

BRAZIL NUTS

The all-knowing, all-seeing Peter Lockett continues his percussive tour of the world with a look at the kung-fu kickin' world of capoeira...

If one looks back at ancient and traditional forms of drumming and music, it soon becomes apparent how closely linked most of them are to ritualistic ceremonies and dance styles. Hence there are certain styles of music which do not altogether make technical 'sense'. One such example is the powerful percussion music of the Ewe tribe in Ghana. Rhythms such as the 6/8 *Agbadza* become very difficult to identify without the dancers stressing where beat 'one' falls.

Some two thousand miles or so from Ghana, around the west coast of Africa, we find Angola, a large state with a population of around eight million. Angola is as rich as any other African state as far as percussion is concerned, and has a wide array of traditions and instruments. One such instrument is the *hundu* or *bolumbumba*. This is basically a metal stringed bow with a hollow gourd amplifier – what we'd all recognise as the Brazilian *berimbau*. How then did it manage to travel thousands of miles across the sea from its native land? A short answer to this question is necessary to give a realistic impression of Brazilian capoeira.

Angola was one of the main centres of the Portuguese slave trade from 1500 onwards, and had an estimated forty thousand people a year put into slavery and onto *tumbiros* to be shipped across the Atlantic in extremely inhuman conditions. The main destination for most was the New World territory of Brazil where the discovery of gold had led to the worst consequences of human excess.

Once in South America, the Africans were forced onto the plantations where they lived in *senzalas*. Luckily, many could regularly escape when the plantations were raided by the Dutch, and would flee away from the coast into the dense, almost impenetrable forest land. As years passed, more and more Africans escaped, and autonomous communities were established in the low-bush regions of the forest land. It was in this climate that the Afro-Brazilian tradition of capoeira was born.

Capoeira could be described as a subtly disguised martial art accompanied mainly by percussion instruments and voice. By its very nature, it's a difficult art form to define, containing elements of acrobatics, dance, music and martial arts. The ritual involves two or more dancers moving around a circle and attempting to launch kicks at one another while stepping in time to a very percussive accompaniment. A lot of the movements are slow and graceful, making it a lot less aggressive than it actually sounds. This is partly due to the fact that in the *senzalas*, the Africans attempted to disguise the effectiveness of the martial art from the authorities. Centuries later, having survived oppression and even a nation-wide ban,

capoeira is still very much in vogue, and every year in Brazil there is a national competition to find the top capoeirist.

The instrumentation is of particular interest. Capoeira uses instruments well known to any percussionist who has studied Brazilian samba. The main percussive component is the *berimbau* – a single stringed bow with a gourd amplifier. The wooden bow is generally about 50" long and is bent into shape by the tension of the metal string which is tied to it at both ends.

Affixing the string to the bow is actually quite an easy affair. First, a loop is tied in one end of the string. The loop is then placed over the notched end of the bow. This end of the bow is then put on the floor and the bow bent downwards, bringing the ends closer together. Held firmly in this position, the string



