

# State of the Art of Interactive Drumming

By Robert J. Damm

**T**he PAS Interactive Drumming Committee (IDC) sponsored a panel discussion on the state of the art of drum circles at PASIC 2022. Robert J. Damm moderated the panel, which consisted of Jim Boneau, puck glass, Arthur Hull, and K. Michelle “Yeshima” Lewis. “Drum Circles Suck!” was the provocative title for the session in which panelists were confronted head-on with questions generated from negative press about drum circles. While these negative comments included some valid criticism, they also reflected some misconceptions and stereotypes. The panelists reacted to negative comments about drum circles and candidly discussed negative experiences they have had in drum circles.

This dialogue led to reflections on how to facilitate more successful interactive drumming events and illuminating perspectives on best practices to foster musicality and positive social interaction. Highlights from the session are shared below.

**Jim Boneau:** Certainly, I’ve had negative experiences. I don’t go through life thinking I’m not going to have negative experiences. That attitude helped me learn that I want to move drum circles towards musicality. I don’t have an expectation that a group of third graders is going to get to a professional level, but I still want to give them the experience of a musical connection. I was

reintroduced to music and drumming as an adult when somebody came and led a drum circle at my place of business. That drum circle was socially connecting because there was a facilitator who set the intention of “We’re going to create music, and we’re going to connect socially.” Furthermore, that facilitator had the skills to help us do it. My grounding is in facilitated, community-based events. I have gone to other places where a facilitator is not necessarily welcome because the group has played together for a long time and has a different experience. There are different flavors and types of drum circles.

**puck glass:** i did not enjoy the first few drum circle events i attended. They

were part of my coursework at school, and we were required to go to them as music-therapy majors. Looking back now, i think a lot of my negative reaction was from being a little afraid of the situation. i was showing up with expectations that affected how i received the experience. The drum circles were being facilitated by students who were uncomfortable facilitating, and everybody could feel that anxiety. My style of drum circle is not “Let’s play in the park without our shoes.” There are ways i like to facilitate and ways i like to be facilitated. Not every space has to be for every person. That doesn’t mean it’s an unwelcoming space; it just isn’t my space.

PASIC 2022 Panel (L-R): Robert Damm, Yeshima, Arthur Hull, puck glass, Jim Boneau



**Arthur Hull:** The words “drum circle” cover a vast array of amazing opportunities to make connections, share spirit, and do rhythm care. What I have found — from people who are working with prenatal drum circles all the way to people who are doing hospice drum circles and everything in between — is that the negativity comes from a judgement regarding the lack of connection. My first negative experience was my first rainbow-gathering, hippie, thunder drummer circle where we dug a ten-foot-wide pit to sit in and another pit for the fire. We just floundered for two-and-a-half days. Crazy! An amazing, loud, noisy, quiet, tired, and bloody experience. When you walk into a hippie thunder drummer circle in the park, you will find moments of connection and bliss and beauty amongst the chaos, and that’s what most of the participants are trying to experience.

From the PASIC point of view, where there are a lot of professional percussionists, even walking into the drum circles that we have facilitated here, there’s an over judgement. Sometimes, loudness hurts, and it’s our responsibility as facilitators to keep the volume down. I say, “The softer the volume, the more the listening, and the more the music.” Even in a family-friendly community drum circle, you start with joyful noise — not music and connections — and move the group towards musicality, to that place where it isn’t the rhythmical expertise that defines the quality of the music. Rather, it’s the connection that you help them make with, to, and for each other.

**Yeshima:** There are drum circles for therapeutic purposes, recreational purposes, and so on. It’s the context in which we are making a judgment call that must be considered. I have attended a few drum circles in which I did not have a good experience. This was because I’m a highly sensitive person and the big and loud events do not help me, or make me feel good. These experiences helped me learn what I like to do as

a facilitator. If I’m going in as a percussionist who loves drumming and loves playing solos, then I appreciate the opportunity to express myself. I may have attended a drum circle that I did not like, but there may be other people who would have said that particular drum circle was the most amazing experience they’ve ever had. That’s the beauty of this buffet of opportunities and experiences in group drumming that is assembled in a circle and includes instruments that you can strike, shake, or scrape.

