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A History of the Word 'Tom-Tom' in English (to 1932)

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The origin of the word 'tom-tom' is the Hindi टमटम [tam-tam]. It passed into French as pronounced in Hindi, with a change to the vowel in English. All the early uses in English relate to India, the earliest in the *Oxford English Dictionary* being from 1693. Typical is this example, taken from the account of a tour through West Bengal in the 1790s and published in a London magazine in 1808:

In their nautches, or dances, they are always accompanied by a band of music, consisting of a small drum, called a Tom-Tom, a most uncouth kind of fiddle with three strings, and two or three other discordant instruments, which are played on by men whose strange grimaces and hideous countenances disgust the eye as much as their horrid din tortures the ear; habit, however, reconciles us to the noise, and there are instances of English gentlemen becoming more attached to this diversion than the natives themselves.¹

Many of the later notes are struck here: the discordance and disgust, occasionally modulated by attachment.

For a longish stretch of time, the word always needed a gloss: "the sound of a *tom-tom*, or Indian drum",² though in a report in the *London Magnet* in 1838, an account of two criminals being punished in the East Indies has a common crier beating on a tom-tom, with no explanation of the term deemed necessary.³ So it can be concluded that from the middle of the nineteenth century the word was firmly established in English.

Tum-tum is also found before the nineteenth century; tam-tam survives as a variant into the early twentieth. The word tom-tom was also used in the seventeenth century for a Chinese gong (chau gong), now called in English a tam-tam.⁴ And to further confuse matters, a large tom-tom is called a gong drum; and in French the word for tom-tom remains tam-tam.⁵

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¹ "Narrative of a recent Tour in India", *Monthly Magazine* [London], no. 178 (1 January 1808), p. 443.

² *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* [London], 1 July 1819, p. 304. A publication of the London Missionary Society.

³ "Foreign Miscellany", *Magnet* [London], 26 February 1838, p. 2.

⁴ Information about the Chinese gong (or cymbal) was introduced into Europe by the Jesuit missionary Jean Joseph Marie Amiot in his 1779 *Mémoires*: see Edwin C. Hill, *Black Soundscapes White Stages The Meaning of Francophone Sound in the Black Atlantic*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, pp. 99-100.

⁵ *Tam-tam* (drum) passed into French from Hindi at the same time as into English. Cf. "TAM-TAM, s. m. (Hist. mod.) sorte d'instrument fort en usage chez tous les orientaux ; il semble avoir pris son nom du bruit qu'il occasionne, car il n'a d'autre son que celui qu'il exprime. Il est fait en forme de tymbale, dont le ventre est de bois, & dont la partie supérieure est couverte d'une peau bien tendue, sur laquelle on frappe avec une seule baguette. Cet instrument sert à annoncer au coin des rues, un encan ou autre chose d'extraordinaire. Aussi l'on dit battre le tam-tam" (*Encyclopédie*, 17, p. 831).

From the start, the connotations of the drum were at best uncouth, at worst positively sinister, as in this letter that offered one of the first eye-witness accounts of *sati*, or widow-burning, as well as one of the first appearances of the word tom-tom in the USA:

As soon as the pile had been fired, the band of native musicians, chiefly consisting of players on a species of drum, called a Tom tom, and on cow's horns, and other instruments, more remarkable for their discordant noises than for any musical quality, struck up a din well calculated to drown all human exclamations.⁶

Another account comes from a visit to Johanna, one of the Comoros Islands northwest of Madagascar, off the east coast of the African continent, indicative of the beginning of the term's wide geographical spread:

As the Prince's time of prayers approached, we went to see the slaves dance; they were assembled in a square, surrounded by their miserable hovels, little better than pigsties, which are built of the branches and leaves of the cocoa-nut tree. One man was beating with all his might on the tom-tom, an instrument somewhat resembling a drum, so named from producing a sound similar to the word tom-tom: its construction is very simple, being nothing more than a skin tied over a piece of hollow wood, but it produces such a dreadful noise as to be distinctly heard for a distance of two or three miles.⁷

The onomatopoeic explanation for the name may be simplistic, but the long carry of the sound is recognised early on as a characteristic of this kind of drum.

Along with the cymbals, the Chinese gong, and the trombone, the tom-tom quickly became a synonym for an unbearable racket.⁸ Newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic are full of reports from the east that feature tom-toms. A wedding in Jerusalem is accompanied by "the beating of the tamborine, and a large kind of tom-tom instrument, accompanied by the blowing of a large whistle".⁹ Clearly by this point the word was being used to describe what the observers saw as a *kind* of drum rather than as an example of the original Indian drum named 'tom-tom'.

A Chinese theatre periodically appeared in Castlemaine in Australia:

A tom tom, a single-stringed fiddle, a bass horn, and a couple of sticks, form an orchestra which discourses anything but a concourse of sweet sounds, but which, judging from the satisfaction of the Chinese auditors, is delightful harmony to them. Civilised as they undoubtedly are in many respects, they have evidently advanced no further in the art of music than semi-barbarous nations. The Chinese performer, like the negro and the aboriginal of Australia, delights in rhythm, but scarcely ever rises to the simplest melody, and the preparatory tunings and flourishes of an English band are the nearest approach to the music produced by the most skilful Celestial artists. The whole canine inhabitants howl

⁶ R.D., "A Sutte", *New Monthly Magazine* [London], vol. XXII (1828), p. 311. Reproduced, for example, in *The Athenian* [Athens GA], 10 June 1828, p. 4.

⁷ "A Visit to the Island of Johanna", *United Services Magazine* [London], 1830, Part I, p. 150.

⁸ *Richmond Enquirer* [Virginia], 13 August 1839, p. 2.

⁹ *The Bloomington Newsletter* [IN], 11 February 1854, p. 4.

in chorus with the strains proceeding from the theatre, and increase the discord inflicted on the ratepayers of that rural spot.¹⁰

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In the middle of the nineteenth century the tom-tom began to take on political connotations. An early example comes in the Chartist writer, James Bronterre O'Brien's forensic dismantlement of the British political system in his magazine, *The Power of the Pence*, which ran from November 1848 to April 1849. One article is dedicated to the town of Beverley where both political parties have paid bands that appear at election time:

You will not have been in Beverley, at such time, long, without coming to the conclusion that its inhabitants are decidedly musical. There is a constant 'tom-tom' heard from a far off –

The long, deep, roll of the thundering drum.

By and bye, it comes nearer. 'Tom, tom, tom' – you hear it at the end of the long street. Presently the sound seems to pass through the old gateway, and it is evident that the musicians approach you.¹¹

In this case the sound itself is made by a large number of tambourines, an instrument clearly related to the tom-tom, though without its exotic oriental connotations and by this time a well-known – domesticated – part of the military band.¹²

In 1859, in an editorial discussing the passing of a Naval Reserve Bill, the *London Express* disavowed the old tub-thumping method of diplomacy: "The tom-tom style of terrifying a people into the persuasion of its invincibility is not, perhaps, barbarian in the Chinese sense, but it is scarcely civilised in the European acceptance; and it has the disadvantage of conjuring the dangers it professes to avert".¹³

A particular and related metaphorical usage seems to have entered public discourse in the USA in the 1880s, with the evident meaning of 'making a song and dance' but as a conscious element within a political campaign:

Of course, if the democrats insist on carrying on a campaign, as they do with commendable grit in Iowa, it is just as well for Mr. Kinne as for anybody else to sound the hew-gag and beat the tom-tom, but unless he can offer the people some improved theory of the state government, or suggest material improvements in state affairs, that is all the use they will have for him...¹⁴

The *OED* definition of 'hewgag' is: "A toy musical instrument for children, consisting of a wooden tube with a hole near one end, and the other closed by a piece of parchment, the vibration of which produces a wailing sound. (Humorously

¹⁰ *The Age* [Melbourne], 13 May 1862, p. 7.

