

# From Vision to Reality: The WPN and pas.org

By James A. Strain, PAS Historian

“Imagine being able to instantly access a database that could tell you all the recordings of the Basta ‘Concerto for Marimba’ or to download a digital accompaniment for the concerto so that a student could play along with it, right from your own home or office!” Though that paraphrased statement seems easily done today via the World Wide Web and current technology, when it was first written in an article by Norm Weinberg in 1990 it was only a visionary idea for percussion teachers and students. For the last 20 years, PAS has created and utilized many electronic or digital systems and resources with which to realize its missions to communicate, educate, and assist its members and the public at large. Two of the most successful and innovative methods of achieving these missions were the development of the World Percussion Network (WPN) and the Society’s website, [www.pas.org](http://www.pas.org).

Though it’s hard to imagine a world without the World Wide Web, it has only been open to public access about 20 years. Prior to the “Web,” computers were able to connect to other computers or the Internet, a system of interconnected computer networks, only by a direct connection, or by calling into a network over a telephone line via a modem. These early connection processes were used by the WPN until the “browsers” and the World Wide Web developed. These developments allowed one to connect freely to the WPN and then [pas.org](http://pas.org) with only the URL of the site using the HTTP address. Though the above is a simplified explanation of the technical aspects of the Internet and the Web, the real story is how all of this came about for PAS.



(L–R:) Blair Helsing, Ian Turnbull, Barry Zimmerman and Norm Weinberg pose at the WPN booth during PASIC '91 in Anaheim, Calif., where the WPN was unveiled to the PAS membership.

In August 1990, after being asked by *Percussive Notes* Editor James Lambert to serve as editor for *Electronic Percussion*, Norman Weinberg published his visionary article proposing what could be possible for PAS on an imaginary “World Percussion Network.” At PASIC '90, Rebecca Kite approached him and said, “Norman, how could you possibly publish that article about the World Percussion Network and forget to publish the phone number?” Weinberg replied, “There *is* no number because there is no WPN! It’s just an idea I had.”

His article intrigued several members of PAS who independently approached him and said, “PAS needs this, and I think we can make it happen!” One of these was Blair Helsing, who at that time worked for Bank of America and was accustomed to organizing people and new ideas and bringing them to fruition. He and Weinberg also met at PASIC '91, and then through phone calls and several correspondences the two of them began planning the required resources.

In February of 1991, Weinberg officially asked Randy Eyles, 2nd Vice-President of PAS, if he could establish a committee on *Electronic Percussion* in order to work on the WPN project. Eyles’ response by letter, dated March 29, 1991 stated: “PAS needs to have an *Electronic Percussion Committee*, and I would like you to act as chair. In this capacity you would be able to delegate various projects to other committee members as appropriate. Your job as *Electronic Percussion Committee Chair* would be to supervise all PAS projects that relate to electronic percussion. This would, of course, include the *World Percussion Network*.”

Weinberg then began the process of identifying committee members. In April, he received a letter from Barry Zimmerman of Lakeland, Florida, who said, “I don’t see a number for the WPN in your article.” Again, Weinberg had to tell someone that was because it did not actually exist, but he also asked

Zimmerman, “What are we going to do about it?”

Zimmerman, who already operated a dial-in BBS (*Bulletin Board System*), decided he would accept the challenge and set one up at his home. After its initial configuration, he sent Weinberg the number to dial and waited. When Weinberg called in and connected, the *World Percussion Network (WPN)* was born!

Other members of the *Electronic Percussion Committee* were also given the number, and Blair Helsing is credited as being the first member to “log on” May 10, 1991. Helsing states that, “One of the best things I remember about the early WPN was that I was able to serve on a committee with people from all over the world, including Evelyn Glennie.”

Zimmerman recalls that members of the committee “traded messages, accumulated files of various sorts, and experimented with all of the things that would make it a useful service for PAS members. We collaborated on an article for *Percussive Notes* concerning the upcoming PASIC in California, and none of us had ever met.” This article, which appeared in the October 1991 issue, begins as follows:

Editor’s Note: This article represents a unique milestone for *Percussive Notes*. It was actually written online by members of the *Electronic Percussion Committee* as a collaborative effort. By using the features of the *World Percussion Network*, members living in Florida, California, Texas, and Ontario were able to read, edit, add, and delete portions of the article and mold it into its final form. The entire process from start to finish was completed in nine days.

