

# “Inuksuit”: An Anthem for Being Human

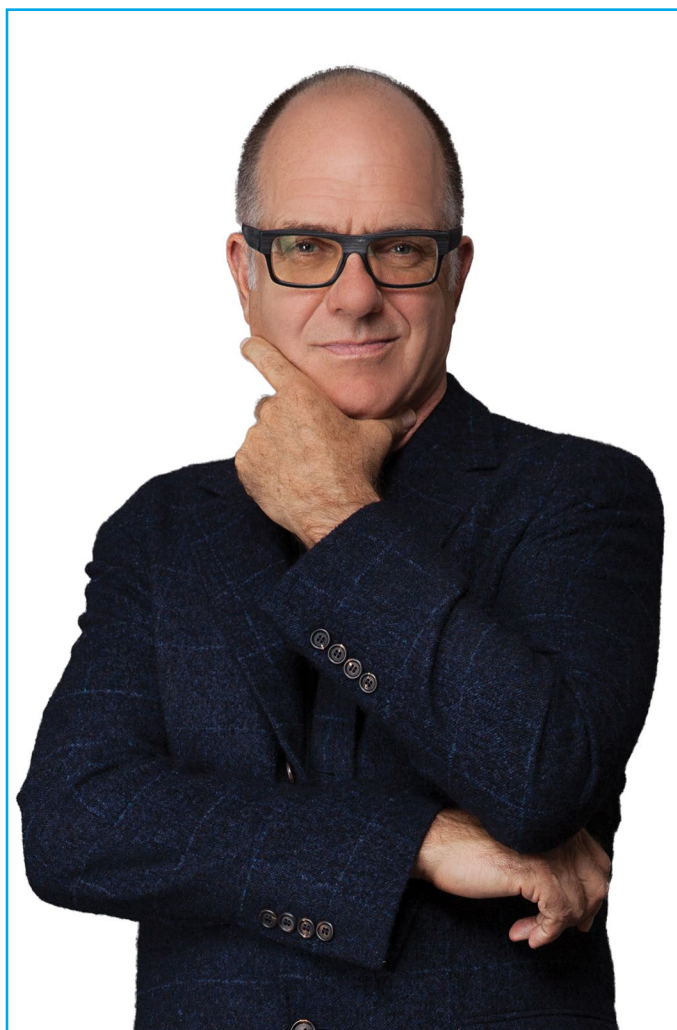
By Steven Schick

On June 30, 2009, 21 percussionists,<sup>1</sup> all participants in the “Roots and Rhizomes” percussion course at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, gathered at Goat Creek near Kananaskis in Banff National Park to give the first performance of John Luther Adams’s “Inuksuit.” The previous night, at a soggy preview concert on the grounds of Banff Centre, an audience of several dozen hearty Canadians braved the weather. But with a worsening forecast, even the breathtaking scenery of the Canadian Rockies failed to draw a crowd for the official premiere. Under threatening skies, the small ensemble ported dozens of drums, cymbals, and gongs across frigid streams and up muddy mountainsides. The audience was minuscule, consisting of the faculty for Roots and Rhizomes that year – Bob Becker, Anders Loguin, and Aiyun Huang – along with Barry Shiffman of Banff Centre, a videographer from *The New Yorker*, and the composer, John Luther Adams.

Afterward, the cold, wet, and tired musicians faced an arduous load-out. The music was exhilarating, but it was hard work. None of us would have imagined then that “Inuksuit” would become one of the most performed and best loved works of the percussion repertoire, having been played on nearly every continent before combined audiences numbering in the tens of thousands.

Today, many hundreds of performances later, the success of “Inuksuit” is well-established. But it still feels a little mystifying. In every performance I have organized, percussionists have played for free, supplied their own instruments, and often traveled long distances. They load in over uneven terrain, rehearse, and perform under whatever weather conditions might prevail, and load out again for the trip home. There are no soloists, no star performers, and no paychecks. On the other side of the curtain, concert presenters can’t easily sell tickets, and in large outdoor sites with performers spread over many acres, it might not even

be possible for an audience member to hear all the music being played at a given moment. “Quixotic” doesn’t even begin to de-



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scribe this! Yet perhaps because it is indifferent to the economies of modern concert giving, “Inuksuit” has tapped into the deep aquifer of communal energy that drives all percussion playing.