¹¹ *The Power of the Pence* [London], 10 February 1849, p. 221.

¹² 'Tambour' (French) comes from twelfth-century Persian. Hindi and Persian are related languages, so it seems likely that the words tambour and tom-tom have a common origin.

¹³ *The Express* [London], 17 November 1859, p. 2.

¹⁴ *The Hawkeye* [Burlington IO], 20 July 1883, p. 2.

referred to as a sound of jubilation.)” The earliest appearance noted for the word is 1850.

Here’s a slightly later example:

Finding they cannot shake the responsibility of their pet fallacy the democrats are attempting to bolster it up with the most meaningless, illogical and irrelevant argument, until their frenzied efforts have reached the stage of positive absurdity. All this tom-tom beating and furious declamation is for the purpose of convincing the people that there is something in the free trade measure beside ruin to the industrial interests of this country.¹⁵

Also “Sound the hewgag and beat the tom-tom: Aguinaldo is getting ready to surrender”.¹⁶ And, “The election in most of the states is over. The political tom-tom has been hushed, freedom’s spangled banner has been rolled up and the voice of the man pleading for votes has been stilled.”¹⁷ Later, Col. Charles A. Edwards, secretary of the Democratic Congressional Committee, was reported as saying: “It is results that Democrats want, and not a flamboyant, ranting, tom-tom beating and hew-gag sounding campaign that will end in dead sea fruit and apples of Sodom.”¹⁸

That kind of expression developed outwith politics too, as when this newspaper made a pitch for local advertisers:

It is a great mistake to imagine that the people know you and you do not need to advertise. The public has a memory in such matters that is shorter than the hair on a dog. It is too much occupied to notice whether you are alive or dead unless you continue to beat your tom-tom and blow your own bazoo.¹⁹

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A significant shift in the tenor of the usage came with the so-called Indian mutiny, news of which filled the British newspapers in September 1857. Typical was this eye-witness report from a commercial agent at Hansi: “By beat of tom-tom it was proclaimed by the Sepoys that the rule of the British was over and the country belonged to the King or Emperor of Delhi, and any one found protecting the English would be put to death”.²⁰ Significant here is the idea of a tom-tom as a secret means of communication, unknown to the British, and from now on always used with the suggestion of nefarious purposes. This association was clearly remembered. More than 25 years later, an article celebrating the English drum noted that indigenous drums were encountered all over the world: “In India, during the mutinies, the rebels mustered from north, east, south, and west tap-tapping as they came; the bazaars and country side were all noisy with tom-toms recruiting for the mutineers”.²¹

¹⁵ *Bloomington Leader* [IN], 20 July 1892, p. 4.

¹⁶ *Evening Herald* [Syracuse NY], 20 May 1899, p. 4.

¹⁷ *The Dixon Sun* [IL], 7 November 1883, p. 1.

¹⁸ “Edwards Hurls Brick at Bryan”, *The Sullivan Union* [IN], 11 December 1907, p. 1.

¹⁹ “Just A Story About Ourselves”, *Daily Palo Alto Times* [CA], 28 May 1909, p. 3.

²⁰ “A Religious War in India”, *The Evening Star* [London], 25 September 1857, p. 3.

²¹ “The Drum”, *The Mount Alexander Mail* [Castlemaine, Australia], 25 February 1884, p. 4.

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In the Bahamas, a report on the 1857 Christmas festivities noted that everything had passed off peaceably:

The representatives of the illustrious 'Johnny Canoe' of former days have dwindled down to two or three, and as for 'Neptune and Amphitrite,' they have not left their watery domains at all this season. The 'Waits' went their rounds, as usual, and the African 'tom-tom' has done its duty at the Barracks.²²

This is an early example of an association of the tom-tom with Africa. Then in 1860 the *New York Times* reproduced a report from the *Nassau Guardian* about the aftermath of the running aground of a slaving ship. The slaves had been 'liberated' (into either the West Indian Regiment or labouring jobs on various plantations). One sat apart, clearly an outcast – and it turned out that he was the original kidnapper back in Africa. One sign of his withdrawn behaviour is that "even the tom-tom had no effect on *him*".²³ It would appear likely that any kind of small drum outside a European context was now likely to be called a tom-tom.

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The association of the tom-tom with Native Americans seems to begin in 1879 with the Sioux, perhaps not accidentally soon after the Battle of the Little Big Horn had seen the annihilation of much of the Seventh Cavalry under George Armstrong Custer. One of the local traders, D. L. Pratt, Jr., wrote a report in June for the *Hillsdale Standard* (Michigan) from the Rose Bud reservation in Dakota Territory from where he had travelled into the Badlands to witness the famous Sun Dance. His description of the preparations notes "Two tom-toms or bass drums, around each of which are about ten middle-aged Indians with sticks, and near them are a crowd of squaws, who are to accompany the drums with their voices".²⁴ Around the same time a Canadian newspaper carried a report from Capt. E. D. Clarke of Sitting Bull's arrival in Canada, after his evasion of US troops: "In the lodges the tom-tom (a rude drum) was in full swing, and to this, coupled with the squaws' chants, which are not unmusical, was the dance going merrily on".²⁵

By 1883 Sitting Bull was off the warpath and settled at Fort Yates, where the Sioux were allowed to offer picturesque sights: "After night-fall, the Sioux camps lend a most pleasing picture, with camp fires brightly burning, around which are assembled the bucks, squaws and pappooses of the tribe, chanting in their unintelligible jargon and thumping the 'Tom Tom' as accompaniment".²⁶ Similarly, Judge Sage spoke with a degree of respect about the Sioux at Fort Yates: "He described the Sioux Indians as fine specimens of manhood. They had finely developed chests, small arms and splendid legs. They were symmetrically perfect. The dances they had, which he described, he said developed the muscles. When

²² "Christmas Festivities", *The Nassau Guardian*, 30 December 1857, p. 2.

²³ *New York Times*, 3 September 1860, p. 5.

²⁴ *Hillsdale Standard* [MI], 9 September 1879, p. 1.

²⁵ *Winnipeg Free Press*, 24 July 1880, p. 2.

²⁶ *The Bismarck Tribune* [Dakota Territory], 19 October 1883, p. 1.

these dances were going on the songs of the men, while beating on the big drum, called the tom-tom, could be heard five miles.”²⁷ But even after the cessation of hostilities with the Sioux, the string Sitting Bull – medicine man – tom-tom – killing of Custer was irresistible, as in this account of his visit to the Cheyenne Agency: “Sitting Bull is honored and worshipped as the great medicine man who mixed the herbs and roots, to the sound of the tom-tom, that caused the defeat of the gallant Custer and his dashing and heroic Seventh cavalry”.²⁸

The Seneca were by now no threat at all, and therefore their festivities could be safely visited and reported upon in a quite different mode: “a young brave took a seat on a rude bench in the centre of the long room and commenced beating, with measured time, a tom-tom which he carried in his hands”.²⁹ Chanting and dancing ensued. The ceremony is curious and primitive, but not barbarous or frightening.

