

# 2012 HALL OF FAME

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## John Bergamo

Percussive Renaissance Man

By B. Michael Williams

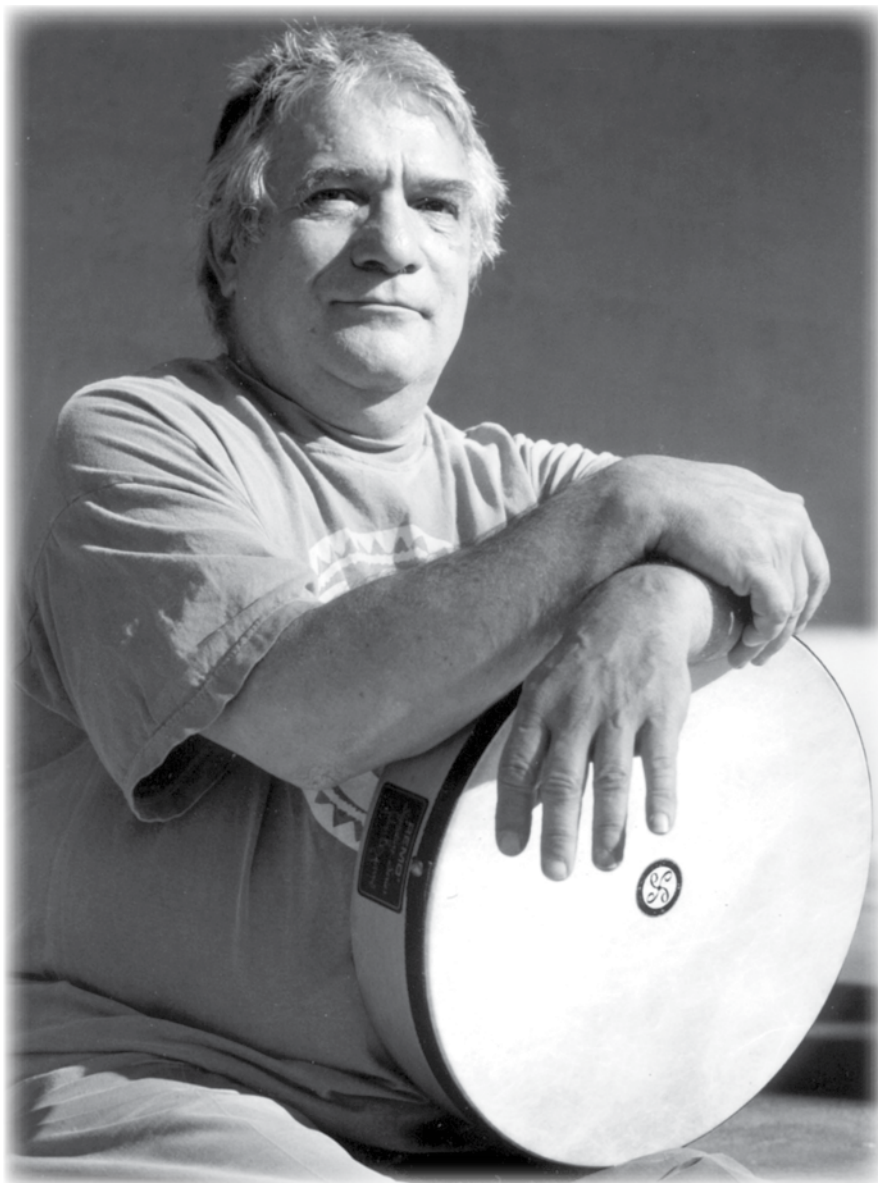


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**Renaissance man** *n*: a person who has wide interests and is expert in several areas.

Nowadays, terms can be so overused as to be rendered totally useless in describing aspects of quality in a person or work. Think of *awesome*. A perfectly good term that once meant “inspiring of fearful reverence,” it now means simply, *cool*. The term *renaissance man* today might casually refer to someone who can multitask or drive a stick shift, but among percussionists the world over, John Bergamo is a true renaissance man. He began as a “good snare drummer” (his own description), just good enough to gain acceptance into the Manhattan School of Music. He went on to study and work with some of the most diverse musicians on the planet, including Lukas Foss, Gunther Schuller, John Cage, Ringo Starr, Charles Wourinen, Lou Harrison, Ali Akbar Khan, John McLaughlin, Morton Feldman, Herb Albert, Percy Heath, Robert Shaw, Max Roach, Frank Zappa, and the list just keeps going and going and going.

Bergamo was the driving force behind two highly-acclaimed professional percussion ensembles: Repercussion Unit and Hands On'Semble. He has appeared on the soundtracks of at least 18 Hollywood films, produced three instructional videos, and published over 25 percussion compositions since 1963. His collection of mallet solos, *Style Studies*, published in 1969, has enlightened generations of collegiate percussionists on the stylistic nuances of contemporary keyboard percussion music. Always willing to share his experience with a wider audience, Bergamo's informative and inspiring articles have appeared in *Modern Drummer*, *Percussive Notes*, *Percussionist*, *Drum!*, and *Percussioner International*. From 1979 to 1988, he served on the PAS Board of Directors.

