

# Mapping the Beat: Music as Communication

**GRADE LEVEL:** 3-5

## INTRODUCTION

African songs, dances, and instruments fascinated European traders and explorers, who recorded their observations in letters, diaries, and books. Music, they noted, was used to preserve history, set the pace of work, enhance ceremonies, and mark life's major and minor events—such as marriages, births, babies' first teeth, the beginning of puberty, initiation into tribal societies, and deaths.

Slaves brought their rituals with them to America, and played drums of all shapes and sizes in the tradition of both eastern and western Africans. The drumbeat not only accompanied chants and dances, but could be used to send messages. In this activity, students learn how music can be used to non-verbally convey meaning.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the 1940s, Jewish anthropologist Melville Herskovits and black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier began a famous argument about the impact of slavery on African cultural traditions. Frazier argued that blacks had been entirely stripped of their African cultural background, while Herskovits argued that blacks retained a number of significant Africanisms. In the last six decades, scholars have continued to debate the impact of chattel slavery on the transplantation—and transfiguration—of African traditions in the Americas.

Enslaved Africans confronted European languages, religious beliefs, kinship practices, dress, food, and cosmic and moral philosophies that were significantly different from their own. But while they might have been legally and economically disenfranchised by their owners, the impact of African cuisine, certain African words, African styles of dance and religious practices, African styles of architecture and art, and aspects of African music in the United States was profound.

This African influence was the result of syncretism. After all, Africans who came to the New World were members of several different tribes and groups, and although they shared some similarities, there were also distinct differences. The experience of New World slavery blended these various peoples from Africa to create “Africans.” This amalgamation almost certainly, particularly in plantation life, re-enforced and re-invigorated certain customs and practices, especially musical and artistic expression.

Drums were integral to many African nations' cultural traditions, not only as instruments of artistic expression but also as tools to send messages across vast distances. The practice of communicating non-verbally through drums continued in the Americas, and that worried many slave owners and traders. From the 1740s, many North American colonies, and later states, banned the use of drums in fear that Africans would use them to create a system of long-distance communication in order to aid rebellion. Nonetheless, blacks managed to generate percussion

and percussive sounds. They created stringed instruments such as the banjo, as well as rhythm instruments, such as the tambourine, shakers, and instruments improvised from washboards, pots, or spoons. This exercise encourages students to use the most basic instruments of all, their hands, to practice non-verbal communication and learn about tone can imply meaning in place of words.

**THEMES:** cultural traditions, adaptation, music, communication

## **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Students, following this activity, will understand:

1. How music can communicate various messages.
2. The history and uses of the African Djembe drum.
3. How to identify and practice the three basic African drum tones.
4. How to use drum tones to create and convey a message.

## **NEW JERSEY STANDARDS**

**STANDARD 6.3 (World History)** All students will demonstrate knowledge of world history in order to understand life and events in the past and how they relate to the present and the future.

**STANDARD 6.4 (United States and New Jersey History)** All students will demonstrate knowledge of United States and New Jersey history in order to understand life and events in the past and how they relate to the present and future (particularly strand c, “Many Worlds Meet”).

## **MATERIALS**

- Blackboard
- Hard surface (tables or desks)

If you opt to complete the optional practice/reinforcement activity:

- Brown wrapping paper
- Muslin fabric
- Yarn or twine
- Large rubber bands
- Medium-sized round canister with a plastic lid (such as a powdered drink or coffee can); one for each student.
- Glue
- Scissors
- Color markers

## DETAILS OF ACTIVITY

### Part 1: Mapping the Beat (15 min.):

Introduce Djembe drums, also known as “talking drums” or “waisted” drums because they have an hourglass shape (or waist) in the middle. The Djembe is a goblet shaped, solid wood carved drum from West Africa. Originally an instrument of the Malinke people, it is now played by many ethnic groups. The top of the djembe is covered with a shaved goat skin, which is made tight with ropes. It is traditionally hung by a strap over the drummer’s shoulders, and played with the hands. Show a picture or an actual drum if you have one (a sample picture is included at the end of this lesson plan).

