

Way Out West

Part 1



Peter Lockett's global percussion odyssey continues o'er land and sea, taking him for the next couple of months to Ghana, where, as you shall discover, there's barrels of fun to be had...

The drumming of the Ewe tribe from Ghana, West Africa, is without doubt the most well known African drumming tradition, tempting composers as great as Steve Reich to go out and study its roots. Reich's 'Drumming' is a classic example of the Ghanaian influence on Reich's music. All the different drum parts interlock in a very African way, using simple, repeating patterns layered over one another to build up a larger whole. Also of note is the ambiguity of the rhythms and the way a 6/8 groove can become elusive and sound more like 3/4. The most recent visitors to tap into Ghanaese drumming are the contemporary percussion group Ensemble Bash, who spent some months out there last year and built up a whole repertoire of pieces based on Ghanaian rhythms.

The influence that African drumming has had on all groove-based music in the West is enormous and continues to grow, be it from its early roots and migrations or from present day studies.

My most recent study of African drumming took me less than a mile from Kentish Town station, not to Professional Percussion but to Prince of Wales Road and the small store-room of Peter Goldsmith, a very skilled percussionist and drum maker running a company called Ujama African Percussion. It was amazing to think that behind the facade of a house I'd driven past hundreds of times, there was a specialist drum factory in action.

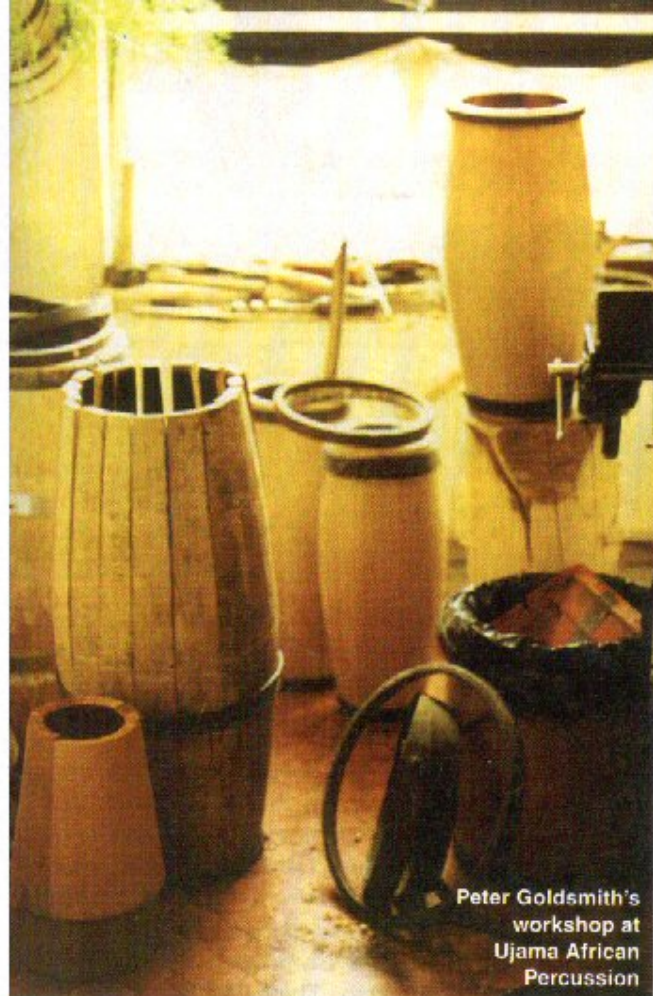
As with a lot of African drumming traditions, the Ewe drumming group is made up of a number of players all playing simple parts on different drums and bells. The basic set of Ewe

drums consists of six different shapes and sizes. The main drum is the astimava, the master drum. This really is a monster of a tub, standing over 52 inches tall and with a head diameter of between nine and ten inches. It is shaped rather like a huge, elongated conga, going slightly wider at the belly of the drum which is nearer the base of the shell than it would be on a conga. Its appearance could be described as cylindrically thin and elegant. The drum is usually played with a stick in one hand – usually the right – while the other hands strikes on its own. The drum rests over at an angle with the player reaching over from behind and slightly to one side. There are a number of basic strokes used on the drum, such as mutes, slaps and open tones with the bare left hand, and stick open tones, mutes and pressed notes with the right hand. The astimava is the lead drum in the whole ensemble and is responsible for all the cues and changes in the rhythmic patterns. (More about the techniques and compositions next month.)

