

The Healing Power of the Frame Drum

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When I was thirteen I laybyed a small drum I'd had my eye on for ages. Once a week I'd slide over my two dollars until at last it was mine. At home, sitting on the old green couch, I lifted the drum to my face and breathed in deeply the smell of the wood. I held the drum up to the late afternoon light, and saw the backlit glowing veins of a once living being.

Something ancient and profound stirred in me that afternoon. I can't say exactly what, but it was a kind of memory of having held a drum in my hands before, though lifetimes ago.

There's a story in the making about my long and arduous journey back to the ancient lineage of the frame drum, but one thing I know: over the past 25 years as a drum maker, teacher, performer and sound healer, many people have told me that they too were stirred by the sound and vibration of the drum, activated in some ancient part of themselves that they couldn't explain.

What is this power the frame drum holds, a power that made it the main instrument of ceremony, music and healing in most cultures for thousands of years?

What is a frame drum anyway?

Believed to have evolved from the grain sieve, frame drums are usually made from a round, though sometimes square or octagonal, wooden frame with the skin of an animal stretched over it.

The art of drum making itself is a sacred art, where the drum maker takes part of a once living animal and timber from a once standing tree, and brings them back to life in a new form.

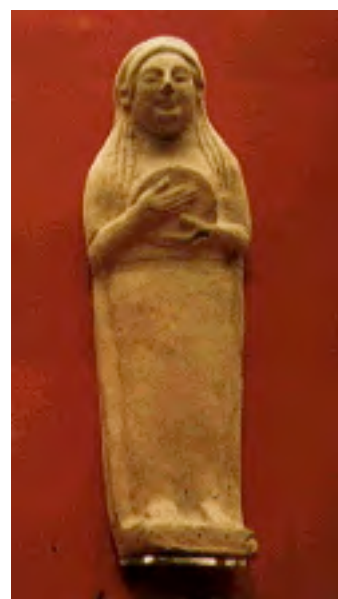
This is a sacred process of transformation and during that process, we're moved and shaped within ourselves, as we and the earth are One.

The resonating chamber of the frame drum is the air itself, so there's an incredible range of tones and sounds that can be produced from such a deceptively simple instrument.

The earliest known depiction of a frame drum is from a wall painting in Catal Huyuk in modern day Turkey, believed to be from 5800BC.

There are literally thousands of ancient images depicting women and goddesses playing the frame drum for ceremony, healing and music making.

In 2380BC, Sumerian texts speak of Lipushau, spiritual head of the Temple of the Moon at Ur, and designated player of the Balag-di frame drum.



380BC - Sumeria
Lipushau holding her
Tah style frame dtum

The Old Testament contains numerous references to the frame drum called the Timbrel.

*And Miriam, the Prophetess,
sister of Aaron,
took a timbrel in her hand
and all the women went out after her
with timbrels
and with dances*

Exodus 15:20

By the time Rome adopted Christianity around 200-300 AD, it was decreed a heretic act to play the frame drum.

Why was this simple drum so feared by the early church that it was forbidden to be played?

Rhythm reaches into deep levels of our consciousness and expands our awareness. If you take away someone's rhythm, you take away an aspect of their inherent power and birthright – the knowledge that all beings are connected through the pulse of Life.

If we become disconnected from our own source, we become physically and emotionally out of balance. Out of rhythm. Drumming restores our knowing of ourselves and each other as deep rhythmic beings, gradually helping us synchronise back to a healthier more balanced state.

The first sound we hear in the womb is our mother's blood pulsing through her veins. We are born into a rhythmic world, each day embodying the continuous beat of life itself – the heartbeat, the nervous system, the breath.

These miraculous cycles, as well as those of the seasons, the planets, the traversing of worlds, have been mirrored and expressed for millennia through the playing of the frame drum.



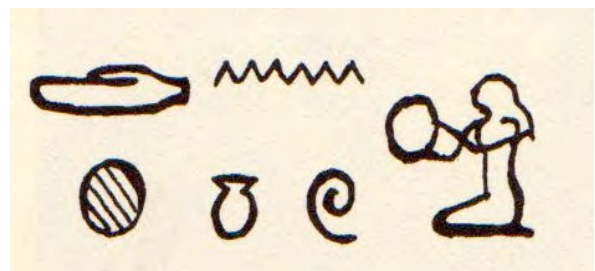
Greek Vase Painting
Demeter planting the seeds of the world
while Persephone plays the frame drum
to bring them into form

After having been banned, the next part of the frame drum's history is a separate article.

