

Native American Drumming

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Native American drumming has been around for thousands of years. There is no exact date as to when the first native American drum was invented. The drum was a way for Native Americans to connect to the creator and to have a spiritual experience. The sound created from these powerful drums were many times meant to mimic or recreate the sounds of thunder to get the attention of the gods. This was a way to directly communicate with the creator. It has also been said that by playing these sacred drums you are directly opening up a portal between the human and spiritual realm. The drum was actually often viewed as a living entity. The drum also was described as the heartbeat to mother earth.

Most all Native American drums are created from some type of animal hide or animal skin. Large branches or logs were used to shape the frame of the drum while the animal hide was stretched over. There are many different sizes and types of native drums. Some drums are small and tight while others can be as large as three feet. The Nisenan Maidu, a native tribe to Northern California, did not use a hand drum. Instead, they used a foot drum created from a giant log. The creation of the foot drum was an important task. Before the men began creating the drum they would spend a significant amount of time in the sweat lodge preparing for the task. The wood that would be used to create this foot drum was made from a tree with the most dense type of wood. This was from the sycamore tree. The tree was cut down and then a five to six foot section was taken from the trunk of the tree. It was then cut lengthwise while the workers would select the portion of the tree with the fewest knots. The center portion of this section was then burned and carved out. A half cylinder would be left open at both ends. The drum making was a sacred tradition which is why no one was allowed to watch during the creation of the foot drum. Once the drum was completed, the drum was then brought into the village where a feast and ceremony was held to celebrate. The drum was placed in an open trench with the hollow portion facing down. The foot would then be used to stomp on the drum to create a sound.

Another type of Native American drum is the very unique water drum. The Iroquis tribe created a small hand drum with stretched animal hide. Water would actually be placed inside the drum which would change the sound of the drum depending on how much water was placed in the drum and how wet the animal hide became. Another tribe that created water drums was the Yaqui tribe. The Yaqui would cut a gourd in half and then was placed in a basin of water. The gourd would be hit with a stick which would create vibrations. The vibrations would cause the water to then resonate from the gourd. Native American church ceremonies will often times not use wooden water drums but iron, brass or copper. The water inside is in constant motion, which produces a unique special resonance. The players thumb will be pressed up against the drum head. By pressing the thumb against the drum head a constant

pitch can be held. When the player releasing the thumb in between songs the pitch will lower by a fifth or more due to pressure being released from the drum.

Small hand drums are one the most common type of native drums found still today. The circular shape of the hand drum was important as it represented the never ending circle of life. The spinner drum is the popular drum still seen today many times as a type of instrument for a younger child. These have stretched hide on both sides of the drum. These drums are tiny often times only a few inches in diameter. These drums are usually held up by a small pole. Beads are placed on a string to use as strikers to the drum. The pole can be spun between both hands to beat both sides of the drum. Another hand drum is the double sided hoop drum. This drum has rawhide on both sides of the drum and was often times used by the Tarahumara Indians.

Powwow drums are another type of Native American drum. These are massive drums usually used in drum circles. Drum circles consist of 8 or more surrounding the powwow drum which is placed in the center of the circle. These drums are mostly made of cedar. Animal hide which is usually elk or buffalo is stretched over the large cedar frame. The drummer will keep a steady consistent beat while others will play and sing along with the larger powwow drum. Some believe the powwow drum was brought to the culture through a woman. This is why it has been said that the spirit of a woman resides within the powwow drum.

Many of these drums are most often used during Native American Ceremonies. Native American ceremonies can also be called a powwow. This gathering was many times used to celebrate the creator, give thanks and to give offerings up to the creator. Different drums would be used for different types of ceremonies. Often time there was one person responsible for the main tempo or beat of the ceremony. This was an important responsibility and was often given to the eldest son of the tribe. One type of ceremony is the peyote ceremony. During this ceremony peyote would be ingested during the beating of a drum. For the larger drums more than one person could strike the hide of the drums. In some tribes each person would be designated to have their own unique drum. This drumming would further themselves into the spiritual realm. The drumming allows for the spirit to travel out of the body connecting with the creator. Other powwow ceremonies would often involve new babies. The babies would be brought into the ceremony as the beating of the drum symbolized the beating of the mother's heart while the baby was inside the mother's womb. During times of stress for the tribe, ceremonies would be held. The drumming would allow the members to connect to spirit to receive a helping hand in times of need.

War or battle was another reason drums would be used. Ceremonies or gathering would be held before battle. Drums were used during these times in order to set the intention and tone before the battle. This would be to connect back to the spirits for the guidance and protection. The drumming allowed for the connection to the spiritual realm before any type of war. They would ask spirit for strength and guidance.

