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AFRO ASIA



*REVOLUTIONARY POLITICAL & CULTURAL
CONNECTIONS BETWEEN
AFRICAN AMERICANS & ASIAN AMERICANS*

royal hartigan with Fred Ho

The American Drum Set:
Black Musicians and Chinese Opera
along the Mississippi River

The drum set is a twentieth-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 drum set 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 foundation 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 nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, like the small Chinese cymbal (*bo*), large gong (*da luo*), woodblock (*ban*), varied pitch temple blocks (*mu-yu*), and the first tom-tom (*bangu*), usually a thick painted pigskin drumhead tacked onto a red painted wooden shell and suspended on a folding carriage stand.

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, when the use of musical instruments, especially drums (which could be used for communication and revolt as well as for spiritual remembrances and affirmation), were forbidden on the part of enslaved Africans in the United States, 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.¹ Juba is a clapping play similar to the "hambone" patting and movements that many Americans learned in the 1950s and 1960s.

While the drum set is relatively "new," it has a spiritual heritage traceable to the ancient drum orchestras of West Africa, especially in the coastal rain forest region from present-day Cote d'Ivoire 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 dialogue (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. The interplay of coordinated independent voices characterizes the function, sound, and feel of the drum set practitioner in the African American "jazz" tradition and West African drum ensembles.

During the post-slavery era, African Americans sought employment and economic self-activity in many areas, including as professional musicians performing in various recreational venues, theaters, traveling shows, and aboard steamships that traversed the Mississippi River and visited port cities from New Orleans to Chicago. It was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that the hybrid instrument, the drum set, was created and

shaped into its basic form, still in use today, of bass and snare drums, tomtoms, high-hat cymbals, and ride and crash cymbals.

Since the immigration to the Americas of large numbers of Chinese during the mid to late 1800s, Chinatowns took root primarily in Hawaii, on the West Coast, and in cities such as New York. By the beginning of the twentieth century, a highly active and extensive Chinese opera touring circuit had been established in Chinese communities extending from Vancouver, Canada, along the West Coast, to Central and South America, to the Caribbean (notably Havana), and on into New York City. In Chinese theater, percussion figures prominently with an array of gongs, cymbals, drums, clappers, and woodblocks that accentuate, highlight, and drive the stage drama. In the aesthetics of Chinese opera, a stage performer must be well versed in singing, acting, and movement (with martial arts-like acrobatics and specific physical movements and hand gestures). The repertoire of Chinese opera is a collection of well-known traditional scenes and stories with all-too-familiar plots, characters and story lines, and verses. Chinese opera audiences know the stories, lines, and lyrics by heart. What makes a particular performance fresh and enjoyable are the virtuosic performances. Typically, a Chinese opera actor-performer never asks, "What is my line?" but rather, "What are my beats?" referring to the percussion rhythms to which they follow and use as a springboard for their particular individual performance.

In 1904, the World's Fair took place in New Orleans where it featured "exotic" exhibits from around the world, including Asia, Polynesia, and the Philippines. Chinese opera was an especially popular and well-attended exhibition in the 1904 World's Fair. During the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth, a small population of Chinese had resettled to Mississippi and other southern states, where they were brought in as a short-lived experiment to replace African labor after the formal ban on slavery in the United States. The more enterprising and successful of these Chinese laborers began small service and mercantile businesses. Historians have documented the contact between the Chinese and African Americans during this period, with events of both conflict and cooperation (including mixed marriages).²

It is surmised that African American drummers, fascinated by the sounds and role of drums and percussion in Chinese music, especially in opera and

theater performances, found a way to incorporate both the instrumentation and setup of the multiple-percussion arrangement of the Chinese opera percussion ensemble into the drum set. This effort was seen as a way to broaden the sonic percussion palette as well as to economize and reconfigure an array of percussion played by multiple performers into a "single" instrument (the drum set) played by one musician. This was especially practical and efficient for steamboat musicians who were greatly limited by space. Where once several percussionists played a single percussion instrument, with the drum set one player using all four limbs in coordination could play multiple percussion.