A similar example comes in the account of an Ojibway war-dance, now performed as a picturesque jamboree. The tom-tom provides the accompaniment, “responding to the quickly plied stick in a dozen willing hands”, beating louder and louder as the chanting increases in volume and dancing becomes more energetic – until suddenly everything stops.³⁰ And as reports of the Ghost Dance began to appear, they inevitably featured the tom-tom: “the squaws take the leading part to the music of the tom-tom”.³¹

Collections of Indian curiosities were soon being made and displayed. One visited Albuquerque and contained what the reporter described as “a complete assortment of the musical instruments used by the Indians throughout the country... There is the medicine and war drum, the tom tom, whistle and the medicine and war rattle”.³² Eventually Geronimo’s tom-tom was presented to the Oklahoma Historical Society. It’s described as “a circle of raw-hide slightly larger than a dinner plate, painted in a design symbolic of the points of the compass and hung with a fringe of feathers attached by raw-hide thongs”.³³

It was only then a matter of time before the Red Men clubs, white fraternal organisations that aped Native American ceremonies and rituals, adopted the tom-tom as one of the elements for their displays, alongside wampum belts, tomahawks, bows and arrows, and other symbols of American aboriginality.³⁴

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²⁷ “Life with the Sioux Indians”, *Connersville Times* [IN], 23 June 1886, p. 4. Reprinted from the *Cincinnati Enquirer*.

²⁸ “Some Big Sioux”, *Elkhart Sentinel* [IN], 16 February 1888, p. 2. Reprinted from the *Chicago Tribune*.

²⁹ *The Era* [Bradford PA], 8 February 1881, p. 3.

³⁰ “The Ojibbeway War Dance”, *La Plata Home Press* [MO], 27 August 1881, p. 2. Reprinted from the *Winnipeg Times*.

³¹ “Dancing in Minnesota”, *Davenport Morning Tribune* [IO], 26 November 1890, p. 1.

³² “Indian Ideas”, *The Advertiser Courier* [Hermann MO], 19 October 1881, p. 2. Reprinted from the *Albuquerque Journal*.

³³ “Famous Tom-Tom”, *Hutchinson News* [KS], 25 November 1919, p. 6.

³⁴ “Red Men Have A Booster Meeting”, *Brazil Daily Times* [IN], 21 September 1921, p. 6.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the word could turn up in just about any part of the world, always applied to a small native drum (and most societies had their own kind) and often conveying a sense of loud and barbarous noise. A skirmish with natives of the Admiralty Islands in the Pacific sees them retreating to the shore and “sending up fearful yells, and beating their tom-toms loudly”.³⁵ A long account appeared of a Chinese Masonic funeral. As the coffin finally headed to the cemetery:

The procession was headed by a hack in which were four Chinamen. One of them held sole control of a big gong, another held a pair of cymbals, a third beat a tom-tom and a fourth blew a small flute. They all worked hard and made a most terrible noise all the way to the grave. This was for the purpose of scaring away the devils, and succeeded in scaring several horses.³⁶

This was in Colorado, but the tom-tom accompanied the Chinese all over the world, as seen here in an account of a visit to a joss-house in Australia:

The room is lofty, though so hung and festooned with tablets, banners, and fans that it assumes a dwarfed appearance. Starting from a door on the left of the room we pass a large iron bell and tom tom. A peacock is cunningly painted over the pig-skin which is stretched over the tom tom. They are used for driving away evil spirits, and must be eminently successful, judging from the hideous sound they emit when Cerberus strikes them.³⁷

Wherever a shaman or medicine-man appears, there is usually also a tom-tom, here in Alaska: “Suspended by a cord from the top of the hut the shaman’s tom-tom and rattle proclaimed his calling”.³⁸ And whirling dervishes were in equal need of the instrument, here in Constantinople: “Somewhere, hidden away in the upper part of the building, is an orchestra, which plays discordantly upon a sort of flute and a tom-tom”.³⁹ Or in Ceylon where “[t]o the music of the tom-tom, kept up on one note, the dancers sing a peculiar, wild funeral dirge, in which the spectators often join”.⁴⁰

Soon it seemed as if no account of a non-European celebration or ritual could be complete without the report of a tom-tom. This about the Tantah Fair, just north of Cairo in 1882:

It was a singular spectacle to be in the midst of one of these huge assemblies, numbering as high as 300,000 souls, coming from every part of Syria, Arabia, even India and North Africa, and particularly at night by their rude camp fires, beating on the tom-tom, singing rude negro and Egyptian chants, telling fortunes with the howling dervishes sending forth the most

³⁵ “A Dangerous Pearling Expedition”, *The Advocate* [Burnie, Tasmania], 19 November 1881, p. 21.

³⁶ “Masonic Chinese”, *Boston Weekly Globe*, 25 April 1882, p. 6. Reprinted from the *Denver Republican*.

³⁷ John B. Cooper, “The Joss House, Emerald Hill”, *The Telegraph* [Pahran, Australia], 16 September 1882, p. 7.

³⁸ R. G. Morey, “Witches in Alaska”, *Burlington Daily Gazette* [IO], 19 July 1893, p. 3.

³⁹ N. H. Barns, “Oriental Customs”, *Daily Illinois Courier* [Jackson], 29 April 1893, p. 4.

⁴⁰ “The Horrible Devil Dancers of Ceylon”, *Morning Times* [Cripple Creek CO], 30 June 1898, p. 2.

hideous and heart rending howls while whirling in their maddening testimony of fealty to the Moslem god.⁴¹

In 1884 J. Arthur Blaikie reported a performance – laid on for tourists – in the old town in Algiers where “half-naked performers lounge around; some horrible negresses resplendently attired squat on the ground, while the musicians are gently agitating the inspiriting tomtom”.⁴²

Eventually, and significantly, the tom-tom became the sound of Africa in the Caribbean, as in this report by Mrs Juan Orts Gonzales for a missionary newspaper on Cuban customs, although, as now quite often, the term refers to a particular *sound* rather than a particular *instrument*:

In some respects you will believe you are in the United States; in some others that you are in Spain; and in still others, that you are in Africa, even the darkest part of Central Africa, because you will hear day and night the lugubrious tom! tom! tom! of the African drum calling to the African practices of witchcraft and to the demoralizing African dances.⁴³

The association with black Africa got stronger in the later nineteenth century, as here in a report on the supposed decline of paganism:

There is an old saying that ‘all Africa dances when night comes.’ Wherever paganism reigns in the Dark Continent, the ever-recurring carousal by the light of the moon or a bonfire is the chief amusement of life. But in wide areas the noisy pleasures of the nocturnal orgy are no longer witnessed. Throughout the broad Soudan, stretching from sea to sea, are 60,000,000 blacks who now gather at nightfall, not to dance like their fathers, but to study the language of Mohammed and hear the Koran read in the village mosques. The beating of the tom-tom and the noise of revelry, so dear to every savage African, cease wherever Islam advances, and the hum of the school room replaces the sounds of rude festivity.⁴⁴

The patience of British colonial officials was constantly tested by tom-toms:

His chief musical treat, however, is the tom-tom. In season and out of season, all day and all night, he is prepared to abandon himself to the delight of a noisy demonstration on this instrument of torture, and it is more often exhaustion on the part of the performers than boredom by the audience that puts a period to the deafening and monotonous noise.⁴⁵

It seems as if the more supposedly barbarous the part of the world discussed, the more likely that a tom-tom would be heard, hence the appearance of the word

⁴¹ “Scene of the Outrages”, *Marshfield Times* [WI], 12 August 1882, p. 3.

⁴² J. Arthur Blaikie, “Algiers”, *Magazine of Art*, 7, (1884), 140-148, at 147-48.

⁴³ Mrs Juan Orts Gonzales, “How the Cubans Live”, *The Presbyterian of the South* [Atlanta], 10 December 1919, p. 6.

⁴⁴ “Paganism’s Decline”, *Kokomo Gazette Tribune* [IN], 28 June 1888, p. 2. Reprinted from the *New York Sun*.

