DRUMMING ACROSS BORDERS

An American Drum Circle Specialist Takes His Teaching to Japan

BY DAVE ALLEN

After years in Memphis, Tennessee, Grammy-nominated professional musician John Scalici returned to his hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, to focus his musical skills on reaching out to people and bringing rhythm into their lives.

He began researching how other artists used rhythm and drums in programs. Along the way he discovered Arthur Hull, father of the modern drum circle movement, and traveled to California to learn how to be a drum circle facilitator. Scalici founded GetRhythm! Interactive Rhythm Events in 2001 with a mission of empowering participants to discover the "universal language of rhythm."

At the time, Scalici never dreamed GetRhythm! would take him nearly 7,000 miles from home to Japan. As a representative for the drum company Remo, Scalici traveled to Tsumagoi to work as an instructor in a drum camp at Yamaha's retreat center.

Back in the US, John Scalici leads a drum circle at a community arts festival in Birmingham, Alabama.

Scalici describes the camp's roughly 100 participants as diverse: "We had adults from age 18 to those in their 80s, professional musicians to music enthusiasts, teachers in elementary and high schools, and music therapists." The musicians came for instruction in leading drum circles, teaching techniques, and the fundamentals of rhythm.

From the first session, Scalici and the other facilitators could feel the excitement in the air. "It was clear that few words needed to be spoken once the drumming started," Scalici said. He found that even first-time drummers were willing to go in many directions. He incorporated deep breathing, and body percussion, and turned rhythms into vocal percussion. His students followed along with great interest and energy.

Each day began with a two-hour-long drum circle. With the help of translators Scalici fielded questions about improvisation, rhythm, and teaching methods, which mirrored the ones he hears at drum circles in the US.

Facilitation cues—signals and gestures to start or stop playing—carried over well to the Japanese students, but his humor was often lost in translation. After one long set-up was met with silence, Scalici had to tell his translators, "Please tell them it's a joke."

Contact with Japanese musicians led him to realize one difference between amateur and professional players in Japan and the US. "Over there, the playing field was totally level," Scalici says. "In the states there's a separation between professionals and amateurs." That's one thing he hopes to change by getting more professionals involved in community drum circles in the US.

The original formula for Alabama-based Scalici's drum circles remains largely the same: open-ended, with room for improvisation and invention. "I try not to do much instruction," Scalici says. For those hesitant to bang their hands on drums, he offers subtler percussion, and eventually, even shy participants find themselves drawn in and driven by the rhythm.

Six years after founding GetRhythm! Scalici is gaining exposure across the US through his work with Remo. He has brought his drum circle programs to schools, retirement centers, music festivals, and medical facilities, but there's always room, even for a rhythm expert, to learn more about "the universal language."