

**INTRODUCTION
TO
WEST AFRICAN RHYTHMS
FOR THE
HIGH SCHOOL/COLLEGE
CURRICULUM**

Drumming, Songs, and Concepts of West African Music

Volume 1

MICHAEL A. BENNETT

Introduction
to
West African Rhythms
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By

Michael A. Bennett

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INTRODUCTION

Mike Bennett has been a drummer all his life. His father was a Big Band drummer and Mike took after his dad very early on. He knew the life of a drummer was his destiny. A BM in Music Ed from the University of Maine; private studies in Symphonic Percussion with Dr. Stuart Marrs; Drum set with David Saucier and the late great Alan Dawson; led Mike to a career in jazz and studio performance as well as education. In the 90's Mike played with The Patti Wicks Trio and backed many jazz greats such as Buddy DeFranco, Ray Alexander, Anita O'day, Sheila Jordan, Clark Terry, Larry Coryell, Greg Abate, Liza Rey and many more. In the late 90's Mike was percussionist for the Beatroots and toured extensively on the Jam Band scene. Mike is also a first call studio percussionist working on more than 50 CD's. His own CD 'Boongah' ... which is Balanta Balafon music... has won critical acclaim from Modern Drummer magazine. He continues to perform Jazz with Ned Ferm, Ryan Blotnick, Shane Ellis, Liza Rey, etc. and leads Balantama, a West

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African/Jazz groove band that is truly one of a kind.

14 years teaching World Percussion at College of the Atlantic has opened Mike up to another direction into the world of West African music. In 1999 Mike made his 1st trip to The Gambia, West Africa and has made 11 trips staying 3-4 months at a time.

Studying with great musicians such as Amadou Joof... Djembe, Keba Mane... Balafon, Mamjam Janha... Wolof Sabar. Mike has been documenting and notating his studies and the musicians of Gambia and Senegal for many years and features musicians of Serrekunda, The Gambia in his documentary video Gambia ... N'Karamoo, which means Gambia... my teacher.

This book is designed for the reading musician, but remember, this music in West African culture is not notated, but imitated and memorized. A lot of folk and cultural musics from all over the world are not notated. It is to the student's advantage to be able to not only read this notation, but also to learn music by imitation too. Repetition is the key,

as well as recall. Many of these rhythms feel strange to us ! Here in the USA and Europe we are used to certain rhythms and cadences. West African rhythms will open us all up to many new possibilities in feeling and hearing music. We will especially focus on groups of 3... triplets... and see how differently West Africans arrange and feel the beat. I highly recommend using a metronome and tapping the foot. We need to have the pulse... the beat... solid and secure... in order to play these rhythms. Also important to remember, this music in West African culture is for the dancers. If you ever want to know where the pulse is... watch the dancers !

We will start slow and build a solid foundation of fundamentals. Playing a hand drum can be at first painful unless you learn to strike the drum properly. There is no substitute for time spent playing the drum. Getting your hands on the drum as much as possible will eventually lead to good sounds, endurance, and comfortability.

As with any musical instrument we have to stick to it and work very hard and then the rewards will come. Believe me ... getting an authentic sound and playing authentic West African rhythms is very rewarding! It takes much more time than a High School class to properly learn West African music, as it does with any musical instrument. What we will do is make the 1st step in learning and truly understanding this music.

The first drum we will play is the Djembe ... pronounced 'Jem Bay.' It is originally from Guinea but is found all over West Africa. Today the Djembe is the 2nd most popular hand drum in the world next to the conga. In West Africa the Djembe is considered to be a very physical masculine drum. Generally women do not play it in West Africa, although that is changing. The Doun Douns are the bass drums of the Djembe ensemble. We will also look at Wolof Sabar drumming, West African Xylophone ... or Balafon, and other

West African percussion.

