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2024 Hall of Fame Neil Grover

By Lauren Vogel Weiss

Neil W. Grover is a renowned percussionist who has been pursuing his passion for creating world-class percussion accessories for over four decades. He has also achieved success as a top musician, playing with world-class orchestras and performing on soundtracks of blockbuster movies.

"Neil has had an incredible impact and forward-thinking influence on so many," states Sherry Rubins, Professor of Percussion at the University of Texas–San Antonio. "Current musicians have benefited, and future musicians will benefit from his wonderful insight both as a professional performer and a successful industry leader."

When asked to describe himself, Grover grins and says, "A schizophrenic! But seriously, I consider myself equally a performer and music entrepreneur – mainly performing while trying to juggle the aspects of designing, making, and selling instruments! Having my life's work recognized by my peers is incredibly fulfilling."

"I took the study of percussion accessories seriously," he adds, "and I hope that my musical legacy will be elevating the art form of playing tambourine, triangle, and other small auxiliary percussion items."

FROM LONG ISLAND TO BOSTON

Born on July 7, 1955 in Queens, New York, Grover was raised in Bellmore on Long Island. "My dad was, and still is, a very gifted jazz musician. We had a piano in the house, even though we

didn't have a couch!" Neil jokes. "Our house was constantly full of music."

Grover became interested in percussion at age nine when he saw his cousin perform a concert in New Jersey. "He was playing cymbals," recalls Neil, "and I thought it was the greatest thing. This was also the year that the Beatles played on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. That's when I decided I wanted to play the drums and be in a band."

His first percussion teacher, Ronnie Benedict, also taught Dom Famularo. "Ronnie was not only an incredible teacher, he was a life motivator," Grover says. "He kept kids interested through discipline; you had to earn the privilege to play the drums."

"My next teacher was Joseph Castka," Grover continues. "He was a percussionist for the NBC Symphony and Radio City Music Hall. George Gaber was one of his first students, and I was one of his last. Up until that time, I was basically a drumset player, but I wanted to learn more percussion, especially mallets, timpani, and accessories."

During high school, Neil played timpani in the orchestra, started a percussion ensemble, and was the drum major of the marching band. He graduated from John F. Kennedy High School in 1973 but wasn't sure he wanted to major in music.

"I decided to go to Florida State University, where I studied with Robert McCormick," Grover explains. "Bob was a wonderful teacher, mentor, and friend. During my freshman year, I realized, through Bob's help, that I wanted to pursue a career as a professional percussionist. He helped me prepare auditions for

Left: Neil Grover playing drums on the Long Island "bar mitzvah circuit" in 1968.
Middle: Neil Grover was the drum major for his high school marching band in 1972.
Right: Neil Grover in his first PASIC exhibit booth in 1981 in Indianapolis.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NEIL GROVER

Eastman, Juilliard, and the New England Conservatory. He was the most supportive teacher I could have hoped for.”

Grover transferred to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston as a sophomore, where he studied with Vic Firth, timpanist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, for three years before graduating with high honors with a degree in percussion performance from NEC in 1977.

“Vic was really an incredible teacher,” Grover remembers. “At my first lesson, he said, ‘Talent got you this far. Perseverance is going to take you from here.’ Vic was a consummate musician. Not only would he explain what he wanted, but he was able to actually demonstrate it, whether it was mallets, snare drum, or timpani. I would schedule a noon lesson every Friday. At one o’clock, I’d walk over to Symphony Hall with Vic, walk in the stage door with Vic, then find an empty seat in the balcony. Just watching him play, especially the repertoire on timpani we had just covered, was the greatest lesson of all.”

During these three years, Grover was also a Boston Symphony Fellowship student at Tanglewood, the BSO’s summer home in the Berkshires. “The Fellowship orchestra was made up of great young musicians from all over the world,” explains Grover. “We got to work with some of the world’s greatest conductors, like Leonard Bernstein, Seiji Ozawa, and Aaron Copland. One of the greatest concerts I remember is when Bernstein conducted his ‘West Side Story Suite.’ I was able to ask him questions about the percussion part that were puzzling to me, and hear the answers right from the composer’s mouth! We also got to hear every single concert the BSO did throughout the summer. It was an incredibly inspiring musical environment.”