Through this new technology, online collaboration, exchange of data or information, and the amount of time it took to complete projects for PAS became much quicker. As the WPN became a reality, the *Electronic Percussion Committee* worked hard to expose the membership to the possibilities WPN presented by demonstrations at PASICs from 1991–95. Members dialing into the BBS system grew



by leaps and bounds, which required multiple phone lines, additional computers, and updated software. This ultimately required the system to be moved to the PAS office in Lawton, Oklahoma, so in April 1994, Zimmerman and Weinberg made the trip there to assemble and install the system, allowing PAS to assume official control of the "hobby" BBS system that Zimmerman had been operating.

As the WPN evolved, so did the technology. A new method of rapidly expanding technology allowed members to connect to the WPN via the Internet, rather than a phone call. Utilizing TELNET members could connect directly through the Internet with no long-distance phone call or expense. As the PAS Technology Committee (renamed from PAS Electronic Percussion Committee) had achieved its primary goal of creating the WPN, it was discontinued. When new technologies emerged that required a more extensive "hands on" administration in 1997, committee member Rebecca Kite agreed to house the system in her home in Minnesota, where it operated on a DSL connection and was updated to begin a move to access via an Internet "browser."

When Kite began to serve as the system administrator she was "amazed at how everyone actually used the WPN. They were from all over the world and called 24 hours a day, around the clock." Kite recalls that it was often an adventure serving as the administrator to the WPN at this time and vividly recalls when Weinberg was presenting a demonstration of the WPN from London. "I wanted to be sure that the system didn't go down or fail during Norm's demonstration. So there I was at 4:00 A.M., sitting in my basement, surrounded by the computer equipment and my laundry, watching him connect to be sure his demonstration worked perfectly for our London percussionists!"

Significant contributors who shared information on the WPN at this time included com-

mittee member Greg Malcangi, who provided access to Evelyn Glennie's database of new music for percussion, and Russ Girsberger, who shared his vast knowledge as the former librarian for the United States Marine Band, as well as other experts in all areas of percussion literature and performance. If someone had a question about percussion, it could easily be answered in just minutes by posting it on the bulletin board. In a June 1993 article in *Percussive Notes*, dozens of articles, catalogs, MIDI files, music apps, text and library files, and computer utility programs were listed showing the types of information one could find on the WPN.

By 1997, the PAS Board and PAS President, Garwood Whaley, realized the advantages that the WPN had achieved for efficient and increased communication for all members and the public. During the summer of 1998 the Executive Committee, which consisted of Genaro Gonzalez, Robert Breithaupt, Jim Coffin, and Mike Balter, along with Executive Director Randall Eyles, moved forward with the decision to greatly enhance the presence of PAS on the World Wide Web and the need to re-invent PAS electronically for members by professionalizing pas.org. Breithaupt, who became PAS President in January 1999, recalls that there were several specific goals in mind: "We wanted to effectively reduce the cost of printing and postage, especially for international mailings, as well as reduce the cost for student membership. In addition, we were firmly committed to a continued dissemination of all information available to us, especially images of the contents of the museum and archives."

When PAS made the decision to transform the WPN into www.pas.org, a "web team" was assembled to oversee the project. Susan Hunt-Wallace, who served as Web Administrator for PAS from 1999 to 2009, was hired to design the site and take care of all the technical aspects. PAS Publications Editor Rick Mattingly was asked to supervise content and edit any new material that would be added to the site. Teresa Peterson, who served as Managing Editor for the PAS publications, served a similar purpose for the new website, coordinating the activities of various people and groups who would be involved in specific website projects. And Hillary Henry, who was graphic designer for the PAS publications, would work closely with Hunt-Wallace and help prepare much of the material for being put online.

"The first milestone was creating a website that was easy to use, and that allowed people to sign up and renew their membership online," says Hunt-Wallace. "In addition, there was the international factor to consider. Members from all over the world had to be able to access the site, regardless of the technologies available in various countries."

In terms of content, Mattingly recalls starting with the WPN files. "We wanted to put

a lot of what was on WPN on the new site," Mattingly recalls, "but the technology had changed quite a bit, so much of it had to be redone. The good thing was that the new technology would allow the same material to be presented in a format that would be much easier to access. As I went through that WPN material, I was constantly amazed at how much the WPN committee had been able to accomplish with the limited technology that existed when they began the project."

