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Santhi Iyer

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The Evolution of the Drum Set

SANTHI IYER

The origin of rhythm has been traced back to the big bang that created our solar system. As Grateful Dead drummer, Mickey Hart, says, "In the beginning was noise. And noise begat rhythm. And rhythm begat everything else ... Strike a membrane with a stick, the ear fills with noise — unmelodious, inharmonic sound. Strike it a second time, a third, you've got rhythm" (Hart, p. 12).

It is this kind of cosmogony that has propelled human beings to create rhythm from simply beating different parts of their bodies to crafting percussion instruments out of sticks, skins, and gourds. As a consequence, a rhythmic tradition becomes part of a cultural history. And as each culture is introduced to another, this rendezvous results in the synthesis of varying rhythms and melodies that spawn a unique musical sound. Such is the history of jazz, a unique blending of European and West African musical traditions so as to create a whole new kind of music. Jazz is a three hundred-year-old blending of West African and European music that has often been described as an African response to European music.

The development of jazz brought about the genesis of not only an entirely different style of music, but also various instruments that are commonly used by all styles of music ranging from orchestral to rap. This intermingling of West African and European cultures in the United States brought about the genesis of the modern day drum set—a combination of varying drums and cymbals that is manipulated by one person.

Jazz music has much of its origins in the rhythmically charged tribal cultures of West Africa. West Africans have been credited with not only being the most spiritual people in the world, but probably the most rhythmic as well. They have an awareness and appreciation of rhythm; and in most of Africa, the proper rhythm and the proper life go hand in hand (Hart, p. 195). In many of the religious tribal ceremonies, the musicians play a variety of percussion instruments including rattles and gongs. But the central instrument in any religious ceremony is the drum. The tribe surrounds a set of three drums known as a drum choir, around which they clap and sing. According to West African religions, the gods speak to their worshipers through the drum; therefore, the dancers face the drum while dancing. Music (especially rhythm) is as

much a part of everyday life as conversation or cooking. It enhances the significance of events such as birth and death. Rhythm is so ingrained in their culture that there are special rhythms that help a farmer sow his seeds and worship the spirits (Hart, p. 196).

Africans were able to make their drums speak by creating multiple tones or rhythms. While specific instruments were not necessarily used since virtually anything could be seen as a means of producing a beat, one of the classic variable-pitch talking drums played was the *dundun* (Hart, p. 200). With an hourglass shape, its two heads are laced together by gut strings or thongs of leather. The *dundun* is held under the arm and played with one hand, and by squeezing the strings with the other hand, the player is able to change the tension of the head, thus altering the pitch of the sounds he is making (Hart, p. 200). Africans also used rattles and marimbas to convey their musical messages.

The rhythmically charged environment in these West African religious ceremonies gave rise to a polyrhythmic sound which is generated by layers of different rhythms superimposed upon one another so as to create a complex combination of sounds and beats. The unique fusion of various rhythms gives music a characteristic "swing" (a steady, pulsating rhythm) by accentuating beats between and around, above and below, the march beat (Stearns, p. 5).

This strong drumming tradition was brought over from West Africa to the United States when the various tribes of the region were captured and sold into slavery. Existing as a part of the slaves' culture, both openly and furtively during times of civil unrest, African music and drumming still played a significant part of the slaves' lives even after coming to the United States. Dances in New Orleans' Congo Square, for example, reinforced and preserved the African drumming tradition. Furthermore, these public displays of African culture brought about the use of European instruments of all types, including percussion instruments.

From a European perspective, many of the percussion instruments that were employed orchestrally and were destined to be part of the drum set had their origins in other countries. For example, the Turkish Janissary bands gave rise to the use of a number of different orchestral instruments, which until the 18th century had remained a rarity in Europe. The Janissaries were an elite Turkish troop that would play instruments such as trumpets, different drums, and cymbals as part of their military band tradition. Following the decline of the Turkish Empire, the Europeans started associating enlightenment and exoticness to the Turks. As a result, "Turkish music" invaded opera houses and European military bands (Beck, p. 195).

Introduced by the Turkish Janissary bands, the bass drum was soon employed in European music. The bass drum ranges in diameter from 32 to 40 inches, with a shell depth of between 18 to 22 inches. It is double-headed with either calfskin or synthetic materials. It is employed to create a low, undefined pitch and is played with a variety of mallets. The bass drum gained popularity as it was more frequently employed in orchestral music.