You may wonder... "when and where is this music played?" Traditionally it is played at any kind of ceremony. When a baby is born they have a 'Naming Ceremony' which is possibly the most common time of music. Also weddings, birthdays, and holidays. These events take place outside, usually in the streets. West Africans spend most of their time outside due to the hot climate. These ceremonies commonly supply traditional food, and the most common food is benachin... or pronounced jay bu chen in Senegal. These ceremonies are mostly for the women. They will dress up in their finest dress, do their hair, dance and dance. In West African society women do most of the work and these events allow them a time to have fun in what may seem an otherwise very difficult life.

Okay... more culture, history and facts later. Let's get started on the Djembe !

TUNING AND MAINTAINING A DJEMBE

As in all styles of music and instruments, experience is invaluable. Tuning a Djembe properly is a process. I will not discuss how to put a skin on a drum, but rather how to tune it after the skin is on. Most Djembes are kept too slack. There are different reasons for this all due to inexperience. You may buy a Djembe and it comes quite slack and there is no room in the rope to tighten more. This is a common problem with beginners. Chances are when they bought the drum it was loose with no room to tune. If the Djembe is tuned with the 'Mali Weave' and it goes all the way up to the top of the sides of the drum, then you are about to buy a drum that has very little if no tuning possibly... at least not without a lot of hassle. When you buy a Djembe make sure it is fairly tight and the weave is not too far up the sides. This will give you more tuning range. Other things to look for when buying a Djembe are ... make sure the rope is of good quality. Check the metal hoops and make sure they are

strong. Pick up the drum and look it over. Has it been patched? Are there cracks? After you've done these basics, see if the drum suits you. Is it the right height for you and is it easy to play? Does it sound good? A simple test to see if the drum is tuned high enough is to play a bass stroke and listen to it. Does it have a flutter to it? If it does, it's too low and needs more tightening.

Djembe heads are meant to be fairly taut, especially the solo Djembe. This drum should be higher in pitch than all the others in the group. It should also have good volume. In my opinion, a solo Djembe can only be too high if it's so tight the skin breaks. This drum has to carry over the sound of possibly 8-10 other drummers.

Don't put anything on the skin as far as moisturizers go and keep it dry and stable. Great changes in humidity can cause a skin to break. When storing Djembes for a length of time loosen them to minimize the possibility of skins breaking. We use a certain knot to do what we call the 'Mali

'Weave', which slowly tightens the drum. See illustration how to tie this knot. You can't get an authentic sound out of a Djembe that is too loose! When traveling with a drum a case is a good idea. I recommend putting some cardboard or even better a round piece of plywood on top of drum before zipping up the case. This will protect the skin from being punctured. The wood itself is very strong; unless you have a serious crack. I suggest a good stretchless climbing rope when new rope is needed. A Djembe skin will only last so long, even with no puncture. The most common way a skin splits is humidity change. If you walk over to your Djembe one day and the head is split chances are it was not sabotage! Also, keep away from a wood stove. When making the 'Mali Weave' use a stick to slide under the rope. This will make it much easier on your fingers.

Tuning a Djembe can be very physical. Sit in a chair and put your feet on the drum when pulling the knot tight... trust me... unless you have huge biceps,

you will need the leverage ! You can either go clockwise or counterclockwise... I prefer counterclockwise, which is left to right. Okay, here is how you make the 'Mali Weave'. 1st, put the drum down on the floor with the skin away from you. Take the rope where it ends and count over 2 vertical lines. You will go over these 2 and then back up through the middle, then over the 1st line and back under both. Pull the rope down as far as possible. Now, put your feet on the drum and pull until the knot comes tight. A picture or video is worth a thousand words, so check out the photo I have provided.

Typically there is no maintenance to the wood shell of the drum. When it was made it should have been oiled or covered in some kind of wood preservative. In West Africa we use palm oil. It is slathered inside and out of the drum and protects the drum from rotting as well as giving it a more vibrant sound.

