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Robert J. Damm

Mississippi State University, rjd6@msstate.edu

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Foundational Rhythms for Drum Circles

By Robert J. Damm

Many drum circle facilitators use “foundational rhythms” to start a jam, establish a groove, and provide a structure within which other participants can improvise in a relatively freestyle manner. In other words, the facilitator will play, or ask one or more participants to play, a repeated ostinato. On top of this consistently repeating pattern, the rest of the group is empowered to play complementary and/or contrasting rhythms that develop and evolve during the spontaneous in-the-moment jam. This approach provides a satisfying balance of structure and freedom. For example, the bass drum will maintain a heartbeat rhythm, the cowbell will play a steady beat, or a pair of rhythm sticks will play a clave rhythm.

Kalani demonstrated the concept in his YouTube video titled *Rhythmic Grounding*. Jim Donovan calls his foundational patterns “rhythm seeds.” In a YouTube video titled “Drum Along Rhythm 1,” Donovan demonstrates an example played on a bass drum, which corresponds to the spoken phrase “I play drums with you” (Figure 1). The rhythm is known as *cinquillo* in the context of Cuban/Caribbean music and is a ubiquitous bell pattern in West Africa.

Figure 1. “I play drums with you.”

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
I		play	drums		with	you	

Facilitators may have adopted the strategy of establishing foundational rhythm “jam starters” in drum circles, yet they still seek new ideas to invigorate the interactive drumming experience. Twenty drum circle facilitators responded to a request to share their favorites. Some ideas came from nationally recognized leaders in the field, while others came from rising stars or locally focused facilitators. This article highlights a sampling of foundational patterns drawn from universal drum rhythms, culturally specific drumming styles, and speech rhythms (based on spoken words, poems, and song lyrics, etc.).

The musical examples are written in the Time Unit Box System (TUBS), a form of notation originally used by musicologists to graphically notate polyrhythms in African music. TUBS is an advantageous notational system because musicians who have not had formal training in reading Western music notation can easily interpret it. Each box represents one instance of the fastest pulse required for the “rhythm seed” and receives a symbol for pitch (e.g., high and low), tone quality (tone, slap, bass), handing (right, left, or both), or a syllable of a word. Numbers, words, or syllables are used to aid in counting the rhythm. If the box remains open, no sound occurs in the time unit.

UNIVERSAL RHYTHMS

Universal rhythms are ubiquitous drum patterns popular around the world in various countries, among diverse ethnic groups, and used in myriad styles and genres.

Figure 2. “4/4 Steady Beat” (contributed by Craig Norton)

1		2		3		4
X		X		X		X

When facilitating a drumming event for people with disabilities or people who are new to drumming, keeping it simple is always the best way to ensure engagement with everyone. Begin “at home” with a simple Native American 4/4 played on a low-pitched drum. This starter rhythm gives everyone the chance to be successful and experience the power of entrainment.

Figure 3. “One two three four-and” (contributed by Amy Jackson)

A driving variation of steady beat learned at a women’s retreat.

1		2		3		4	&
bass		bass		bass		bass	tone

PULSE

The pulse is the foundation of the rhythmic pattern and grounds it while also giving it momentum. We internalize the pulse by vocalizing it. Engage the participants in the process of listening for, hearing, feeling, saying, and playing the pulse together by leading them in a chant: “pulse an pulse an pulse an pulse an.” After a minute, stop them and explain how to use the vocal sound, “an” to maintain a consistent space between the pulses.

Say and play pulses with the dominant hand by playing a single sound (e.g., bass sound on congas and djembes) on each pulse while saying “an” between the pulses. Playing single upbeats between each pulse gives the rhythm a lift, like lifting the foot between each step while walking, while also maintaining momentum. Go through the same “say and play” process for upbeats, replacing the initial sound “an” with a sound (e.g., tone for congas and djembes) appropriate for each instrument. Say and play, “bass tone bass tone bass tone” with the dominant hand for four cycles, and then four cycles with the other hand.

Figure 4A. “Pulse” (contributed by Jim Greiner)

Key for Hand Drum Sounds

D = Dominant hand, ND = Non-dominant hand

B = Bass sound, T = Open tone.

