

**Uncommon Instruments Played by Groups we Love, Part I.** — Percussion It's in the Beat.

Edited by Harry {doc} Babad

Now I'm sure that you, as I've done many times, wonder at the strange instruments that folks play, as listed on their CDs. Ignoring oddities like spoons or Jimmy Dancers, I've become interested in instruments of percussion of African, South American, Baltic, pan-Arabic, Persian, and other mid-eastern origins. The many unusual string instruments of ethnic origin whose sounds are so different from the more ubiquitous guitar, banjo, and mandolins in contemporary use have also attracted me. Or I wondered, when attending a renaissance faire, what those musicians are doing with those weird looking, at times un-amplified, instruments from which they coax such great sounds.

If you live in the Tri-Cities, check out Ye Merrie Greenwood Faire, June 30<sup>th</sup> and July 1<sup>st</sup> in Howard Amon Park. Marjorie books some great musical performers, and the Elizabethan era (1558–1603) was one of the earliest for folk music.

[[http://greenwood\\_players.home.comcast.net/%5D/](http://greenwood_players.home.comcast.net/%5D/).] Most of today's dumbness about the differences in hand drums used in percussion became apparent while checking out the instruments played by Balkan, Celtic and Nautical groups whose CDs I own.

I recently got my new *Lark in the Morning* [LIM] catalog [<http://LarkintheMorning.com>], and checked their website which contains some great articles, and of course photos, of the quality instruments they sell. A bit of the material in the LIM articles helped serve as a source of information for this article. So I did a little further checking —Wikipedia, and then for added detail, I Googled around {yes it's now a verb.} Unless otherwise noted, the information is from Wikipedia [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)]

The percussion Instruments this article focuses on are the Ashiko Drum, Bodhran, Djembe, and the Dumbek. Some of our groups use congas and bongos, which are essential to Afro-Cuban music, but you know all about those, don't you?

All of the images, unless otherwise noted, are from the Lark in the Morning catalog and are used with their permission, or from Wikipedia. [LIM holds the copyright to material on their website. Material on the Wikipedia website is available under the copyleft rules.] I thought to share my findings with you. My only complaint about LIM is the articles they provide are rich and interesting but alas are too few to satisfy my curiosity. And of course they sell more types of percussion instruments than any other vendor I've found to date. [They state that one (or three) of their staff plays everything they sell.] Wouldst I could travel more; their showrooms must be a sight to behold.

As part of the article, I searched my CD collection, which I extensively catalog, to see which of the artists I've purchased albums from played a particular instrument. I also wondered whether there was any relationship between the origins of the instrument and contemporary use in a musical genre. No, there isn't for the most part. Isn't cross-fertilization of musical themes and instruments wonderful.

[This is not a complete list of folk performers who use these items, but only those I found in my database.] Check out the fine print to see what instrumental surprises your albums or CDs hold!

Sooner or later (beyond Part II), I'll write about other instruments. You can join the party if you like, either as an author or by alerting me to instruments that raise your sense of curiosity and wonder. I'm always surprised, and mostly pleased, by the more obscure instruments that folks use to add rich tones and rhythm to their music. *Send me a message – send it by (e)mail – tell me the instrument name and I'll not fail.* In the next article in this series, I'll at least talk about some unusual stringed instruments including the Balalaika, Bouzouki, Cittern, and Hurdy-Gurdy.

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Ashiko Drum — The ashiko is a kind of drum shaped like a truncated cone and meant to be played with bare hands. The ashiko drum is played throughout sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas. In eastern Cuba, it is known as boku and is played during carnivals and street parades called *Comparsas*. Some consider the ashiko to be male and the djembe female. Some Ashikos come with fur on the playing surface and others have the head shaved. Drums with fur on the playing surface produce a more muted or muffled sound. Some people refer to this as a dry or dead sound. Ashikos with a shaved head are more open sounding and tend to be louder.

