

# Drums and Drumming

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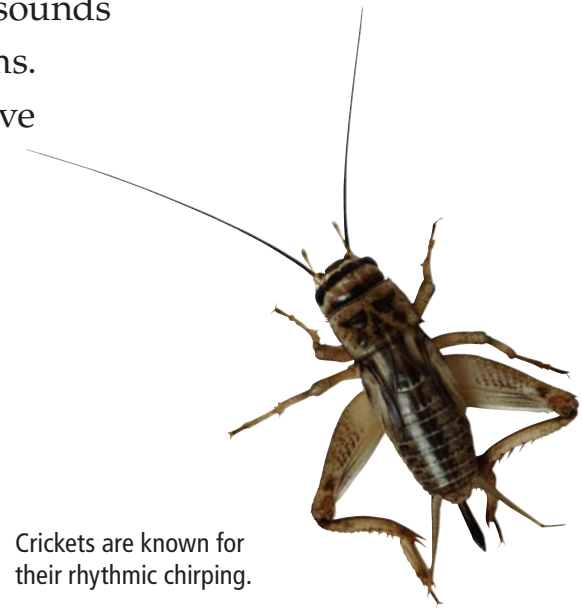
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## Introduction

Stop and listen. Is the wind causing a twig to tap against the window? Is rain dripping from the eaves of the roof to a puddle on the ground? Are you near the beach, and if so, can you hear the waves breaking on the shore? You are experiencing rhythm, a repeated pattern of pulses. Feel the pulse at your wrist. That life-giving rhythm comes from the beating of your heart.

Many animals make rhythmic sounds to attract mates or defend territory. Since ancient times, people have created rhythmic sounds with drums.

Drums have been used for many reasons besides making music.



Crickets are known for their rhythmic chirping.



A young girl enjoys listening to drumming.

### **A Drum Is . . .**

People all over the world have made and used drums. Drums are percussion instruments, instruments that must be hit in order to create rhythmic sounds and patterns. But what exactly is a drum?

### ***Cylinder-shaped Drums***

Some drums are shaped like cylinders and have a head at each end. Drummers hit the top head with their bare hands or with drumsticks. The bottom head helps the sound bounce around inside the drum.

Imagine you are a drum maker from long ago. You would cut a piece of a tree trunk and

hollow it out.

Your drumhead would be made of animal skin, and you would use nails or leather straps to attach the head to the drum.



Native American drums

Drums in modern drum sets are made of cylinders. And drumheads are still attached to the top and bottom of the cylinders. But modern drumheads are made out of plastic, and metal parts attach the heads to the drums.

## *Kettle-shaped Drums*

Some drums are shaped like bowls or kettles. Early kettledrums were made of a clay or wooden bowl, which could be small or very large. A single drumhead would be stretched over the opening.



Modern kettledrum

Many centuries ago, soldiers used kettledrums made of brass to frighten their enemies. These kettledrums were huge and so heavy that they had to be carried by horses or elephants. An enemy could become confused and be thrown off balance by the pounding of the drums. The sight and sound of elephants and drums could cause panic in the hearts of the enemy.



A timpani player, in an orchestra

By the 1600s, this type of drum was being used in symphony orchestras as a musical instrument. Kettledrums, or timpani, are still used in modern symphony orchestras. They are usually made out of brass or copper.



Male drummer-dancers in Papua New Guinea

### How Drums Are Used

Over the years, drums have had many uses. In wars long ago, drums were used to frighten enemies. But drums have also been used to communicate with friends. Some people even believe that drums have the power to heal.

### Communication

Imagine your tribe needs to send an urgent message to other members of your tribe. Now imagine that the other members are miles away and that a lake or a steep cliff separates you from them. It would take a messenger hours to deliver the message by foot, and there is no such thing as telephones or e-mail where you live. How could you send your message in a matter of minutes? The answer is, simply, with drums.

For centuries, Native Americans, Africans, and other tribal peoples have sent messages using drums. Natives living on islands in the South Pacific used tree drums to send messages. Tree drums were hollowed-out logs that were placed on their ends. Some of these tree drums were twenty feet tall. A slit about four inches wide was cut down one side of the tree drum. The sound made by the tree drum depended on the length of the slit. People often carved faces, animals, and different shapes in the tree drums.



