

Q&A with Hands On'Semble

By Randy Gloss

Since Hands On'Semble began in the 1990s, we have been fortunate to present our work on many occasions at PASIC. The Percussive Arts Society has always given the group the opportunity to share our work, helping us stay connected to the percussion community at large, which has been a constant barometer and sounding board for us in our growth and evolution as an ensemble.

When sitting down together to discuss our proposal for this year's PASIC, it was unanimous that we wanted to present something different than we've done before. In the past, our format has either been concert performances (with literally no opportunity for questions), or a highly structured clinic/performance, often leaving just a short amount of time for questions. So this time we thought we'd flip it. We will still of course play, but want to put more emphasis on the "Q&A."

To open our session, we'll perform an arrangement of one of my compositions, "Peeling the Onion," which covers a wide spectrum of musical approaches, concepts, and techniques and should offer plenty to talk about as a jumping off point for questions and discussion.

Here's a free link to a recording by Hands On'Semble, as well as a PDF of the score: <http://www.handsonsemble.com/peelingtheonion>

The link will remain active through PASIC 2015.

Also as a point of departure, we came up with some general categories for questions that we thought might be of interest:

- Composition
- Techniques
- Group history
- Individual backgrounds
- Influences
- Importance of our teachers

What follows is some of our discussion based on these bullet points:

Randy Gloss: What would you say is the overall approach with regard to our compositions?

Austin Wrinkle: My piece "Wart Hog #3" was written in the same kind of way that John Bergamo wrote his famous piece "Piru Bole." That is western notation with Indian drumming syllables, or boles, below the notation. It's not instrument specific. It can be played on anything or even just vocally. The nota-

tion gives you the rhythm and the boles tell you how to phrase on your instrument: high, low, open, closed, etc. I found this to be a great way to compose because it can be highly structured, yet it leaves room for the players' unique voices to shine through on whatever instrument they choose. It's the way that most of Hands On'Semble music is composed. Randy's piece "Peeling the Onion" uses this quite extensively. It's an epic piece that takes you on a trip around the world in 11 beats. It's a great example of the openness and cross-cultural influence that exists at CalArts today, and that John instilled in the group almost 20 years ago.

Randy: I would especially agree that "Piru Bole" is an archetypal piece for Hands On'Semble. So definitely, "Peeling the Onion" "stands on the shoulders" of a piece like "Piru Bole." In many ways, it is an extension of this idea, building on it, much in the way that our work is a continuation of what John started doing many years before. I also would think of it as an extension in that the piece is not centered exclusively on Indian drumming and respective syllables. Even though Indian ideas are surely a common thread throughout our music, there is also extensive representation of other types of drumming and percussion that I think shows the true personality of the group. There's a certain

"cross-pollination"—as John Bergamo used to say—of these ideas that I think really defines the group's overall aesthetic.

You mentioned your piece "Wart Hog #3." That has particular importance to the group, as I think it was our first piece. Talk a bit more about that.

Austin: My time at CalArts was incredibly valuable to me. It provided the fertile ground for experimentation, and it was in this creative environment that Hands On'Semble was born. We were all studying tabla with Swapan Chaudhuri and were already spending lots of time practicing together. So when it came time for my recital, I wrote "Wart Hog #3" and asked John and Randy to perform it with me (Andrew was away studying at the Ali Akbar College of Music at the time). We all felt that group had a great chemistry, and after the recital we thought it'd be fun to keep it going. That was in '97, and we've been getting together weekly just about ever since.

Randy: CalArts is a recurring entity when talking about our history and evolution. It's at the center of how the group was formed, but also integral to each of our own personal journeys and developments in music, as well as our relationships with several life-long mentors for each of us. There's definitely a lot we can discuss just about that, and in many





different tangents (e.g., the school, our teachers, certain influences).

Andrew Grueschow: CalArts really played a key role in making Hands On'Semble possible. For one, we all met there and connected as musicians, students, and friends. It's where we all became students of John Bergamo, and as was so often the case with John, our lives were changed forever. It's where we had the opportunity to learn music and life from incredible artists like Swapan Chaudhuri, Kobla Ladzekpo, Alfred Ladzekpo, Poovalur Sriji, I. Nyoman Wenten, and others. All of their generosity as teachers, and humility as masters of their craft was something that was truly amazing to be around.

Amazing teachers like Kobla and Swapan welcomed new students with open arms—opening not only their endless knowledge of music, but also their culture and families to their students. They both placed high demands on their students, and felt that their music was for anyone to play. To have musicians of such stature telling you that their music is for *you* was incredibly inspiring.

Randy: Absolutely, one of the defining factors for us as a group (and individually) has been our relationships with our teachers. We've been extremely fortunate to have such amazing masterful teachers who are all so incredibly giving, unconditionally supportive, and have cared for us like family.