If an Ashiko appeals to you check out World Wide Drums' article on *Ashiko Care & Maintenance* [<http://www.wwdrums.com/ashiko-care-maintenance-a-10.html>]. Such drums, ethnic instruments by their very nature, come in many different sizes and styles. “An Ashiko with a natural hide head and rope tensioning requires the same basic care as a Djembe. But a little extra care is needed for the Ashiko heads, as they are usually a bit thinner than those on other drums. The head thickness is in part the source of its distinctive sound. Usually the shells (the drum body) are either made from a single piece of wood or from staves (strips) of wood sort of like constructing a barrel or antique mandolins. If they are carved from a single piece of wood they have a greater tendency to crack or split. For the most part, the stave bodies require little care.



What should you listen for? Listen for open, deep bass tones and a nice sharp crack when slapped. The artist should not have to use a full force blow to extract a nice tone. The drum should sound good or respond at all volume levels. The tone should have a nice sustain without strange overtones or pitch shifts/bends.” [World Wide Drums.]

... And Who Play's it — Steve Bloom who performs with Robin Bullock, and Amy White who performs with Al Pettyway.

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**Bodhran** — The bodhrán is an Irish frame drum ranging from 10" to 26" in diameter, with most drums measuring 14" to 18". The sides of the drum are 3½" to 8" deep. A goatskin head is tacked to one side (although nowadays, synthetic heads, or new materials like kangaroo skin, are sometimes used). The other side is open ended for one hand to be placed against the inside of the drumhead to control the pitch and timbre. One or two crossbars may be inside the frame but this is increasingly rare on professional instruments. {Most of the instruments used by our artists have crossbars.} Some professional modern bodhráin integrate mechanical tuning systems similar to those used on drums found in drum kits.



The exact origins of the bodhrán are unclear and are subject to discussion. Third-generation bodhrán maker Nicholas Driver asserts that the name *bodhrán* means "skin tray". Others suggest a link with the Irish word *bodhor*, meaning soft, or dull sounding. Still others claim that its name is derived from the similar Irish word *bodhar*, meaning deaf. A relatively new introduction to Irish music, the bodhrán's has largely replaced the role of tambourines, suggesting another possible origin for bodhrán's name from the abbreviation "bourine".

There are no known references to this particular name for a drum prior to the 17th century. The drum itself didn't gain wide recognition until the Irish traditional music resurgence in the 1950s in which it became known through the work of *The Clancy Brothers* and others. The second wave roots revival of Irish Traditional music in the 1960s brought virtuoso bodhrán playing to the forefront, when it was further popularized by bands such as *Ceoltóirí Chualann* and *The Chieftains*.

Growing interest led to internationally available LP recordings, at which time the bodhrán became a globally recognized instrument. In the 1970s, virtuoso players such as *The Boys of the Lough's* Robin Morton, *The Chieftains'* Peadar Mercier, *Planxty's* Christy Moore, and *De Dannan's* Johnny "Ringo" McDonagh gained notoriety for their performance techniques.

The drum is usually played in a seated position, held vertically on the player's thigh and supported by his or her upper body and arm (usually on the left side, for a right-handed player), with the hand placed on the inside of the skin where it is able to control the tension (and therefore the pitch and timbre) by applying varying amounts of pressure and also the amount of surface area being played,



with the back of the hand against the crossbar, if present. The drum is struck with the other arm (usually the right) and is played either with the bare hand or with a lathe-turned piece of wood called a "bone", "tipper", "beater", or "cipín". Tipplers were originally fashioned from a double-ended knuckle bone, but are now commonly made from ash, holly or hickory

... And Who Else Play's it — Al Pettyway, Kevin Mckeown (*Irish Rovers*) Heather Alexander, Barbara Tuttle (*Campbell Road*), Theresa Morgan (*Cutters*), Johnathan Lay (*Shanghaied on the Willamette & Spinnaker*), Kevin Conneff (*Chieftans*), Nigel Elliott (*Celtic Nots*), Nancy Johnson (*Craicmore*), Denver Greer (*Skweez The Weezle*), Felicia Dale (*Pint & Dale*), Jesse Winch (*Celtic Thunder*) and Myron Bretholz, who plays with Robin Bullock. Also, the artists *Curtis & Loretta* at times incorporate the bodhran into their albums, as do *The Mammals*, and Chipper Thompson, who plays with Mason Brown. Are you getting a nautical and Celtic flavor here? Good!