BOSTON PERCUSSIONIST: FROM OPERA TO POPS

In 1977, while still a senior at NEC, Grover joined the Boston Musicians Union, Local 9-535, and began to freelance in his adopted hometown. He immediately won the principal percussion position with the Opera Company of Boston, a position he held

Neil Grover and Michael Balter at PASIC '92 in New Orleans.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL BALTER

for seven seasons. It was around this time that Neil began to play as an auxiliary percussionist with the Boston Symphony (through 2015), and the Boston Pops, which he did for more than four decades. In 1983, Grover also joined the Boston Ballet as a percussionist and assistant timpanist, and he was part of that orchestra until 2003.

After more than 2,000 concerts, several stand out in Grover’s memory, including two with the BSO. “My debut at Carnegie Hall wasn’t exactly how I thought it would be,” he recalls with a smile. “We were playing a Mahler symphony, and I was one of the offstage percussionists — Arthur Press on snare and me on bass drum. Seiji [Ozawa] decided we would be in a custodial closet off stage right. So we sat in this hot, dark closet for what seemed like an eternity until I opened the door just before we played!”

“My second memorable concert was also at Carnegie Hall, but quite different,” Grover continues. “It was just after 9/11, and Seiji decided to change the program to the Berlioz ‘Requiem.’ At the end of the piece, there was complete silence — except for people sobbing. It was a great performance, and one I will never forget as long as I live.”

Grover also remembers decades of traveling around the world with the Boston Pops. “Playing with John Williams was an incredible experience,” Neil says. “I remember one concert in Red Rocks, Colorado, playing in that beautiful outdoor amphitheater. We were doing selections from John’s score to the movie *The Witches of Eastwick*. I was playing thundersheets, amongst other things, and there was heat lightning all around us. I thought, ‘Do I stop playing now and let nature take its course?’ But my other thought was, ‘Could I get electrocuted if lightning hits one of these?’” Neil’s sense of humor is never far away.

“Playing John’s music with him over the years was an amazing experience,” Grover adds. “What an incredible musician and incredible human being.”

A video of Grover playing with Williams and the Pops at Sun-tory Hall during a 1987 tour of Japan may be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLbsmUrOVwU.

In addition to live concerts, Grover has also performed on the soundtracks of several movies, including *Blown Away*, *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (with music by Philip Glass), and the 1984 action/adventure *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, which was nominated for Best Original Score (by John Williams) at the 57th Academy Awards.

“During a recording session for *Indiana Jones*,” Grover remembers, “I was asked to play brake drums, hoses, and chains — all these wild sounds. I asked John what was going on in this scene and he said, ‘Neil, this is where we’re going to scare the crap out of every kid in America!’”

ENTREPRENEUR

Neil may be best known for his company, Grover Pro Percussion, whose origins can be traced to a 1979 performance

with the Boston Symphony. “I was playing the triangle part in [Rimsky-Korsakov’s] ‘Scheherazade.’ Vic told me to use the Leedy triangle. It had this incredible sparkle! I didn’t understand, because it looked like all the others, but it sounded like the Stradivarius of triangles. So I took it to a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and we reverse-engineered the triangle! They handed me a piece of paper explaining what alloy it was, the temper, how it was fabricated – basically, instructions of how to duplicate it.

“I found a blacksmith in Charlestown, where the old Boston Navy Yard used to be,” Grover continues. “I came back a week later and he gave me a triangle that sounded *identical* to the old Leedy, and only charged me \$20. At the next rehearsal in Symphony Hall, I used the new triangle instead of the Leedy. Arthur Press, Assistant Timpanist at the time, asked if he could get one, so I went back to the blacksmith, ordered another one for \$20, and gave it to Arthur. Then other players in town started asking about it, and I went back and had six more triangles made. Just to show you how naive I was at that time, I charged my colleagues the same \$20!” Grover shakes his head in disbelief at the thought.

“I got a call from Doug Howard, who was principal percussionist with the Dallas Symphony,” Neil says. “He heard from someone in Boston that I was making triangles and he wanted one, too. Then I got a call from Harvey Vogel, who had started Lone Star Percussion in 1978. He said, ‘I hear you’re in the triangle business.’ I said, ‘Harvey, I’m sorry. I’m not.’ Then he said, ‘Well, you are now!’” Grover laughs at the memory.

“Harvey placed an order for a dozen triangles,” Grover recalls, “but I didn’t really understand how the business worked. He explained to me about wholesale versus retail. And by 1980, Grover Enterprises was a reality.” Neil soon added tambourines, with beryllium copper jingles, and mallets to his product line. “I got into business out of necessity because it was hard to find quality accessories at that time.”

