range of populations.

In addition, on Sunday after PASIC (Nov. 23), Arthur will conduct a drum circle facilitation workshop

in which he will take participants through seven basic protocols that will empower them to guide a group of people in a drum circle event. The workshop will include many of the exercises used in Arthur's Village Music Circle drum circle facilitators training programs.

"Drumming is getting hard to miss," Arthur says. "If you Google 'facilitated drum circle,' you're going to get plastered with all kinds of variations of what that is and what it can be and what some people think it shouldn't be. It's a wonderful debate that's part of the evolution of the professional facilitator community, where we are trying to make, with the help of PAS, facilitated rhythm-based events a profession, not just a free-for-all. It's no longer a phenomena or a fad. This is an international cultural revolution. It's not going to stop because the power of rhythm and music making in a group can satisfy the needs of almost any person or group on the planet. It's a tool for unity, building community, and for making the world a better place one beat at a time."

#### **MORE INFO:**

Arthur Hull's website: [www.drum-circle.com](http://www.drum-circle.com)

Arthur Hull drum circle videos: <http://www.coolmojito.com/2628138>

Information about PASIC 2014: [www.pas.org](http://www.pas.org)

Information about the Drum Circle Facilitation Workshop: <http://www.pas.org/PASIC/drumcircleworkshop.aspx> **RS**