

The Hellcats: Rudimental Torchbearers Since 1778

By J. Andrew Porter and Jack Bounds

Rudimental drumming has a rich and unique history in the United States. Much of what we practice today evolved from European drumming styles and traditions. Given our history as a former British colony, a great deal of our rudimental drumming tradition evolved from the practices

of the British military. As it was in much of Europe, drumming in the earliest history of the United States was of practical use. It was used by the military in camp and in battle — to provide instruction to soldiers on the battlefield, to practice drill and ceremony, and to lift morale in camp.

The Hellcats have a proud lineage of rudimental drummers dating back to the Continental Army in January 1778, when the garrison of West Point was established on the banks of the Hudson River, approximately 50 miles north of New York City. Given its strategic importance in the Revolution, General George Washington made West Point his headquarters in 1779. Washington had previously issued General Orders that stated a fifer and drummer were to be stationed with each company of soldiers. Additionally, fife majors and drum majors were tasked with ensuring the professional capabilities of the musicians; otherwise, the musicians risked being reduced in rank and pay. There have been fifers and rudimental drummers stationed at West Point ever since, and we take pride in hiring the most skilled and technically proficient musicians available. This lineage has established The Hellcats as the first and longest serving group of professional musicians in the U.S. Army.

The Hellcats got their nickname in the early 1900s from those they serve: the Corps of Cadets at USMA. The U.S. Military Academy was established as an engineering and officer training college for the U.S. Army in 1802 by President Thomas Jefferson and has since evolved into one of the premier leadership training institutions in the world. The West Point Band was officially recognized by an act of Congress in 1817, making it the oldest band in the U.S. Army.

Known officially as the Field Music Group of the West Point Band, The Hellcats are comprised of six buglers, two piccolos, and five drummers, and are one of three performance elements in the West Point Band. They are the U.S. Army's only remaining traditional field music group and are responsible for continuing military field music support traditions at the U.S. Military Academy. This



The Hellcats

includes a live bugler to perform Reveille and Retreat ceremonies daily, and small ensemble support for all cadet accountability formations prior to breakfast and lunch.

All members of the West Point Band go through a rigorous audition process that is specific to the job requirements of each job opening. Once candidates are selected, they must complete U.S. Army Basic Combat Training before joining the West Point Band and eventually serving as a Non-Commissioned Officer in the U.S. Army. The West Point Band is one of four Army Special Bands, with the other three stationed in the Military District of Washington.

Today, drummers in The Hellcats serve an important role at the United States Military Academy and enjoy one of the most dynamic and varied responsibilities of all musicians in the U.S. Army's Special Bands. Duties include everything from early morning music for formations and keeping the cadets in step for drill and ceremony practice, full military honors for soldiers and veterans who have passed, feature performances at West Point and on various national and international stages, and performances for national and international media broadcasts.

The Hellcats have performed with the New York Philharmonic; as part of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and the Macy's July 4th Fireworks Spectacular; as featured performers in tattoos in the U.S., Germany, and Scotland; and for broadcasts on ABC, NBC, FoxNews, and BBC1. Additionally, The Hellcats have filled many roles in leading and instructing cadets, including running USMA Reception Day activities, instructing basic drill and ceremony techniques, and leading land navigation instruction for cadet summer training.

The Hellcats are excited to highlight and build on this rich history as part of their presentation for PASIC50. With the unique responsibilities of today's Hellcat drummers, they take pride in bridging the gap between the historic military roots of rudimental drumming and today's artistic and competitive drumming endeavors. The Hellcats will perform some of their standard traditional repertoire as well as some more modern compositions and look to expose the link between our shared rudimental drumming history and today's modern writing styles and performance techniques. In short, there's something for everyone, whether you are interested in "ancient" style drumming, modern drum corps and WGI drumming, or just getting a little history lesson on how our current art form evolved.

Biographies for current performers in The Hellcats: <https://band.westpoint.edu/hellcats/>.

Note: The Hellcats are currently looking to hire a rudimental drummer. The application window closes on Oct. 6, 2025. Audition requirements and other information are listed at: <https://band.westpoint.edu/audition/rudimental-drummer/>. PN

MARCHING

Shelby Shelton

Virtual Marching Clinic

MOVE IT! Front Ensemble Emotive Gestures

This interactive session will focus on strategies for teaching students to move with effectiveness and expressiveness while performing. We'll primarily explore front ensemble gestures that can enhance exercises or show music, helping to convey a broad range of emotions to the audience. Audience participants will engage in movement activities and observe student musicians demonstrating effective gestures in performance. We will also touch briefly on scientific studies that support the positive impact of gestures for musicians. While this clinic will focus on front ensembles, the techniques are applicable to other percussion instruments and chamber ensembles.

Shelby Shelton is an active performer, adjudicator, and educator. She is the director of percussion at Northwest Missouri State University and the Front Ensemble Coordinator at Carolina Crown. Shelby has worked with the Cavaliers, Sacramento Mandarins, Madison Scouts, George Mason Indoor percussion, Music City Drum Corps, Father Ryan High School, and Veritas indoor percussion. She is currently pursuing a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in percussion performance at James Madison University. Her academic research is centered on emotive gestures and expression within the context of front ensemble.

KEYBOARD

Rim of the Well Trio

Virtual Keyboard Clinic / Performance

Marimba Improvisation in Flamenco-Fusion Style

Flamenco's sophisticated rhythms thrill audiences, and spontaneous improvised marimba adds new excitement. The Rim of the Well Trio — composer Steve Mullins, guitar; Doug Walter, marimba; and Carl Dixon, cajón — have performed for Flamenco dance parties, Flamenco school recitals, concerts and clubs in the U.S. & Europe. Steve's flamenco background and love of snare drum fuse complex, syncopated rhythms with Spanish Flamenco's aggressive, tragic vision. Doug will describe how well-timed phrasing leads to accuracy and why, for music of such passion, we practice dynamics as methodically as we work for speed. Flamenco rhythms shift between 3/4, 12/8 and 3/2. Doug will demonstrate improvising through these spontaneous metric modulations. Flamenco improvisation emphasizes exotic minor chords. Doug will teach marimbists to exploit these frenzied sounds and rhythms in a unique experience!

The Rim of the Well Trio plays Flamenco-Fusion improvised music. Dr. Doug Walter directs percussion at the University of Colorado Boulder. Composer, multi-instrumentalist and ethnomusicologist, Dr. Steve Mullins taught at the University of Colorado. His PhD dissertation, *Flamenco Gestures*, explores the aesthetics of Spanish Flamenco. Carl Dixon plays with the Brazilian band Ginga, teaches hand drums and percussion at University of Colorado Boulder, directs the Boulder Samba School, holds several orchestral positions, and is the founder of Virada Drums.