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The Djembe — The Djembe drum is undoubtedly one of the most powerful drums in existence. A djembe (pronounced *JEM-bay*) also known as djimbe, jembe, jenbe, yembe or sanbanyi in Susu; is a skin covered hand drum shaped like a large goblet and is meant to be played with bare hands. [It is a member of the membranophone family of musical instruments: a frame or shell (in the djembe's case it is a shell) covered by a membrane (drumhead) made of one of many products, usually goatskin or rawhide from a female animal. The djembe originated in West Africa, where it became an integral part of the area's music and tradition.



“It has been called "The Healing Drum", and dates back to the 12th C. great Mali Empire of West Africa, and the Mandingo people. A sacred drum, it was utilized in ceremonies such as healing, ancestor worship, rites of passage, warrior rituals, communication and storytelling. It has an incredible tonal range, from body-felt base to thunderclap slap tone, and a dynamic range from whisper soft to a lion's roar, setting it apart from other drums.” [LIM]

As a result of the goblet shape, the density of the wood, the internal carvings, and the skin, there is a wide range of tones that can be produced by the djembe. The rounded shape with the extended tube of the djembe body giving it a deep bass note. The primary tones are generally referred to as "bass," "tone" (or open tone), and "slap." Striking the skin near the center with the palm produces a bass note; striking the skin nearer the rim with the fingers flat produces a tone, and the same position with the fingers relaxed so that the fingertips snap to the head of the drum produces a slap. The slap has a high, sharp sound and the tone is more "round" and full. Other notes exist, but only advanced drummers can consistently create sound distinct from the others. Traditionally, djembes are about 12" (30cm) in diameter, varying an inch or two, but can be found in sizes from 5" (13cm) up to 18" (46 cm) depending on the size of the player.

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The djembe, according to Wikipedia, is said to contain three spirits: the spirit of the tree, the spirit of the animal of which the drumhead is made, and the spirit of the instrument maker. The djembe is also known as the magical drum, mushroom shaped drum, and the Devil Drum. It is legend that the djembe and/or the tree from which it is created was a gift from a Djinn or malevolent demigod, male counterpart to the more familiar Genie. Properly crafted djembe drums are carved in one single piece from hollowed out trees called Dimba, or Devil Wood. Drums made from slats (lathes) or segments of wood glued together are considered by traditionalists to have no soul of the tree. Properly made drums are not smooth on the interior but have a series of teardrop shaped divots inside that enhances the tonal qualities. In earlier times and still in some rural areas djembe were used to send messages over long distances.



... And who play's it — Jarred Kaplan who plays with *The Magical Strings*, Steve Bloom and Laryea Addy who play with Robin Bullock, Barbara Tuttle of *Campbell Road*, Will Dowd who plays with Joe Crookson, and Jonathan Lay of *Spinnaker* fame.

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The Dumbek — This instrument is known by different names in different regions. The dumbek is the traditional hourglass or goblet shaped drum of the Balkan and middle-eastern regions. These names all refer to a goblet-shaped drum. However, the construction and playing methods of each are so varied as to make many of them different instruments altogether. African drums such as the Djembe are related in origin through the African connection, but are rarely included in discussions of the goblet drum. The West African djembe, a related instrument, is larger and made from a log carved into a goblet shape.