DYNAMICS... PURPOSE OF THE DJEMBE ENSEMBLE*** And other thoughts about West Africa ***

This music is usually played outside. It is meant to draw attention, even from other villages. To be perfectly frank, a Djembe ensemble is loud, louder, and loudest ! Sorry, but no pianissimo here folks. If I said Djembe music is to be played as loud as possible it would not be at all far from the truth. In Wolof Sabar drumming the same is true, as well as most balafon playing. Music in West Africa provides a service within their culture. What is the deeper purpose ? Music is not food... it is not water... and yet we need it ! Well, let's talk about the hardships of West Africa. For generations it has been for the most part very poor. It is the 'mother' of the earth and it's where some believe we all originated. Average life is difficult and the life expectancy is decades shorter than ours. In West Africa they are living in a way that some here in the USA would consider very primitive. They still have

many diseases that we have eradicated and no longer think about, such as malaria and polio. So I'm going to go out on a limb here and say music is uplifting and healing to the soul. Of course we all do realize that, don't we? But music is not only uplifting... it can be sad, introspective, groovy, swingin', funny, hard, soft, fast, slow, simple, and complex. It can be ever changing... it can be repetitive without change. West African Music tends to be simple in Harmonic and Melodic structure, complex in Rhythmic structure, and very repetitive. The songs are about people, love, history, morality, and every day life. In West African culture songs carry the history of the past and do's and don't within a Tribe. Songs can be for Circumcision... songs can be for work. The Song... and the Dance... is supported by the drum... not the other way around. I can say especially the women enjoy these ceremonies. In West African culture, women do most of the work, and for the most part are still quite submissive to the men, although the times are changing. These various

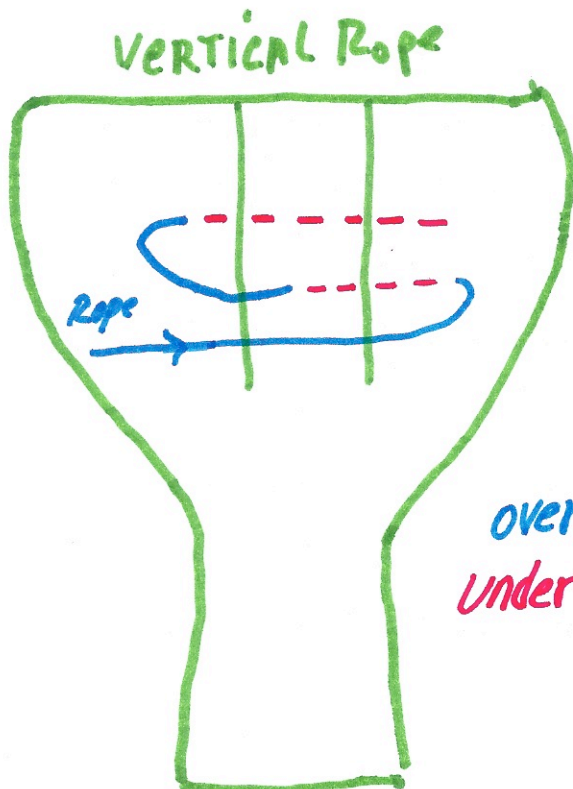
ceremonies provide an outlet for the women to get all dressed up, dance, eat, and have fun.

To learn Ethnic music one must also dive into the culture, or else you will never sound authentic. If you want to really learn West African music one must go to West Africa and live with the people, eat the food, smell the smells, adjust to the heat, learn the language, get sick, have good teachers, make good friends, live with poverty all around you, be a minority, and the list goes on. But when you arrive don't look for the music school, because the music is not separated from the culture like that. When you get to know local people you will be invited to ceremonies. I lived with a Mandinka family for 9 consecutive winters in The Gambia and my experience is immeasurable and priceless. I have seen this music in the culture from the eyes of an insider, not an outsider. So... what is the purpose of music? What does it mean to you?

MALI WEAVE

Below is a diagram of how to tie the knot used in tightening a Djembe. Notice I am showing you both clockwise and counterclockwise... I prefer counterclockwise. It is important to try and pull all these knots down... towards bottom of drum... as far as possible. This gives us the most room for tuning.

CLOCKWISE



COUNTER-CLOCKWISE