Leigh Howard Stevens, founder of Malletech, states, “Neil Grover is an important percussion entrepreneur, having started his business at a time when the idea of a ‘professional tambourine’ was an oxymoron! He felt a need to perform on a more professional sounding product and had the drive, courage, and vision to develop something out of nothing.”

Grover remembers exhibiting his fledgling company at PASIC ’81 in Indianapolis. “I brought several dozen triangles, tambourines, and mallets. If I sold them all in three days, that would pay for my travel expenses. So I made a sign and printed some flyers. I sold out of everything within the first hour! That’s when I thought I should really go into business instead of just dabbling in it.” Grover Pro Percussion, incorporated under that name in 1992, has exhibited at almost every PASIC since 1981, only missing a few in recent years.

World-renowned percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie has been a longtime friend and supporter of Grover. “There is some-

thing very assuring and satisfying when playing on instruments made by Neil,” she says. “You know they have come from a player’s perspective with absolute quality, functionality, and reliability at the core. Many years ago, when I was playing Joseph Schwantner’s ‘Percussion Concerto,’ two big [Grover] orchestral bass drums were delivered to my studio in the U.K. Little did I expect my own logo to be painted on the drumheads!”

In addition to the hand-held accessories that Grover is known for, he also made snare drums with synthetic shells and cable snares, and, for a short time, wide-bar glockenspiels. In 1999, he purchased Silver Fox, before selling it a decade later to concentrate on other aspects of his business “I always liked the drumsticks that Al LeMert made,” Grover says.

“In 2001,” he continues, “I noticed Vancore, a company in Holland, was buying a lot of Silver Fox marching sticks. During a trip there, I visited them and noticed all the keyboard percus-

Neil Grover hand-hammering tambourine jingles, circa 2010.



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Neil Grover and John Williams, circa 2007.

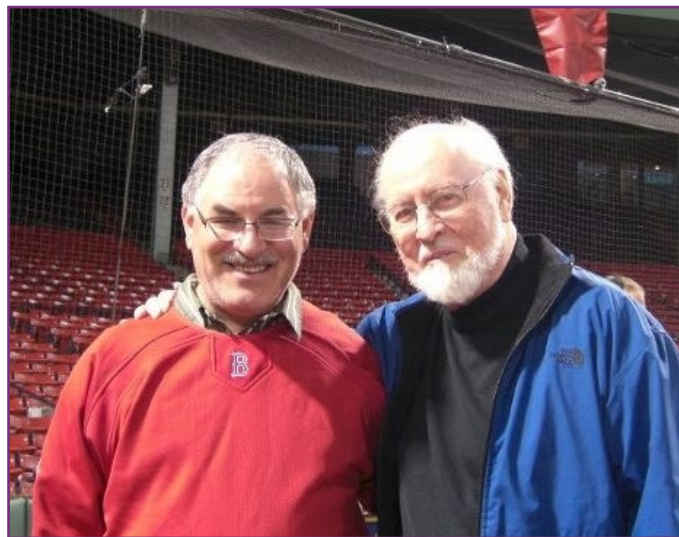


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sion instruments they made at their factory. I asked if they had a U.S. distributor, and when they said no, I quoted Harvey and replied, "Well, you do now!"

Over the years, Grover also acquired Spectrasound, the company that made Mark Tree bar chimes. He also introduced Grover concert bass drums, the EQlipse Dual Apex snare drum (with two distinct bearing edges), temple blocks, the first multi-tonal anvils, and a line of proprietary travel cases designed specifically for percussion products.

Grover Pro Percussion was featured on two episodes of the Canadian documentary television series *How It's Made*, which aired on the Science Channel in the U.S. "They filmed for two full days," recalls Grover. "What I didn't realize at the time was that it would live in reruns forever!" The episode on making snare drums (Season 7, Episode 2, originally aired in 2006) may be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=PltwBvmiwNM and

the episode on making Silver Fox sticks and mallets (Season 8, Episode 9, originally aired in 2007) may be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LyPXnFUGOE.

PAS Hall of Fame member Michael Balter describes his friend of nearly 50 years. "I have seen first-hand his drive for never allowing himself, or Grover Pro Percussion, to rest on their laurels. Throughout the years, he was always pushing his company to the next level. Once the next level was obtained, Neil would continue to push the company even higher. At each level, new products would emerge to aid the professional percussionist, university student, and general player, providing them with the tools necessary to create their sound."

In 2019, Grover Pro Percussion was recognized by the United States Small Business Administration (New England Chapter) as the "Small Manufacturer of the Year." They also received a Massachusetts House of Representative commendation for manufacturing excellence.

