

THE DRUM AND ITS SINGERS

The drum is the heartbeat and central pulse of any gathering. There are always one or several groups of singers who sing as they beat in unison a rhythm on a large drum. Each group of singers is called a drum (usually 5-10 members or entire families). Each drum has a lead singer and a "second" who repeats the lead line on a different or similar key. The drums are usually positioned around the edge (under the arbor when outdoors) of the dance area.

The singers are very important to the structure of the powwow because they must know several types of songs for all the different dances, honorings and events that take place. It is common for participants and visitors to cluster around a good drum, sometimes recording the songs. Good drums are become quite popular and are in demand for many powwows and gatherings. Many make professional recordings that are sold at powwows and other Indian venues.

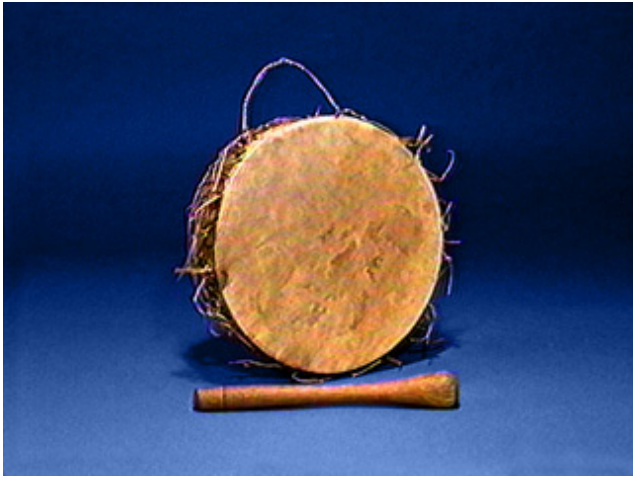
Often a drum is requested for a particular song of honor or for just a good song to make the dancers dance. People who make a request for a song are expected to offer the drum group a small gesture of appreciation. This is usually tobacco, a gift of some sorts or sometimes money.

Usually drummers are men, but women may also drum. Women are commonly seen standing behind the drum singing along with the group. Some singers believe that the gift of drumming was only for men. It has been said that the drum was given to men because women have two heartbeats (when she is pregnant) and the drum was a gift to the men from the spirits so that he may also have two heartbeats.

Drums usually receive financial assistance from the powwow committees to help pay for traveling expenses. At a powwow the drums are expected to perform when the emcee calls their name out. They also are expected to have the particular song ready when called upon. If not, then the song is passed to another drum that knows the song that is required.

Drum groups play several different kinds of songs, some of which are very old and some are written brand new. Each drum has its own style, such as Northern, Southern, Eastern, or Contemporary. Northern singing is sung in a higher vocal pitch than Southern. Most songs have no actual words but are syllables that carry the melody and the meaning of the song. These syllables are called vocables. There are songs that do contain language and those songs have special meaning depending on what is being said in the native tongue.

There are various songs that a drum is called upon to sing. These songs range from honor songs to specialty songs that the dancers have chosen to dance to. The songs have various beats to them such as straight beats, double beats, crow hops, sneak-ups and ruffle songs to name a few.



Penobscot Hand Drum



Eastern Water Drum



Eastern Horn Rattles

Traditionally, here in the Northeast, the singers would use hand drums and rattles to sing the songs but the contemporary singers today use the bigger drums that evolved from the western plains. Hand drums are now primarily used to sing round dances at social events and in competitions there are hand drum competitions. The hand drum is a drum that is usually twelve inches in diameter and has a beater that is smaller than the beater used on the larger drums.

Another type of drum used in the East is the water drum. This drum is from the Six Nations area of New York. This drum is usually four inches in diameter and contains a small amount of water that moistens the leather head to make its unique sound. Songs associated with the water drum are social songs like stomp dances, round dances, smoke dances and other social style dances where everyone participates. These songs are usually sung in the winter months in a longhouse to relieve the stress from a long winter.

Rattles are used by every Indian Nation. Here in the East the rattles are primarily made from birch bark, animal horns or other animal parts such as turtle shells or deer toes. Rattles are considered a sacred instrument and are often called shakers. They are used in social singing as well as ceremonial singing.