Please don’t misunderstand: “Inuksuit” is thrilling and emotionally rich music. But somehow its logistical challenges also seem to be part of the attraction. Doug Perkins, long-time advocate of “Inuksuit,” lists among his favorite performances one

3). The skin and metal rhythms are modeled on the shapes of “inukshuk”—stone assemblages made by the indigenous people of the circum-polar arctic. Inukshuk are the sentinels of the north, signposting the vast expanse of the arctic to indicate an especially welcoming place for humans—perhaps a rich hunting ground or a place simply where good things happened. The large supporting stones of the inukshuk are represented as massive drum,

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in Chicago’s Millennium Park, the fabled “Inuk-So-Wet” when a summer-long drought ended in a downpour that greeted that performance.” Another Perkins performance in the Italian Dolomites was interrupted by a sudden passing storm. Megan Arns encapsulated it well, “‘Inuksuit’ often meant driving long distances with our gear and cramming into shared hotel rooms. We didn’t mind. We were happy to see old friends, meet new ones, and be a part of the performance. I have noticed a renewed appreciation for our percussion community when my students return home from a performance of ‘Inuksuit.’” Maria Finkelmeier added, “It reminded me how grateful I am to belong to a community that values important narrative work and careful sonic exploration while completely embracing a gear haul to wild places.”

Are the exigencies of weather and labor of positive value in “Inuksuit”? Bonnie Whiting answers by evoking John Cage: “The work succeeds through collective, process-based labor. Percussionists are uniquely positioned to take on both conceptual and logistical challenges in community, and in ‘Inuksuit’ the unpredictability of each environment at any given moment adds a welcome layer of indeterminacy.”

Who knows what the weather will be like in Indianapolis when we perform “Inuksuit” in November for the 50th anniversary of PASIC, or what the load-in will be like. But we do know that we will be among like-minded artists, friends, and colleagues. Along with members of the artistic committee, whose comments I am including in this article, I invite you to join us, as performers or as listeners.

The musical components of “Inuksuit” are self-evident. Starting together at the center of an outdoor space, a percussion ensemble consisting of three sub-groups gradually moves to pre-determined remote positions within a chosen outdoor site. The first group begins with breathing sounds and walks slowly to the farthest positions; Group 2 takes its positions next in the middle-distance, playing rubbed stones and other friction sounds along the way. Then Group 3 walks to positions closest to the center and plays whirled tubes or other aeolian instruments as they move. Once in place, cues from Group 1 prompt a rising tide of rhythm from sets of drums (Group 2) and cymbals (Group

cymbal, and gong strokes in the score. And silences within the rhythmic flow symbolize the open spaces of the stone sculptures—the arches and fenestrations within each inukshuk.

Finally, after a build-up of noise and rhythm, the texture slowly thins. Performers from Groups 1 and 2 return one-by-one to their central starting point. Glockenspiels and piccolo players from Group 3 offer an elegiac coda of birdsong. The pieces finishes, as it began, in silence. This is where the magic truly begins. The concluding bell and piccolo birdsong music is a gossamer invitation to hear the music that is always there—the often-obscured songs of the planet. Wind rushing through trees or across water, the sounds of nearby birds and animals (including bipeds.) This moment, in which the intense focus of listening shifts from composed music to the sounds of the earth itself, is always luminous. Life-affirming.

“Inuksuit” teaches us that our primary job as musicians is not to perform, but to listen. In an increasingly noisy and distracted world, we are reminded in “Inuksuit” that musicians play a critical role in society as models of the selfless action of listening attentively. This is not just a practical skill but an ethical act that can help salve the scars of environmental or social damage. Reflecting Wendell Berry’s maxim that “There are no unsacred spaces; there are only sacred spaces and desecrated spaces,” “Inuksuit” has become, for many of us, a force of re-sanctification for people and places in need of healing. In fact, “Inuksuit” so frequently prompts reactions of deep emotion and spiritual connectedness that it feels like much more than music. Doug Perkins: “[It’s] a work that is about more than the notes on the page. It teaches people to work and to listen together.”