⁴⁵ *Report on the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast / compiled by the late Lieut.-Colonel H. P. Northcott from reports furnished by officers of the administration*, London: Printed for H. M. Stationery Off. by Harrison and Sons, 1899, p. 38.

alongside such terms as ‘cannibal’ and ‘head-hunter’, as here in an account of a visit to the Ilongot in the Philippine Islands:

Nowhere have I seen more beautifully muscled and developed bodies; smooth as satin, without the obesity of the Chinese athlete, and yet with his peculiar polish of skin. Not over five feet these people are so perfectly formed, all curves and proportion, that the height is scarcely missed. The eyes, wide, dark, are wild in expression, untamed in glance, as are the limbs in action. As they advanced and fell into position, the white spectators did not exist for them, the fire was in their veins and the beat of a tom-tom was waking them to unsubdued instincts, as could be perceived by the twitching muscles, the suppressed excitement of the whole body.⁴⁶

In 1879, the *Hutchinson News* in Kansas featured the report of a visit to Trinidad, Colorado, very much a frontier location. Saloons and gambling halls were visited, described as being as low morally as the surrounding mountains were high. But even lower were the Mexican dance houses “where the services were carried on in a foreign tongue, to the music of a tom-tom”.⁴⁷ The association with Mexico was still there in this letter to a friend from a soldier on the border in Nogales during the US altercation with Pancho Villa: “You’d maybe like the music them greasers made – violin, a drum and an Indian tom-tom.”⁴⁸

The Midway Plaisance at the Columbian World Fair in Chicago in 1893 brought all kind of ‘barbarous’ practices from around the world into one place, including what one reporter calls “a double-decked affair, that is one tom-tom above another. The drumstick is put between and the noise is made two times with one motion.”⁴⁹ Here in Chicago, the instrument was fully domesticated: “concerts by tom-tom beaters” were laid on for children.⁵⁰ Elsewhere “the monotonous thump of the tom-tom” is just the incessant background to games of chance.⁵¹

And as the term became familiar, it became available for figurative language, as in this essay about evolution:

Religion was and is among savage people limited to a few notions and a few ceremonials. In the process of evolution, religion passed from homogeneous to heterogeneous – from a few vague notions, and meaningless ceremonies to a vast and complicated system of many beliefs and ceremonies – most of which have no more meaning than the beating of a tom tom by a wild African.⁵²

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⁴⁶ Grace Helen Bailey, “Dances of the Head Hunters”, *Lee County Journal* [Leesburg GA], 6 August 1909, p. 3.

⁴⁷ *Hutchinson News* [KS], 6 February 1879, p. 2.

⁴⁸ “Guardsmen’s Letter Indicates That Life in Mexican Border Camp Not Without Its Little Compensations”, *Oakland Tribune* [CA], 16 July 1916, p. 14.

⁴⁹ “To Draw the Crowd”, *Albert Lea Enterprise* [MN], 3 August 1893, p. 5.

⁵⁰ “Children’s Week at the Fair”, *Burlington Daily Gazette* [IO], 16 October 1893, p. 1.

⁵¹ “Sioux Want More”, *Postville Review* [IO], 21 March 1896, p. 1.

⁵² W.S. Bell, “Evolution”, *Monroe’s Iron-Clad Age* [Indianapolis], 22 December 1883, p. 6.

In 1881 a London paper carried an actual description of the drum in a report on a Hindu wedding:

The tom-tom or drum is an especial favourite with the natives of Hindostan. It is unlike the drum used by Europeans. In shape it resembles an egg covered with tight goat parchment. No sticks are used in beating, but a thundering 'tom-tom' is maintained by striking with the open palm the villanous parchment.⁵³

This is an early example of the treatment of the tom-tom as an instrument of musical interest in its own right, to be therefore described, and even listened to, rather than simply denigrated for its connotations. Here's a South American example, also from the 1880s, where the writer realises, almost against his better judgement, that he is in the presence of a musical virtuoso:

The Peon population in the Republic of Columbia draw in blood from three different races, the Spanish, the Indian and the Negro. This, I suppose, says a traveller, writing to the *American Musician*, is generally true of all the so-called Peons or peasants of Spanish-American countries, for upon the original Indian tribes were grafted the Spanish stock, and then the negro came in to utterly and finally upset all previous studies in ethnology.

Their music is in some respects the most peculiar I have ever heard. The instruments upon which they play are common to all savage races, the tom-tom, or drum, played with the hands and the rattle.

These drums are played wholly with the hands, no sticks being used, and although it seems simple enough, there are men who have reputations akin to those of Rubinstein or Liszt on the piano. I remember a celebrated 'master of the tom-tom, one Simon, who was for a time a servant of mine. He was known at every place we came to, and no great pianist or violinist could have been more urged to play than was he. The best drum in the place would be brought for him, and the people would stand or sit around attentively listening.

Simon would drive the wedges until the tone suited him, then place the drum in such a way as to hold it between his knees, the round end being above the ground and then play. If I may so express myself, he played the treble with his fingers and the bass with his wrists, or rather the back part of his hands.

Even as I write, it seems absurd to me, but there was music in the tom-tom under Simon's hands. That is, it is an accompaniment which you could understand when you heard the people sing, and certainly there was more in it than in any drum I ever heard in civilized countries. There was a difference too, which I could appreciate between the tom-tom as played by him and the same thing played by others.⁵⁴

In the 1880s the tom-tom also began its domestication, perhaps not surprisingly first among religious bodies that had likely become accustomed to its use in foreign parts, particularly India and China. Here, for example, in an account of the Salvation Army wedding of Emma Booth, second daughter of 'General' Booth, in London, it is simply part of a musical accompaniment. Her husband had spent several years as an evangelist in India, and a group of Indians was among the 5000 guests: "One native carried a tom-tom upon which he beat with his fingers, another

⁵³ "A Hindoo Wedding", *Brief News and Opinion* [London], 7 May 1881, p. 418.

⁵⁴ "A Liszt on the Tom-Tom", *The Greeley Tribune* [CO], 28 September 1887, p. 6.

played upon a long Indian guitar, and the rest made use of small cymbals while the singing went on".⁵⁵

Interestingly, the Salvation Army – somewhat tolerant of indigenous music – was tarred with that brush, as in this intemperate editorial suggesting that their presence would not be welcome in Bradford, Pennsylvania:

The trouble is that it is a hurrah sort of religion, allied to the methods of the howling dervishes, the tom-tom style of the Cannibal Islands, and the agonistic posturing of the Congo voodoo worship. It is not easy to speak tolerantly of a people who are themselves intolerant and abusive of the older Christian organizations.⁵⁶

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One of the hot new dances of the 1890s was the Buzzard Lope. An imaginative piece originally in the *New York Tribune* attributes its origin to an old black man in Georgia who observed a buzzard loping around the corpse of his mule and spent four hours keeping step with the buzzard in order to learn the dance. Integral to the story is the man's long life as an expert dancer: "He had danced the 'dignity' step in Barbados, the 'Tom Tom' in Dominica; he had danced 'karo' as no other person in the world could dance it, and as far as cutting the pigeon wing, why, he invented it!"⁵⁷

This tom-tom dance appears in travel books of the period. Charles Kingsley reported it in Trinidad in 1871:

These tom-tom dances are not easily seen. The only glance I ever had of them was from the steep slope of once beautiful Belmont. 'Sitting on a hill apart,' my host and I were discoursing, not 'of fate, free-will, free-knowledge absolute,' but of a question almost as mysterious – the doings of the Parasol-ants who marched up and down their trackways past us, and whether these doings were guided by an intellect differing from ours, only in degree, but not in kind. A hundred yards below we espied a dance in a negro garden; a few couples, mostly of women, pousetting to each other with violent and ungainly stampings, to the music of tom-tom and chac-chac, if music it can be called. Some power over the emotions it must have; for the Negroes are said to be gradually maddened by it; and white people have told me that its very monotony, if listened to long, is strangely exciting, like the monotony of a bagpipe drone, or of a drum. What more went on at the dance we could not see; and if we had tried, we should probably not have been allowed to see. The Negro is chary of admitting white men to his amusements; and no wonder. If a London ballroom were suddenly invaded by Phoebus, Ares, and Hermes, such as Homer drew them, they would probably be unwelcome guests; at least in the eyes of the gentlemen. The latter would, I suspect, thoroughly sympathise with the Negro in the old story, intelligible enough to those who know what is the favourite food of a West Indian chicken.⁵⁸

What's not entirely clear is whether this tom-tom dance consisted of a set pattern of steps or whether it just referred to any kind of dancing performed to the sound of the tom-tom.