Knocking on a tree drum on a South Pacific island



Making an African log drum

Tree drums of different sizes were grouped together to produce a variety of sounds. A single tree drum could make different sounds depending upon where the drummer hit it. People of a tribe could send and receive messages using a pattern of drumbeats.

Drums have also been used to communicate during times of war. Imagine you are an officer who needs to give orders to soldiers during a battle. The thunderous noise of guns and cannons would be so loud that your soldiers couldn't hear your voice. You could use drums to communicate with your soldiers. Soldiers learned to recognize drum beats as commands to attack, retreat, and regroup.

The drum beats used by one army had to be different from the drum beats used by the other army.



A Civil War drummer



Two Native American men playing drums

### *Healing Power of Drums*

Ancient tribes knew of the healing power of drums. A hunter might return home very tired after an unsuccessful hunt. While he slept, someone may have softly played a drum over him to scare away the bad memories. Somehow, the soothing rhythms helped the hunter to heal.

Native Americans speak of the spirit power of drums. The sound of drums brought courage to warriors who were about to go into battle. Dancing to drum beats gave a sense of group strength to Native American tribes.



Today, people are learning about the healing power of drums, and many people are joining drum groups. An experienced drummer teaches drum patterns to members of the group. People feel satisfied and happy when they get a pleasing sound from their drum. Playing drums together as a group can be very healing. Group members forget the concerns of everyday life as they play drums together and are able to experience the “medicine” of drums.



A modern drum circle

## The World of Drums

### *Drums of Africa*

The *djembe* (JEM-bay) is a hand drum used by people throughout the continent of Africa. This drum is formed from a hollowed-out log. It is shaped like a drinking goblet—wide at the top and narrow at the bottom. The djembe has a single drumhead and is usually carried

using a shoulder

strap. People

of different

African tribes

have used the

djembe before

battles to give

courage to warriors.

The djembe is used

for dances and is also

known for its power

to produce healing

rhythms.



Djembe

The *talking drum*, another kind of African drum, is shaped like an hourglass—wide at the top and bottom, and narrow in the middle. Talking drums have a head at the top and bottom. Talking drums were first used to communicate between villages. Players held the drum under their arm and squeezed it against their body as they played. This caused the drum to make different sounds, or “talk.” Talking drums are hit with a curved drumstick.



Talking drum

## *Drums of Latin America*

One of the most popular Latin American drums came from Africa. This drum is known as the *conga drum*, or *conga*. A conga drum is shaped like a cylinder that is thinner at the bottom. It has a single drumhead that the drummer hits with his or her hands. A person can sit or stand to play the conga. When sitting, the player holds the conga between his or her knees. The drum rests on a stand when the drummer wants to play standing up. Conga drums come in three sizes that make high, medium, and low sounds.



Conga drums



A bongo player

*Bongo drums*, or *bongos*, are also used in Latin American music. Bongo drums are shaped like the conga drum, but they are much smaller than congas. Two drums of different sizes are connected to form a pair of bongo drums. Bongos are held between the knees and are played sitting down. The single drumhead can be hit with the hands or fingers.

## Do You Know?

The biggest drum: Some Taiko drums are taller than a grown man.

The smallest drum: Your eardrum! This membrane receives and transmits sound waves in the ear.



## *Japanese Taiko Drums*

Long ago, *Taiko drums* were played on battlefields. Today, groups of Taiko drummers entertain people all over the world. Taiko drums are usually carved from a single log. Some of these drums are gigantic. A Taiko drum can be bigger than the person who is playing it. Taiko drummers have to train hard to become members of these drum groups.

## The Modern Drum Set

The modern drum set is made up of drums, pedals, stands, and cymbals. But drum sets have not always looked and sounded as they do today. The modern drum set came about as jazz music developed in the United States.

Jazz music began in the American South toward the end of the 1800s. Jazz is a blend of many kinds of rhythms and music. Work songs of African American slaves, religious songs, and West African rhythms blended together into what we now call jazz.



By the 1920s, jazz music had become very popular.

African American brass bands marched down the street playing music similar to jazz. Many drummers marched together in these bands. Each drummer played an individual drum. In the early 1900s, new inventions allowed one drummer to play many drums at the same time. These inventions led to the birth of the drum set.



The tradition of marching bands in New Orleans continues to this day.



### *Bass Drum Pedal*

In 1909, William F. Ludwig invented the first bass drum pedal that was simple and easy to use. This allowed drummers to play the bass drum with one foot. They could then play the other drums and cymbals with their hands. Today's bass drum pedals are easy to play and adjust.

