

When The Drummers Were Women

- By Layne Redmond
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Yes, guys, there was a time in our history when the primary percussionists and drummers were women. The first named drummer in history was a Mesopotamian priestess named Lipushiau. She lived in the city-state of Ur in 2380 BC, which at that time had conquered all the surrounding city-states. She was the spiritual, financial and administrative head of the Ekishnugal, the most important temple in Ur dedicated to the moon god, Nanna-Suen. Her emblem of office was the balag-di, a small round frame drum used to lead liturgical chanting. In 2380 BC, Lipushiau ruled!

Nineteen years ago I was awestruck by the sight of Glen Velez playing a collection of unusual hand drums. The drums were beautiful, from many different cultures and most of them belonged to the family of frame drums. I was blown away by Glen's playing and made a point of introducing myself after the concert. He wasn't teaching extensively at that time but I convinced him to take me on as a student. Among the drums he'd played at the concert was a doumbek, a ceramic hourglass-shaped drum from the Middle East. I chose it for my first lesson, thinking it might be closer to the conga drums I was already studying. But when I arrived at Glen's for my first lesson, he had some bad news. That morning, he'd dropped and broken the dumbek. He glanced around his studio, which was jammed with frame drums of every description. Grabbing an Egyptian tambourine off the wall, he said, "Hey, how about this?"

It wasn't exactly what I had planned. But, not wanting to lose this opportunity to learn from such a skilled drummer, I agreed. I held my first tambourine in my hands and started on a disciplined regimen of learning to play the frame drum, which eventually changed my life completely.

Once a week, I went for a lesson, tape-recorded it and used it to practice with every day at home. I quickly realized that I had embarked on the study of a seemingly simple yet complex instrument. Glen had studied with teachers from South India, the Middle East, Azerbaijan, North Africa and Brazil. Out of these different styles he was synthesizing his own techniques. And he was beginning to create elaborate pieces that centered around unusual rhythmic patterns — cycles of ten, nine and eight beats, within which he could cue me, using another rhythm, to move to a cycle of seven beats, six beats, nine beats, and so on. If I had spent years playing music in 4/4 time, I might have had a hard time adjusting, conceptually as well as musically. Instead, I found that seven-, five- or even 37-beat cycles against a pulse of four weren't that tough for me.



After a couple of years, Glen and I began performing together in the new music scene in New York and Europe. We earned some serious attention and good press. We started to record for several different music labels in Europe and the U.S. and spent nine years performing together. Although I had never planned on making a career out of playing the tambourine, it soon became the center of my life.

During this period I began studying the history of the frame drum whose point of origin appears to be the old cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world. There are occasional representations of hourglass shaped drums or kettledrums, but the frame drum is by far the most prominent drum. For at least 3,500 years, c. 3000 BC to 500 AD, it was the primary percussive instrument.

Glen had collected hundreds of images of frame drummers and to my surprise almost all of these drummers were women. I noticed that many of the images were of

goddesses or priestesses. From the civilizations of Anatolia (Old Turkey), Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome, the Goddess and the frame drum emerge as the core trance and mystical religious traditions. To my surprise I found the frame drum at the center of the oldest rave like gatherings — it was the oldest technology for altering consciousness. The mystery rites would last for days at a time with nonstop drumming and dancing. Get this in perspective — this was church. Quite a different religious experience than I had growing up! A frame drum is defined by the diameter of the drumhead being much larger than the depth of its shell. The shells range in depth from 2" to at most 6". They range in diameter from 4" to 30". Most of these drums are portable and can be held in one hand.

The frame drum most often has a skin on only one side but sometimes it may have skins stretched across both sides. Bells or jingling and rattling implements may be attached to the inside rim, and in ancient times were believed to add to the drum's power to purify, dispel and summon. Very often the drums were painted red, the color of blood, or sometimes green, the color of vegetation, the primordial colors of life. Mystical designs and symbols might also be painted on the skin head or the wooden frame. Threads or ribbons knotted with ritual prayers or chanting often hung from them.

Although this frame drum is similar in appearance to the shaman's drum found throughout Asia and North America, there is a major difference in how they are played. The shaman's drum is struck with a bone, horn or stick. The Mediterranean frame drum is played with the bare hands. While striking a drum with a stick gives a single deep resonant sound, finger techniques allow more variety: a deep, open tone, a slap, a high-pitched rim sound, or a soft brushing sound. This difference in stroke technique has led to differences in construction. The inner edge of the rim of the Mediterranean frame drum is often beveled and its skin is usually thinner, to enhance the sounds produced by fingers and hands. Hand or stick? I have not been able to determine which technique is older - the shaman's drum played with a stick or the frame drum played with bare hands.