Eventually, though, there was a two-step dance called the Indian Tom-Tom:

⁵⁵ *Daily Gleaner* [Kingston, Jamaica], 10 May 1888, p. 2. Reprinted from *The Standard* [London].

⁵⁶ "The Salvation Army", *Bradford Era* [PA], 23 November 1889, p. 2.

⁵⁷ "The Buzzard Lope", *Daily Independent* [Monroe WI], 3 May 1890, p. 2. Reprinted from the *New York Tribune*.

⁵⁸ Charles Kingsley, *At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies* [1871], London; Macmillan, 1910, p. 307.

Never since the alumni gave a dance did they have any better music than that furnished by the Madden orchestra at the academy last Friday night. The most popular two step was the Indian Tom-Tom, played with perfect time and melody.⁵⁹

And sheet music for a song called “My Tom Tom Man” was being advertised in 1915 (next to “Dancing the Jelly Roll”).⁶⁰

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Greater Western familiarity with China brought greater detail to the descriptions and a greater awareness – if not appreciation – of the complexity of Chinese musical instruments. This is from a celebration in Kowloon:

[The band] consists of a gong, a tom-tom, a drum, a clarinet and cymbals. Sometimes there are two and even three clarinets, and sometimes they add a trumpet and even a horn. The first combination is bad enough. It causes you to gnash your teeth and desire to shoot somebody. But the last is something frightful.⁶¹

It begins to take on the appearance of a jazz combo.



A real turning point in the perception of many of these pagan instruments came in the summer of 1897 when the National Association of Music Teachers (mostly if not entirely female) announced the production of a “heathen concert”, gathering together music and instruments from across heathen lands, all of which, Miss Charlotte Hayes, the Boston composer, described as “extremely sweet” and “lovely in quality”. Among the instruments were the Tartar kettledrum, Japanese chimes, the Manchurian two-stringed violin, the bagpipes, the war-drum of the Congo, and “the tom-tom of the pagan temples, which calls worshippers to

prayer and is sounded for joy at the massacre of a Christian”.⁶²

By early in the twentieth century the tom-tom seamlessly formed part of circus music: the Ringling Brothers’ five bands included “a Fiji tom-tom orchestra”

⁵⁹ “Alumni Dance”, *The Salida Mail* [CO], 5 October 1909, p. 1.

⁶⁰ *Shortridge Daily Echo* [Indianapolis], 18 November 1915, p. 2.

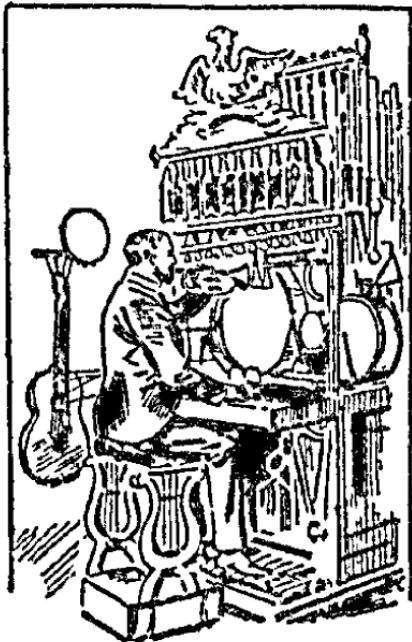
⁶¹ Margherita Arlina Hamm, “A Heathen Picnic”, *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette* [IO], 18 October 1894, p. 3.

⁶² “A Heathen Concert”, *Boston Sunday Post*, 10 June 1897, p. 12. Picture on this page.

alongside its minstrel band and bugle corps.⁶³ And the tom-tom featured in Barnum & Bailey's array of instruments too.⁶⁴

While American Indian dances and music might increasingly have the appeal of curiosities, there clearly came a point when assimilation demanded that Indians should move to more civilised instrumentation:

Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast, said the poet. So the government will try to induce the Indians in Minnesota to abandon their war dances and other barbarian ceremonies, including the beating of the tom-tom. Pianos are to be put into the schools on all of the reservations, teachers are to be employed, and the work of educating the Indians to a higher plane of music than they have heretofore been accustomed to will begin.⁶⁵



The New Invention.

A book of poems taken from Indian legends was published in 1902 called *With Tom Tom and Tomahawk*.⁶⁶ Although the words are unrelated, they have a pleasing assonance that still serves to associate the drum with violence and bloodshed, even if all that is now the stuff of the past.

A 1904 invention, the pneumultiplione, combined 24 instruments into a single device played by one man. Inevitably it included a tom-tom.⁶⁷ But the real breakthrough in making the tom-tom musically respectable came in Oscar Hammerstein's 1909 New York production of Richard Strauss's *Salome*, which featured an unprecedented combination of instruments:

There is the hecklophon, which Strauss conceived and had especially designed for his opera. It is a monster bass oboe, and produces a very distinctive tone color. The contra-bass is not a stranger, though seldom to be found in the average score. Strauss uses eight French horns, four trombones, three bassoons. The clarinets include a high E flat instrument, a B flat clarinet, two A clarinets and bass clarinet; two harps in place of one; the celesta, a pleasant and effective instrument rarely employed; six kettle drums (heaven knows how they are played by one man); a xylophone, a tom-tom, a tambourine, a glockenspiel, a triangle, a snare drum and the biggest bass drum that could be procured in New York. Heavily reinforced strings, divided and redivided. In all an orchestra of 117.⁶⁸

⁶³ "Circus Has Great Variety of Music", *Daily Republican* [Selbyville IN], 10 August 1908, p. 3.

⁶⁴ "Circus Has New Parade", *Fort Wayne Sentinel* [IN], 28 June 1910, p. 4.

⁶⁵ "The Charms of Music", *Defiance Express* [OH], 26 July 1901, p. 3.

⁶⁶ Emil A. C. Keppler, *With Tom Tom and Tomahawk*, New York: A. G. Seller & Company, 1902.

⁶⁷ "Orchestra of One Man", *Price Eastern Utah Advocate*, 10 March 1904, p. 7. Picture on this page.

⁶⁸ "Will Present Salome Again", *Boston Sunday Post*, 24 January 1909, p. 45. And cf. "What It Means To Present 'Salomé'", *New York Times*, 24 January 1909, p. 31.

There are various other reports of the tom-tom in orchestras, suggesting that it was becoming less of a novelty, even though in a new violin concerto by Arthur Severn, “the sudden irruption of the loud tom-tom into the slow movement was given no apparent motive”.⁶⁹ And a 1918 article certainly takes drumming seriously, outlining the three main forms of drum found in modern orchestras: the side drum, the bass drum, and the kettle drum, with the tom-tom and gong used for “any special music”.⁷⁰

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The traditional story – here outlined by Frank Crane – was that the music of the savage was crude: “He loves the tom-tom... His war songs are harsh yells.” As the species advances, melodies are invented, then harmonies, “bringing the art of expressing sentiment in sound up into the realm of intelligence and creative genius. The progress of the race is measured by the span from the crazy sun dance of the savage to the Beethoven symphony.”⁷¹ On this view anything involving the tom-tom could only mark a regression, which was one of the sticks used to beat early forms of jazz.

