



Songs Of Unity

BY JODY ASHFIELD

*Sound,
connection,
inclusion, and
the power of
music for ASD*

As the conversation around inclusive design continues to evolve, so too does our understanding of how public spaces can better support neurodiverse communities. Inclusive and accessible design—now more commonly known as “Universal Design”—is today’s standard for anyone wanting to create community spaces. For individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the environment plays a critical role in shaping experiences and impacting comfort, communication, and the ability to engage with others. Increasingly, designers and planners of community spaces and play areas are recognizing the value of sensory-rich, accessible environments that go beyond compliance and actively promote well-being. At the center of this dynamic is an often underutilized yet powerful tool: sound.



— *An Alternative Pathway* —

Through the thoughtful integration of outdoor musical instruments, companies like Percussion Play are helping to redefine what inclusive play and public space can look like. By focusing on sound, connection, and accessibility, environments are created where individuals with ASD, and indeed people of all abilities, can participate, express themselves, and feel a genuine sense of belonging.

Sound is one of the most immediate ways humans engage with the world. It requires no translation, no instruction, and no prior knowledge. For individuals with ASD, who may experience challenges with verbal communication or social interaction, music offers an alternative pathway, one that is intuitive and deeply personal.

Unlike structured activities that rely on rules or outcomes, musical play is inherently open-ended. There are no expectations, no right or wrong ways to participate. Designers at Percussion Play purposefully develop many instruments that are tuned to the pentatonic scale, so whichever way a person plays it, it sounds pleasing. This freedom to create with no rules is particularly important for neurodivergent users, allowing them to explore at their own pace and in a way that feels comfortable and self-directed.

One of the instruments is specifically designed



to support people with ASD. The Duo is a xylophone-type instrument that encourages social interaction in a comfortable and pressure-free manner. The curved shape of the instrument allows players to engage with one another without the need for direct eye contact or close physical proximity, creating communication in a safe and inclusive environment. As a result, the Duo is a popular choice for music-therapy projects.

Outdoor musical instruments amplify this accessibility. Positioned in natural settings, they invite spontaneous interaction. Rather than people being cooped up in a classroom, outdoor music-making provides space to be creative. Natural environments can help regulate sensory





input, providing space, fresh air, and visual calm. A gentle strike of a chime, the rhythmic tapping of a drum, or the exploration of tonal patterns can become a form of self-expression, one that does not depend on words but still communicates emotion, curiosity, and intent.

— Design Considerations And Impacts —

A key consideration in designing for ASD is sensory-processing. Many individuals experience heightened sensitivity to sound, light, touch, or movement, while others may seek additional sensory input. Inclusive environments must therefore strike a careful balance, offering stimulation without overwhelming the user.

Materiality also plays an important role. Smooth finishes, durable components, and responsive surfaces create a tactile experience that complements the auditory one. The physical act of striking, tapping, or gliding across an instrument provides feedback that reinforces engagement and supports motor-skill development.

One of the most profound impacts of music is its ability to bring people together. In inclusive public spaces, outdoor musical instruments act as social anchors, drawing individuals into shared experiences without the need for formal interaction.

For children and adults with ASD, social engagement can sometimes feel complex or intimidating. Traditional

forms of play often rely on verbal communication or understanding social cues, which may present barriers. Musical play, by contrast, offers a different type of interaction. Individuals can participate alongside others, contributing to a shared rhythm or soundscape without the pressure of direct communication.

This parallel play can naturally evolve into collaboration. A simple beat can be echoed, a melody repeated, a rhythm built upon. These moments of connection, though subtle, are powerful. They create opportunities for social development, build confidence, and create a sense of inclusion.

Families, caregivers, and peers are often drawn into these interactions, creating a shared space where everyone can participate equally. In this way, music becomes a bridge, connecting individuals across differences and encouraging empathy, understanding, and mutual enjoyment.

While accessibility is a fundamental aspect of inclusive design, true inclusion goes further. It is not simply about enabling access, but about ensuring that everyone can participate meaningfully and feel valued within a space.

Outdoor musical instruments embody this principle through their universal appeal. They require no instructions, no specific abilities, and no prior experience. Whether a user is neurotypical or neurodivergent, young or old, the opportunity to engage remains the same.

Percussion Play's designs often incorporate features such as ground-level access, wheelchair-friendly layouts, and varied installation heights. These considerations ensure that physical barriers are minimized, allowing users with different mobility needs to interact comfortably.