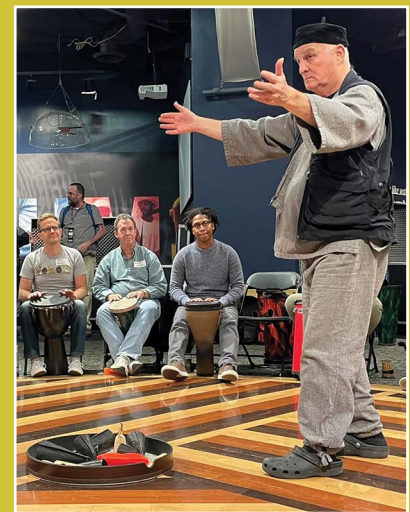
*In a Facebook post, an individual concluded that people in a drum circle don’t understand how to play accompaniment parts, and everyone solos at the same time, instead of taking turns, which results in chaos — defined as complete confusion and disorder. Panelists spoke about the role of soloing in a drum circle and how they handle the situation where some participants want to solo the whole time while some participants never want to solo.*

**glass:** i care about this question because i am in the “never want to solo” group. Participants come to drum circles as different people with different needs. i don’t want someone to solo the whole time because that is not what it means to listen. i often lean into the question “Why are we here?” As a facilitator, i may not say it in so many words, but the answer is, “We are here to make music together and to communicate with each other in various ways.” Facilitators must address the issue that some people in the group are talking a lot. Being heard is important, so if no one is responding to you and people can’t demonstrate that they are listening, then the group is not having a conversation; someone in the group is on a rant. There is no ranting allowed in the drum circle. i make it clear before the circle starts that “no” is a valuable response. Consent matters in all forms and ways, so if participants don’t want to do “a thing,” they are not required to do “a thing.” The opportunity for solo-

ing exists and the group would love to hear an individual’s voice because this is a situation in which participants have a chance to express themselves.

**Hull:** The person who wrote that statement about “parts, accompaniment, and solos” actually knows what he is talking about from the context of a musician, or a percussionist, or a culturally specific trained drummer. We are facilitators of entry-level, accessible drum circles. We go into schools and music-therapy situations. We work with people who have Alzheimer’s disease. We do family-friendly, community drum circles. People who show up to these events don’t have that sense of soloing or accompanying, at all. They don’t have that kind of understanding and musical sensibility; we do.

Our job as facilitators is to embrace the joyful noise and start manipulating, and “teaching without teaching,” by saying things like “All the low drums keep on playing and everybody else stop.” One of the low drummers hap-



The words “drum circle” cover a vast array of amazing opportunities to make connections, share spirit, and do rhythm care.  
—Arthur Hull

pens to be grandma, and she goes, “Oh, there are other low drummers, and I’m a low drummer, and we’re a team,” and the whole group comes back in. The people who were listening will never not hear the low drummers.

Facilitators are sneaky in the way we guide participants to the place where they find out that less is more; that instead of using all your notes to fill up space, you can use your notes to make space for other people to be creative. The traditional, culturally specific rhythm people look at a drum circle and see it as a total disrespect to the culture that they are studying as traditionalists, and as irresponsible in relationship to sharing the music. There’s no music there. The music is in the hearts of the people sharing their rhythmical spirit, and the facilitator’s job is to guide participants to that.

**Yeshima:** Some people don’t realize they are soloing the whole time. They are not completely aware that they are covering up beautiful music because they are so far off into the zone. I can’t be the judge of what that person is experiencing. That’s not my role as a facilitator. What I can do when a person

is soloing is get everybody quiet and then cut the group off so that person gets to solo. Then I call everyone back with, “One, two, back to the groove.” At that point, everybody is synched into the amazing thing that the soloist was doing and then we go on.