A new note begins to appear in the second decade of the twentieth century, one that would grow in importance, particularly in depictions of Haiti and of Harlem. Modernity was now spreading fast, even in areas earlier depicted as primitive. But western travellers would tend to depict modernity as a top layer, under which seethed the old barbarous passions, which would often emerge at night, as here in Cairo:

The barbarism which underlies modernized Cairo creeps out after nightfall, and one who strolls up the side streets and alleys may see the dignified young Egyptian put aside his college education, and forget his Parisian clothes, and do the sinuous Oriental dances, common to all barbaric people, to the accompaniment of a tom-tom and other primitive musical instruments.⁷²

Or in this visit to the site of Babylon, forty miles outside Baghdad:

It was late in the afternoon when a mirage-like fringe of date palms raised themselves from the western horizon, marking the banks of the Euphrates and the edge of the Garden of Eden. At nightfall we reached the Arab town called Mussayeb. Hungry jackals wailed in the tumbledown cemetery outside the village. Redolent camels and goats crowded the narrow

⁶⁹ “Philharmonic Concert”, *New York Times*, 8 January 1916, p. 7. Tom-toms were used extensively in Elliott Schenk’s music for the New Theatre, New York, production of Mary Austin’s *The Arrow Maker* (1911). There were further productions throughout the country into the 1930s: see Michael V. Pisani, *Imagining Native America in Music*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 260. There were around a dozen operas on Indian themes in first decades of twentieth century, most of which used a tom-tom to indicate ‘Indianness’. It was played as a trochee: DUM dum; or a dacytl: DUM dum dum; or even DUM dum dum dum. Dvorak’s *New World Symphony* (1893) had given new respectability to native instrumentation.

⁷⁰ “Drums”, *Sikeston Standard* [MO], 6 December 1918, p. 10. Reprinted from the Montreal Times.

⁷¹ Frank Crane, “The Musical City”, *Syracuse Herald* [NY], 8 August 1913, p. 8.

⁷² William T. Ellis, “The Awakening of the Older Nations”, *Upland Monitor* [IN], 4 January 1912, p. 2.

bazar streets; a tom-tom beat and an indolent dancing-girl amused a group of Bagdad Jews and Armenian wool-buyers. The muezzin's call to prayers awaked the town at sunrise.⁷³

This new note was then brought home in perhaps the most decisive move of all. The twentieth century's first moral panic concerned what was known generally as 'rag dancing'. It involved a series of notionally distinct dance steps such as the Grizzly Bear and the Turkey Trot, all considerably simpler than conventional ballroom dances, all involving some kind of physical contact between partners, all allowing – indeed encouraging – improvisation, and all occasioning concern amongst moral guardians as the steps made their way from the bars and bordellos into the dance-halls. Most of these steps had their origin in black culture. They reached peak popularity between 1906 and 1908, after which they were professionalised into respectable form by white couples such as Irene and Vernon Castle, becoming the fox-trot and the hesitation waltz.

Looking back in 1916 on the phenomenon of rag dancing, the *Oakland Tribune* drew on popular versions of Social Darwinism and racial psychology to suggest that the primitive urges manifest in such dancing, and encouraged by the rhythms of the tom-tom, were latent in all human beings:

Music and dancing are of course inseparable, and both are expressions of the sense of rhythm with which all mankind is imbued. Poetry is the vocal expression of the same instinctive aspiration after melody and motion. Poetry, as human beings ranged upward in the evolutionary scale, became literature, in all its manifold manifestations. Music grew into symphony and song – a far cry from the tom toms with which the First Man beat his crude tempo to the steps of the warrior of his tribe!

But – and this is the crucially new point – “the race never quite loses its memory”. The “shadow of antiquity” manifests itself in dreams:

So it is entirely usual that one person hearing the distant beat of a war drum, in the Hopi region, should feel an unaccountable longing to pursue man or beast and to wage combat... And under similar circumstances another person, responding subconsciously to the impulse which the savage music stirs, begins to fidget and to beat time. Were it not for social restraint, such a person would suddenly fall to dancing!

To achieve this breaking through of social restraint rag dancing required its own music: “the reversion of highly-developed melody to primitive type: the more prominent the syncopation, the closer the resemblance to the original tom-tom.” An atavistic trait was awakened in the listener, and the body responded. “The music did it, operating upon the racial memory!”

⁷³ “Babylon As It Now Is”, *The*

THE HANDY ORCHESTRAS
Jazz Dance Blues on
Columbia
Records



THE muffled boom of the tom-tom flirts with the cault of barbaric cymbals; the hollow moan of weirdly swept strings is overwhelmed as jungle-land's wild symphony swells to its maddest height. Through it all, the fierce rhythm, the frenzied swing of a super-syncopation that is sweeping the dance-world into a vortex of new delight. The Jazz Dance Blues are here!

W. C. Handy of Memphis, Tenn., is the originator and composer of these famous "Blues" successes. The Handy Orchestra of authentic negro musicians play "Blues" dance numbers in an utterly primitive way.

This unique organization makes records exclusively for Columbia. You want to hear these blues records for your party—buy 'em! You will be glad to have records, whether you dance or not—they're great!

Jazz Dance Blues by Handy Orchestra of Memphis, Tenn.
 Love Me (Blue) - Columbia 1507
 Ain't She Sweet (Blue) - Columbia 1508
 The Handy Orchestra - Please (Blue) - Columbia 1509
 I'm a Fool (Blue) - Columbia 1510
 The Handy Orchestra - Please (Blue) - Columbia 1511
 The Handy Orchestra - Please (Blue) - Columbia 1512
 The Handy Orchestra - Please (Blue) - Columbia 1513
 The Handy Orchestra - Please (Blue) - Columbia 1514
 The Handy Orchestra - Please (Blue) - Columbia 1515
 The Handy Orchestra - Please (Blue) - Columbia 1516
 The Handy Orchestra - Please (Blue) - Columbia 1517
 The Handy Orchestra - Please (Blue) - Columbia 1518
 The Handy Orchestra - Please (Blue) - Columbia 1519
 The Handy Orchestra - Please (Blue) - Columbia 1520



Mid-Month List
Columbia
Records



You're as dear to me
as Dixie was to Lee



8 Big War Song Hits
on a Single Record



Long Boy One Step



The Cannibal King



So taken is this writer with his theory that it is applied to the mothers who took up cudgels against rag dancing on account of inherited maternal instinct. It was through their efforts, according to this theory, that "esthetic dancing" became the method for transmitting high ideals and protecting their children from the dangers associated with atavistic return. The sound of the tom-tom was muffled; its temptations eventually spurned – or so the writer hoped.⁷⁴

A more sophisticated argument was that the language of music has

always been fundamentally the same, but that whereas primitive man had only half a dozen notions to express, we now have thousands; but nevertheless "our battle piece arranged for fifty instruments is only the same language that the savage tried to set out for his single tom-tom."⁷⁵

Nevertheless, the word continued to assert its presence in popular culture, as seen in this January 1918 advert for Columbia records: "A hot tamale, tom-tom tune – with Collins and Harlan rollicking through some rather startling lines. The Cannibal King with his 'forty-three children in a twenty-five passenger Ford'" – which sounds like a line that Chuck Berry could have written.⁷⁶ The association of the tom-tom with jazz seems to have arrived the same year with W. C. Handy's jazz orchestra, as described in the second Columbia Records advert: "The muffled boom of the tom-tom flirts with the barbaric cymbals; the hollow moan of weirdly swept strings is overwhelmed as jungle-land's wild symphony swells to its maddest height. Through it all, the fierce rhythm, the frenzied swing of a super-syncopation that is sweeping the dance-world into a vortex of new delight. The Jazz Dance Blues are here!"⁷⁷

⁷⁴ "Why Rag Dancing Is Popular", *Oakland Tribune* [CA], 18 June 1916, p. 37.