The use and basic constructions of the drums are so similar that they probably both grew from the same root techniques of altering consciousness. In every ancient Mediterranean civilization I studied, it was a goddess who transmitted to humans the gift of making music. In Sumer and Mesopotamia it was Inanna and Ishtar; in Egypt it was Hathor; in Greece, the nine-fold goddess called the Muse. Musical, artistic and poetic inspiration was always thought to spring from the Divine Feminine. One of the main techniques for connecting to this power of inspiration was drumming.

The drum was the means our ancestors used to summon the goddess and also the instrument through which she spoke. The drumming priestess was the intermediary between divine and human realms.

Aligning herself with sacred rhythms, she acted as summoner and transformer, invoking divine energy and transmitting it to the community.

The earliest known depiction of any drum was painted on a shrine room wall in 5600 BC in a Neolithic city in what is now Turkey. The shrine room wall depicts a group of ecstatically dancing figures, some of which appear to have percussion instruments. A band of human figures clad in leopard skins play various percussion instruments as they dance ecstatically around a large bull. One figure holds a horn-shaped instrument in one hand and a frame drum in the other. Other figures carry what look like shakers or rattles, as well as bowed instruments similar to the Brazilian berimbau. The excavating archaeologist, James Mellaart, has unearthed numerous other shrines in this city honoring a great goddess, and he believes that primarily priestesses tended these shrines. To date, the wall painting is our oldest evidence of a goddess-based tradition in which the frame drum was used in ecstatic rituals.

From 3000 to 2500 BC, written records of the Sumerians describe the goddess Inanna as the creator of the frame drum, along with all other musical instruments. They tell of Inanna's priestesses who sang and chanted to the rhythms of round and square frame drums. Along with the written texts, numerous figurines of women playing small frame drums have been found. These drumming rituals were carried on in the later worship of Ishtar, Asherah, Ashtoreth, Astarte, and Anat in Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Palestine and Assyria. Somewhere between 2000 and 1500 BC, the frame drum arrives in Egypt. James Blades reports, "All records from this period (Middle Kingdom) show the performers as women; in fact the whole practice of the art of music appears to have been entirely entrusted to the fair sex, with one notable exception, the god Bes, who is frequently represented with a drum with cylindrical body (frame drum)."

Another text described the priestesses as the composers and choreographers of the music and dance used on religious occasions. In the Cairo Museum there is an actual rectangular double-headed frame drum from 1400 BC that was found in the tomb of a woman named Hatnofer. Also surviving from the Ptolemaic period is the skin head of a frame drum on whose surface is painted a woman playing a frame drum in front of the goddess Isis. The inscription on the drum reads, "Isis, Lady of the Sky, Mistress of the Goddesses."

It is important to comprehend the significance of women's control of sacred music and dance in Egypt. Religious ceremonies based on music and dance can synchronize the underlying energy of the mind and directly influence our perceptions of reality. Ritual influences our modes of awareness that both underlie and transcend the normal patterns of consciousness. Rites can be used to rouse and shape group emotion and behavior, developing a continuous shared consciousness. Music vibrationally transmits states of mind directly from consciousness to consciousness. Thus, politically, music can resonate simultaneously on far more levels — emotional, spiritual, intellectual and physical — than can words alone. As music initiates changes in group consciousness, it can affect vast social and economic cycles.

The Biblical lands have also yielded numerous images of women playing the frame drum. Old Testament texts refer to the tambourine as the toph, which has been translated as the timbrel and the tabret. Exodus 15:20, "And Miriam, the prophetess, sister of Aaron and Moses, took a timbrel in her hand, then the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances." In some legends it is said that Miriam parted the Red Sea with the shamanistic power of her drumming.

In Greece, some of the most beautiful representations of the frame drum are found on the red figured vase paintings from the fifth century BC. The frame drum entered Greece from several different directions — from Cyprus, one of the main centers of the cult of Aphrodite where the frame drum was prominent from at least 1000 BC, and also from Crete, where it was used in the rituals of Ariadne, Rhea and Dionysos.

Pre-classical Greece also saw the introduction of the cult of the goddess Cybele, from Western Anatolia. The tympanum, the Greek frame drum, was the main instrument of the maenads, the women initiates, in the worship of Cybele and Dionysos, and the priestesses of Artemis, Demeter and Aphrodite also played them. Both single-headed and double-headed frame drums appear, once again played almost exclusively by women.

The Romans saw the last great flowering of these rites when the religion of Cybele was brought to Rome in April of 204 B.C. She was described as, “Cybele, the All-Begetting Mother, who beat a drum to mark the rhythm of life.” Rome was the cultural center for the mystery religions of Cybele, Dionysos, Isis and Dea Syria — all of which used the frame drum in their ecstatic rituals. These practices flourished until the Roman Empire officially adopted Christianity in the fourth century A.D.