Since we're on the topic of mentors and teachers, I'd like to steer the conversation to a specific question about John Bergamo. I am often asked about his teaching approach, as it was perhaps unorthodox, especially when compared to most pedagogical approaches for percussion. Personally, I felt that John's teaching style was like "the art of teaching without teaching," very Zen-like and often very concise, in as few words (or notes) as needed. So let me ask both of you, what are your thoughts?

Austin: John really helped students find their own voice by giving them permission to experiment and not to be boxed in by a particular tradition. It is important to honor tradition, but not to be limited by it. I learned so much from John, and not just about drumming. His giving spirit, kindness,

and attitude towards life were models for me as well.

Andrew: John had this amazing way of teaching, with all of his students on their own personal journey of musical/personal exploration. When John's students play, they tend not to sound like John. They sound like themselves. Every student will tell you of the profound impact John has had on their playing, but not by making them sound like him. We all have our own, personal experience with John, tailor-made by the man himself, knowing what each student needed. Sometimes he would just lay a book on you, sometimes it was stories, sometimes it was technique, and sometimes just playing together. It was always just right. We were so fortunate to have the years of touring and living with John.

Randy: Yes, very fortunate indeed and on many levels. What he instilled in us really set us on a trajectory, a path that continues to this day. And yeah, one of my first lessons with John was him laying a book on me, but that's a whole other story.

There's a component to Hands On'Semble that's based in collaborating with other artists. John was always interested in pursuing collaborative projects from our very first album onward. When John retired, many of our teachers and friends came to play with us in John's "chair." Later that developed into many different collaborations and combinations, even up to a large ensemble version of the group at one point, as well as resulting in a few albums and several concerts and tours (domestic and international). Even though John never got to perform in those particular contexts, he was very much behind it all.

Austin: One of the great things about being in Hands On'Semble has been all of the wonderful collaborations we've had with so many outstanding musicians—each one bringing their extraordinary talents into the mix, whether it be recording, performing, or both. Getting to work with maestros like Swapan Chaudhuri, Poovalur Sriji, Houman Pourmehdi, Pete Lockett, Adam Rudolph, Abbos Kosimov, Brad Dutz, Carlos Stasi, Guello, and others has been nothing short of inspiring. We've come away from all these collabora-

tions with fresh ideas and new perspectives. It's been a vital part in our development as a group.

Randy: That collaborative nature of the group even extended itself into the realm of film soundtracks, when Hands On'Semble had the opportunity to work with composer Harry Gregson-Williams on his soundtracks to *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* and *Cowboys and Aliens*. We've had some incredible experiences on stage and off over the years and through our travels. Any favorites?

Austin: An experience that really stands out for me was our first trip to Brazil. Really, all of our trips to Brazil stand out, but the first one in 2000, in particular. Being that there's no shortage of incredible percussionists in Brazil, the bar was set high. I wasn't quite sure how we'd be received. We got a healthy applause when we were introduced, but when we finished our first tune, the place absolutely erupted! It was a great feeling, and the positive energy from the audience really inspired us to play our best. The enthusiasm continued throughout our set and well after with autograph signing and picture taking, etc. Feeling like rock stars in the van ride to the hotel I said to Bergamo, "That was the greatest musical experience of my life!" He laughed and said, "Me too!" That said a lot about Brazilian audiences because John was quite a seasoned performer. Later, when we went out to dinner, the whole restaurant, full of concertgoers, started shouting the opening phrases to "Piru Bole." That was quite surreal. We've been back to Brazil many times since then and it's always a blast.

Randy: Besides Brazil being a personal favorite, that particular trip was special for many reasons: that amazing concert; I met and took my first lessons with Guello, and we celebrated John's 60th birthday on that trip. I would also mention the concert in Hamburg Germany that same year. Going on stage and improvising a concert with Hands On'Semble, Jamey Haddad, Steve Shehan, and Mark Nauseef was an amazing experience and a great night.

Any final thoughts about Hands On'Semble and/or our clinic/performance at PASIC?

Andrew: What I enjoy most about being in Hands On'Semble is playing music I love with people I love. When we are on the road, much more time is spent waiting or navigating travel issues than playing music. It helps when we laugh and live as brothers.

Austin: I feel so fortunate to still be making music with my friends and Hands On'Semble bandmates. It's an honor to have the opportunity to share our work with the Percussive Arts Society.

Randy: Agreed, and well said.

We're really looking forward to PASIC 2015, sharing our music, and enjoying the convention with everyone.

Randy Gloss is a founding member of Hands On'Semble, and has also worked with an extensive and eclectic array of artists from around the world. Randy has contributed percussion to numerous albums, soundtracks for film, television, video games, theater productions, and several popular software sample libraries. Randy's first solo percussion album is scheduled to be released in November 2015 on Orenda Records. Randy is the Chairman of the World Music Program at CalArts, where he also oversees the World Percussion Program.