

Drum Circle Etiquette

Drum circle events of any kind, are about dynamic interactive musical and personal relationships. These relationships, when involved in any group rhythmical alchemy event, are based on a simple set of unwritten guide lines. When adhered to, these relationship guide lines can help direct the group of players to their highest musical potential.

In culturally specific circles, these unwritten guide lines have been developed through centuries of ancestral evolution. They can also apply to any contemporary western version of a drum circle, from a "free-form" drum jam to a facilitated community rhythm event. These unwritten musical and personal relationship guide lines are contained within what I call Drum Circle Etiquette. To most drum circle regulars, Drum Circle Etiquette is just a set of nonverbal agreements that everyone adheres to in order to create a fun and exciting musical experience together.

Below are my standard Drum Circle Etiquette suggestions for playing in most community drumming environments. Using these suggestions will help you comfortably merge into an ongoing drumming circle without being obtrusive. By adhering to these Drum Circle Etiquette guide lines you will make the drum circle experience more enjoyable for yourself and the people around you. You will then be a fully participating and contributing member of an "in-the-moment" rhythmical alchemy orchestra, some times called a drum circle.

- Don't wear rings, watches, or bracelets while playing drums. This protects the head on the drum as well as the drum itself from the metal. It also protects your hands.
- Ask permission before playing somebody else's drum. For some drummers, his or her instrument is a very personal possession. Also if someone gets up and leaves the circle to get a drink or go to the bathroom, don't immediately jump in and take their seat. In some drumming communities the drummers will put something on their seat, cover her or his drum with something, or lay their drum on its side to signify that they will be back.
- Don't smoke in the circle. Drumming is a high energy aerobic exercise. Respect the need of everyone to breathe uncontaminated air in such a closely packed environment.
- Listen as much as you play. By listening to what's going on in the circle as you play, you will have a better sense of how you might fit into the groove that is being created.
- Support the fundamental groove. that you hear in the drum song being created in the circle. You don't have to be a rhythm robot and hold down the same part all night long. There is plenty of freedom within the fundamental groove to experiment with while expressing your rhythmical spirit.
- Leave rhythmical space for other players in the circle to express themselves. Don't fill up the space with your own notes so much that there isn't much creative space left for the other players.
- Play at the volume of the group. If you can only hear yourself, you are probably not having a constructive musical relationship with the rest of the players in the circle. Good volume dynamics create good relationship dynamics. Play softly enough so that you can hear everyone around you. While you are drumming, be sure to follow and support the dynamic changes in volume and tempo that the group will go through during a drum circle event.
- Share the solo space. If you are at the advanced level of rhythmical expertise where soloing with your drum is available to you, then you know the excitement and pleasure of being able to play over, around, and through the drum circle groove. Soloing through a drum circle groove is very much like a bird flying through the forest. But the "solo air" above can't accommodate more than a few people soloing at the same time. If there is more than one soloist available in a circle be sure to share the solo space with them. The best way for two or three drum soloists to play through the groove together is to have a "drum dialogue" with each other.
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Advice for Beginners

- Enjoy the Journey. In all the excitement don't forget to have fun. Although it will help you to follow the simple Drum Circle Etiquette guide lines, you don't really have to be an experienced drummer to fully participate and have a good time.
- Don't worry even if you might think that you are rhythmically challenged. Just get started and you will find rhythms inside of you that you didn't know you had. All you have to do is actively participate in the drum circle event and the excitement and rhythms that will surround you will pull out of you exactly what you need to fully contribute to the group song. You don't even need to play a drum. You can bring a simple percussion instrument, like a shaker, a bell or a wood block. They are a lot easier to play than a hand drum.
- Support the drum community experience. If you are participating in a drum circle event for the first time, the best way to play is with an attitude of humility and support. Be very observant of the actions and reactions of the more advanced drummers who are playing in the circle and you will learn a lot quickly.
- Keep it simple. Listen for, then play along with, and around the pulse that will always be somewhere in the music. It is like keeping the side of the pool within reach as you are learning how to swim. The simple pulse will always be there for you to "grab on to" if you ever get rhythmically lost while playing. Once you are comfortable with what you are playing, you can explore deeper rhythmical waters. Just keep the pulse in site.
- Just Ask. Every rhythm event is different, and has it's own particular variations of Drum Circle Etiquette. If you're not sure what's appropriate, just ask somebody. They usually will respond with supportive suggestions.

There is a basic agreement in these kinds of events that each person in the circle is there to share their rhythmic spirit and personal energy with the community that is present. With this kind of group consciousness, a drum circle can be a very powerful, yet intimate experience for everybody as they create unity in their community by drumming together. Your drumming skill level is less important than how much of yourself you contribute to the experience. If every player is there to share their spirit and have fun, the musical part of any drum circle it will take care of itself.

If you have any questions, don't be shy, ask.

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