

Moorambilla Magic

Djembe Drumming with Elliott Orr of Talkin' the Drum

Welcome to the world of the djembe, an instrument to bring people together.

I recorded these videos on the land of the Arakwal / Bumberlin people of the Bundjalung Nation. Respect and gratitude to elders past, present and emerging. Always was, always will be.....
Aboriginal Land.

These lesson plans are to provide supplementary support to the 6 video modules.

The modules are progressive so it would be wise to stay with one module by repeating sections before moving to the end and onto the next one. The first one would be good to repeat frequently, or at least sections of it to maintain focus on the technique.

Technique is everything! Getting the rhythms is the easy part, making them sound good is where the real challenge lies. Learn to walk before running. The modern western mind tends to have a very short attention span (amplified in our young people) and so as challenging as it may be, giving time to finding and building good technique is crucial in order to gain the long term benefits available through playing the djembe.

Please use high fidelity speakers to get the most out of the videos.

Follow the handing as instructed. In other words if you are right handed, as I am, then follow my handing. If you are left handed then use exactly the opposite hands.

In these videos I have predominantly used the method we refer to as 'ghosting'. Ghosting is based on the natural law that we tend to use one hand after the other - right left right left right left etc - unless there are longer spaces. The idea of the term 'ghosting' is that there are ghost notes; notes that are not actually played but result in a natural order of right and left hands. For example, if there is one semi-quaver rest between two notes then you would double the same hand. Or if there are two semi-quaver rests between notes then you would use one hand and then the other hand.

One of the key advantages of 'ghosting' is that it helps one to stay 'in time'. We naturally keep our hands rising and falling in a steady timing. Ghosting also helps to create the ability for improvisation and self-expression within the rhythm. Adding variations to the rhythms is an exciting way to keep the overall sound interesting. This process also leads to the ability to 'take a solo'.

The modus operandi in teaching African drumming is follow a 'call and response' method. Generally speaking I will play a sequence of notes and the students echo back to me. I have facilitated a smooth flow to achieving this method by including my good friend Charles Wall in these videos. Basically I play alone and the student body echos in unison with Charles. In this way everybody can hear clearly what it is that I am playing, unmasked by other drums, and then everybody plays back together. Please play at the same time as Charles.

Where I use vocal percussion to teach the rhythms please also respond just with voices and not drums. Learning to sing the rhythms will radically help your students to integrate the complexity and accuracy of the rhythms.

I recorded these 6 modules in one epic session on Monday November 2nd 2020 at the studios of North Coast Events, 5 Wollongbar Street, Byron Bay. I had the very professional assistance of Michael and Odin. Big thanks to Sean Latham and Dan Cassidy for making such a professional studio and team available to me at highly discounted rates.

Module 1

Introduction to the Djembe

History, context and meaning.

Technique of the Djembe

Bass, Tone and Slap.

Key points:

Djembe, pronounced with a silent 'd', means 'to gather in peace'.

The djembe is always accompanied by the doundouns, they are a family of drums.

The largest is the Doundounba ('ba' means big).

The middle Doundoun is the Sangbang.

The smallest is the Kenkeni.

Introducing Charles Wall.

Also known as Bobby Alu, Charles is an amazing musician and a great human. I've been teaching Charles djembe and doundoun since around 2005. Check him out on Spotify as Bobby Alu.

Each time you sit down to play it's important to have a good warm up. Loosen up the shoulders, wrists and hands.

Sit forward in your chair and maintain good posture.

Technique:

Bounce off the drum - strike the drum quickly and bounce straight back up. Imagine you are lifting the sounds out of the djembe rather than pushing into the skin.

Be light and don't allow your fingers to 'stick' to the skin.

The first row of knuckles lines up directly over the rim of the djembe.

Tones are found with your fingers straight and together.

Slaps are found with fingers slightly separated and ever so slightly curled.

At 16 min 53 seconds you could pause the video and repeat that simple rudiment for much longer.

Do the same at 19:57.

Before beginning each new Module I would suggest that you remind the students about the technique and then do the warm up from Module 1.

Start the warm up each day at 20:25 and go up until 23:44.

Module 2

Tihah - Music of the morning.

A rhythm from Nigeria, the first rhythm I learned with Nigerian drummer Sam Oshodi.

Background image of gum tree by Noni Carroll Photography

This module covers the basic version of the low hand drum part plus the introduction. The best approach is, once the student's have got the hand drum part, to play the Introduction and then go in and out of the rhythm by repeating the introduction as a Bridge.

I like to consolidate the vocalising of the rhythms by actually singing "cuppa tea cuppa chai cappuccino and you'll fly" before entering the groove every time.