John was one of the first Western percussionists to study East Indian rhythmic systems and percussion instruments such as tabla, ghatam, thavil, and kanjira. In his February, 2001 *Percussive Notes* article, “John Bergamo: Percussion World View” (vol. 39, no. 1), N. Scott Robinson describes him as “part of the first generation of ‘new percussionists,’ and his approach to playing involves an eclectic blend of classical, jazz drumset, and world drumming traditions.”

John Bergamo was born in Englewood, New Jersey, May 28, 1940. Barely 17 years old upon graduation from high school in 1957, he auditioned for admission into the Manhattan School of Music. The judges were impressed with his ability on snare drum, but John had no experience with music theory. “I didn’t even know what the treble clef meant,” he admits. “They accepted me as a remedial student.”

John studied at Manhattan with Fred Albright and the legendary Paul Price. Like many of Price's students who would become famous in their own right, Bergamo was exposed to many of the classic percussion ensemble compositions from the early days of the genre: works by John Cage, Lou Harrison, Henry Cowell, and Edgard Varèse. He would stay at Manhattan until 1962, earning Bachelor and Master of Music degrees in percussion.

In 1959, concurrent with his studies at Manhattan, John enrolled in the Lenox School of Jazz, near Tanglewood in Massachusetts. There he studied drumset with Max Roach, played in a jazz ensemble directed by

Percy Heath and Kenny Dorham, and took classes in music history and theory with Gunther Schuller. Among his classmates at Lenox were Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry. “For me, at age 19, to get to study with Max Roach—it was like studying with God,” he told N. Scott Robinson in 2001:

I had listened to his albums and memorized half of his solos. We used to sit and count the drumset solos. Max would play a solo that was 64 bars, or whatever multiple of the tune, and it was exactly that. I knew there was something else going on inside his solos, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. He taught me what it is. He said, “How do you know where you are when you're playing a solo?” I said, “Well, I *don't* know. I just play, and then I go ‘boom-boom-boom’ and the band comes back in.” So he said, “You've got to sing the tune to yourself while you're playing.” ...That opened a huge door for me. The structure is inside my head because of Max.

After graduating from Manhattan in 1962, Bergamo was accepted to the Darmstadt International Summer Course in New Music along with Max Neuhaus, the first American to play Karlheinz Stockhausen's seminal percussion solo, “No. 9 Zyklus.” Impressed, Stockhausen arranged several private classes with Bergamo and Neuhaus on the structure and performance practice of the piece. Later in 1962, Bergamo toured Europe and the Soviet Union as percussionist with the Robert Shaw Chorale. Upon his return to New York, he freelanced alongside Paul Price and Michael Colgrass (another of Price's prized former students) and studied composition with Colgrass. From 1963 to 1965, he spent summers with conductor/composer Lukas Foss at the Tanglewood Music Festival on a Fromm Fellowship in contemporary music performance.

Upon his appointment as Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra in 1963, Lukas Foss was instrumental in forming the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts at the University of Buffalo. In 1964, Foss organized a new music ensemble called Creative Associates and hired Bergamo as percussionist. Bergamo in turn recommended Jan Williams, a fellow student from Manhattan School of Music, as the additional percus-

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By N. Scott Robinson

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Williams would go on to direct the percussion program at the University of Buffalo for the next 30 years, a life-changing event was about to unfold for John Bergamo. He told Scott Robinson:

During my last year there, in the fall of 1965, they had a Festival of India at SUNY Buffalo. There was live music, food, dance, poetry—everything. So who comes to play? Ali Akbar Khan spent the week! I didn't know who this guy was, but I'd heard tabla on records. A friend of mine played me a recording of Chatur Lal, and he said, "I want you to hear this drummer." I said, "Drummer or *drummers*? There's no way one guy is doing that." I was immediately impressed.

John sat in the front row for the concert, and later went backstage to meet Shankar Ghosh, who played tabla with Ali Akbar Khan. The following year found Bergamo in California, studying tabla at the Ali Akbar College of Music with the master.

Bergamo spent the 1968–69 academic year teaching at the University of Washington, where he met Zimbabwean mbira player Dumisani Maraire, who is largely credited with bringing the instrument to American audiences. Then he got an offer from a new arts school created by Walt Disney called the California Institute of the Arts, or CalArts. The dean of the school, Mel Powell, had worked with John in Buffalo and knew of his experiences there. They were looking for someone with a background in contemporary and world music, and found the perfect combination in John Bergamo.

