

# from hand to drum

## HAND DRUM TECHNIQUES

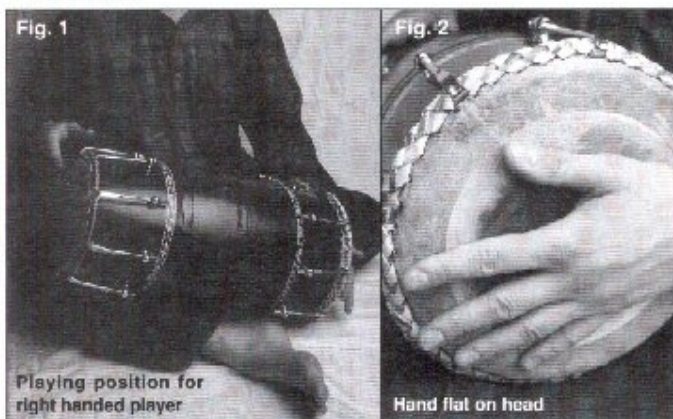
### FROM AROUND THE WORLD



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This month we're going to begin looking at the basics on North Indian dholak technique. The dholak is a double-ended wooden drum with bass on one end and treble on the other. For a more detailed description of the instrument itself take a look at August's *Rhythm* where I cover North Indian drums in more detail.

The first thing we need to look at is the playing position. Sitting cross-legged on the floor can be uncomfortable if you're not used to it, but I can assure you you do get accustomed to it in the end. Sit cross-legged on the floor with the drum in front of you with the treble head on your right. (Reverse all of this if you're left handed.) Move your right leg forwards slightly, allowing enough of a gap for the drum to fit between the heel of your right foot and the shin of your left leg. The drum should rest on the inside of your right leg which should (unless you're a contortionist) be facing upwards. The bass end of the drum should be resting on the floor while the treble end should be raised from the floor by your leg to an angle of about 45 degrees. The treble end should be slightly proud to your right, allowing your right hand to get to the front of the head easily. Refer to Fig. 1 and read through these instructions a few times to be sure of the position.



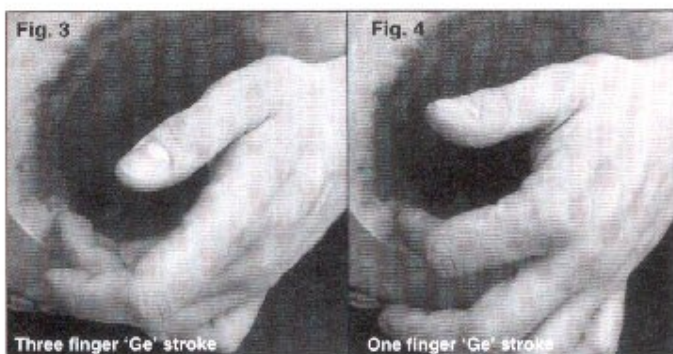
The first stroke we are going to look at is the 'Ge' stroke. This is played with the left hand on the bass end of the drum. It is difficult to explain this stroke without demonstration, but the photos should make it clear. Firstly lay your hand flat on the head as in Fig. 2.

Now, with the underside of the wrist remaining in contact with the head, cup your hand as if you were holding a snooker ball. Then split your fingers into two striking units, unit one consisting of the little, ring and middle finger, and unit two being the first finger alone. Then, with the wrist remaining in contact with the head, strike with these two units, one after the other. If we look at Fig. 3 we can see the three finger unit striking, while in Fig. 4 we can see the one finger unit striking.

One important thing to bear in mind is that, because of the length of the fingers, the middle finger is the main tool in the power of the three finger unit, both because of its muscle power and also its length. Many dholak players would only use this striking unit and not the one fingered unit. This two unit striking method is derived from tabla technique. Having said that, for the purposes of this article we will only be using this three fingered striking unit as in Fig 3.

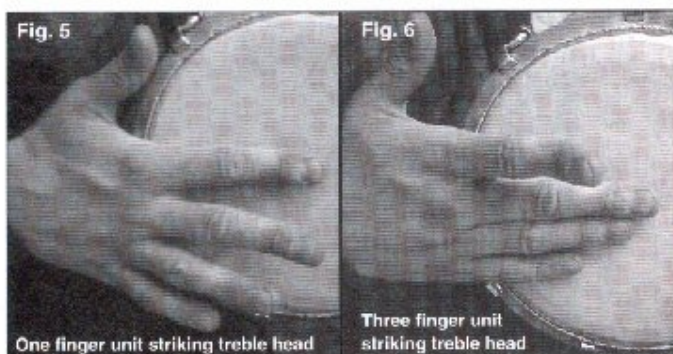
The sound of the 'Ge' stroke should be a resonant bass tone, not muffled too much by the wrist resting on the head. We will look at the influence of the wrist in the creation of the glissando inflections of the bass tone in a later article.

The next note we will look at is the 'Ke' stroke, also on the bass end. This



is the closed note for the bass side of the drum. It is executed by laying the hand flat on the head as in Fig. 2, and, with the wrist remaining in contact with the head, pivoting the hand upwards from the wrist and striking the drum with all four fingers. The result should be a closed, 'slapping' type sound. Notice how in Fig. 2 all the fingers are slightly apart as they strike the head. It would not be totally incorrect to play this stroke with all four fingers held together. I personally prefer the sound with the fingers slightly apart, as well as finding it more relaxed.

Now we can move on to the treble head and its strokes. As with the bass head the hand is split into two striking units, namely the three fingered and one fingered striking units. The division of fingers is the same as with the left hand, but unlike the left hand, the wrist does not rest on the drum, nor do the fingers get bent. If we look at Fig. 5 and 6 we can see the position for striking with our two units on the treble head. With these units



one can strike in the middle of the head for a closed, non-resonant sound (as in Fig. 5 and 6). For this stroke the fingers strike sharply, playing into the drum with the fingers staying on for a millisecond after striking. These will be called the 'Te 3' and the 'Te 1' stroke respectively. Alternatively one can move one's hand out as near to the rim as possible for a more ringing and resonant sound. For this the fingers would not remain on the head after impact. I'm going to use the terms 'Na 1' and 'Na 3' for these strokes – it will be the simplest way to convey the

information for the purpose of these articles, avoiding any ambiguous terms used for certain notes in the context of certain phrases.

In tabla, playing the 'Na 1' stroke is made more complex by holding down the ring and little fingers while striking. This creates a particular harmonic which does not come out strongly on dholak and therefore is not an important part of the technique.

The sound of the 'Na 1' and '2' strokes should be high pitched and clear, with each striking unit moving away from the head quickly after the stroke, allowing the head to resonate.

Now, to recap, we have six strokes: 'Ge', 'Ke', 'Te 1', 'Te 3', 'Na 1' and 'Na 3'. Next month we will go on to look at some patterns involving these strokes. It is very important to get the sound of these strokes and the hand movements well ingrained before we go on to look at any

rhythmic structures.

To finish off, I'll give a brief run down on tuning. The smaller, high pitched head should be cranked up to a high tension similar to that of a high bongo. It should be sharp and cutting, almost woodblock like. The bass head, on the other hand, should not be too highly tuned. It should be less than half the tension of the small head, allowing the bass end to sing out. The small head should always be slackened off after a performance. Needless to say, tuning a drum with bolt tensioning is a lot easier than tuning one with rope tensioners running between the two heads. That's all for this month. Work hard on the strokes and get ready for some rhythms next issue.

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