Such names, according to Wikipedia, include:  
 Darbakeh/Tarabuka (General), Doumbek/Doumbeg (Armenian), Dumbul/Dunbul (Azeri), Tarambuke (Balkan), Tombak/Tonbak (Iranian), Zarb (Iranian), Darbuka/Dumbelek (Turkish), Tablah/Tableh (Arabic General), Derbakeh (Lebanese Arabic), and Toumbeleki (Greek). It is also know as the chalice drum.

The dumbek is used in both popular and folk music around the world, and has been adapted by Yiddish Klezmer groups, doubtless due to the influence of Sephardic (Jewish) music. The great goblet drum has a single drumhead on one end and is open on the other end. Its thin, responsive drumhead and resonance help it produce a distinctively crisp sound. The drum's hourglass design

produces a high resonance and a deep *doum* sound. It is of ancient origin, and is believed by some to have been invented before the chair.

Traditional dumbeks have ceramic bodies, a change that significantly alters their tone and sound from the more contemporary metal models (aluminum, copper, nickel) that are part of the middle-eastern ethnic nightclub scene. Indeed, if you go into a nightclub or cabaret or elsewhere in the Middle East, say Cairo, to hear Arabic music, 99% of the time the drummer will be playing a metal-based dumbek. The metal drums made have a brighter clearer tone that can be incredibly loud.

The body may be made of beaten, cast, or spun metal (usually of aluminum, nickel or copper), ceramic (often with a glued-on head) or wood. A softer sounding rosewood dumbek has become more popular and is widely used for playing Persian music, and by some Celtic groups.

Materials for the head now include synthetics such as PET film or FiberSkyn, as well as more traditional animal skins, such as goat or fish. In general, goblet drums tend to have much lighter heads than African or Indian drums.

While ceramic bodies with skin heads are usually considered to have the best tone, metal bodies and Mylar heads are generally favored by professional musicians because of their practicality, since they are far more durable, easily tunable, and insensitive to weather conditions. Furthermore, drums with Mylar skins can be played very loudly, making them well matched with modern brass and electric instruments.

Playing Styles and Techniques — Goblet drums are played with a much lighter touch and quite different strokes (sometimes including rolls or quick rhythms articulated with the fingertips) than hand drums such as the djembe, found in Africa.

There are two main types of goblet drums. The Egyptian style has rounded edges around the head, whereas the Turkish style exposes the edge of the head. The exposed edge allows closer access to the head so finger-snapping techniques can be done, but the hard edge discourages the rapid rolls possible with the Egyptian style.

The goblet drum may be played while held under one arm or by placing it between the knees while seated. It produces a resonant, low-sustain sound while played lightly with the fingertips and palm. Some players move their fists in and out of the bell to alter the tone. There are a variety of rhythms that form the basis of the folkloric and modern music and dance styles of the Middle East.



There are two main sounds produced by the goblet drum. The first is called the *doum*. It is the deeper bass sound produced by striking the head near the center with the length of the fingers and palm. The second is called the *tek*. It is the higher-pitched sound produced by hitting near the edge of the head with the fingertips. A *tek* struck with the secondary hand is also known as a 'ka'.

Additionally, there are more complex techniques including snaps, slaps, pops and rolls that are used to ornament the basic rhythm. Hand clapping and hitting the sides of the drum can be used in addition to drumhead sounds.

Another technique commonly used in Bulgaria, Turkey, and Egypt, is to tap with the fingers of one hand and with a thin stick in the other. In Turkey the stick is called the *çubuk*, which means wand, or stick. The gypsies of most of the countries associated with the goblet drum use this technique.

Check <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dumbek> for a who's who of the worlds best dumbek players.

... And Who Play's it — Jarred Kaplan who plays with *The Magical Strings*, Adam Bently of *Vivian's Keeper*, Sofia Segal who played with *The Cutters*, Dan Ochipinti who at times plays with Heather Alexander, Steve Bloom who plays with Robin Bullock, and Jesse Winch of *Celtic Thunder*