The atmosphere was special at CalArts, where collaboration and experimentation crossed boundaries and sparked creativity. Faculty and students interacted freely, and John found himself learning as much as any student. He studied South Indian *kanjira*, *ghatam*, and *solkattu* with T. Ranganathan, *ghatam* with T.H. Subashchandran, African drumming with Alfred and Kobla Ladzekpo, tabla with Swapna Chaudhuri, and Javanese gamelan with K.R.T. Wasitodiningrat. More importantly, John helped foster a culture of mutual trust and respect among his students by learning along with them in real-world performances. His efforts resulted in two professional percussion groups, *Repercussion Unit* in the 1970s (with Larry Stein, Ed Mann, James Hildebrandt, Greg Johnson, Paul Anceau, and Steven "Lucky" Mosko) and *Hands On'Semble* in the 1990s (still going strong today with Andrew Grueschchow, Randy Gloss, and Austin Wrinkle). His 35 years at CalArts yielded generations of inspired students who carry on his vision of collaborative learning today. Ed Mann, a member of *Repercussion Unit*, remembers:

sionist. Other artists involved with the program included Mauricio Kagel, Sylvano Bussotti, George Crumb, Buell Neidlinger (bassist with Cecil Taylor), composer/trombonist Vinko Globokar, and violinist Paul Zukovsky. The ensemble explored the cutting edge of avant-garde music, premiering new works and performing in Buffalo and New York City's Carnegie Recital Hall.

While at Buffalo, Bergamo and Jan Williams organized the first percussion ensemble at the university. In Jonathan Hepfer's February, 2007 *Percussive Notes* article, "Jan Williams: The Evolution of New Music" (Vol. 45, no.1), Williams recounts:

When John and I got to UB, there was no percussion ensemble. We were just coming from Manhattan, where we were doing all this percussion ensemble stuff with Price.... John and I volunteered to start a percussion ensemble "off the books," in that it was not an official course but just a group of students who wanted to get together and play percussion music. We put up a few signs and put together a group of six or so players at the beginning, and started rehearsing some of the stuff we had been doing in New York. Luckily, Frank Cipolla, the band director, had bought some percussion music before we got there because he wanted the band percussion section to play something in concerts. So we had some pieces on hand that got us started—pieces like Mike Colgrass's "Three Brothers" and the Chavez "Toccata." So some percussion ensemble pieces had been performed at UB by the band before John and I got there. But when John and I came, we formalized the UB Percussion Ensemble as a separate ensemble that students could sign up for and get credit. So that's how the percussion ensemble got started at UB. We could only start such a group because John and I just had all this percussion ensemble experience with Price, and we had all the new instruments because of the Center [for the Creative and Performing Arts].

Bergamo would continue working in Buffalo until 1966, and while





### Hands On'Semble

I am always grateful to have been steered toward John by a previous great mentor, Mr. Al Lepak at the Hartt College of Music. My first impromptu lesson with John was on the long roll, a technique that John immediately noticed I needed work on. After that, John asked me what I wanted to study. I was not prepared with an answer, as I thought he would be telling me what to study! That was the first step of many under John's guidance, all which served to show us how to think for ourselves and teach ourselves and ultimately compose for ourselves, all with a very discriminating ear and the utmost musicality. How can we ever thank you John? You gave us everything with lots heart and soul.

Randy Gloss of Hands On'Semble considers Bergamo his "musical father," and describes his teacher's contribution as "immeasurably deep." "As far as his contribution to Hands On'Semble, John is the root of the

band," says Gloss, "I guess you could say it's a recipe/chemistry/group dynamic of John's creation. John is as selfless as they come, and so incredibly and sincerely humble. I wish him my heartfelt congratulations on being inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame."

In reaction to his Hall of Fame honor, John characteristically demonstrated the humility to which Randy Gloss referred, saying, "I'm surprised and honored to be inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame. Wow! Hal Blaine, Gordon Stout, Dave Garibaldi—I'm with *them*? I've just been exploring percussion, and I'm grateful for PAS. It's all we have!"

Contemporary, jazz, and world music performing and recording artist, composer, collaborative and creative facilitator, teacher, mentor, and friend for countless students and colleagues, John Bergamo is indeed a modern-day renaissance man, well-deserving of induction into the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame. You've inspired us all, John. We think you are *awesome*!

### ONLINE VIDEO

The Hands On'Semble, featuring John Bergamo, Randy Gloss, Andrew Grueschow, and Austin Wrinkle, performing at the PAS Southern California Day of Percussion at CSU, Long Beach on Sept. 30, 2001.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xeXDjm3-zw>

**B. Michael Williams** teaches percussion at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina. He is a three-time Past President of the South Carolina PAS Chapter, serves on the World Percussion Committee, and is an Associate Editor of *Percussive Notes*.

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*Remo congratulates our 2012 Inductees to the PAS Hall of Fame*



John Bergamo, Hal Blaine, David Garibaldi