The origin of the snare drum was first seen in European military bands. The earliest known side drum, which is played with one wooden stick, is the medieval tabor. It was adopted with other customs in the 13th century by the armies of Western Europe (Beck, p. 97). The instrumentalists were high-ranking officials and were an essential feature at all public festivals. In England during the 16th century, the name tabor or tabrett was displaced by "drume," and at this time, the dinner music for Queen Elizabeth I is said to have included side drums with other instruments. The side drum used at this time looked much like the modern day snare. With a small double-headed cylindrical drum with a metal shell, the snare's upper head is hit with two sticks while the lower head has gut or synthetic string stretched over the head of the drum (called "snares") that is not struck (Beck, p. 85). These snares vibrate against the lower head giving the snare drum its classic sound. By this time, the snare was below the lower head as it is today, instead of the above the upper head as on the tabor.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, various manuals concerning drum routines were issued in Europe and the United States. During this period, the drum was used by the military for conveying the word of command to troops. By the mid-19th century, the side drum was being employed in orchestral scores. The tenor drum, the drum midway between the bass drum and an unsnared side drum, first made its appearance in the military band in the early 1800s. The tenor drum is a deep two-headed cylindrical instrument (Beck, p. 96). The shell is usually made out of wood, but can be metal or plastic. With such a late debut on the musical stage, the tenor drum was rather immediately incorporated into orchestral pieces written by Kastner, Berlioz, and Wagner to name a few.

The ancestry of the cymbal can be found in the most primitive, idiophonic order of instruments (Beck, p. 169). Idiophonic instruments generally produce sound by the vibration of its body when it is shaken, rubbed, or struck (Beck, p. 46). They were used in Israel around 1100 B.C. but did not appear in Egypt until 800 B.C. The evolution of cymbals occurred in the Bronze Age when metalworking artisans improved their techniques of making discs. At this point, cymbals became larger and more resonant. Near East armies began incorporating cymbals and evidence of their use could also be seen in religious ceremonies of most of Asia Minor (Beck, p. 169). It was during the Middle Ages that the development of bells, a near cousin to the cymbal, became a symbol for the church. The instrument was first used in an orchestral composition in 1680 by N.A. Strungk's opera *Esther*.

As a consequence of jazz's intermixing of West African and European music, the modern drum set was created with European instrumentation and employed African rhythm. The actual origin of the modern drum set is commonly traced to a period when one drummer began to serve the function that two or three drummers served in the past (Breithaupt, p. 173). Many saw this as an extension of the West African drum choir, except that one drummer played many different drums. While it clearly owes a lot to polyphonic West African percussion music, the drum set's most imme-

diate predecessor is the percussion section of the brass bands which were popular in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

During the post-Civil War period, many African American musicians began to form groups, first serving as funeral bands in New Orleans and other large metropolises. These marching bands essentially featured at least two drummers, one playing the snare drum and the other playing the bass drum often with a cymbal attachment. During the late 19th century, these marching units began to perform indoors, providing entertainment for dances, parties, and various social gatherings (Beck, p. 173). As certain musical ensembles began to become exclusive indoor entertainers, the need for two or more drummers diminished both through economic pressures and some ingenious inventions of these early drummers. These innovations included placing the snare drum at an angle on a small stand and developing a method of *double drumming* so as to play both the snare drum, the base drum, and the small Turkish cymbal that was mounted on the bass drum. The constraint put on the hands by needing to play so many different instruments caused some musicians to play the bass drum with the foot. The different patterns drummers used on their drums with their sticks became the hallmark of jazz drumming in the future.

Early sit-down drum sets also included a variety of sound-effect instruments and percussion instruments from other cultures. These "contraptions" or "traps" consisted of whistles, slapsticks, washboards, and other devices used by drummers for various shows. Wood blocks, temple blocks, tom-toms, camel bells, and Chinese cymbals were introduced to the American drummer via immigrants or through popular world fairs of the late 1800s and early 1900s (Beck, p. 174). By 1920, the standard instrumentation of the drum set included a bass drum with pedal and cymbal attachment, concert snare drum, Turkish cymbal, Chinese cymbal, wood block, and/or temple blocks, camel/cowbell, Chinese tom-toms and assorted sound effect instruments. The introduction of these instruments is often accredited to Duke Ellington's drummer, Sonny Greer. He was among the first to go beyond the drum kit to generate funky beats with the employment of gongs, cymbals, and instruments from other cultures. This created the first "jungle" feel (<http://www.harlem.org/people/greer.html>).