Much of the early research in the historical development of the drum set is drawn from Theodore Dennis Brown's exhaustive dissertation *A History and Analysis of Jazz Drumming to 1942*, as well as from the oral interviews conducted by royal hartigan of many drummers.³ Several components of the African American drum set have connections to Chinese percussion. The wood block was an important element in the ragtime and later New Orleans drum sound. This instrument, which is a hollow oblong chamber of wood with slits for sound projection, was widely used by drummers (in many sizes and shapes) well into the 1940s. With its various sizes and tones, it can be seen as a descendant of African slit-log drums, although Theodore Dennis Brown groups the wood block with the Chinese tom-tom and Chinese cymbal as instruments with an Asian heritage. Wei-hua Zhang, a Chinese ethnomusicologist, has stated that the wood blocks and temple blocks she has seen in this country, the same as those used in the early drum set, are similar and perhaps traceable to hollow wooden blocks played with a stick in China. These blocks are of varying sizes and pitches and are used during prayer in Chinese Buddhist temples. Zhang also relates that the general onomatopoeic name for the sound of Chinese drums is *don-don*, which parallels the sound and name for the tom-tom (the general name for snareless drums, such as tom-toms, obviously has a wide and international derivation).⁴

Another Chinese ethnomusicologist, Wu Wen-guang, has noted that wood blocks (*bang-zi*), temple blocks (*mu-yu*), tom-toms (*tang-gu*), cymbals (*nao bo*), and large and small gongs (*da luo* and *xiao luo*, respectively), used in the early years of drum sets, are all found in Chinese theater performances and in Buddhist temple prayer rituals. A continuous bass drum-

cymbal pattern in quarter notes is also used as a Chinese folk parade rhythm. Wu has identified a common African American ride cymbal beat—a quarter note followed by two eighth-triplets separated by a triple-eighth rest—as similar to a rhythm found in Chinese drama. He has also described two small hand-held cymbals, sounding on alternate beats.⁵ The inclusion of wood block, tom-tom, temple block and Chinese cymbals in the early drum set indicates that jazz drummers heard and were attracted to the sounds of Chinese instruments.

There are many similarities between not only the physical characteristics of Chinese percussion with aspects of the African American drum set, but also in the manner in which individual components are played. For example, the Chinese double hand cymbals (the *nao bo*) are played by striking up and down (vertically) as opposed to the Western hand-held crash cymbals played striking against each other (“crashing”) side to side (horizontally). The high-hat in the drum set is composed of two small cymbals suspended on a pole carriage and played by a foot pedal, clanging vertically. The high-hat, like the *nao bo*, can be “choked” to create a tightened, nonringing metal accented sound.

Brown points out that the nineteenth-century immigration of large numbers of Chinese people to the United States, and the music that in their new home remained a part of their festivities—including opera, theater, and parades, influenced American jazz musicians.⁶ He also points out that wooden slit drums, Chinese cymbals and tom-toms are commonly used in Chinese theater productions and are traceable to the Ch’ing dynasty (1644–1911). The sounds of these instruments were adopted by African American jazz musicians, as well as by their white counterparts. In stage and steamboat shows, dance hall revues, and cabarets African American drummers had to utilize a variety of sound effects and percussive techniques in a manner similar to that performed by the Chinese percussionists. Chinese percussion instruments used in Chinese theater functioned as a unit to portray dramatic action, parallel to that of jazz drummer reflecting the dramatic action of soloists or dancers. African American drummers studied and borrowed these instruments, the particular instrumental construction and combination, and the narrative role of Chinese theater percussion, which then became incorporated into the hybrid drum set and subsequently expanded the role, scope, and power of American vernacular music across the globe.

Notes

- 1 Bessie Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes, *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), 37-40.
- 2 See, for example, James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1988).
- 3 Theodore Dennis Brown, "A History and Analysis of Jazz Drumming to 1942" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1976); royal hartigan, "Blood Drum Spirit: Drum Languages of West Africa, African-America, Native America, Central Java and South India" (Ph.D. dissertation, Wesleyan University, 1986; part 3, chapter 6, "The Evolution of the Drum Set in the African-American Tradition").
- 4 Oral communication between hartigan and Kwadzo Donclar and Kobena Adzenyah, 1986.
- 5 Oral communication between hartigan and Wei-hua Zhang, 1986.
- 6 Oral communication between hartigan and Wen-guang, 1986.