Hand	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	N	ND
Count	1	ee	An	uh	2	ee	An	uh	3	ee	An	uh	4	ee	An	uh
Pulse	B				B				B				B			

Figure 4B. “Pulse plus upbeats” (contributed by Jim Greiner)

Key for Hand Drum Sounds

D = Dominant hand; ND = Non-dominant hand; B = Bass sound; T = Open tone

Hand	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	N	ND
Count	1	ee	An	uh	2	ee	An	uh	3	ee	An	uh	4	ee	An	uh
Pulse & Upbeat	B		T		B		T		B		T		B		T	

Train Rhythm

The three-note pattern anchoring what is called the “train rhythm” in North America may also be found in Asia, India, Africa, South America, the Middle East, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. Start everyone saying “bass an tone an bass an tone an bass an tone an,” playing the bass and tone sounds only with the dominant hand. Then segue into adding the non-dominant hand playing a tone on every second “an” by continuing to say the “an” space-keeper after the first dominant hand bass and saying and playing a tone with the non-dominant after the first dominant hand tone. Create variation in rhythms by adding or subtracting sounds.

Play the train rhythm for at least 30 minutes to get into a relaxed, solid groove. After a few minutes, participants can stop saying the rhythm, but may begin saying it again any time they want to ground themselves in the rhythm. When the groove is solid, introduce several variations by adding, or subtracting, sounds and introduce slightly longer phrases by repeating variations in a regular pattern (e.g., every other cycle). Once the participants are comfortable with their parts, encourage them to play with, and respond to, variations other people are playing.

Figure 4C. "Train Rhythm and Variations" (contributed by Jim Greiner)

D = Dominant hand; ND = Non-dominant hand; B = Bass sound, T = Open tone

Hand	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND	D	ND
Count	1	ee	An	uh	2	ee	An	uh	3	ee	An	uh	4	ee	An	uh
Train #1	B		T	T	B		T	T	B		T	T	B		T	T
Train #2	B	B	T	T	B	B	T	T	B	B	T	T	B	B	T	T
Train #3	B		T		B		T		B		T		B		T	
Train #4	B	T	T	T	B	T	T	T	B	T	T	T	B	T	T	T
Train #5	B		T	T	B	B	T	T	B		T	T	B	B	T	T

Half and Whole Notes

Figure 5A. "Half notes and whole notes, short version" (contributed by Zorina Wolf)

Gun = Bass; Go = Open tone

1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
gun R		go L		gun R		(rest)		gun R		go L		gun R		(rest)	

Figure 5B. "Half notes and whole notes, long version" (contributed by Zorina Wolf)

1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
gun R		go L		gun R		(rest)		gun R		go L		gun R		(rest)	
gun R		go L		gun R		gun R		gun R		go L		gun R		(rest)	

Heartbeats

Figure 6. "3/4 Heartbeat" (contributed by Christine Stevens)

Starts with a "pick-up." Remember that drum circles can be relaxing and meditative.

3	&	1	&	2	&	3	&
lub		DUB		(rest)		lub	

Figure 7A. "4/4 Heartbeat Rhythm" (contributed by Dennis Maberry)

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
bass		bass		tone	tone	tone	tone	bass		bass		tone		tone	tone

Figure 7B. "Heartbeat - Bass Tones Alone" (contributed by Dennis Maberry)

- While the group plays the 4/4 heartbeat rhythm, lower the volume, and then cut out all the rhythms except for the bass tones.
- Have the group imagine being in the womb listening to their mother's heartbeat. Tell them that, after spending nine months living with the heartbeat rhythm, they are born in rhythm and they just need to get themselves back to that sacred space.

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
bass		bass						bass		bass					

Figure 7C. "Heartbeat - Call-and-Response" (contributed by Dennis Maberry)

- Divide the group in half.
- Half of the group plays the first part, and the other half plays the second part.

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
bass		bass		tone	tone	tone	tone								
1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
								bass		bass		tone		tone	tone

Figure 7.D. "We Will Rock You" (contributed by Dennis Maberry)

- Keep the heartbeat and use only one tone to create the rhythm of "We Will Rock You."
- Someone in the group will start singing the song (or I will) and everyone joins in singing.

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
bass		bass		tone				bass		bass		tone			

Figure 8. "Slow Heartbeat" (contributed by Amy Jackson)

Simple but effective.

1		2		3		4
bass		bass		(pause)		

Figure 9. "Bass Bass Snap Clap" (contributed by Amy Jackson; learned from Jana Broder.)