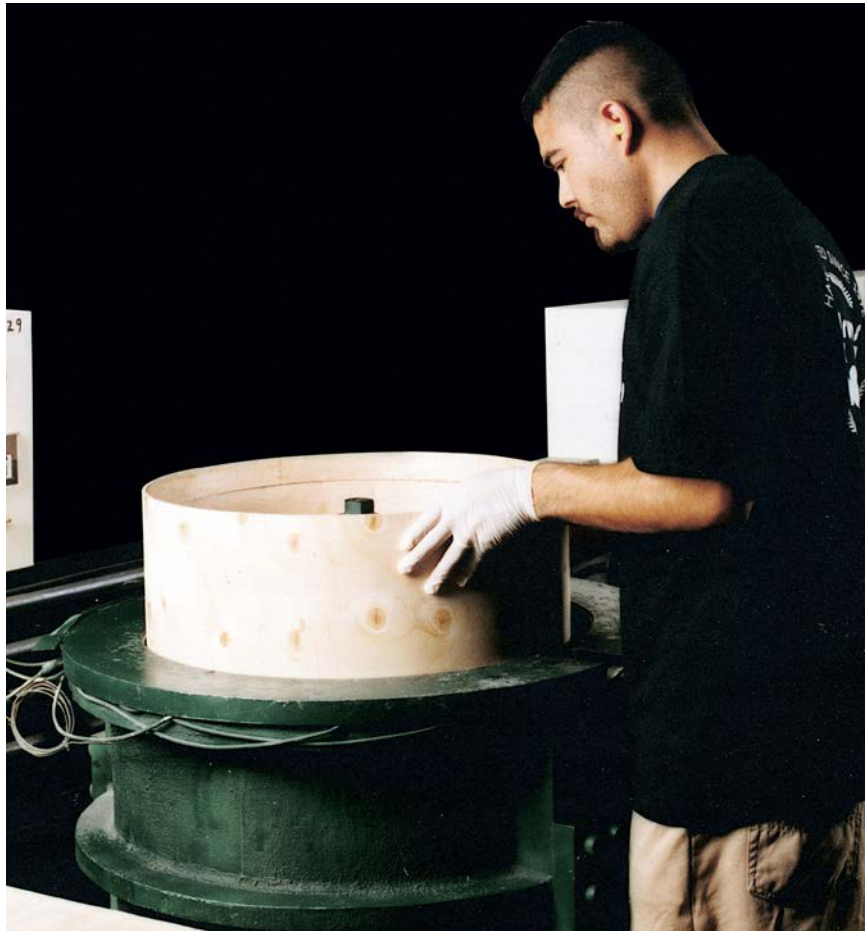


### *Hi-hat*

The hi-hat is a set of cymbals found in a modern drum set. At first, the hi-hat was just a pair of hinged boards with cymbals attached to each board. Drummers tapped the top board with one foot to make the pair of cymbals strike each other. Today's hi-hat is made of a foot pedal and a stand that holds a pair of cymbals. Drummers can make the cymbals strike each other by using the foot pedal. They can also hit the hi-hat with a drumstick.

## *Drum Shell*

Today, drum shells are usually made of layers of maple or birch. Thin layers are glued together in circular presses to make cylinders. Then heat and pressure are used to form the layers into drum shells.



Drum shells being made at Drum Workshop in Oxnard, California

## **Conclusion**

Drummers and inventors have helped to create the modern drum set. But a drum set is only as good as the drummer who plays it. A good drummer is not always the fastest drummer. And a good drummer is not always the drummer who plays the most difficult beats. A good drummer sets the beat and rhythm for the other musicians to play to. To make music with a band, a drummer has to be a team player.



The author playing with the Troy Olsen Band

## Some Drummers to Check Out



**Art Blakey** (1919–1990)  
American jazz drummer  
and bandleader

**Cindy Blackman**  
contemporary  
American jazz  
and rock drummer



**Ringo Starr**  
British rock star  
and drummer  
for the Beatles



## A Note from the Author

My grandfather was a drummer, and he got me started playing drums. Being in a band is like being on a team, where everyone works together in order for the team to succeed. I've been working in bands since I was ten years old, and I still love playing drums.



The author's grandfather playing drums at the Hollywood Canteen