

Ceremonial Hand Drums

Teacher Background



The drum is not just a musical instrument. To many Native American people, the drum holds great cultural and symbolic power. They believe the drum has a life of its own, as well as its own powerful spirit. The drum is the heartbeat of the Indian Nation. It carries the heartbeat of Mother Earth and calls the spirits and nations together.

Native Americans believe the drum often helps bring the physical and mental side of a person back in touch with his or her spiritual side.

Just like many things in the Native American culture, the drum is used to bring balance and renewal to a person through participation in dancing, singing or listening to the heartbeat.

The drum is referred to as both the instrument and the group of people gathered around it to play and sing. It is central to all powwow ceremonies. It makes the dancers want to move. The better the drum, the easier it is for the dancers to get excited about their performance.

The drum is considered sacred and is to be treated with great respect by anyone who comes in contact with it. Each drum has a keeper to ensure no one approaches it under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Nothing is ever set on a drum, nor does anyone reach across it. Many drum groups bless and name their drums in special ceremonies before sounding them at a powwow. Gifts are often designated to the drum, and many have their own ceremonial medicine pipes. Some drums even have their own song, which is sung as a warm-up at the beginning of the powwow.

Each powwow usually has a host drum and several guest drums. The host drum is usually made up of a group of eight to 11 men. Traditionally, men are the drummers, but women often take part by singing with the drummers.

Reference:

<http://aktalakota.stjo.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8913>

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There is a variety of rhythms and drumbeats, and each type of song requires a different one. The drumbeats must be in perfect time, and each singer must be in perfect unison. The drum group is responsible for being able to play whatever kind of song is requested at the powwow.

The powwow is basically a celebration of Native American culture that not only preserves important traditions but also happens to be exciting to watch. For that reason, it tends to be the most popular way of presenting Native American cultural identity to the public. The powwow is an intertribal event (artists from all tribes participate) and the songs and dances are now basically social in nature.

The songs and dances of the powwow are rooted in the warrior societies of the plains and prairie tribes of North America. They were once ceremonial in nature and provided much needed order and social structure. The drum in the center served as the heartbeat of the organization. The songs and their words honored people, denoted important occasions and preserved history. The dances promoted courage in the face of the enemy and emphasized their duty to the people. Over time, these military societies began to lose their relevance as tribes were moved on to reservations under federal control. However, the obligation to honor veterans as they returned from the World Wars, the need to preserve cultural identity and the desire of the public to see these powerful traditions allowed them to continue until today. And surprisingly, most of the basic structure of the songs and dances remains unchanged. These are truly disciplined art forms that still have much meaning and relevance today. Regardless of their tribe, dancers and singers will adopt the plains/prairie traditions at the powwow but still maintain their distinct and individual tribal traditions when at home.

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