In the ancient world, prayer was an active, trance-inducing combination of chanting, music and dance, and initiates often danced the sacred spiral into the labyrinth. The classic labyrinth is a single path meant for meditative circling. To enter it is to experience a ritual death; to escape from it is to be resurrected. The danced line into the labyrinth was a sacred path into the inner realm of knowing. Dancers holding a rope signifying Ariadne’s thread (that allows participants to find their way in and out of the maze) followed a leader into the labyrinth, spiraling right to left, the direction of death. At the center they turned, dancing out in the direction of evolution and birth, all to the driving rhythms of the frame drums.

Another function of the frame drum was to create a prophetic trance state in which the priestess could foretell the future. The most dramatic mode of prophecy was uttered in inspired rhythmic speech. In the depths of ecstatic trance, the oracle was possessed by the goddess, who rapped in powerful rhymes directly through her lips. The Greek word for this state of transfigured consciousness is *enthusiasm* – “within is a god” – the root of our word *enthusiasm*.

Ecstatic prophecy has many parallels with shamanism. Prophetesses sought inspiration through a number of external stimuli, including fasting, ingesting honey, inhalation of burning herbs or essential oils and intoxication via alcohol or psychotropic plants. Cybele’s priestesses relied most heavily on the trance-inducing properties of music and dance. The rhythms of frame drums, cymbals and flutes moved them towards the consecrated, concentrated state of divine revelation.

The Dionysian rites are the most widely known of all the mystery schools and have an enduring reputation as drunken sexual orgies. This is due to the later descriptions by Christian political leaders to whom the ancient mysteries of the goddess along with ecstatic drumming, dancing and in this century, rock and roll, have been labeled devil worship. Our word “orgy” comes from *orgia*, derived from the root word meaning “deed.” The term was used for the celebrations following initiation in mysteries, which might or might not include sexual imagery or behavior. Its ancient connotation seems to have been simply “secret rites.” Their aim was the ecstatic transformation of consciousness through rhythmic movement of the body.

Historians have associated the maenads, priestesses of Dionysos and Cybele, with unbridled sensuality and socially uncontrolled behavior. The word *maenad* means “mad women.” Their erotic longing for union with the Divine found expression in wild, barefoot dances to the primordial music of flute and drums, their unrestrained hair flying wildly about their faces, snakes wrapped around their arms. According to some reports they drank blood and tore wild beasts limb from limb. Not too far out of line from what might take place at a contemporary summer rock festival!

Wine was indeed an important part of the Dionysian mysteries. External stimulants were always used in pursuit of higher consciousness, for divine intoxication with the spirit of the deity. References to drinking blood may actually allude to a communion rite in which the fruit of the grape represented the blood of the deity, as it does today in Christian communion rites.

Mastery of the precise musical rhythms required to align the devotees’ consciousness with divinity suggests a control and sophistication of technique that contradicts the historical image of wanton frenzied women. Creating rhythms powerful enough to move hundreds of people into ecstatic trance states required skill, discipline and endurance.

With the ascendancy of Christianity, Cybele's great temple in Rome was destroyed, the Vatican was built on the site and the new priesthood banned the priestesses, instruments and music associated with her rites. Not only was the frame drum banned from Christian religious rituals, its use in secular contexts was also frowned upon by the Church, in particular its use by women. The Catholic synod of 576 (commandments of the Fathers, Superiors and Masters) decreed: "Christians are not allowed to teach their daughters singing, the playing of instruments or similar things because, according to their religion, it is neither good nor becoming."

For 3,000 years women had been the primary percussionists in the ancient world. As Europe pursued this policy of disallowing women to learn music, they effectively barred them from the professions of composing, teaching or performing.

The last 30 years have seen a dramatic rise in the number of professional women musicians, but there are still few women pursuing drumming. Although little is known about the history of frame drums and the women musicians who played them, it is an important part of our percussive history. And the ancient traditions of using drumming for spiritual purposes can point out what we have lost.

At contemporary rock concerts we have all the trappings of ritual without the spiritual purposes. Flashing trance-inducing lights, loud rhythmic sound, chanted and sung words, but often with no higher purpose than to momentarily entertain or to glorify the individual performer. And no matter how much idolization some of these quite gifted musicians attain, they are often driven to attempt to fill the emptiness with drugs and alcohol.

Yet I remember concerts that hinted at the search for wider realms and dimensions of being. The first concert I ever saw was a show by the Monkees. But what blew me away was the opening act — Jimi Hendrix. I had no frame of reference for where he was taking me. I soared with him beyond the known on the piercing sounds and songs of his guitar. Yet in the end he burned and beat that beautiful guitar to pieces. I had experienced something profound and transformative, but it had ended in destruction, leaving me bewildered and yearning for something more. I have spent the rest of my life looking for the pathway into the ecstatic that leaves me transformed, whole and euphoric.