The 'one' in Tihah is on "fly". We sing Tihah on the 'one'.

Module 3

Tihah - extended

A rhythm from the Yoruba people of Nigeria.

Background image of Uluru. Always was always will be.....

In this module we introduce slaps to the Low drum part of Tihah.

We also teach the High drum part of Tihah. The vocalisation for which is:

Gung gung gidi di di dikatakata

Where 'gung' is a bass, 'gidi' are tones and 'kata' are slaps.

If you can sing it you can play it!

The concept of 'polyrhythm' is introduced. The music of ensemble drumming is based on polyrhythmic arrangements, the combination of complementary rhythms played together to a common pulse.

To hear the two hand drum parts, the Low and the High, played together go to:

21:05.

This is the ultimate challenge for your students, break them into two groups and have them play the two parts simultaneously.

Module 4

Zebola - Serpent Healing

This rhythm comes from the Congo and has been adapted to the djembe and doundouns.

The traditional context of Zebola is this:

The village community gathers for the purpose of healing someone. The drummers play, people dance and everyone chants the song Zebola. Whether the person needs healing for physical, emotional, mental or spiritual reasons the healer/witch doctor of the village goes into a trance through the music and singing and then intuits the necessary healing technique or treatment required.

In this module I present the Low drum part and the break.

In the Low drum, as in most rhythms, it is important to follow the handing:

Right Left Right Right Left for the first half.
Right Left Right Left Right Left for the second half.

I speak of the important of the doundouns this module. If any of your students are particularly capable you could try and introduce the doun pattern and play it on some other type of bass drums. Ideally you would have three drums, low, medium and high. Perhaps one day you'll have your own set of douns.

For Zebola there is a vey cool 'call'.

The vocalisation for it is:

Kataka ta ka ta ka ta gu du

The main goal is to work out how to bring in the Introduction from the Call and then go straight into the Low Drum part.

I would suggest getting this module fully learned before moving on to the next module.

Module 5

Zebola - continued

In this module I present the Mid Drum part as well as the chant.

The words:

Zebola, Zebola kani Zebola
Aiey aiey (or aioh)

Ok, doing the chant may feel a little awkward. My experience is the only way to make it work is to simply go full throttle and have no shame. Once the awkwardness passes the feeling of singing while drumming is a really powerful thing. Integrating vocalising the chant simultaneously while coordinating the hands to play the rhythm is also a great challenge.

My suggestion is to follow the call and response style that I do with Charles. My fingers are crossed that the kids will get into it.

For those in the group who really take to the chanting I would suggest they might like to try the extra vocal calls that I add once the group is strong.

It's totally doable to sing the chant and play the Low Drum part at the same time. This would be a great outcome. Once the mid drum is being played the singing will get drowned out, so is a good point at which to let the chanting go.

The main goal of this module would be to play the Low Drum and Mid Drum simultaneously. You might like to separate the group into two and take it in turns to play each of the parts. The trick here is to play the Low Drum slowly so that the Mid Drum is not too fast.

Module 6

This module is the wrap up for Zebola, including the High Drum part.

Drum drum speedy faster speedy is the mnemonic for this part.

The complex thing about this rhythm is that it has a different dominant pulse. The best way to come to terms with the difference between the two different pulses is to come to get to know the feeling of '2 over 3'. The clapping that we do at the beginning is something you could easily focus on for a great deal of time. It's worth doing the two pulses between two groups and then also doing the two pulses with your own two hands.

At 15:21 we begin a full run through with this arrangement:

Begin with the song

Call comes and we play the Introduction

Keep singing while simultaneously playing the Low Drum part

Call comes and we move to the Mid Drum part

(The group could split into two groups when I move to the Low Drum part)

Call comes and we move to the High Drum part

- at this point half the group might like to play with Charles on the Low Drum part and then change with him to the Mid Drum part.

- through this section it would also be great to try and have all three parts represented.

We then bring the doundouns in and return to the Low Drum part.

With a simple count of 4 we change to the Mid Drum part.

Then again, with a simple count of 4 we all change to the High Drum part.

From this point I demonstrate some solo ideas.

This would be a good time to have all three parts played by the group, 1/3 each or some combination of people to have the three parts represented.

Keep in mind that pulling together Zebola as I do in Module 6 is relatively advanced. If the students simply do each Module preceding this Module just once I would not expect great success. The intention is to work on each module for a number of sessions until the rhythms, including the technique, begin to 'stick'.

Please note that I take the tempo up during this section of the arrangement.

I'd love to think that some keen drummers may try to nut out/transcribe/memorise some of these solo ideas.

Have fun!

All the best,

Elliott