Last year, along with Daniel Moore, Doug Perkins, Megan Arns, and many others, I organized an emotionally charged performance of “Inuksuit” in Iowa City at my alma mater, the University of Iowa. Our chosen site was City Park on the floodplain of the Iowa River. In 2008, in one of the most devastating natural disasters to hit my home state, the Iowa River crested to more than 31 feet. City Park was under water as were nearly all the arts facilities I knew as a student. In a massive gesture of faith in the arts, the university rebuilt those structures. But scars from

the flood can still be seen in the high water marks a dozen feet above people's heads and in a brigade of brand-new buildings set back from the flood zone. The resilience of the university and its commitment to artmaking is tangible. And on a crystalline, windswept day in October it felt as though, through "Inuksuit," we were helping to consecrate those efforts.

Another moving "Inuksuit" performance was a 2018 bi-national project, in which we played across the U.S./Mexican border. The ensemble was separated into two groups – roughly 40 in each country. Our audience of several hundred was also divided into two sides, positioned several hundred feet apart and separated by the 30-foot-tall border fence. Before the concert, listeners on the Mexican side wandered along the Tijuana boardwalk and ate lunch in cantinas along the playas. On the U.S. side, the scene was grimmer. We set up in the ironically named "Friendship Circle and Bi-national Garden." Google it: there is nothing friendly about this small plot of bare, reddish-brown dirt. It's a kind of no-man's-land between the border and the United States proper. Normally, the Garden is closed to the public, but for a few hours on some weekends it opens, and you can walk right up to the border fence. One sunny November morning I watched an elderly man on the U.S. side carry a chair and small table to the fence and over an early Sunday lunch speak to some young children and their mother on the Mexican side. Passing objects through the tight wire mesh is strictly forbidden, but if you press hard enough you can just feel someone's fingertips on the other side.

That day, "Inuksuit" grew out the sounds of wind and breath, as it always does. As usual, the dramatic drum, cymbal, and siren moments were thrilling. The ending was especially poignant as the glockenspiel and piccolo birdsong ended so softly that at first no one knew the piece was over. For several minutes there was only the music of the birds and the rising afternoon wind.

Finally, the applause began. Starting slowly, the first uncertain claps were barely distinguishable from the growl of the nearby surf. Then in a roar of its own, with every passing second more clearly itself, a tide of human noise washed over the border in volleys of cheers, first on the Mexican side, then answered by an equally raucous response from the U.S. side. For a quarter of an hour, we cheered. We cheered for each other, for the land, and for the dream that it might belong to us all. A massive wave of noise flowed across the border. And for a fleeting moment of joy the wall disappeared.

It seems that just when we need it, "Inuksuit" brings us lessons in healing and hope. It heals by touching the land itself, and by extension also touching the original stewards of the land, from the indigenous people of the circumpolar arctic to the Kumeyaay along the San Diego-Tijuana border to native peoples everywhere it is played. It prompts hope when we manage to live up to its name: "Inuksuit," from the Inuit for "to act in the capacity of being human."

Whether "Inuksuit" is played at the U.S./Mexico border, in the Canadian Rockies, or as it was in Scott Herring's favorite performance around the University of South Carolina's historic Horseshoe, it demands, as Thad Anderson wrote, "the audience's curiosity and ability to move within the soundscape. In the same way that the music breathes with the natural surroundings, the shared intent of the audience profoundly contributes to the overall experience."

Omar Carmenates recalled a conversation with the composer after the U.S. premiere at Furman University. "I thanked him profusely for being with us and for his wonderful leadership with the many young musicians (some even high school age)." John Luther Adams responded saying, "That is something I will cherish about this performance too, Omar – that the piece teaches its performers as much, if not more, than it learns from them."



Yes, we all gain. “Inuksuit” is an anthem for being human. This is music not only for die-hard percussionists or fanatical new-music audiences, but for any of us who call this beautiful blue and green planet our home. Our sacred space.