**Boneau:** People show up to a drum circle because they want to play. It is important to create an inclusive environment for that person who doesn’t know that we are trying to create a shared space of dialogue and it’s not just about one person. As facilitators, we must establish the awareness that a drum circle is about all of us. We serve the group in so many ways. We help people see that life is not an either-or situation, it’s a both-and situation.

**Hull:** There are two kinds of ignorant soloists. There are people playing “loud and happy and excited” and there are soloists who have chops and they’ve been trained inside their culturally-specific area what soloing is according to that culture. A jembe player who has the ability to solo has worked up to the point where soloing means nobody else is soloing, and they are ignorant in relationship to sharing the space. Then there are soloists with an agenda who think, “I’m going to show them that I have chops. Look at me!” One way to deal with the ignorant soloist or the agenda soloist is to help them understand that they need to share the space with others. I find three or four soloists and then I showcase them together, taking turns, and bring them all together. Hopefully they get tired enough that they will quiet down so we can all play together.

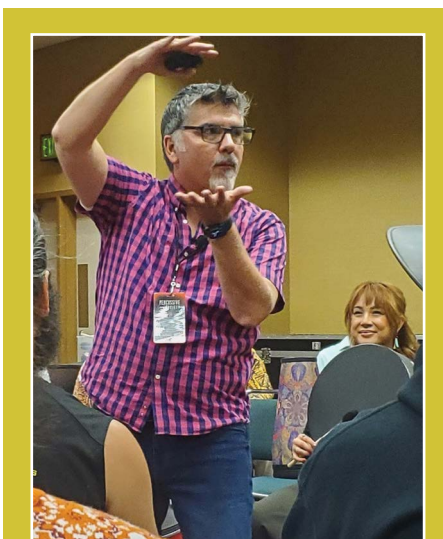
**glass:** It is important to add that this issue is context-specific. If I’m going to facilitate a group one time, I’ll handle it very differently than if this is a group I’m going to see six times. If there is a therapeutic goal to the drum circle event, I might recognize that a person may feel unheard in life. If I know that, I might intentionally give that person the opportunity to play something and have

the group respond — call-and-response. This demonstrates that the person is a valued member of the community and is being heard.

**Hull:** The definition is in the context. At Liberty Park in Toronto, every Tuesday night, in the summer, 300 people grab all the picnic benches and make a huge 50-foot circle. Out of the 300 people, there are maybe 100 soloists from the point of view that you think they are soloing, but they don’t see it that way. It’s a fantastic event for some people, but other people think there are too many soloists because they are thinking about that context. We generally talk about facilitated rhythm-based events and now it’s more definable, and manipulatable, and persuadable regarding moving people towards connection that results in musicality. There is a whole other side, because in therapy, those drummers are not soloing; they are expressing something.

*Another opinion posted on Facebook was the statement that “Drum circles suck.” A person went on to say that drum circles “end up a cacophonous mess because most people who participate in them are (a) not drummers, (b) high, or (c) not drummers who are high.” Panelists were asked to address the unfortunate association of drugs or alcohol that some people have with drum circles.*

**Hull:** Members of the Drum Circle Facilitators Guild (DCFG) have been trying desperately for many years to educate people to see the ignorance of that statement. What that person defined is a Sunday drum circle in the park that is unfacilitated and anybody can show up. The drum brings in all kinds of people. Years ago, that was the definition of a drum circle. I was part of that movement; it was wonderful and horrible at the same time. I finally took action to help people listen to each other. Now look at who and where we are in relationship to the facilitated process that we have created and developed over the last 30 years. That kind of drum cir-



An important strategy is to create a welcoming environment.  
—Jim Boneau



cle still exists today and is an entry-level experience for some people who go to two or three of these and then ask, “Is that all there is?” The answer is “No, that’s not all there is!” We’ve been able to take rhythm-based and facilitated events into almost every population that exists on the planet, not just in our culture, which is amazing, powerful, and beautiful.