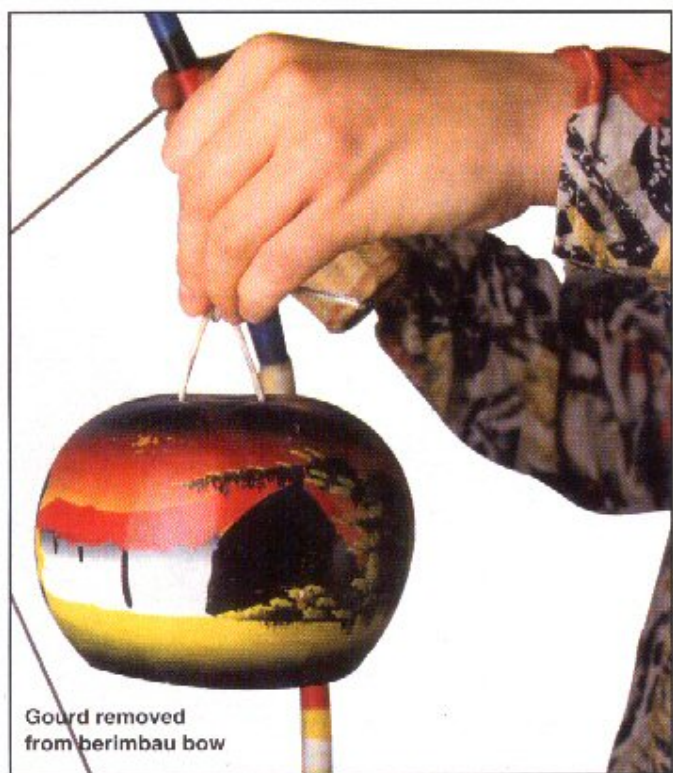
Basic position for both hands

is then brought over the top of the wood, which will usually have a leather disk attached to stop the metal cutting into it. The string is then pulled tight and wrapped around the bow before being tied into position. This tensioning is made possible through a thin piece of rope tied to the end of the string. When you release the bow, the string should give a fairly high note. This note will be made even higher when the gourd is affixed.

If you're going to try this for the first time, I would recommend you go to someone with the requisite know-how for advice, since the bow really can be quite highly tensioned.

Next, the gourd is fitted to the instrument. This is actually the shell of a dried fruit, the front of which is cut away and the back of which sports two holes for the reception of the piece of rope which ties it to the bow. The loop of this string is made big enough to allow the bow to be inserted into it. When this is done, the back of the gourd should be touching the wooden bow and the rope of the gourd should be touching the string of the bow – study the photos for clarification. The berimbau is then tuned by pulling the gourd up and down the bow. The higher the gourd up the bow, the greater the tension and the higher the pitch.

The Berimbau is held in the left hand and played with a small stick held in the right. The playing position can be uncomfortable to begin with because a lot of weight is taken on the little finger which is inserted underneath the gourd rope, between the gourd and the bow (see photos). This enables the thumb and the first finger of the left hand to hold the small metal disc used to adjust the pitch, which is done by pushing against the string as it's struck with the right hand.



Gourd removed from berimbau bow

To compliment this, the right hand also holds a small instrument called a *caxixi*, which is a small woven basket full of beads. The base of the basket is made from either a piece of gourd or a thin piece of wood, giving a very sharp, responsive sound when struck by the beads. (Meinl Percussion actually do a *caxixi* with a fibreglass base, which is even more cutting.) The *caxixi* is held intricately with the stick, as in the photographs.

The berimbau is usually played standing up, with the open face of the gourd facing the player. The reason for this is that the open face of the gourd can be moved backwards and forwards from the stomach to create a type of 'wah-wah' effect in the rhythms. (This is an effect also used in South Indian ghatam playing – see September's *Rhythm*.)

The berimbau is the main percussive voice in capoeira, and all the other percussion parts are subservient to it. The berimbau section consists of three berimbaus, each with its own respective part. The bow of each is identical, but the difference in pitch is obtained by having three different sized gourds. This 'drum family' approach really does highlight the African influence: so much of African drumming is built around

families of drums, each with their respective part complementing the others and working towards a bigger drum fabric.

The bass berimbau is called *bera boi* and plays a rhythm called, strangely enough, *Angola*. The second of the three is called *medio* and plays a rhythm called *Sao Bento Pequeno*. Both of these players get no chance to deviate at all from their pattern during a performance – that is left to the third berimbau player. This berimbau is called *violinha* and is the highest pitched of the three. The rhythm it plays is called *Sao Bento Grande*.

A performance would begin with the three berimbaus, rapidly followed by the national instrument of Brazil, the *pandeiro*. This is a headed tambourine with jingles. The jingles are quite often made from beer bottle tops or any other flat pieces of metal which might be hanging around. This adds to the authentic 'dry' sound of the Brazilian tambourine. Modern pandeiros often have plastic heads, but in capoeira they only use pandeiros with animal skin. The technique used and the rhythms played are slightly different from the 'samba norm'. Although the 'thumb-tip-hell-rip' technique is commonly used, it's something of a simplified version. In some styles of capoeira two differently tuned pandeiros might be used, but usually there's only one.

Next on stage is the *atabaque*, or *conga*, as we'd be more likely to call it in Palmers Green. The basics of the rhythms pivot around the open tone, the muted tone, and the slap tone. The patterns tend to be articulated in a 'hand-to-hand' fashion in the same way as a lot of Brazilian conga playing. (That is, more single stroke patterns which involve one stroke with each hand, than double stroke patterns which might incorporate two strokes with each hand in different configurations.) As with the pandeiros, the atabaque provide a supporting rhythmic fabric for the berimbaus to do their thing, luring the dancers into ever escalating profundities and acrobatic feats.