What I do know is that throughout the world people are now rediscovering the power and potential of the frame drum.

Contemporary shaman and author Neville Drury says: "One thing never ceases to amaze me – that within an hour or so of drumming, ordinary city folk are able to tap extraordinary mythic realities that they never dreamed of".

As well as that, frame drumming's a joyful and empowering experience that's good for our physical, psychological and spiritual health.



Egyptian Hieroglyph
for "joy" and "to play the frame drum"

Modern science is researching and discovering what our ancestors, the ancients, have always known – that rhythm is a technology for personal and collective transformation

Scientists such as Melinda Maxfield, Tom Kenyon and others, have researched the effects of rhythm on consciousness.

They found that playing a continuous drum beat at approximately 4 hertz (or cycles per second) ‘entrains’ our brain waves from the normal waking state of 14-23Hz (the Beta state) down to 4-8 Hz (the Theta state).

This Theta level to which the brain waves synchronise is characterised by ‘deep relaxation, profound imaging experiences, and certain types of accelerated learning. Furthermore, Theta is often linked with the phenomena of self healing.’

Changing the brain waves from one frequency band to another to induce an altered state of consciousness partly occurs through the phenomenon called Entrainment.

Simply put, entrainment shows us that our brainwaves tend to synchronise to repetitious rhythmic patterns. Just as two grandfather clocks with their pendulums swinging at different rates will eventually entrain with each other, so too will our brain waves and other bodily cycles like the heartbeat, entrain to an external pulsation, the drum.

Tom Kenyon says that playing a repetitive drum beat also stimulates the part of the brain known as the RAS (Reticular Activating System), increasing creative right brain activity. Linear time changes to cyclic time as our spatial intelligence is engaged. Our intuitive self opens, and healing can occur.

For millennia, shamans have been using this process to enter into altered states of consciousness to ‘journey’ to other worlds, realms outside our normal linear state of being.

With focus and training, the repetitious drum beat allows the practitioner to leave the normal Beta (waking) realm of consciousness and enter a profound state in another ‘frequency band’ where he or she can gain access to the wisdom that resides in these other realms.

Many shamanic cultures, like the Tuvans, refer to their frame drum as their ‘horse’, which they ride on their journey to other worlds.



Tuvan Shaman with her frame drum, traditionally made from reindeer rawhide

They do this to collect insight, power and healing for their community. As the drum beat subsides, the shaman returns to the fold to offer the newly gained insights.

The phenomenon of rhythmic entrainment also explains the feeling when drumming with a group of others where a magical rhythmic coherence suddenly occurs.

Something miraculous kicks in, and we *know* intuitively that we are not alone in this world. We feel ourselves as part of an ensemble. We’re rhythmically aligned, creating something bigger than the sum of our own parts for ourselves, our community, our planet.

Mind you, this doesn't mean we all have to be playing to 'the same rhythm'. Cultural, psychological and spiritual diversity is the rich stuff of life.

But at the level of Pulse, the fundamental groove, we know ourselves a part of Divine Oneness.

When a group of drummers gather together with connected loving intention, we have the ability to create conscious change.

How? As well as the effects of rhythm on our own brainwaves, ongoing repetition of rhythmic cycles set up particular cultural 'organising fields'.

Biologist Rupert Sheldrake says that human systems are regulated by these fields. Magnetic in nature, these organising fields play a major role in determining our cultural norms and patterns of behaviour. Science has shown that if a new rhythmic pattern is introduced and repeated often enough, it's 'morphic resonance' has a collective effect, and change occurs.

Like shamans and healers throughout the world, the new physics now knows that mind and intent play a deliberate role in our reality.

Australian sound healer Ruth Shepherd says 'rhythm adds power to carry our prayers and amplify our intent'.

The beautiful simple frame drum, once banned, burned and feared, is back.

And so are we, holding our power, literally, in our hands.

*Beat the drum and say no more.
The heart and mind have gone.
The soul has flown to the Beloved.*

Rumi