*The person who was so against drum circles concluded that he wanted no part of the “dreaded drum circle of death” experience with so called “non-drummers.” Panelists considered the question of successfully facilitating an interactive drumming event in which individuals with significant drumming experience and novices with no drumming experience can come together in a way in which everyone has a musically and socially satisfying experience.*

**glass:** The concept of a “non-drummer” is problematic. I don’t know if I’ve ever met a “non-drummer.” I’ve worked with a lot of populations such as medically fragile people and older adults. I’ve worked with plenty of people who consider themselves non-drummers. But if



Participants come to drum circles as different people with different needs.  
—puck glass

you can hit, strike, and shake, you’re a drummer. There are people who have never played drums, or feel uncomfortable doing so, but they can be facilitated. They are still drummers; they just don’t know it yet. Anyone who wants to participate is a drummer! Is it sometimes difficult to walk into a drum circle as an experienced drummer and play with “non-drummers”? Yes, it can be. If you are showing up because you want to have a high-level music experience, then you are not in the right place. Or, it’s time to figure out what your place is in that environment. Even if there is a facilitator, you can be a part of making sure this group functions well because the person next to you is a drummer who wants to play and be happy and be a part of something social, and probably wants to learn something. A lot of people who might consider themselves “non-drummers” still want to participate. If you can take a moment to show them something like how to make three different sounds on one drum, they can become good drummers somewhat quickly.

**Robert J. Damm:** Another percussionist recently posted an essay on Facebook prescribing drum circles as shared community music experiences where everyone improvises, creates, and plays for fun. He explained that a drumming activity that is led or conducted is not a drum circle, is something quite the opposite of a drum circle, so it should be called something else. It seems no two people have the same idea of what a drum circle is. Yeshema provided an example of a unique type of facilitated interactive drumming experiences that led to discourse with the audience about a wide variety of facilitated drumming events and what vocabulary might best describe these myriad programs.

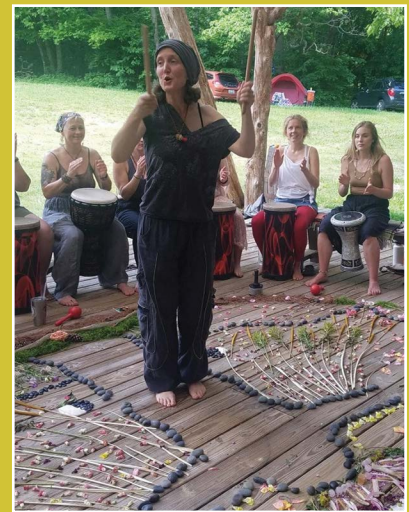
**Yeshima:** I do “Sing, Say, Drum, Pray,” which is an interactive drumming event in the shape of a circle with percussion instruments that you can strike, shake, or scrape. It was born out

of a Baha’i convention I attended. My co-facilitator sings mantras that come out of Baha’i faith texts. She reads off a text that speaks to her and relates it to a chosen topic such as transformation or letting go. The people in the group then come up with a word inspired by that quote, which turns into a rhythm, and we begin from there.

**Greg Whitt** (Executive Director of the DCFG, who was in the audience): In the same way that carpenters don’t talk about hammers and other tools when they explain what they do, we facilitators should focus on outcomes such as building connections or fostering wellness when we describe our work.

**Hull:** Babatunde Olatunji said that if we keep doing what we’re doing and stay on the mission, we will eventually have a drum in every household.

**Arianna Monge** (Rhythm and Wellness Manager for Remo, who was in the audience): John Fitzgerald gave us



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—Yeshima

the language of “facilitated interactive rhythm experience.”