Here are the rhythms notated. It's interesting to yet again come across the use of phonetic syllables in the interpretation of the rhythms. For the berimbaus, the 'chi' sound represents the sharp sound of the *caxixi*, whilst the 'ding' and 'dong' represent high and low tones, both on the bow and utilising the movement of the open face of the gourd. On the pandeiro, the 'shi' sound represents the sound of the jingles when the drum is lifted up and down sharply.

NOTATION OF PARTS FOR THE FIRST TWO SECTIONS

BERIMBAU 1 (BASS)	
	CHI KE DONG DING
BERIMBAU 2 (MID)	
	CHI KE DONG DING CHER
BERIMBAU 3 (HIGH)	
	CHI KE DONG DING DONG
PANDIEIRO	
	(THUMB TIP THUM UP DOWN TIP) BA DI BA SHI (!) DI
ATABAQUE	
	OPEN SLAP OPEN MUTE MUTE MUTE

For many styles of capoeira this would be the full instrumentation, but there are some styles which would include other percussion instruments. *Agogo bells* (two tuned metal bells) and *reco reco* (two untuned metal springs supported on a resonating tube and played with a thin metal rod) might be

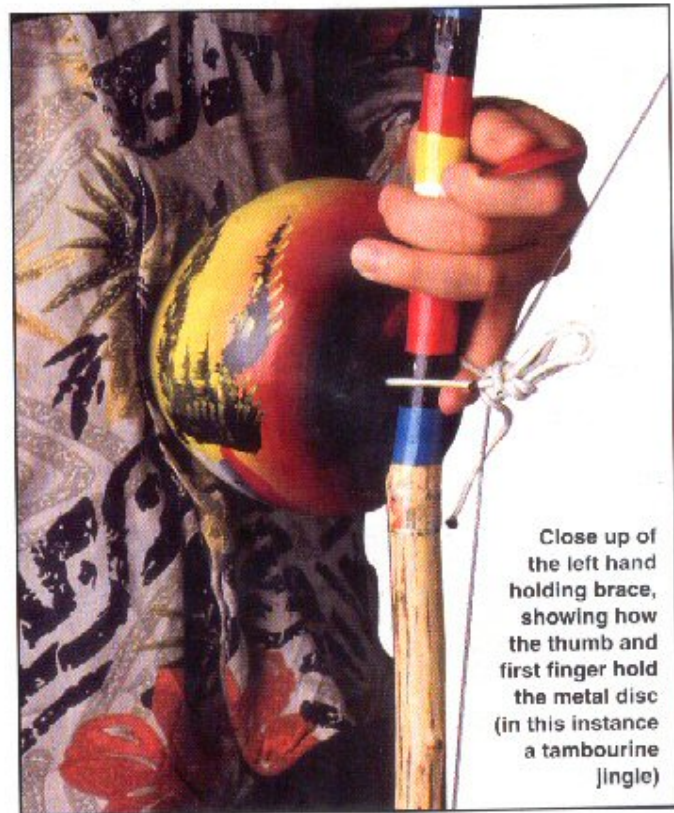
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included in the band. *Agogo bells* and *reco reco* players are renowned for always looking with disappointment at the jobs sections in Brazilian newspapers.

Once the performance has reached this platform and the introduction has been established, the dancers are at their most inspired and the entrance of the singers is hard to postpone. This is where the three main sections of the musical piece begin. These are called *Chula*, *Quadra* and *Corrido*. The first of these two pieces is centred around a slow/medium tempo groove, as notated for ensemble above. The third section is a more up-tempo groove not dissimilar to the Brazilian *baion*. At this point the audience joins in by clapping – not because they want to go home, but because they simply want to take part. It's this faster section that constitutes the finale of the event.

The popularity of capoeira is not solely confined to Brazil. All over Europe there are capoeira schools springing up. In London we are lucky enough to have the London School of

capoeira, run by Sylvia Bazzarelli and Marcos Dos Santos. Since it was set up in 1987, the school has grown in popularity and



Close up of the left hand holding brace, showing how the thumb and first finger hold the metal disc (in this instance a tambourine jingle)

continues to be a good source of information. Anyone interested in taking the study a little further might be interested in contacting them on 0171 281 2020.♦