1		2		3		4
bass		bass		snap		clap

Figure 10. "Chicka-chicka-boom-boom..." (contributed by Amy Jackson; learned from John Scalici.)

Related to the duple feel of Brazilian samba, with characteristic bass tones on the second beat.

1	e	&	ah	2	e	&	ah	1	e	&	ah	2	e	&	ah
tone	tone	tone	tone	bass		bass		tone	tone	tone	tone	bass		(rest)	

Figure 11. "Mr. Farf's Favorite" (contributed by Richard Farvour)

Some people say this rhythm has an "exotic" or Middle Eastern feel. This simple one-measure rhythm may be easily modified by (1) changing the eighth-note placement, (2) switching high/low relationship, or by (3) changing the tempo.

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
bass	tone		tone	bass	tone	tone	

Figure 12. “Rocker Rhythm” (contributed by Arthur Hull)

This is a call-and-response pattern found in many cultures around the world. The pitch may move from high to low, or low to high, but it will always be evenly spaced back-and-forth movement.

	1	e	&	ah	2	r	&	ah	3	e	&	ah	4	e	&	ah
Low djun-djun call	X		X						X							
High djun-djun response					X		X						X			

Figure 13. “To The One” (contributed by Arthur Hull)

The first two notes are played just before the downbeat in a rhythmic cycle, thus the name of the rhythm, “To The One.”

&	ah	1	e	&	ah	2	e	&	ah	3	e	&	ah	4	e	&	ah	1
X	X	X														X	X	X

Figure 14. “Rolling to the One” (contributed by Arthur Hull)

The opening phrase of this rhythm rolls to the downbeat, suggesting the name of the rhythm.

4	*	*	*	1	*	*	*	2	*	*	*	3	*	*	*	4	*	*	*	1
X	X	X	X	X												X	X	X	X	X

Figure 15. “6/8 (12/8) Triplets” (contributed by Arthur Hull)

6/8 patterns are commonly found in the music and rhythms of most African cultures and are the foundations for polyrhythmic music heard throughout the world.

- Start by playing the 6/8 short bell rhythm with a stick on a low drum.
- The rest of the group joins in the moment they are ready.

	1	*	*	2	*	*	3	*	*	4	*	*
Triplet pulse	X			X			X			X		
Short bell	X		X		X	X		X		X		X
Long bell	X		X		X		X	X		X		X
Clave	X		X			X		X		X		

Habanera

Figure 16A. “Pass the popcorn” (contributed by Robert Shiflet)

1	e	&	ah	2	e	&	ah
Pass			the	pop-		corn	

Figure 16B. “Now I-know the way to-have fun” (contributed by Matt Richardson)

1	e	&	ah	2	e	&	ah	3	e	&	ah	4	e	&	ah
Now			I	know		the		way			to	have			fun.

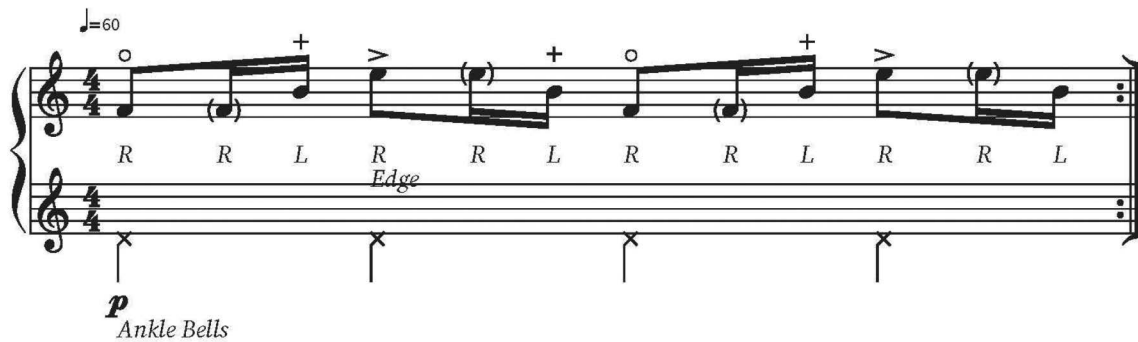
3:2 SON CLAVE (contributed by John Yost)

The 3:2 son clave is the structural core of many Afro-Cuban rhythms. It originated as a bell pattern in sub-Saharan African music traditions. The pattern is widely used in rock and pop music and sometimes called the Bo Diddley beat.

