

# The African Drum as Symbol in Early America: Cultural Expressions in Music

The African drum played a central role in the lives of African people brought to the Americas during the transatlantic slave trade. As a symbol of their cultural heritage and resilience, the drum served as a means of communication, religious expression, and community building. This article explores the history, significance, and legacy of the African drum in early America, highlighting its multifaceted role in the cultural expressions of enslaved Africans.

During the transatlantic slave trade, millions of Africans were forcibly removed from their homelands and transported to the Americas. Deprived of their language, customs, and social structures, they found solace and a sense of continuity in the rhythms and traditions of their ancestral drums.

The presence of African drums in the Americas was initially met with resistance from European colonizers, who feared their potential for rebellion and communication among enslaved Africans. However, over time, the drum became an integral part of African American life, transcending its original purpose and evolving into a symbol of cultural resistance and identity.



## Musicians' Migratory Patterns: The African Drum as Symbol in Early America (CMS Cultural Expressions in Music) by Keisha Ervin

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African drums brought to the Americas represented a wide range of sizes, shapes, and materials. Among the most common types were:

- **Djembe:** A goblet-shaped drum with a goatskin head and a distinctive high-pitched sound. It was used in West African ceremonies and celebrations.
- **Ashiko:** A taller drum with a cylindrical body and a goatskin head. It produced a resonant bass sound and was often played in ensembles.
- **Conga drums:** Barrel-shaped drums with calfskin heads that originated in Central and South America. They were adopted by African Americans in the early 1900s.
- **Babatunde drums:** A large, bass drum used in religious and ceremonial contexts. It had a very low pitch.

For enslaved Africans, the drum served as a vital means of communication. They used it to send coded messages across plantations, coordinate work activities, and express their hopes and sorrows. The rhythms of the drum could evoke memories of home and provide a sense of comfort and connection.

In religious ceremonies, the drum played an essential role. It accompanied songs and prayers, creating a sacred atmosphere and facilitating spiritual

experiences. The drum was believed to have the power to connect with the ancestors and invoke divine assistance.

Moreover, the drum fostered a sense of community among enslaved Africans. It brought them together for social gatherings, dances, and storytelling. The drum became a symbol of shared heritage, resilience, and resistance to oppression.

The African drum had a profound impact on the development of American music. African rhythms and drumming techniques were incorporated into genres such as jazz, blues, rock and roll, and popular music.

- **Jazz:** The improvisational nature of jazz owes much to the call-and-response patterns of African drumming. Jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington drew inspiration from the rhythms and melodies of African folk music.
- **Blues:** The blues, with its soulful melodies and call-and-response structure, also has its roots in African drumming traditions. Blues musicians such as B.B. King and Muddy Waters incorporated African rhythms and vocal techniques into their performances.
- **Rock and Roll:** Rock and roll drumming evolved from African drumming influences, particularly the use of backbeats and syncopated rhythms. Rock drummers such as Keith Moon and John Bonham were known for their energetic and complex drumming styles that incorporated elements of African drumming.

The African drum continues to inspire and influence musicians and artists today. In contemporary music, African drumming is often used to add a rhythmic foundation or to create a sense of cultural authenticity.

- **Hip-Hop:** Hip-hop music often features African drumming samples or live percussion. Artists such as Jay-Z, Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar have incorporated African rhythms into their beats and lyrics.
- **World Music:** World music, which encompasses a wide range of non-Western musical traditions, often incorporates African drumming techniques and instruments. Artists such as Salif Keita and Youssou N'Dour have popularized African drumming and music around the world.
- **Educational Programs:** Many schools and community centers offer educational programs that teach African drumming and rhythms. These programs aim to preserve and promote African cultural heritage while fostering an appreciation for the role of the drum in music and community.

The African drum is a powerful symbol of cultural expression and resilience in early America. It served as a means of communication, religious devotion, and community building for enslaved Africans. The drum's rhythms and traditions have left an enduring legacy in American music, influencing genres from jazz and blues to rock and roll. Today, the African drum continues to inspire and connect people, fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of African cultural heritage.



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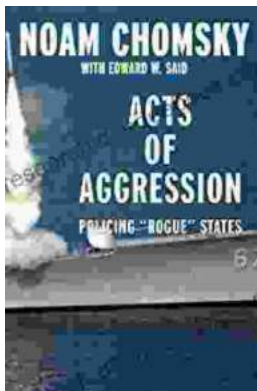
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