

*African
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Review*



The Heritage of the Drumset

royal hartigan is a percussionist who leads his own quartet, and performs with Juba, the Fred Ho Afro Asian Music Ensemble, Hafez Modirzadeh's Paradox Ensemble, and the David Bindman-Tyrone Henderson Project. hartigan holds a B.A. in African American music from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in World Music from Wesleyan University. His understanding of the drumset is based on his study and apprenticeship with master African American drummers Lennie McBrowne, Clifford Jarvis, Max Roach, and Edward Blackwell, and on study with West African master drummers Freeman Kwadzo Donkor and Abraham Kobena Adzenyah, as well as research on West African drumming in Ghana. In each case information and insight have been passed on orally, and there is no written documentation, which in itself would be inappropriate for an aural/oral culture.

The drumset is a 20th-century American instrument whose historical development has largely been the result of African American creativity. It stands today as one of the most widely played, recognized, and powerful instruments used on the global stage.

The trap drumset emerged in the late 1890s, when single percussionists were forced for economic and logistical reasons to operate a multitude of instruments. Snare and bass drums of the concert and marching bands in New Orleans provided a base to which, from 1900 to 1930, other accessories or "trappings"—hence the name *traps*—were added. This diverse sound palette enabled percussionists to accompany films, theater, and other stage shows and dances. Additions included whistles, cowbells, tympani, chimes, marimba, bells, bird calls, and many other instruments. Early drummers, in their search for new sounds, also adopted the instruments they heard played by Chinese immigrants in urban areas in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, like the small Chinese cymbal (Bo), large gong (Da Luo), woodblock (Ban), temple blocks (Mu-Yu), and the first tom-tom (Bangu), usually a thick painted pigskin drum head tacked on to a red painted wooden shell.

Later, during the 1920s and 1930s, high-hat cymbals—at first less than one foot high and called low boys (Papa Joe Jones told me in 1981 that he invented the longer rod which brought the high hat to its present, aptly named height, but the Leedy drum company stole his idea and took all the rewards)—bass drum pedals, manufactured mounted and floor tom-toms, and larger cymbals came to be included in the drumset. By the bebop innovation of the 1940s, the drumset had assumed the basic form still in use today—bass and snare drums, tom-toms, high-hat cymbals, and ride and crash cymbals.

In addition to its physical history, I suggest that the drumset has a spiritual heritage traceable to the ancient drum orchestras of West Africa, especially in the coastal rain forest region from Ivory Coast through Ghana, Togo, and Benin to Nigeria, where drumming is highly diversified into variously pitched and timbred drums, bells, and rattles. In these areas there is a master drummer who directs the dynamic interplay of song, dance, and drumming with conversational dialogues (calls and responses). An ensemble of distinct personal drum voices, each with its own pitch range, timbre, and rhythm, specified by tradition, repertoire, and occasion of performance, comes together to make a composite statement. This dynamic living force creates a space for the "gods to descend," for people to connect with each other, with nature, with life, and with themselves. An interplay of coordinated independent voices characterizes the function, sound, and feel of the drumset performer in the African American "jazz" tradition and West African drumming.

The historical genocide of captive peoples and the radically different geographic, social, and political circumstances in the "new world" account for the evolution of this new instrument, which produced an ensemble of multiple sounds, speaking in a composite voice, mirroring the dramatic action of an ensemble, soloist, or dance. Dancers at the Savoy ballroom or tap dancers on the sidewalks of 125th Street in New York interact with the music: Not only do they dance to the music, but they create new rhythms, new music, as a response to what they hear.

Between the 17th and 19th centuries, when musical instruments, especially drums (which could be used for communication and revolt, as well as spiritual remembrances and affirmation), were forbidden, African American people used their bodies as instruments. The coordinated interdependence of multiple percussive instrumental voices in a composite statement is found in the "Pattin' Juba" hand-clapping and foot-stomps of African American peoples throughout the South (Jones and Hawes 37-40). Juba is a clapping play similar to the "hambone" patting and movements many Americans learned in the 1950s and '60s.

Among African Americans who were able to use external (to the body) instruments, Black Benny stands out as a drummer extraordinaire who could move an entire band with a single bass drum. We find other manifestations of African drumming in the Sunday dance and music sessions in Congo Square in ante-bellum New Orleans; in Revolutionary and Civil War fife-and-drum bands; at Pinkster Days in Albany, New York, and at Governor's

Days in Hartford, Connecticut, where marching ensembles included large sections of drums and metal percussion instruments; and in the drum-and-fife blues tradition of the Southern United States and in Barbados (Brown).

The drumset of the 1890s continued this rhythmic heritage functionally and spiritually. In the 20th century, the genius of African American master drummers like Baby Dodds, Kenny Clarke, Max Roach, Elvin Jones, Edward Blackwell, and Jack DeJohnette transformed the way the drumset is played. A heritage so strong and open can include people of many ethnic backgrounds.

Some feel the use of electronic sampling, drum machines, and other technologies constitutes a continuation of the evolution of the drumset. Others see the use of electronic technology in music as a barrier, a means by which an elite, capitalist, technocratic class has commodified life and music, robbing people and musicians (the two not mutually exclusive) of the three-dimensional, physical, spatial, immediate, and direct contact with each other, themselves, nature, sound production, and a creator, essential to a people's humanity. This perspective, they argue, becomes clearer after having experienced the immediate personal, social, spiritual, and musical interaction found in cultures without 20th-century electric technologies, such as those in non-urban areas of the Philippines, the near East, South America, and West Africa. The issue is both the dehumanizing nature of technology as well as what people do with the technology and what access the majority of people have to the technology in use.¹

1. If you are a musician, scholar, teacher, or student, and would like to learn about West African culture, cuisine, weaving, language, song, dance, or drumming, while living in a village in southeastern Ghana, please contact royal hartigan: phone (408) 972-4732, fax (408) 924-4773. There are also opportunities for teaching in the village school. Studies will be with master Ghanaian artists led by master drummer Godwin Kwasi Agbeli. We are also developing an African American section of Mr.

Agbeli's Dagbe Cultural Center in his home village, in order to provide an arena for cross-cultural studies.

**Works
Cited**

- Brown, Dennis T. "An Analysis and History of Jazz Drumming to 1942." Diss. U of Michigan, 1976.
- hartigan, royal. "Blood Drum Spirit: Drum Languages of West Africa, African America, Native America, Central Java, and South India." Diss. Wesleyan U, 1986. [This 1700-page work with pictures, text, and notations of audio cassettes investigates the heritage of West African and African American music. It focuses on Edward Blackwell, a master African American drummer, and West African master drummers Abraham Kobena Adzenyah and Freeman Kwadzo Donkor of Ghana.]
- Jones, Bessie, and Bess Lomax Hawes. *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.