Play the clave rhythm on a hand drum and sing any of the following songs: “American Girl” by Tom Petty; “Black Horse and a Cherry Tree” by K T Tunstall; “Desire” by U2; “Faith” by George Michael; “Footloose” by Kenny Loggins; “Golden Thing” by Throwing Muses; “Hey Bo Diddley” by Bo Diddley; “I Want Candy” by the Strangeloves; “Iko Iko” by The Dixie Cups (check out version by Dr. John); “Magic Bus” by The Who; “Mr. Brownstone” by Guns N’ Roses; “Not Fade Away” by Buddy Holly or the Rolling Stones; “She’s the One” by Bruce Springsteen; “Willie and the Hand Jive” by Johnny Otis.

Figure 17. “Comfort Sound® Drumming Groove” (contributed by John R. Beck)

In a 2015 study, John R. Beck provided four weekly 30-minute interactive group-drumming sessions to 35 hospitalized cancer patients. The participants played Remo Tubanos with low-volume Comfort Sound heads. The patients reported a statistically significant increase in energy and relaxation, improved mood, and decrease in distress and anxiety after drumming.



Organic Approach (contributed by John Fitzgerald)

At the very beginning of a circle, particularly with a new group of people, play the simplest possible rhythm. Do this to avoid their intellect, so that they simply feel, perhaps without knowing, the fundamental pulse. As the group becomes more comfortable, begin adding syncopation, with eighth notes and sixteenth notes. Specific rhythms might come from a theme, a word, or language phrase that is translated into rhythms that can then be used as the metaphor to underpin the group’s contributions.

Conversation (contributed by Ed Sorrentino)

Start by having a conversation, then ask the group to continue the conversation on the drums and percussion instruments.

CULTURALLY SPECIFIC RHYTHMS

It is important to acknowledge and respect the cultural source of traditional world-drumming rhythms you introduce in a drum circle setting. Best practice is to indicate the ethnic group, geographic location, and traditional context of such rhythms. It must be understood, however, that a drum circle is not a percussion ensemble committed to the study and performance of culturally specific repertoire. Many of these rhythms can also be designated to the universal rhythm category or speech rhythm category.

Reggae

Figure 18. “Co-co-nut pear” (contributed by Robert Shiflet)

1		2		3		4
Co-	co-	nut		pear		(rest)
tap-	a-	tap		slap		

Kuku

Figure 19A. "Ap-ple wa-ter me-lon" (contributed by Robert Shiflet)

1	e	&	ah	2	e	&	ah	3	e	&	ah	4	e	&	ah
Ap-				ple				wa-				me-	lon.		
boom				boom				tap				tap	a.		

Figure 19B. "I want chips & salsa" (contributed by Matt Richardson)

1	e	&	ah	2	e	&	ah	3	e	&	ah	4	e	&	ah
I				want				chips				sal-	sa.		

Sing, Sing, Sing

Figure 20. "Sing, Sing, Sing" (contributed by Tim Kane)

Most senior citizens remember Gene Krupa and know the swing feel of "Sing, Sing, Sing." Take time to slow down the tempo and teach the accents, which transforms a mundane group of quarters and eighth notes into a swinging dance rhythm.

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
>		>			>			>			>		>		
X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Funk/Hip Hop/Rap

Figure 21. "Funk - Hip Hop" (contributed by Christine Stevens)

If you do any work with teens, this is a must-know rhythm. Play the 4/4 groove with a swing feel as in the recorded example on the CD included with *The Art and Heart of Drum Circles* by Christine Stevens.

	1	e	&	ah	2	e	&	ah	3	e	&	ah	4	e	&	ah	
bell	X				X				X				X				
clap					X								X				
bass drum	X						X		X	X							
djembe			X	X			X	X				X	X			X	X

Figure 22. Breakbeat patterns from rap and hip-hop (contributed by Martin "Wolf" Murphy)

Gun = Right hand bass, Do = Left hand open tone

Start jam sessions with breakbeat patterns adapted for hand drums or use them as accompaniment when passing a soloing opportunity around the drum circle. These rhythms, because they are derived from popular music, provide an "in" with at-risk youth.