At the opposite end of the spectrum we have the kan kan. This is the tiniest drum in the set, standing generally about 21 inches tall with a 7 inch head diameter. The belly of the drum is slightly wider in the centre of the shell. Rumour has it that this tiny fella finally grows into a huge master drum, but I don't believe it myself.

Just bigger than the kan kan is the kidi. This drum is approximately the same height but has a slightly bigger head (by about two inches) and a much fatter belly.

Next is the don don. This is a short, fat and altogether bassier drum, usually around twelve and a half inches tall with a head



Peter Goldsmith's workshop at Ujama African Percussion

diameter of about fifteen inches. It's a bit like the floor tom of the set. The shell has only a very mild bulge to its belly, and the sides of the shell could inaccurately be construed as vertical.

The *sogo* is slightly bigger than these three and has a head diameter of around nine inches. The shell is approximately 26 inches tall and, like the *kidi*, *kan kan* and *don don*, it sits on the floor between the player's legs. The taper on this drum is much more extreme with the shell bulging out at the bottom by almost double the diameter of the head size.

Last but not least we have the *kpan logo* drums. These – within a loose definition of the word – are basically congas. Sizes vary, as with standard congas, from ten inch heads up to thirteen inch heads with a shell depth of around 30 inches.

Besides the drums you'll also find *shekeres*. These are shakers made from a dried hollow gourd and covered with a net of beads. The *shekere* is held vertically by the neck and shaken in one hand, while the other hand sometimes gets involved by hitting it on the bottom. Also found in the instrumentation is a metal bell type instrument called *aroke* or *gankogui*. This is best described as a metal clave equivalent; it looks like a dried metal seed pod, hollow in the middle and curled up at the edges. It's held in the palm of the hand in much the same way as a clave, and is played with a metal beater. Like the smaller drums, these two instruments play simple, supportive rhythms.

Traditionally all these drums are carved from one piece of wood and tuned by the ancient pegging method. This entails connecting rope at strategic points around the head and fixing it to pegs hammered into holes in the side of the shell. For this the holes have to be exactly the

right size. If the hole is too small for the peg, the peg can split the shell; if it's too big, the peg won't stay in place and the tuning slips. Nowadays in Ghana, you're just as likely to find drums constructed from half inch timber slats, which have a tendency to lose their shape and deteriorate faster than one would want.

One person with a mind to eradicate this problem is Peter Goldsmith, owner, designer and drum builder of Ujama African Percussion. Based in Kentish Town and with a workshop in Camden Lock, Peter hand builds all his African drums using the most time consuming, skilful and thorough methods I've ever come across. The shells are made from one inch thick 'quartered oak' (or sometimes mahogany) and built using the dying skills of coopering (barrel making).

Quartered oak is wood cut from the log in such a way as to always go across the grain in a particular direction. This maximises the strength of the wood and makes shrinkage more predictable – all the timber shrinks in the same direction. It's an expensive way of doing things because it leads to so much wasted wood – but don't worry, Peter only uses reclaimed timber.

Simply speaking, the drums are made from staves of wood glued together and formed into a shell. The first stages of this involve making the staves. These obviously need to go together side by side to form the shell, which isn't as easy as it sounds. Think of the shape of a conga, for example. As I mentioned earlier, these drums have a wider belly in the middle of the shell, posing an enormous problem: how do you get the slats to bulge in the middle? It would certainly be easier if the sides of the shell were straight.

