

# The Gong Show

Peter Lockett takes us to Indonesia for a look at a very different kind of heavy metal...



There are 14,000 islands in Indonesia, and nearly as many percussive instruments.

If you're the sort of person who's into powerful, hypnotic beats and large groups of percussionists going ten to the dozen on a multitude of differing percussion instruments, then you should seriously be checking out the Gamelan.

Gamelan originates from Indonesia, a group of nearly fourteen thousand islands south of Thailand. The geographical situation is of particular interest when we come to look at the multitude of influences that have become integrated into the various regional styles of Gamelan. More or less equidistant from China and India, the integration of both musical cultures is

clearly evident.

The Gamelan is basically an ensemble made up of mostly percussion instruments – drums, cymbals, gongs, or tuned metallophones. The size of the ensemble can expand to as many as 50, as in the ancient Balinese group Gong Gede, or as few as three or four for shadow puppet theatre groups or families in much the same way as an orchestra. This is done in a modular way so that the numbers in each group can differ from composition to composition.

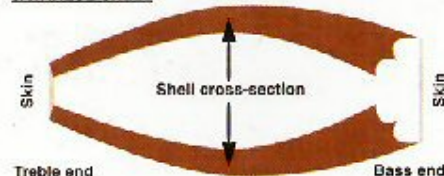
The generic name for the drum is *kendang*, and there are a whole variety of *kendang* in the Gamelan. The most common type is a double-

ended barrel drum which comes in a range of sizes. The shell is carved from one piece of wood, usually from the jack fruit tree, and has a goatskin head at either end. Drums of this nature nearly always have the heads tuned with the bass at one end and treble at the other. This is achieved through different means depending on which Gamelan tradition one adheres to. For example, in Java they tend to put a masala paste on the inside of the bass head to create the bass, whilst in Bali they shape the shell differently. Overall we see a cross section of the two shells showing the different shapes.

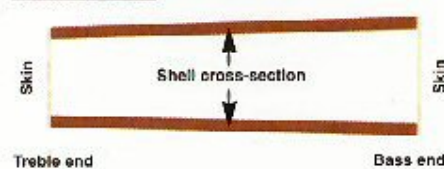
Before I go any further, I need to point out that



#### JAVANESE SHELL



#### BALANESE SHELL



There are three main styles of Gamelan: Balinese, Javanese and Sundanese (West Java). The Balinese and Javanese use a majority of pre-composed material with little if any improvisation. Out of these two, the Balinese has a bias towards pure rhythmic influences whilst the Javanese concentrates more on melody. Sundanese, however, is a lot freer in its approach, has a lot more improvisation and is generally funkier all round.

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All three styles use a wide array of kendang in many sizes, all double-ended. The three basic drums are called *ketipong* (small, about 5"x14"), *chiblong* (medium, about 7"x22") and *kendang gede* (large, about 8"x26"). The bass head on each drum is usually proportionally larger by an inch or two, depending on the size of the drum in the first place. With all these drums the tuning method is the same. The heads at either end are laced together with thongs of rope which pierce the rim of the head at regular intervals. Laced in with all this are metal rings which slide up the ropes, pulling them closer together and increasing the tension of the drum. This effective tuning method is also commonplace in India and can be seen in one form or another on drums such as the *dkolak* and the *nail* from the north, and the *wildengaw* from the south. The other common ground between these and Indian drums is the masala paste used to tune the bass end down low. Besides all this, they also use phonetics to represent the strokes and rhythmic phrases on the drum.

The *chiblong* drum has approximately twenty sounds on the two heads, each of which is represented by a syllable. For example, a teacher might teach the student a rhythm by speaking the words "tak tak dong da", and the student would know exactly what to play. I particularly like this method – it would be great if somebody could come up with a unified phonetic method for drum kit. I know people have tried but it's never really taken off. Anyway, it did in Bali, so let's get back to that.

There is one instrument I haven't mentioned so

far. Sometimes a drum called *balong* is used. This is a huge 18"x18" ceremonial drum carved from one piece of wood from the jackfruit tree. Unlike the other kendang, the head, made from cow or goatskin, is nailed onto the shell. This drum is usually used in religious circles and therefore is not commonplace in the Gamelan.