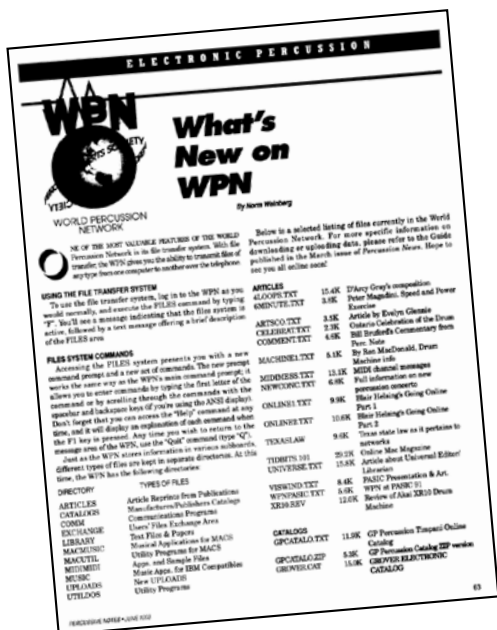
In terms of structure, it was decided that the site should have two main sections: a public section, which would help promote PAS, and a Members Only section that would provide added value for a PAS membership. One of the first goals was to create a new membership category through which, for a reduced dues amount, an ePAS member would access the publications through the website rather than receiving printed copies through the mail. This would serve a variety of purposes: provide a more affordable membership category; make it easier for college students who lived on campus much of the year and at home the rest of the year to receive their PAS publications without having to have them forwarded; allow non-U.S. members to see the publications in a timely manner, without having to pay extra for airmail delivery or wait weeks for regular overseas delivery; and save PAS money by not having to print and mail as many copies of each publication.

One of the first goals of the Members Only section was to put every issue of *Percussive Notes* and *Percussion News* online as soon as it was published, and Hunt-Wallace remembers that "the project to get all of the past publications scanned, cataloged, and online was huge. Hillary worked very hard on that project, and it was very successful."

"WPN had some content from early issues of *Percussionist*," Mattingly says, "but pdf technology didn't exist when they started, so it was just straight text files with accompanying graphics that were often not very clear. With the new technology, we were able to put exact replicas of the original publications on the website, and PAS members could print out any pages that they wanted hard copies of."

"That boosted the value of a PAS membership tremendously," Mattingly says. "When I joined PAS in 1971, I waited several weeks before I received my first copy of *Percussive Notes*, and it was several years before I had a sizable collection of PAS publications to use for research. Once all the publications were online, someone could join PAS through the website and moments later have access to every issue of *Notes*, *Percussionist*, and *Research Edition* ever published."

Another goal was to have an area where members could post comments, questions, and answers about a variety of percussion-related topics such as mallet-keyboard percussion,



drumset, world percussion, repertoire, timpani, and marching percussion. It quickly became a popular feature for many members. The WPN had a similar capability, but again, the technology had improved tremendously, and as more people became comfortable with using the Internet, more members took advantage of this feature.

The “public” side of the website was designed to promote PAS. It had basic info about the organization including a brief history, membership information, and listings of the PAS committees, state and international chapters, and Hall of Fame members. There was also a page where one could download the 40 PAS International Drum Rudiments. “In the first year the rudiments were on the site, they were downloaded thousands of times,” Mattingly recalls. “Previously, when someone requested a copy of the PAS Rudiments, someone in the PAS office had to photocopy and mail them. That took an employee’s time plus the cost of paper, envelopes, and stamps. Now it wasn’t costing the PAS anything.”

The site was also used to promote the PAS museum. At first, the pages featuring instruments from the museum that had been appearing in the back of *Percussive Notes* were collected into a “mini-tour.” A new page was added every time a new issue of *Notes* was published. Hunt also recalls that, “There was also a ton of work put into converting the Gerhardt Cylinder Recordings collection so that it was accessible online and in creating a Virtual Museum tour.”

PASIC was given its own section (and even its own URL, [www.pasic.org](http://www.pasic.org)) so people could go directly to that site for up-to-date information about the next convention. Hunt-Wallace states: “I also remember working with Jeff Hartsough on putting PASIC session applications online, which saved hundreds of hours and several trees each year from what I understand.”

Once the basic framework of the site was set up, a lot of work was done to fill it in. “As an example,” Mattingly says, “we started with just a list of the PAS Hall of Fame members. Our ultimate goal was for people to be able to click on a name and read a biography of that person. With some of them, it was easy, because in recent years we had been doing extensive articles on Hall of Fame inductees in *Percussive Notes*, so we put those articles on the site and linked them to the names. But with some of the earlier Hall of Fame inductees, *Percussive Notes* had only run a short paragraph, and the PAS archives had very little information. So we gradually started writing new articles and updating the oldest ones.”