Many drum makers use the quickest solution and cut 'V' shapes out from the middle of one of the slats on its interior side. Then the slat is bent into shape, glued and allowed to dry, resulting in it being bent to the desired angle. This is then glued together with the other slats to form the drum. All of the slats need to be wider in the middle to form the bulge of the drum – the wider the middle, the bigger the bulge. All the measurements need to be spot on so all the edges meet perfectly. This we could call the 'cut and bend' method. Peter uses a method called 'scarfing' which entails a great deal more effort.

Scarfing involves taking the prepared slats and putting them into a metal hoop one by one until you have the elements of the shell standing upright and supported by the hoop – this is called 'raising'. At this point the slats only touch each other at their farthest points, where the bulge of the drum would be most pronounced. (Bear in mind that there can be between twenty and 30 staves of wood for each conga sized drum.) At the top and bottom there will be a gap between the slats. A series of fires are then lit inside the shell to soften the wood and bend the tops of the staves inwards until they meet. (Wood always bends towards a flame.) As



The Ujama African Ensemble 'jargin' it in Covent Garden

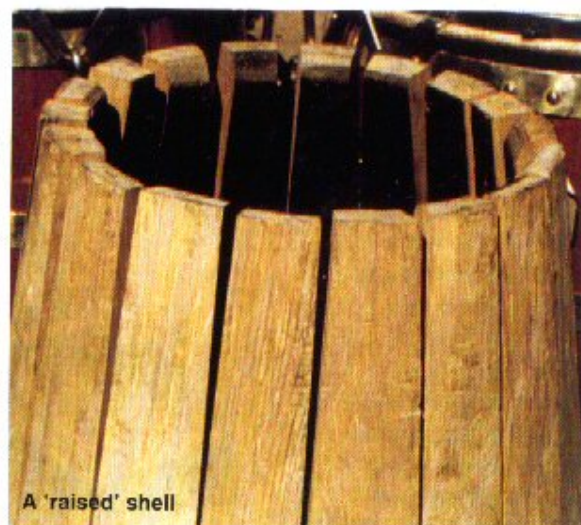
this process develops, more steel rings are hammered on to force the staves into close alignment with each other. When this has been done to both ends of the drum, it is left to settle for a fortnight in a centrally heated room. Then the rings are removed and the staves are taken apart to allow them to be glued back into position. The hoops are then put back onto the drum to hold the whole thing in place while it dries. When it is dry, the hoops are again removed to allow the finishing of the shell. This is done in three main stages: smoothing with a spoke shave, finishing with a cabinet scraper, and finally going down through grades of sandpaper before staining and polishing. Then the hoops are fitted back onto the drum and hammered into position. The hoops do actually make a big difference to the resonance of the shell, and when the final one is fitted, the whole drum rings like a bell as it is hammered into position.

Unlike with traditional drums, Peter tends to use standard metal fittings and tuning lugs to allow for easier tuning. Having said that, he does also do the rope and peg tuning system on special order. The drums are lapped with English cow hide rather than the more common water buffalo skin from south-east Asia. The skin he uses is a lot thicker and takes a lot more tensioning to bring up to tone, but because the shells are one inch thick, the risk of lug boxes being ripped from the shell by the high tension placed on them is eliminated.

Ujama are the only company I know of making African drums in the UK, and they're doing a splendid job. Next month we'll take a look at the techniques and styles

of drumming coming from the Ewe tribe, but in the meantime, if you want to know more about how these drums are made, call Peter Goldsmith on 0171 482 5089, or check out the book *The Cooper And His Trade*, by Kenneth Kilby (John Baker Publishers, ISBN 0212 983 997).

Just as a matter of interest, the biggest ever cask made in this way was 30 feet deep by 44 feet diameter and contained 272,520 gallons of liquor. In 1814, at the Meux brewery in Clerkenwell, it broke, drowning eight people and knocking down walls as its contents flowed down the street. I wish I'd been there. ♦



A 'raised' shell