As Neil Grover approached age 65, he began to think of an exit strategy from the day-to-day tasks of running a small business. "I wanted to spend more time with my wife, Maureen, and my son, Max," Neil admits. "I met with the folks at Rhythm Band Instruments [RBI] and realized it was a good fit. Their values were the same as mine. The ownership change took place in May 2019, but I'm still very involved in product design, marketing, and education. This has enabled me to go back to the things I loved doing."

Sherry Rubins adds, "Even after selling his company, Neil continues to develop innovative products. When I am performing with a professional orchestra or on a gig, I have at least one instrument or implement that Neil has designed, and I often think, 'Thank goodness he thought of this!'"

Star Wars in Concert, North America Tour, circa 2009.



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Neil Grover before a Pops concert, circa 2023.



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CLINICIAN OR COMEDIAN?

"Everything that you wanted to know about the tambourine and triangle...but were afraid to ask!" (PASIC 1995) "Accessories: Musical Instruments or Weapons of Mass Destruction?" (PASIC 2010) "Playing Percussion Accessories: Not as easy as you think!" (PASIC 2019) These are some of the hundreds of clinics that Grover has given over the years, and a perfect example of his sense of humor. "I just want them to leave feeling happy," he says, "and if they learn a little something, that's great!"

Since 1987, Grover has presented ten sessions at PASIC, from clinics to FUNdamental classes (1987, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2017, plus the three mentioned above.) "The FUNdamental clinics were easier to do," explains Neil, "because you can stick to the basics. But I remember giving a master class on tambourine in 1987, and Alan Abel was in the front row! You don't want to talk above everybody, but you don't want to talk below them either. It needs to be a little bit of something for everyone."

Grover has also given clinics and master classes at countless universities around the world. "The Pops used to travel quite a bit, sometimes four to six weeks a year," he recalls. "Mostly

one-nighters. When the plane landed in the next city about noon, I would go to the local university and teach. What else was I going to do? Sit in the hotel room with my practice pad? Especially in the early days, before the internet, my products were new to people. So I would show up with a box of tambourines and get all the students to play ‘Trepak’ [from Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker*]. It was a real treat for them, and a good business decision for me. I wanted to share some techniques and let them hear what these instruments *should* sound like when they’re played correctly. The percussion educators were very supportive.”

Bob McCormick, former Professor of Music at the University of South Florida, agrees. “Neil has given more master classes at schools, PASICs, and Days of Percussion than one could ‘shake a tambourine at!’ He’s always giving so freely of his time to help others.”

What advice does Grover tell students? “How well you play is only half of being a professional performer,” he replies. “Remember that it is a business. You need to be organized; you need to be serious; and you need to be the supportive of your colleagues.”

Neil Grover presenting a tambourine master class, circa 2012.



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Neil Grover at PASIC 2022 in Indianapolis.



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Grover also was the chair of the percussion department at the University of Massachusetts/Lowell (1984–88) and the Boston Conservatory of Music (1988–92), but realized he could not maintain a teaching schedule while performing and running a business.

There are also five publications to Grover’s credit: *Four Mallet Primer* (1994); *The Art of Tambourine & Triangle Playing*, with Garwood Whaley (1997); *Four Mallet Fundamentals*, with Whaley (2006); *The Art of Percussion Playing*, with Whaley and Tony Cirone (2006); and a chapter in *The Drum and Percussion Cookbook: Creative Recipes for Players and Teachers* (2014).

Garwood Whaley, founder of Meredith Music Publications, describes Neil: “We’ve developed a long-lasting friendship and mutual admiration for over forty years. As his publisher, I am always impressed with his clear concepts of education and his ability to communicate them.”

Grover has been an ardent supporter of PAS over the years since joining the organization in 1979, serving on the Board of Directors (2004–12) and Board of Advisors (2020–22), and chairing the Symphonic Committee (2006–10) and Sustaining Members Advisory Council (1986–88). He also received the PAS Outstanding Supporter Award in 2009.

Sherry Rubins summarizes his career. “I believe Neil Grover’s multi-faceted legacy will continue to inspire generations to come.”

Dame Evelyn adds, “Our friendship goes back years, and the far too few times we do actually meet, it is as though we lived next door to each other. Neil is a true friend and an utterly inspiring musician who has given so much to us in the percussion world.” PN

Dame Evelyn Glennie and Neil Grover at the Texas Music Educators Association (TMEA) convention in San Antonio in February 2023.



PHOTO BY LAUREN VOGEL WEISS