

A Different Beat: The Providence Drum Troupe takes it to the bridge

I spoke to **David Lee Black** (founder/photographer) and **Jamie Lyn Bagley** (performer/marketing and collaboration consultant) of the Providence Drum Troupe. The troupe uses drums to bring people together in joyful spirit and to connect in a meaningful way, and when I met them, I felt like I had been introduced to a magical group of humans. I was lucky enough to interview them as they embark on the adventure of creating space for performers and audience alike to be our whole selves and to heal through the cleansing power of a drumbeat.



Mayté Antelo-Ovando (Motif): What is the troupe and how did it come about?

David Lee Black: The Providence Drum Troupe (PDT) was born from the pandemic. We combined percussion, dancers, street performers and the healing arts to activate a space with positive interactive energy and demonstrate that living in harmony with one another is not an antiquated notion. I initially invited my musician and visual art friends to gather and simply play, not unlike a childhood playdate. PDT organically grew from there. Knowing that bureaucracy kills creativity, we have only one rule, "Don't be annoying."

MA-O: What's your vision or utmost hope for the group?

DLB: As the public interest, gigs and bookings continue to grow, the vision for PDT remains simple: Connecting creative forces for the greatest good.

MA-O: Jaime mentioned that you rehearse/perform at the pedestrian bridge every Thursday. Is there a specific reason to use that location?

DLB: In early 2021, PDT realized the timing was perfect to create our own vision featuring our unique brand. [We] created our own vibrant art scene at the Michael Van Leesten Memorial Pedestrian Bridge. Taking it to the bridge is perfect for the troupe to perform and for the public to interact. Michael Van Leesten was a visionary African American leader and civil rights activist who provided leadership in pursuit of economic and social justice for the citizens of Rhode Island. He also was a friend of the arts. We are honored to play at such a poignant place.

MA-O: How did you become involved with PDT, Jaime?

Jaime Lyn Bagley: Okay, are you ready for just a little story?

M: I love story!

JLB: It's been important to me to do things that bring me joy. And one of the things that brings me joy is singing. Another thing is singing with my drum, and taking my drum and my voice and bringing it to the water as a form of prayer. I get to connect with the water, I get to sing. I create songs, I just improvise. It's just something between the water and me. It's become like a form of connection and meditation for me. So I go where I feel called to be. And one night, I went by the pedestrian bridge. I'm sitting by the water by the bridge, and I'm playing my drum and I'm singing. And [I met someone who] said, "Hey, there is this group of drummers here sometimes." So they entered my awareness. Then the next time I show up, again, feeling called to be there, I'm singing, I'm with my drum, there are a couple people watching me, and this man walks by and he [says], "I heard you playing from down the way a bit. We're with a drum troupe, and you're invited to join us at 6:30 tonight." David Lee Black — that was him. He invited me to just go and join them because he heard me playing my drum. And so, I joined and then they invited me back and it's, you know, you take the step. That first step to do something that brings you joy, because you know that you need to right? And then that's what happens.

MA-O: So much goodness in what you just said.

JLB: Yeah. That's kind of everything right now. Because people are like, well, what's my purpose? And how do I feel fulfilled? And how do I find my tribe? And it's a matter of, "Hey, you can even go back to childhood. What did you love?" I've always loved singing. And now I have this big group of people that feel like family. And we perform together, and it's so much fun. We make people happy. And it's just us showing up as ourselves.

MA-O: Right, seems so simple and yet...

JLB: So simple, because there's alignment there. So other people feel it. You were at a show. How did it make you feel?

MA-O: When I was there that day, to be really honest with you, I was a little bit nervous, just because everything is new right now. And sort of navigating going into crowds of people still feels tricky. But I loved it. I thought it was great and I could feel the community in it. And I also thought it was really

interesting when I first walked up. Someone at the back of the crowd did some sort of a chanting or singing at the very beginning and it sounded kind of tribal and beautiful.

JLB: That was Rock Paint. He has Indigenous roots, and he brings that — we call it, you know, his medicine. We are a mix [of people]. He's got Indigenous roots and it's a very spiritual [and] native thing with him. And my background is a little bit different, but I fully dig what he brings to the table.

MA-O: I wasn't expecting it, which I think is the reason that I was like, "Oh, I love that."

JLB: And that's exactly what we needed that night, because you came on the night of the eclipse. And so, people were being thrown. I mean, even internally in our group, there were people that were like, "I'm kind of low energy tonight, but I'm going to show up." My dad had just been brought to the hospital. So, I was trying to hold it together. We're all just kind of holding it together. And then there's Rock Paint grounding everybody to do this. We [don't] necessarily have a formula. [Things] morph. When something works, we tend to keep it. So that might be something that we keep, you know, his sort of starting with that grounding.

MA-O: I've only seen you all once, so of course take this with a grain of salt, but I like the idea of some sort of a ritual that begins the process. Is there a set vision for what you're bringing together?