	1	e	&	ah	2	e	&	ah	3	e	&	ah	4	e	&	ah
basic	gun				do						gun		do			
var. 1	gun				do		gun				gun		do			
var. 2	gun			gun	do		gun				gun		do		gun	
var. 3	gun				do		gun				gun		do	do	do	

Malinke

Figure 23. “Malinke Passport” (contributed by John Yost)

This foundational rhythm is like the one Arthur Hull calls “Nigerian high life.” The basses ground with the “pulse...pulse-pulse” and the open tones bring forward motion to the feel. A very important and popular djembe accompaniment with the same rhythm is nicknamed “passport” because it “gets you into” a wide repertoire of West African djembe rhythms.

&	ah	1	e	&	ah	2	e	and	ah	3	e	and	ah	4	e	and	ah	1
T	T	B			B	B		T	T	B			B	B		T	T	B

Jingolaba

Figure 24. “Jingolaba” (contributed by John Yost)

“Jingolaba” is a solid groove that works well on a bass drum.

1	e	&	ah	2	e	and	ah	3	e	and	ah	4	e	and	ah
X			X					X			X				

Fanga

Figure 25. “Fanga in Four Parts” (contributed by Tim Kane)

- Teach a group all four parts.
- Divide the group into four sections and assign instruments.
- Teach one rhythm part to each section.
- Each of the four rhythm parts is a great session starter.

The musical score for "Fanga in Four Parts" is written for four parts: Djembe 1, Djembe 2, Djembe 3, and Djun Djun. The time signature is common time (C).
 - **Djembe 1:** Features a pattern of snare (S) notes on the first and third beats of each measure, with rests on the second and fourth beats. The pattern repeats every two measures.
 - **Djembe 2:** Features a pattern of bass (B) and open (O) notes. The first measure has B on the first beat and O on the second. The second measure has O on the first and second beats, and B on the third. This pattern repeats.
 - **Djembe 3:** Features a pattern of bass (B) and open (O) notes. The first measure has B on the first beat, B on the second, and O on the third. The second measure has B on the first, B on the second, and O on the third. This pattern repeats.
 - **Djun Djun:** Features a pattern of bell notes (X) on the first and third beats of each measure, with rests on the second and fourth beats. The pattern repeats every two measures.

SPEECH RHYTHMS

The temporal organization of syllables, words, and phrases from an ongoing speech stream or song translate easily into drum rhythms.

Figure 26. “Upset is optional.” (contributed by Greg Whitt)

R = Right, L = Left, B = Both

“If you can say it, you can play it.” Ask participants to create their own phrases that they can share with the whole group. Extend the experience by incorporating movements contributed from the group to create dances built on the same “seed” concepts.

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
Up-	set		is	op-	tion-	al.	
lap	lap		clap	chest	chest	clap	
R	L		B	R	L	B	

Figure 27. "I like ice cream and chocolate cake." (contributed by Ed Sorrentino)

This spoken phrase corresponds to a simple variation of a universal djembe rhythm known as the break or the call. The leader plays this short phrase at the beginning of a piece to set the tempo and as a signal to call everyone to stop at the end of a piece.

1	e	&	ah	2	e	&	ah	3	e	&	ah	4	e	&	ah
I		like	ice-		cream		and	choc-		late		cake.			

Figure 28. "Walk the Dinosaur" (contributed by Robert J. Damm)

The rhythm is the hook from the 1987 song by Was (Not Was).

1	e	&	ah	2	e	&	ah	3	e	&	ah	4	e	&	ah
Boom			boom			ack	ah	lack	ah	lack	ah	boom.			
1	e	&	ah	2	e	&	ah	3	e	&	ah	4	e	&	ah
Boom			boom			ack	ah	lack	ah	boom		boom.			

Figure 29. "Meet the Flintstones" (contributed by Tim Kane)

This well-known television theme song is easy for children (and adults) to sing. Slow down the tempo and play the melody on djembes and other hand drums.

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
Flint-		stones			meet		the	Flint-		stones			They're		the
1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
mod-	ern	stone	age	fam-		i-		ly							
1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
From		the			town		of	Bed-		rock			They're		a
1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
page	right	out	of	his-		tor-		y							

Springtime Rhythm Bouquet (contributed by Monique Morimoto)

This activity works well when you need to keep things very simple. It can be effective when drumming with seniors and adults with disabilities.

- Pick a theme to inspire drum rhythms.
- What is the name of your favorite flower?
- What would it sound like if you played it on your drum?