⁷⁵ "How Modern Music Was Developed From Savage Cries of Primitive Men", *San Antonio Evening News*, 19 January 1923, p. 24. Cf. "The seeds of the first instruments were sown unconsciously by an early man as he stamped upon the ground, beat upon his throat, clapped his hands or slapped his body. He produced contrasting sounds with hollowed hands, flat palms, heels or toes, or by striking either bony or fleshy parts of the body.... Percussion – the act of striking – was an art in which primitive man was skilled. He survived in every sense by the dexterity of his blow; from which it is fair to assume that the first instruments to augment the hand clap and the stamp of the foot may have been the implements or weapons upon which he relied for food or survival. The striking of objects such as stones, the hide or (wood) shield, the hunting bow or the cudgels or clappers and so on, further suggests that implements used percussively were among the first instruments" (Blades, *Percussion Instruments*, 1992, p. 35).

⁷⁶ *Evening Review* [East Liverpool OH], 10 January 1918, p. 4.

⁷⁷ *Kingston Daily Freeman* [NY], 2 January 1918, p. 2.

It can be noted that the percussionist in the illustration has cymbals but no tom-tom. It could be that whoever designed the advert thought that the bass drum was actually a tom-tom. (And 'muffled boom' is probably more appropriate for a bass drum.) The point is that the word tom-tom was required to help convey the appropriate connotations. Here, now, all the negative terms of the late nineteenth century - tom-tom... crash... barbaric... jungle... frenzied... vortex... have been turned into positive markers of desired sophistication. Not only in popular culture. Here it is in T. S. Eliot's early poem, "Portrait of a Lady":

Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins
Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own,
Capricious monotone
That is at least one definite "false note."⁷⁸

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US-made tom-toms were on sale as early as 1919.⁷⁹ And the incorporation of the tom-tom into the jazz drum kit is illustrated in an article about the Filipino boxer Pancho Villa (no relation to the Mexican revolutionary: his real name was Francisco Guilledo), who came to the USA in May 1922 and was soon World Flyweight Champion. Villa fell in love with jazz and with drumming, and is reported to have bought a kit consisting of "a huge bass drum with bells, cymbals, tom-tom, and all the other ear-splitting jazz attachments and a snare drum".⁸⁰ More evidence is found in these adverts from 1923 and 1927.⁸¹

TRAP DRUMS FOR SALE
A Ludwig separate tension all metal orchestra Drum, nearly new, drum stand, 16-inch crash cymbal, cowbells, wood block and holder, alternating Ludwig Bass Drum, beater and cymbal, tom-tom side drum, bass drum spurs, two pair drum sticks, triangle and a few other accessories, including case, amounting to over \$100, going for quick sale at \$75.00.
M. S. LOCKE, Doerflinger's.

Landay
SPECIAL SALE



100 GENUINE
Ludwig
DRUM
OUTFITS
Complete at

\$47⁵⁰

Complete with:
Full size Ludwig Bass and Snare
Drum, Drum stand, 1 pair of
stems, 1 pair of cymbals and holder,
Ludwig crash and holder, 1 cow-
bell, wood block and cowbell
holder with holder.

PAY ONLY \$1 WEEKLY

OPEN EVENINGS
All the Latest from Hits for Orchestra and Piano

LANDAY BROS.
1192 Main Street

⁷⁸ T. S. Eliot, "Portrait of a Lady", *Others*, 1, no. 3 (September 1915), p. 36.

⁷⁹ *The Music Trader*, 7 June 1919, p. 162.

⁸⁰ "Pancho Villa Aspires To Be Champion Jazz Band Drummer; Likes U.S. History", *Bridgeport Telegram* [CT], 13 June 1923, p. 10.

⁸¹ *La Crosse Tribune and Leader-Press* [WI], 22 November 1923, p. 15; Landay Special Sale, *Bridgeport Telegram* [CT], 4 January 1927, p. 4.

One might imagine that Utah would be one of the last states to embrace jazz. Certainly in 1920 one of the local newspapers was still using scare quotes to keep it at bay:

What is there about 'jazz music' that makes it so popular? That question has been asked many times and answered in many ways. Wise men say that 'jazz' appeals to that elemental nature which is a heritage from the days when our ancestors danced with rhythm typical of savages to the accented music of tom-tom and other weird instruments, the tones of which the modern 'jazz' artists imitate.

Not even the most ardent devotees of 'jazz' music admit it is beautiful. It is fantastic and out of the ordinary. Some even claim that the strange harmonies from a 'jazz' band produce an effect upon them like a strong wine. [...]

The life of 'jazz' may be shortened in Utah by reason of the discouragement to be given the noisy brand of music by the church authorities. In the church social advisory committee's pamphlet on dancing the following is said about 'jazz' music:

'Jazz' in orchestra dance playing might be defined as 'departure from the correct,' making the instruments perform that which is not written, and in a way contrary to their accepted use. This time of playing is rank 'faking' and should not be tolerated by intelligent people. Very few of the so-called 'jazz' effects are, or can be written, and if performers on musical instruments will confine their performance to the written music of their parts there will be very little jazz.⁸²

Ohio also showed signs of resistance. The mayor of the town of Lorain banned all but "modest dances", and in addition "ordered a gag for the tom-tom and yowling trombone. He contends that they stimulate one to execute movements unthought of during the brassy rendition of the ordinary dance tune."⁸³ Massachusetts joined in:

The criticisms are coming from sober-minded, reasonable and sensible people, and public journals, that have come to realize quite fully the evils of the decadent ball rooms where scenes that would almost shame the inhabitants of an African jungle are not of uncommon occurrence.

The modern dance has largely come to be little more than an appeal to the purely sensual. With its kiss waltzes and shimmyings, its aim seems to be to invite the breaking down of the natural and acquired reserves between the sexes. Its peculiar posturings are apparently purposely made suggestive. Its contortions and gyrations to the tom-tom beating of jazz music have nothing of beauty in them and would seem to be lacking in the elements of enjoyment.⁸⁴

A piano manufacturer made the same point: modern dance music is based on the tom-tom:

"There is something about the boom, boom of the tom-tom that excites the blood of the savage," said Mr. Gulbransen. "The dance music of the present day is the tom-tom, with an embroidery of weird melody. Strip away the decorations and there remains the tom-tom, in all its naked savagery... So-called jazz music is the cannibal drum, come to the city and dressed up in cabaret clothes."⁸⁵

⁸² "Jazz' Music", *Ogden Standard* [UT], 22 January 1920, p. 4.

⁸³ "'Shimmy' Has Shaken Last Shake, Says Mayor", *Canton Daily News* [OH], 1 February 1921, p. 7.

⁸⁴ "The Modern Dance", *The Lowell Sun* [MA], 31 March 1921, p. 6.

⁸⁵ "Says Savage Is Blamed For Jazz", *Arlington Heights-Cook County Herald* [IL], 20 March 1925, p. 6.