## ENDNOTE

1. The performers in the premiere of Inuksuit were Andrew Bliss, Michael Compitello, Justin DeHart, Eric Derr, Dustin Donahue, Jonathan Hepfer, Sandra Joseph, Ross Karre, Andrew Meyerson, Daniel Morphy, James Petercsak, Jorge Peña, Corinne René, Melanie Sehman, Steven Sehman, Daniel Tones, Jude Traxler, Bonnie Whiting.

## VIDEO

<https://www.newyorker.com/video/watch/inuksuit> PN

### EVENING CONCERT

#### Wula Drum and Dance Ensemble

Wednesday

Steeped in the dynamic sounds and energetic movements of West Africa, Wula Drum is comprised of world-class master drummers, dancers, and instrumentalists. Performing a broad repertoire of energetic rhythms, songs, and dances, the music is played on such instruments as the djembe, dunduns, krin (log drums), and balaphone (African xylophone). Guided by Artistic Director master drummer M'Bemba Bangoura, The Wula Drum and Dance Ensemble has people jumping out of their seats, rousing audiences with the vibrancy of a rich musical culture.

In West Africa, the djembe drum is used to bring people together for many purposes: to communicate, celebrate, and motivate. The djembe, a cultural lineage that spans years upon years, is for all humanity to experience. Through the rhythms, expression, mindfulness, and joy are cultivated.

Wula Drum's mission is to deliver the highest quality West African performances with authentic, handmade instruments, educating people about African drum and dance. They believe that the way to break down barriers of race and class is through music and dance education, environmental awareness, fair wages, and supporting sustainable livelihoods in both Guinea and the USA.

Wula Drum has performed at countless events over the years, ranging from Performing Arts Centers, festivals (internationally and domestically), schools, universities, libraries, museums, corporate venues, and private events. Wula Drum has performed in the USA as well as in Mexico, China, Canada, and the Caribbean.

### EVENING CONCERT

#### Jeff Hamilton Trio

Thursday

Jeff Hamilton was born in Richmond, Indiana. He attended Indiana University and later studied with John Von Ohlen. Hamilton was influenced by Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Mel Lewis, Philly Joe Jones, and Shelly Manne. In 1974, he got his first big break playing with the New Tommy Dorsey Orchestra. He attained a childhood goal in 1977 when he joined Woody Herman and the Thundering Herd, with whom he made several recordings. Throughout his extensive career, Jeff has performed with many artists and won multiple awards, including playing with Lionel Hampton, L.A.4, Ella Fitzgerald, the Count Basie Orchestra, Rosemary Clooney, and Monty Alexander and the Ray Brown Trio, and more.

Jeff currently focuses on performing with The Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra, pianist Tamir Hendelman, and the PASIC50 concert group, The Jeff Hamilton Trio, featuring Tadataka Unno on piano and Jon Hamar on bass.

#### Galactic Featuring Jelly Joseph and Stanton Moore

Saturday

For over 30 years, Galactic has been a powerhouse of New Orleans music, fusing funk, jazz, rock, and soul into a sound that's unmistakably their own, driven by drummer Stanton Moore. Originally coming together in the '90s as a late-night funk band, the group has grown into a genre-defying collective that continues to evolve while staying true to their roots. Their high-energy live shows and adventurous collaborations have earned them a loyal following around the world. In recent years, Galactic has been touring and recording with dynamic vocalist Jelly Joseph, whose soulful, commanding voice adds a powerful new dimension to their sound. The band also serves as the owner and steward of the legendary Tipitina's music venue, where they host iconic performances and foster the next generation of New Orleans artists. In 2021, they launched Tipitina's Record Club, an all-vinyl label celebrating the city's rich musical legacy.

Their newest release, *Audience With the Queen*, marks a major milestone: a full-length collaboration with Irma Thomas, the beloved “Soul Queen of New Orleans.” Featuring Thomas on every track, the album blends her timeless voice with Galactic's modern edge, delivering a powerful and deeply rooted collection of songs that honor both tradition and innovation. *Audience With the Queen* is a testament to Galactic's unique place in American music — deeply New Orleans, endlessly collaborative, and always pushing forward.