Rhythmic Naming (contributed by Christine Stevens)

Use the name of a person in the group and play it as a rhythm seed.

Drum O’Clock (contributed by K. Michelle Lewis)

Ask a question to the participants and use their responses as rhythmic building blocks to establish the “jam starter.” K. Michelle Lewis has 16 different themes in her book (with links to YouTube videos and lesson plans). Here are five examples:

- SPRINGTIME - What do you like about springtime?
- FEELINGS - How do you feel today?
- KINDNESS - Describe how to be kind.

GRATITUDE - Describe the things for which you are thankful.

PEACE - Describe what brings you peace.

- Ask a question related to a given theme.
- Participants answer by listing a few words.
- Participants create a rhythm with their words.
- Participants join along with the steady beat of the music in the drum circle by playing their rhythm on a drum or percussion instrument.

Scat Cards (contributed by Robert Lawrence Friedman)

Here are four examples:

- "Snoop Dooby-Doo Boppy-Boppy Boo"
- "Skimmy-Skimmy Skee Binky-Binky Bee"
- "Jiggy-Jiggy Pop-Pop Skittle-Bittle Bop"
- "Boom Bop Biddy Bop Foo Foo Foo"

Use Friedman's cards, which have nonsensical rhythmic phrases on them, to teach spoken word and drum patterns:

- Give a scat card to each participant.
- Each participant layers in by vocalizing his or her scat phrase.
- After everyone is vocalizing, participants transfer their scat rhythms to drums and percussion instruments.

Affirmations

Positive statements (affirmations) transfer directly from spoken word to drum rhythms for improving self-concept, building self-esteem, and modifying behavior.

Figure 30A. "Empowerment Affirmations" (contributed by Robert Lawrence Friedman)

- Develop phrases that reflect the goal of the group, for instance: creating harmony, community, empowerment, and/or connection.
- Divide the room into four phrases that, when spoken and drummed together, create an interweaving of syncopated rhythms.
- Once the group has developed and locked in their rhythms, invite participants to create their own phrases and rhythms.
- Specific rhythms notated here represent one interpretation.

1	e	&	ah	2	e	and	ah	3	e	and	ah	4	e	and	ah
I				am			a-	maz-		ing					
I		love	my-	self		ex-		act-	ly	as	I	am			
I			ac-	cept			my-	self							
I		am		beau-	ti-	ful		wise		and		strong			

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Figure 30B. “Drummer Affirmations” (contributed by Robert Lawrence Friedman)

- Start a jam using vocalizations of multiple phrases.
- Divide the room into four phrases that when spoken and drummed together create an interweaving of syncopated rhythms.
- Specific rhythms notated here represent one interpretation.

1	e	&	ah	2	e	and	ah	3	e	and	ah	4	e	and	ah
I				play		my		drum				(rest)			
I		have	a	great		beat		I		have	a	great		beat	
I		rock		I		rock		yes		I		do			
I		am	a	drum-		mer		to		my	core				

CONTRIBUTORS

Thanks to all 20 facilitators who generously shared foundational patterns to help your drum circle participants feel grounded, and provided many fresh rhythm seeds to revitalize your program. Both newcomers to the world of interactive drumming and long-time drum circle aficionados will find inspiration in this collection of jam starters.

Contributors: John R. Beck, Richard Farvour, John Fitzgerald, Robert Lawrence Friedman, Jim Greiner, Arthur Hull, Amy Jackson, Tim Kane, K. Michelle Lewis, Dennis Maberry, Monique Morimoto, Martin “Wolf” Murphy, Craig Norton, Matt Richardson, Robert Shiflet, Ed Sorrentino, Christine Stevens, Greg Whitt, Zorina Wolf, and John Yost

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Robert J. Damm is Professor of Music and Director of Music Education Partnerships at Mississippi State University, where he teaches world music, world drumming, music of Africa, music of Latin America, African American music, and drum circle class. He has studied music and culture in Cuba, Ghana, and Mali. He is a certified Orff-Schulwerk teacher and a Smithsonian Folkways certified teacher of world music. He is the director of Jembe Den, an African percussion ensemble comprised of his students, who play for cultural and educational programs throughout Mississippi. He is co-chair of the PAS Interactive Drumming Committee and has served as president of the Mississippi PAS Chapter.