*The panelists were asked by a member of the audience to recommend strategies to engage reluctant drum circle participants.*

**Yeshima:** “Everybody rumble!”

**Hull:** Rumble games are safe. Nobody is going to be embarrassed or forced to perform. Saying “play this rhythm!” can be intimidating to people. Out of a rumble game can come simple rhythms, or you can pass out foundations for them to explore. Keep your heart open, keep the space open, and “they will come.”

**Boneau:** An important strategy is to create a welcoming environment. I make sure to smile, greet participants, and learn their names. Another strategy is to create relationships by asking if they have played in a circle before or enjoy other kinds of art. Find a way to have a connection with participants so they can start to develop trust. As a facilitator, I don’t know what participants are

bringing into the room. I don’t know what their home life is like. I don’t know what a kid just said to them before they came into the room. I try to create a safe space before we even hit the drum.

**John Yost** (Co-chair of the IDC, who was in the audience): A good facilitator teaches the group to listen to itself, helps make space for musical dialogue, and connects people to the “one.” This all comes full circle when we realize that people drumming together, even in a circle, can be any number of experiences. It could be a class, a ritual, an ethno-specific jam of some sort, an unled drum circle, or a facilitated circle. This work is constantly being redefined. There are so many ways to use the tools we have as percussionists to help people connect to themselves and each other.

**Damm:** Most of the negative press about drum circles comes from people who are comparing drum circles with culturally-specific percussion ensembles

or referring to unfacilitated or badly facilitated drumming events. In a jembe/dundun ensemble, for example, participants play assigned parts to perform traditional music. In a drum circle, participants make up patterns, which may be inspired by a culturally-specific foundation, but never consider what they are doing to be a performance. It’s enough that people who have never played a drum before keep a steady beat and create simple patterns that fit with the groove. The intention in drum circles is to help participants feel the unique joy that comes from playing drums and to feel a sense of community in the synergy of in-the-moment freestyle group drumming.

**Hull:** I hope our panel and resulting article reveal the depth and commitment of the thousands of people who use rhythm care as a life enhancement tool and are dedicated to using FIRE – Facilitated Interactive Rhythm Experiences – to make the world a better place.

**Robert J. Damm** is Professor of Music, Director of Music Education Partnerships, and Coordinator for the Minor in Music and Culture at Mississippi State University, where he teaches World Music, African American Music, Music of Africa, Music of Latin America, and Native American Music. He studied in Cuba, Ghana, and Mali; is certified in Orff-Schulwerk and Smithsonian Folkways World Music Pedagogy. He also directs Jembe Den African percussion ensemble.

**Jim Boneau** has collaborated with Arthur Hull for over 20 years in drum circle facilitation and leadership/mentorship. Jim serves as curriculum designer, master facilitator, and teacher of the Village Music Circles Mentor Training. Jim is also an executive coach, mas-

ter facilitator of leadership workshops, and author of *The Rumble Zone: Leadership Strategies in the Rough & Tumble of Change*.

**puck glass** is passionate about making music accessible to all and has taught and facilitated music for people of all generations. puck received undergraduate degrees in music education and music therapy from Seton Hill University under the direction of RJ Heid, and a master’s degree in music performance from the University of Missouri under the direction of Megan Arns. puck is Communications Manager for the PAS Diversity Alliance and on the Professional Opportunities Committee. puck received the 2016 Outstanding PAS Supporter Award.

**Arthur Hull** is the founder of Village Music Circles and is at the core of the modern, facilitated, drum-circle movement. He has taught thousands of drum circle facilitators around the world through his intensive training Playshops. His books include *Drum Circle Spirit*, *Drum Circle Facilitation*, *Drum Circle Games*, and the *Drum Circle Facilitators Handbook*.

**K. Michelle “Yeshima” Lewis** is passionate about drumming, teaching, and strengthening community. An educator and percussionist of 26-plus years, Yeshima, through DrumSmart LLC, provides group drumming opportunities in world music using world music pedagogy, drum circle facilitation to support social and emotional learning, and professional development for music educators.