

from hand to drum

HAND DRUM TECHNIQUES FROM AROUND THE WORLD



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Bongos

Having spent the last few months on the Indian vibe, I felt it was about time to go a little more mainstream. For the next three instalments I'm going to be taking a look at bongos and the playing techniques found in Cuban and Brazilian music.

If any of you drummers out there are considering adding some hand percussion to your setup, then I'd strongly recommend bongos. They're easily affordable, very portable and have a lot of possible applications, be it with sticks or hands.

Set yourself up with a pair of bongos on a stand and some shakers and general hand percussion. Set this up on the hi-hat side of your kit and invest in a double bass drum pedal. Now, by turning to your left, you can get some bongo/shaker grooves going and still include the meat of the bass drum. This could fit somewhere in any group's repertoire – after all, I played tabla with hard rockers Thunder once.

If you are thinking about what drums to buy, then I would strongly recommend that you spend at least £120. It's simply not worth economising, because you'll only lose out when you want to replace them with something better. Make sure you get a pair that has the proper four-bolt 'hoop to hoop' bolt tuning system (i.e. free-floating and with no lugs affixed to the shells).

Right, on to sound production. What we're going to look at are the basic striking techniques, a simplified form of the Cuban Martillo (mah-tea-oh) and some basic rhythms along this line. Next time we'll devote the whole article to an in-depth look at the 'thumb-tip' technique used in Cuban bongo playing.

It is most common for the bongos to be played sitting down, although it is also perfectly admissible to stand-mount them. If we look at Fig. 1 we can see the way the drums are held between the legs. This really is a case of finding the most comfortable position for you. They're not necessarily comfortable drums to play, and the bolts can dig into your legs. I get around this by loosening the whole tuning carriage and positioning the bolts so they fall in the crease of the leg behind



Fig. 1 Playing position



Fig. 2 One-finger strike applicable to both hands

the knee.

You will also see from the photo that the drums are angled slightly downwards. All these points are subjective, but one thing that is absolutely necessary is that the playing surface does not fall below the knees. The heads have to be proud. This makes access to the playing surface easier and helps to avoid the player resting his arms on his legs, which must be avoided. One final note: for right-handed players, the larger drum should be on the right.



Fig. 3 Full strike applicable to both hands

The high pitched sound is articulated by striking with the tip of the first finger for quieter playing (as in Fig. 2) or with the tips of all the fingers for louder playing (as in Fig. 3).

The fingers should strike as near the edge of the drum as possible and should create a very high pitched cracking sound. This is due partly to the tuning. The small drum should be cranked up as high as you dare go, whilst the larger drum should be tuned approximately two thirds as high as this. Listen for the tones of each drum and the interval between them to decide this. And don't forget to de-tune them when you are not using them.

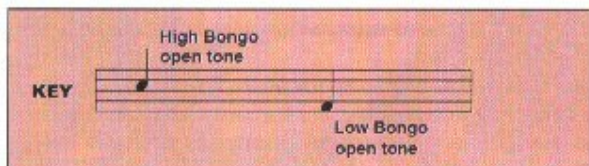
▶ Try this single stroke with both hands and begin to work on a smooth and even single stroke pattern at a slow tempo: R L R L R L R L.

Next we have the open tone on the larger drum. This is articulated with the first finger slightly more into the drum than for the small drum. This helps accentuate the bass tone by bringing out some of the lower harmonics. It is important not to hit the larger drum near the rim if you want to pull out the bass of the drum.



Fig. 4 Open tone on larger drum

Right, some rhythms to be getting on with. Ex. 1 is the simplified Martillo rhythm whilst the remaining examples are general rhythmic motifs.



Ex 1 SIMPLIFIED MARTILLO



Ex 2



Ex 3



Ex 4 SAMBA STYLE GROOVE



Ex 5



Ex 6



See you next time for the real thing. In the meantime, play up bongo, bongo play up...

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