JLB: Alright. I like to think in terms of limitlessness. And when there's alignment, and you've got people who are like, "Wow, yeah, we're not going to limit this — it's Providence." But Providence also has a really cool definition, right? It doesn't necessarily stand only for the capital of Rhode Island. It's being provided for, having foresight, destiny, fate. There are so many good definitions for the word providence, it's perfect. Our vision is just that we continue to keep it a representation of unity — different worlds coming together for the greatest good, and it's inclusive. There's something magical about, like, "Hey, I'm gonna bring what I bring to the table, and others do the same." And then we do have ... I'll call them actual drummers, right? You have some people that show up as percussionists. But then some people are actual trained drummers who have been drumming in bands for a very long time. Like John Cote (aka Cocktail Cote). He's the musical director. It's basically his job to keep everything tight, to keep the sound tight, when we're doing actual songs. So, David and I, our vision is to maintain the purity of what this is because so easily something like this can turn bureaucratic. It can turn into something where someone has to take control, and then it just kind of falls apart where it gets too big, and then it stops being like a tight-knit family, or it stops being special, or it stops resonating. He and I both see this as being an activator for not only creativity, but freedom. My personal mission is to help activate people to greater depth. It's like, I am I'm activating your personal freedom. Your yes means yes, your no means no. We're just at a time where, you know, you step into that personal power. And the drum is such a good way to connect to your own heartbeat, to get back in the body...

MA-O: Yeah. Speaking again of the grounding.

JLB: Yes, yes. It does ground. And sound has the ability to take things away with it. And I see what we do as clearing. And so, we show up to the river on Thursday night, and that's our rehearsal. It's also a performance. We're not getting paid. We do collect tips that go to upgrading our equipment, maybe helping somebody get to the rehearsal because they don't have a ride. We're not making money on Thursday night, we're just there to rehearse, [and] it becomes a performance. And we're clearing gunk, you know? If you show up, it's almost like, you need it, whether you know it or not, and it doesn't feel like healing. It feels like a party.

MA-O: Yeah, it feels like joy.

JLB: It feels like joy. And that's what it feels like to be making the sound, making the music with everybody.

MA-O: You are also marketing yourselves as a performance group?

JLB: Yes. So, we just did an event for Haus of Codec at Dexter park. A group of us went and we had about an hour of time, and we performed for the community that was there. We're going to be opening for Fringe Fest on July 19 at WaterFire Arts Center. That's also part of our vision is to be able to [provide] entertainment. [Though] what we do is beyond entertainment. It's very activating. And so, I think PDT is less of a business right now and more just kind of [a group] organically becoming what it's becoming. And we're not limiting that.

MA-O: Love that. So you're still in the process of becoming. It's not something that's already defined, it's like you said, limitless.

JLB: Yeah. And I think you get that, even personally at this time, it's important for each of us to kind of feel that way about ourselves and to be open to becoming. Because you know, you have this, you may have this idea of what you want or who you want to be. But like, maybe there's this other thing that's

inside and it just wants to kind of come out and play. And it wants to be listened to.

MA-O: What if somebody wants to be a part of you?

JLB: We encourage [people] to come check us out on a Thursday night. So, if they've only heard about us, but haven't seen us, come check us out! For example, I have a girlfriend of mine who heard about us. And she came last Thursday when you were there. She had a great time. And then [asked], how do I become a part of this? And so, she spoke with David [and he told her to] come back. She's a dancer. We've got people who dance, we've got people who play drums, we have people who like to hula hoop. That's a great question, because I feel like more people want to be a part of this. David, is the contact person [for those interested].

MA-O: I feel like that's an invitation to experience it, rather than to just talk about it or see pictures of it. It doesn't substitute for the actual experience of being there.

JLB: That's it. People remember how you make them feel, right? So, you remember how you felt when you were there. And what you felt when you left. And we've gotten a lot of good feedback [from] people who maybe weren't having a great day, and then they came, and then they felt good. And they're like, wow, I'm so glad I came. And you don't get that unless you're actually there.

MA-O: Absolutely. Well, and I think, both as performers and then as people that are receiving performances... as everyone is sort of coming out... things are getting easier to access and people are now coming out and having experiences together. It definitely feels like community in that space. And everybody just seemed so friendly, and into it. It's a nice way to gather.

JLB: It is a nice way to gather. And then sometimes a child comes up, you know, at the right moment, and there's my drum, and they [play]. It's community and it's connecting with community. And not calling it a community event. You know, I like to call it bridge night, or like, hey, it's when we take it to the bridge. There's something even about the word bridge, you're bridging people. [Being there] definitely feels intentional. That bridge itself holds significance. And just being on the water, too, with the smokestacks in the background, and the other bridge in the background. It's just quintessential, it's Providence.

MA-O: Is there anything else you want to say about the troupe about your experience?

JLB: What is valuable to [share] — it's that the drum is the heartbeat. And I think we feel it. One of the drummers, Micaiah, he tells people that drumming is therapy. And so once you're done, you're done. It doesn't matter how you play, or like how well you play, right? Just that you've played, and now your therapy is over. And so, I guess I encourage people to come experience it, and then maybe pick up a drum themselves. Don't be afraid to turn a barrel upside down, and [play]. It's rhythm, it's grounding. If people can connect to something that brings them joy now, or finding their tribe, or even like, "Hey! Don't be afraid to step outside of your comfort zone a little bit, and do that thing that brings you joy that you can do anywhere." Maybe it's painting, and maybe you want to do it outside by a tree in the park. And then you go one day to paint by the tree in the park, and someone walks up to you. And that starts a conversation that takes you somewhere else, you know, you start very small. And you just never know.

MA-O: Yes. Oh, I love that. That gave me chills.

JLB: Your tribe finds you wherever you are. I used to think that I didn't have tribe in Rhode Island. I've

been here for so long. My tribe isn't here. The alignment piece, I felt like I was missing. I felt I had to be somewhere else. So, I planned to be out west as an actor. I'm like, I'm gonna move. Something kept saying, "Not yet. Not yet. Not yet." And then my tribe found me, you know? Because I put myself in that. I allowed them to find me.

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