



The Drum

The drum is the heartbeat and central pulse of any gathering, festival or powwow. Depending upon the size of gathering, there is at least one drum or group of singers present. Also depending upon the gathering there may be more than one style of drum present. There are three basic drum styles but numerous ways of singing songs. These styles of drums are the powwow style large drums, the hand drum and the water drum.

The large drums require a group of singers each with a stick (beater) and they all sing and drum in unison. The larger drum groups usually perform at powwows. These drum groups must sing a library of songs to accommodate the variety of dance styles that are present. Singers must also know a variety of honor songs that are required at a powwow. These songs may be Flag Songs, Veteran's Songs, Victory Songs and any other honorings that occur at the powwow.

The larger drums are classified into groups. All drums are considered Traditional but on the powwow trail there are two major classifications. There are Northern Style drums and there are Southern Style drums. Both drums styles have four to eighteen men sitting around the drum as they sing.

There are different beats that each drum group must perform. These beats are called straight beats, crow hops, sneak ups, ruffles and various double beats. The different beats are particular songs which reflect what style of dance that is being performed.

Good drum groups are in demand for powwows and become quite popular. Many make professional recordings that are sold at powwows and other venues that they attend. Popular drum groups are usually asked to perform certain songs at the gatherings and are presented with a gift which is usually tobacco, sweetgrass and in some circumstances money.



The second style of drum is the hand drum. This drum is mostly used in the Northeast along with someone playing a rattle while singing. The hand drum is usually eight to twelve inches in diameter and are made out of the same materials used in the larger drums.

A singer with a hand drum can still sing the same songs that the larger drums sing but only requires one person to beat the drum. It is a more personal drum to have at smaller gatherings. There are hand drum competitions at powwows that do require more singers but each singer has a hand drum.

The third drum style is that of the water drum. The water drum originates in the Northeastern part of the United States. This style of drum is usually four inches in diameter and contains a small amount of water that moistens the leather head to make its unique sound.



The songs associated with this are social songs which include stomp dances, round dances, smoke dances, snake dances and various double beat songs. These are the traditional songs of the Northeast. These style of songs are usually sung in the winter months at family or other social gathering to relieve stress from a long winter and to just spend time with friends and family.

The larger drums and hand drums are made primarily out of wood and leather hides. Most drums are made out of deer, buffalo or elk hides. The hides are soaked and stretched out to fit the wooden frame and then wound with the leather lacings to tighten the heads up. Once tight the result should be a clear boom with no rattle sounds.

Hand drums are now being made with synthetic heads and plastic rims. These are good drums to use but they are manufactured. The best drum makers make their drums the old fashioned way: By hand.