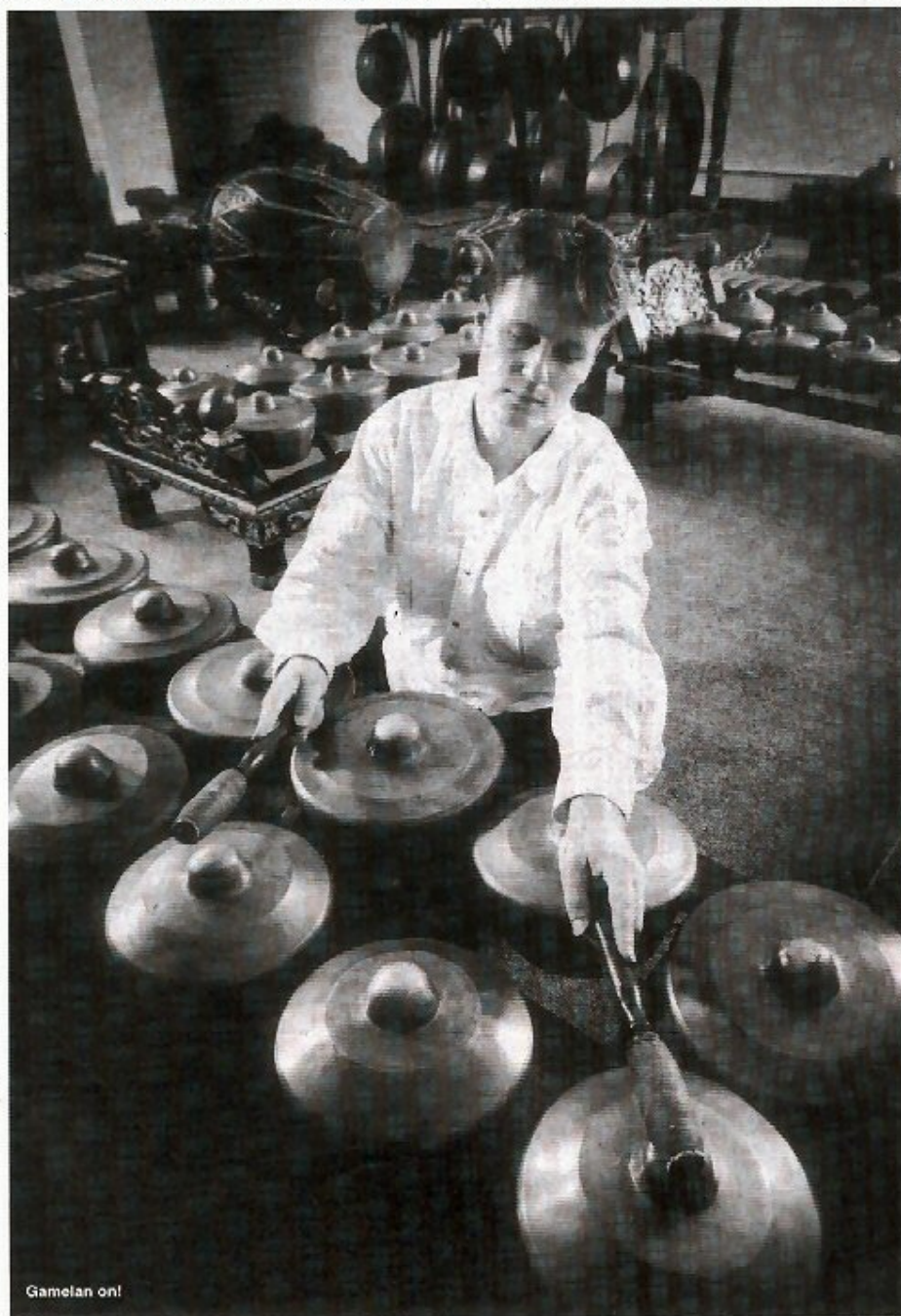
In Bali it is usually the case that each drum is played by a different member of the ensemble. (As with congas in Cuba, many multi-player parts are bastardised into a form for one player.) Each drummer has a partner and their parts are constructed so that they interlock with one another. A very simple example of this would be for player one to be playing on beats one and three of a bar of 4/4, while player two plays on beats two and four.