Explain that drums were often used to send messages from village to village in various parts of Africa, and later from plantation to plantation in America. Slave owners understood how important drums were as a form of communication, but though they knew how drums sent messages they less often knew what different rhythms or beats actually meant. To discourage slaves from communicating over long distances, especially during times of political or social unrest, plantation owners, towns, and even whole colonies and states passed laws banning slaves from owning drums or practicing drumming.

To introduce students to the concept of drums as “ways of speaking,” begin with three basic drum tones: bass, tone, and slap. Students can practice using their hands on a table or a desk:

- Bass: Strike the skin near the center of the drum with palm of hand. Remove hand immediately after the stroke, as if pulling sound from the Djembe drum.
- Tone: Strike the surface with fingers together and hand flat; the hand should bounce off.
- Slap: Strike the surface with fingers open and hand relaxed so that fingertips tap and then bounce off of the head of the drum.

Note that the slap has a high, sharp sound and that the tone is more “round” and full.

Discuss how musical messages are created through a combination of tones and number of beats or rhythm, and practice using a few simple call and response exercises. Either the teacher, or a student acting as the leader, calls a rhythm while the rest of the class responds by replicating it; you can have students take turns acting as the leader.

As examples:

- Repeating a quick, mostly bass = danger
- A quick alternating use of slap and tone = celebration
- A slow repeating bass = solemn (for example, at funerals)

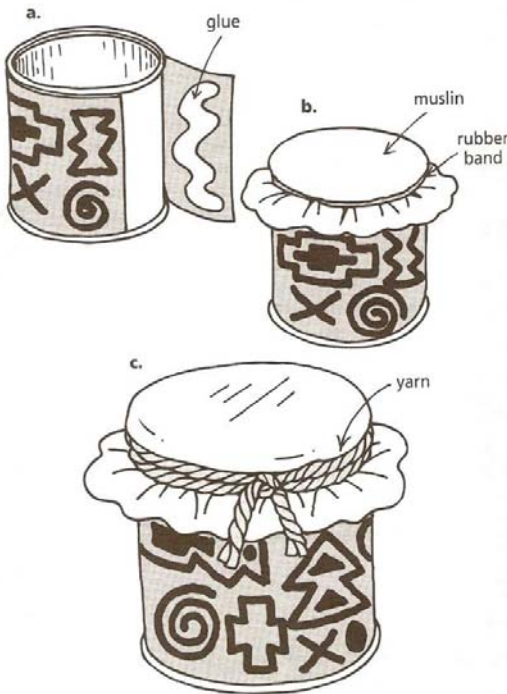
### Part 2: Speaking with Sound (25 min.)

Divide students into small groups and ask that they pretend to be drummers on an American plantation who must convey a message. Groups should create a simple musical message using a

combination of the three drum tones described above. For instance, the message could warn of impending danger, welcome an anticipated visitor, celebrate the birth of a child, or announce an important guest.

Have groups play their messages before the class. Ask the audience to try to guess the general tone of the message and record the responses for each group on the board. Which tone did most students think the group conveyed: danger, celebration, or solemn occasion? Were they right?

### **PRACTICE/REINFORCEMENT: Build your own Drum**



Have each student cut brown wrapping paper into one rectangle large enough to cover their canister.

Next have them cut a piece of muslin (or fabric) 3 inches larger than the diameter of their canister (so at least an inch and a half hangs over each side).

Cut yarn or twine into lengths long enough to wrap around each canister twice, plus a bit more to tie into a secure knot.

Use markers to draw colorful designs on paper. Glue paper around the canister (see sketch A).

Place the muslin circle over the plastic lid, securing with a rubber band (see sketch B).

Wrap and tie yarn or twine around the rubber bank (see sketch C).

Use your hands to make your message!

---

### **REFERENCES and WEBSITES:**

This lesson plan is adapted from “Music in Slave Life,” part of the PBS website “Slavery and the Making of America” (<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/feature.html>) and “Slavery: A History in the Key of Jazz,” part of the Ken Burns’ documentary, “Jazz” ([http://www.pbs.org/jazz/time/time\\_slavery.htm](http://www.pbs.org/jazz/time/time_slavery.htm)).

For more information about African and African American musical traditions see:

John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990; originally published by the Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), pp. 20-26.

## Djembe Drum



Source: "The Art of African Exploration," an online exhibition of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History.