However, the inclusivity of these instruments extends beyond physical design. By focusing on creativity and exploration rather than performance, the instruments remove the pressure often associated with traditional play equipment. This creates a more welcoming environment, one where individuals can engage without fear of failure or judgment.

For individuals with ASD, the ability to control and shape their environment can be deeply





In a world that often relies heavily on words, music offers an alternative, a shared language that transcends barriers and connects people in fundamental ways. For individuals with ASD, this language can open doors to expression, interaction, and inclusion.

Through the thoughtful design of outdoor musical instruments, Percussion Play is harnessing the power of sound to create spaces where everyone can participate. These environments are not only accessible but genuinely inclusive places where differences are accommodated, celebrated, and brought together through the universal experience of music.

Sound, in this context, becomes more than an auditory experience. It becomes a tool for connection, a medium for inclusion, and a powerful force for positive change in the design of public spaces. **PRB+**

***Jody Ashfield** is the CEO and co-founder of Percussion Play, the world-leading manufacturer of outdoor musical and percussion instruments. The company is committed to making musical expression accessible to everyone, everywhere.*

empowering. Outdoor musical instruments provide this sense of agency, allowing users to decide how they interact, what sounds they create, and how long they engage.

This autonomy supports not only self-expression but also emotional regulation. Music can be calming, energizing, or grounding, depending on how it is used. The ability to produce sound on demand gives individuals a tool for managing their sensory experience, helping them to feel more in control and more comfortable within a space.

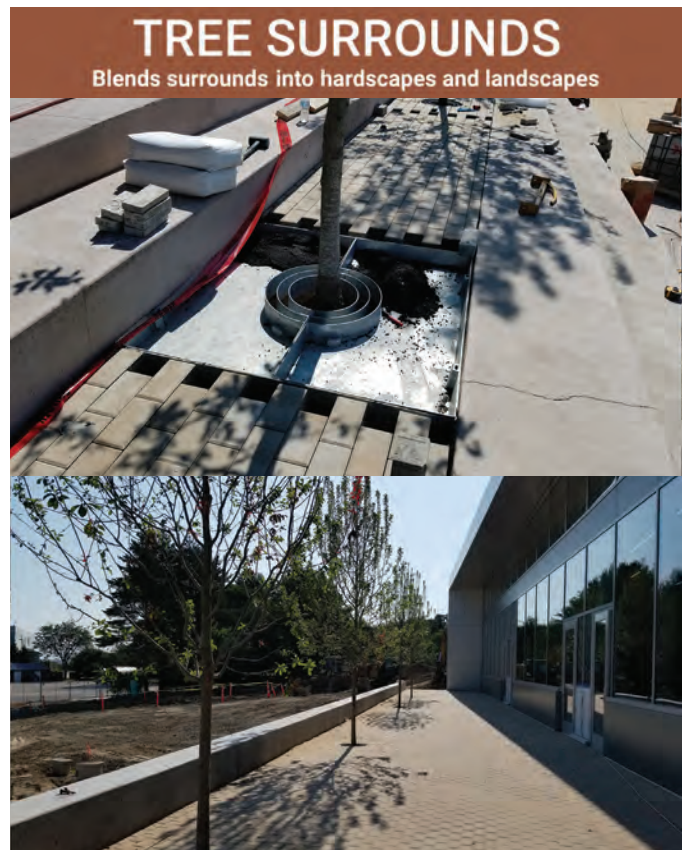
Over time, these interactions can contribute to broader developmental outcomes. Repetitive rhythmic play can support motor coordination, while shared musical experiences can enhance social confidence. Perhaps, most importantly, the act of creating something—of producing sound and seeing its effect—builds a sense of achievement and self-worth.

As awareness of neurodiversity continues to grow, so too does the need for environments that reflect and support this diversity. Universal design is no longer a niche consideration; it is an essential component of modern public space.

— Instruments At Work —

This can be seen in the projects on which Percussion Play collaborates. From libraries, children's museums, parks, and schools, communities are prioritizing inclusivity and accessibility. From a personal standpoint, it has been wonderful to see over the years how inclusivity has become central to our customers' needs. Today, Percussion Play is helping to reshape expectations of what these spaces can offer.

Importantly, the projects do more than serve individuals with ASD; they enhance the experience for everyone. Inclusive design benefits all users, creating richer, more-engaging environments that encourage interaction, creativity, and well-being.



WunderCovers™
(775) 400-2883
www.WunderCovers.com