The alternative method to this is presented in the West Javanese/Sundanese style of drumming. In this instance the drummer plays three drums at once. The large kendang *gede* rests half on the

floor and half on the player's leg as he sits cross-legged. To his left, standing on the floor with the treble end upwards, is a small *ketipong*, and in front, slightly to the right and laying on the floor, is another *ketipong*. This drum has the bass head facing outwards in such a way as to be easily reachable for the player's right hand. This setup opens up four playing surfaces on the three drums.

The left hand articulates general slaps and high pitched parts of the groove on the small vertical drum while the main bulk of the rhythm is played with both hands on the main drum. The right hand also moves backwards and forwards onto the small horizontal drum and articulates some secondary bass tones.

One particularly interesting aspect of drumming in this context is the use of the heel of the foot against the bass end of the drum. The heel digs in and creates a *glissando* effect while the drum is being struck. Here again we have a correlation with the Indian *glissando* techniques. The drums



Gamelan on!



themselves are played mainly with the hands, resorting to sticks for work with dancers. There are a number of slaps, mutes and open tones on both ends of the drums, allowing for quite a varied rhythmic picture.

Generally speaking, the master drummer is the *gubernur*. He's responsible for conducting and cueing the members of the ensemble. These cues are often based around patterns which stand out from the groove in a syncopated fashion, possibly in the form of a contrary rhythmic motif against the beat.

**T**he most striking element of the Gamelan for me is the wide array of gongs. All sizes and shapes, hanging, sitting and standing. Each gong has a name which reflects its tonal quality and sound.

For example, *kempul* is the name given to the large hanging nipple gong and it's a name that quite simply reflects how it sounds. These heavy single gongs hang from a very elaborate wooden framework on strong pieces of rope. The deep, bowed edge tapers backwards on itself and adds a great deal of sustain to the resonance of the sound.

Next we get the single horizontal gong chimes called *keong*. These, like all the other mounted gongs and metallophones, rest on tensioned strings within some sort of wooden framework. *Kawag* is the name given to a two-octave set of

horizontally mounted gongs. These are set in a single wooden framework raised slightly off the floor. These, like all gongs in the ensemble, are nipple gongs with deep, bowed edges.

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The main metallophone of the group is called *gender* and consists of between ten and fourteen flat metal bars suspended on string over bamboo or metal tubes. It actually looks a bit like a tiny vibraphone but sounds quite distinctly different. Like the *bonang*, the whole *kaboodle* is set in an elaborate box, low to the floor. In Bali this instrument is played with hard hammers, while in Java they use softer beaters. This is an important characteristic difference between the two different styles of Gamelan.

As opposed to a set of phonetics for the melodic side of things, the Gamelanians opt for speaking numbers. This can work effectively because the music is pentatonic and doesn't have that many notes. Some of the metallophones span two octaves, but it is more common to have fewer keys than that.

The little mounted cymbals found in Bali and Java are particularly interesting. In Java they have

something called *keler*, which are two small but thick brass cymbals mounted face up on a slab of wood. The player then has two other matching cymbals, one in each hand. Needless to say, they get bashed together in the obvious way.

The Balinese have a similar but even more interesting device. *Ceng ceng* are fundamentally the same apart from the fact that there are four overlapping cymbals mounted on the slab of wood. These are played in the same way, with a cymbal in each hand. It is quite often the case that you will get two cymbal players interlocking parts together.

Add a zither if you like, along with a bamboo flute and a *sralu* and some tuned *arklung* and wallop, you've got the real thing. The judges of that are Andy Channing and Robert Welch, both of whom help run the South Bank Gamelan Players. Both got their scholarships from the Indonesian government to study Gamelan at its source, and both completed their courses and stayed for a substantially longer period.