The regimental music of the Civil War, as well as the African-influenced dance music, largely influenced early drummers. The exposure to African polyrhythm in New Orleans especially caused its characteristic "swing" to infiltrate many brass bands playing at the time. The improvisation and/or augmentation of drum parts were based on the blues, ragtime, and other New Orleans pre-jazz influences. All-black ensembles were gaining popularity throughout America and Europe and at the center of their excitement was a drummer that could mix dotted rhythms and triplets with syncopated eighth-note patterns (Beck, p. 175).

Beginning in the mid-1920s, although not in its modern form, the "high-hat" started first as a *low-boy* or as the *snowshoe cymbal beater*, a device that featured two small cymbals attached to wood planks and operated by the foot. The cymbals used

on both these instruments were called *Charleston cymbals* (Beck, p. 176). The modern day high-hat, a pair of small cymbals mounted on a vertical rod controlled by a foot-operated pedal, joined the drum set family in the late 1920s (Beck, p. 45). A common fly swatter soon functioned as a brush on the drum in an effort to emulate the sound of sandpaper blocks rubbed together. First appearing in Dixieland music, it was also popularly employed in minstrel and Vaudeville shows of the time.

By the early 1930s, both black and white audiences began to listen and dance to a new style of jazz that featured a more restrained, "flat-four" feel (Beck, p. 176). This new style was fostered by the drummers of the era by incorporating connected legato rolls, sustained cymbal crashes, and ostinato patterns onto various instruments. This was especially done on the high-hat, thus creating a metronomic effect with a lighter sound. This timekeeping had relaxed the feel and enhanced the efforts of strong bass players (Beck, p. 177). "Ride" patterns, a carryover from the wood block beats of the Dixieland style, were applied to cymbals.

Since the "ride" pattern was often played with the right hand, this freed up the left hand to allow occasional punctuation on the snare drum or to support and enhance the improvised melody of the other soloists. The primary exponent of this style was Count Basie's drummer Jo Jones. Along with bassist Freddie Greene and Basie on the piano, Count Basie's rhythm section redefined its role in jazz through the development of the flat-four feel and Basie's intermittent chord usage (Gridley, p. 108). Through the use of brushes as well as the high-hat, Jo Jones built his reputation as a skillful percussion accompanist. He used his brushes on the high-hat to create three distinct high-hat sounds: the closed high-hat, in which the back beat was played on the high-hat stand, the open/close combinations of the high-hat as well as the half-open high-hat (Beck, p. 177). These methods were all descendants of the hand-held cymbal techniques of the previous decade. Furthermore, Jo Jones virtually eliminated bass drum playing in some contexts (Gridley, p. 134). This was one of the earliest examples of flexible interaction between soloist and drummer.

The drum set of the late 1930s was generally devoid of many of the traps found on the earlier sets. All the sets included the typical bass drum, but the Chinese tom-tom had begun to be replaced by single and later double-tensioned tom-toms produced by the drum companies. The size of the Ride cymbals was expanded from 18 to 22 inches to 25 to 26 inches during the 1940s and 50s. The crash cymbal came into style when the Ride cymbal became a one-function instrument.

The early 1940s saw revolutionary changes in the way jazz musicians viewed themselves and their music. Jazz began to be seen as an expressive art form, and small band musicians were leading a movement away from dance halls to small venues where the purpose of the band was for listening rather than amusement (Beck, p. 177). The art of improvisation became the essence of this style of music, and was called "bebop." With bebop, tempos became faster, as well as slower, for ballad playing. While Jo Jones began to move ostinato "ride" patterns to the cymbal, drummers like Kenny Clarke and Sid Catlett took drumming to a whole new dimension.

Clarke began to use the bass drum as a punctuating and independent voice on the drum set around 1940, first with Teddy Hill's band and then with pianist Thelonius Monk. Clarke was also responsible for playing a lot of ostinatos on a cymbal soon to be known as the "ride" or "bop" cymbal (Gridley, pg. 134). These rhythms had previously been played on the snare drum. Sid Catlett also brought about more a mature drumming style by keeping time with a more swinging feel than his predecessors of the 1930s. He was one of the few drummers of the time who was able to play with bands from both the swing and the bop eras (Gridley, p. 134). Bebop allowed the drummer to feel as if he, too, was an integral and equal member of the jazz ensemble, not just as a soloist but as a member that could improvise as well.

The birth of the drum set through West African rhythmic traditions and European percussion instruments brought about a new, exciting, and driving force to jazz and to many other styles of music. The modern drum set created over fifty years ago has been able to sustain the rhythmic requirements of drummers whose playing has only become more innovative, intricate, and demanding.

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- <http://www.harlem.org/people/greer.html> (about Sonny Greer)