Likewise, the site started with a list of PAS committees and contact info for the chair. But soon each committee was asked to prepare information for the site that would explain the purpose and activities of that committee. Like-

wise, PAS chapter information was made available, and as many chapters developed their own web pages, they were linked to [pas.org](http://pas.org).

Early on, the idea was discussed that, if the majority of PAS members started using the site regularly, perhaps the printed edition of *Percussion News* could be eliminated and all of its content put on the site. A couple of steps were taken in that direction. First, to accommodate ePAS members who were getting their publications through the website, the dimensions of *Percussion News* were changed from tabloid size to standard letter size for the benefit of those who wanted to print out some or all of the pages from their personal computer. Second, a couple of sections of *News* were moved to the website. “Industry News,” which consisted of press releases announcing new percussion products, was moved to the website and renamed “New Product Showcase.” (Today, *Percussion News* again has a section called “Industry News,” but instead of dealing with new products, it deals with activities and appointments within the percussion industry.) Also, listings of performance programs submitted by members were removed from the print publications and moved to the website.

The change in physical size of *Percussion News* had an unexpected side effect, however. The new size and better-quality paper that was being used resulted in more advertising. *Percussion News* began making a profit (before, it was basically subsidized by advertising from *Percussive Notes*), and surveys indicated that the “regular” (non-ePAS) membership liked receiving it in the mail. Plans to do away with *News* were dropped.

Instead of replacing the print publications, the PAS website has been increasingly used to add content to *Percussive Notes* through articles that are “web enhanced” by means of audio and video files that one can access through [pas.org](http://pas.org). Starting in 2012, instead of *Percussive Notes* appearing on the website as pdf files, a new web reader will be introduced that will further integrate the print publications with the website.

One of the ongoing projects for the website has been in the area of research. In 2001, Tom Siwe donated his *Guide to Solo and Ensemble Literature* to PAS, and not only is it available through the website, but it has been linked with literature reviews and the programs submitted by members over the years. As a result, one can (for example) see in the program information that a certain piece is becoming popular, and then with just a couple of clicks, read a *Percussive Notes* review of that piece and find its instrumentation and publisher through the Siwe *Guide*. The website also contains an Online Research Journal to accommodate scholarly works about percussion, thereby expanding the amount of such information PAS can publish.

The site also includes the *Fujii Database of*

*Japanese Marimba Works*, donated to PAS by Matsuko Fujii and the Senzoku Marimba Research Group at the Senzoku Gakuen College of Music Percussion Institute. The *Fujii Database* lists 724 titles and is available to the public in a 39-page download. The database lists works by title, composer, date of composing, date of premiere, name of concert hall, name of prefecture, country, performer, publisher, and recording.

Yet another recent addition to the site has been the Oral History Project, which is a joint project of PAS and NAMM. It consists of 50 video interviews with prominent players, teachers, and industry figures including Remo Belli, Louis Bellson, Gary Burton, Billy Cobham, Martin Cohen, Jack DeJohnette, Vic Firth, Roy Haynes, Morris Lang, William Kraft, Mel Lewis, Emil Richards, and many others.

The website has also made the “business” side of PAS run more smoothly. Through the site, 24 hours a day, one can join PAS, renew a membership, register for PASIC, submit a PASIC proposal, sign up to be a PASIC exhibitor, vote for the Board of Directors, or purchase items from the PAS Gift Shop.

In 2009, Marianella Moreno assumed the position of Administrator of [pas.org](http://pas.org), overseeing the implementation of a new content management system called Sitefinity by Telerik. This conversion allows for dynamic changes of all web pages by any of the staff at the PAS office using simple word processing programs as well as compatibility for the website with many other software programs.

“PAS now has a fully integrated web solution with a state-of-the-art membership management system and a private social network,” Moreno says. “The integration was made possible by unifying technologies to integrate data from many sources and processes. As PAS evolves, the integration becomes more and more a key aspect of day-to-day operations and new web initiatives for desktop and mobile devices. PASIC has a Twitter feed and PAS has a presence on Facebook as well as LinkedIn. These social media tools enable a boost in traffic and support many of PAS’s campaigns that combine offline and online needs. For video, PAS utilizes VIMEO as the supporting platform for video streaming. This platform enables many possibilities for viewing videos from both desktop and mobile devices, such as iPhone, Android phones, Blackberry or the iPad.”

Reflecting back on the entire electronic evolution, Zimmerman, who created the first WPN, states: “The WPN and [pas.org](http://pas.org) became almost exactly what Norm saw it as being over 20 years ago. And now I get e-mails on topics on the PAS Network the moment they’re posted. I don’t even have to log on. We never dreamed something like that was possible back then.”

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