Another report of another of his speeches found even stronger words to quote: "Jazz is not American,' Mr. Gulbransen asserted... 'It is not music. It is animal howls with an undercurrent of tom-tom beats so that it may be danced to'."⁸⁶

And Los Angeles was perhaps most outraged of all in the person of Mrs Anne Faulkner Oberndorfer, national music chairman of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, who opined that "Boys and girls are going wrong in alarming numbers ... because they get drunk on jazz - quite as powerful an intoxicant as alcohol." Music is a powerful force, she suggested - but for evil as well as good, likely to rouse "the savage breast which throbs under the thin skin of civilization." She was just getting into her stride:

When the American Indian wanted to awaken the bestiality to fever pitch, he first subjected himself to the monotonous tom-tom of primitive music. The same with the jungle black. They knew its savage potency.

In some sections of our southern states women for years locked their doors and windows when the negroes of the swamps began chanting their 'blues'.

Jazz is the modern echo of ominous incantation - the pound, pound, pound, that fires leaping pulses and allays the safety inhibitions slowly built up for social deportment from time immemorial.

It is disorder, anarchy, the churning of primitive impulse, bound to stir the jungle beast, more or less, whether its devotees recognize it or not.⁸⁷

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As jazz began to spread, other parts of the world took defensive action. Vienna, home of the waltz, took particular exception to the introduction of the jazz dances such as the foxtrot and tango, and the Vienna city council responded by forbidding jazz bands in all dance schools: "Jazz bands imported from America, with their 'tom-tom music,' have gotten on the nerves of the Viennese."⁸⁸

At the end of 1925 it was reported from Havana that President Machado had banned "the tambor, or tom-tom, or other instruments of African character, with singing and contorted dancing". His decree stated that "this class of music and the 'rumba' are contrary to the good custom and public order in Cuba".⁸⁹

And, inevitably, some British idiot could be relied upon to blame jazz for weakening the backbone of young British men, who were clearly showing signs of letting women take charge. This was "famous explorer and author... Francis Mitchell Hedges": "The excessive craze for dancing, and the popularity of the tom-tom and the jazz band are further borrowings from people far down the mental

⁸⁶ "Says Jazz Is Not American", *Ogden Standard-Examiner* [UT], 10 June 1925, p. 2.

⁸⁷ Jack Jungmeyer, "Jazz Ruining Youth, Club Leader Thinks", *Sheboygan Press-Telegram* [WI], 17 June 1924, p. 14.

⁸⁸ "Vienna Declares Warfare on Jazz", *Indianapolis Star*, 29 December 1924, p. 8.

⁸⁹ "African Musical Instruments Barred by Cuban President", *Vernon Daily Record* [TX], 11 December 1925, p. 3.

scale. It is urgently necessary that the British man should realize that by nature he is the leader, and refuse longer to be governed or dominated by women.”⁹⁰

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The definition of jazz that Charles S. Johnson quotes in *Opportunity* from the *English Dictionary of Etymology* (“a number of niggers surrounded by noise”) suggests how important the general soundscape of the city was in these years: motor-cars, overground railroads, and high density of population – but jazz drumming would also have played a part.⁹¹ As Edna Millay said: “In New York you can see the noise”.⁹² One of the most popular journalists of the period, Frank Crane, wrote a column in 1913 (here quoted from *The Syracuse Herald*, though it was probably syndicated) in which he berated the modern US city for the ugliness of its sounds. The savage loves crudity of sound

(“He beats the tom-tom. His war songs are harsh yells”).⁹³ The progress of the race is marked by the invention of melody and harmony, leading to Beethoven. But street sounds haven’t yet been civilised, so he makes some suggestions. For a start, “any sort of racket will be regarded as a punishable offence against the public peace”. Streets will be paved with noiseless asphalt and cars will be equipped with silencers. Peddlers will be forced to sing tunefully and fire engines will play martial music as they speed through the streets.



BANG! BANG! How the Tom Toms Thundered—

Bang! bang! how they thumped the googs:
Bang! bang! how the people wondered:
Bang! bang! at it hammer and tongue—

W. S. Gilbert might very easily have been describing typewriter noise when he wrote these lines in *Bab Ballads*.

But what a difference when you install the Noiseless! The click-click and the bang-bang and the tom-tom are silenced forever!

The NOISELESS TYPEWRITER

The Noiseless Typewriter Company, 228 Broadway, New York, Phone # Barclay 2226

A Society for the Prevention of Noises flourished in New York. Kathy Ogren’s book, *The Jazz Revolution*, reproduces a 1926 advert from the *Saturday Evening Post* for “jazz-proof home furnishings”, which suggests that they will dampen the invasive noise.⁹⁴ The advert for the noiseless typewriter is from the *New York Times*.⁹⁵

Condemnation was not universal. The barbaric tom-tom was even welcomed into church in New Harmony, Indiana – which perhaps maintained some of its utopian ideals. This is from a report on a dance given under the auspices of the Altar Guild of St Stephens’ Church:

⁹⁰ “Author Claims Britons Losing Backbone Now”, *Ada Evening News* [OK], 19 August 1925, p. 6. So famous was Hedges that this is his only internet entry; and he appears not have written any books.

⁹¹ *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, ed. Ernest Weekley, London, J. Murray, 1921, p. 779. Quoted by Johnson in *Opportunity*, 3 (May 1925), p. 132.

⁹² Letter to her family, 5 February 1913, *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, ed. Allan Ross Macdougall, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952, p. 32.

⁹³ Frank Crane, “The Musical City”, *Syracuse Herald*, 8 August 1913, p. 6.

⁹⁴ Kathy J. Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 00.

⁹⁵ *New York Times*, 8 April 1920, p. 3.

Music was furnished by the celebrated Hitch orchestra of Evansville, whose syncopated jazz was full of pep and animation and a delight to dance to. Among the instruments employed Monday night was a genuine African tom-tom whose barbaric strains had furnished music for the dusky dancers of the Gold Coast.⁹⁶

Even if there was no moral opprobrium, jazz and the tom-tom always seemed to appear together, as in Stephen Leacock's humorous piece about a night out in New York: "What is this, this vast place, ablaze with light, blue with smoke, strident with noise, the whine of the ukulele, the jizzle of the jazz and maddening throb of the tom tom! It is a show".⁹⁷

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Native American music and song were assimilated into the popular classical tradition in the first third of the twentieth century. Typical was the Mohawk, Chief Oskenonton (1886-1955), who gave recitals of traditional Indian songs "with tom-tom accompaniments".⁹⁸ And the strangest suggestion of all came in the question asked by the *Des Moines Capital* in March 1922: "Will The Tom-Tom Displace Jazz?"



This substitution turns out to have been the suggestion of Mrs Eugene Lawson, from Oklahoma, made at the meeting of the National Board of the General Federation of Women's Clubs held in Chicago. "As an alternative to the often 'hysterical pounding' of saxophone and whining brass, she suggests the more stately measures of the Indian drum; in short, the tom-tom." This was a turn-up. The tom-tom had found itself supplanted as an instrument of barbarity and had, as a result, gained a reputation for 'stateliness'. Mrs Lawson went on to refine her argument by explaining that Indian music and jazz were "in their essentials ... the same", being held together by basic rhythms; but Indian music was melodically superior, and even morally so inasmuch as it is "usually the outgrowth of some deep tribal

feeling".⁹⁹ But however strong the growing connection between the tom-tom and darkest Africa, the Native American connotation was never lost: indeed it was boosted in the mid-1920s by the popularity of the musical *Rose Marie* (1924) with its popular number "Totem Tom-Tom".

⁹⁶ "All Enjoyed The Dance", *New Harmony Times* [IN], 22 July 1921, p. 2.

⁹⁷ Stephen Leacock, "Is New York Going Crazy?", *Vanity Fair*, May 1919, pp. 45, 86.

⁹⁸ "Oskenonton In Native Songs With Tom-Tom", *Boston Sunday Globe*, 8 January 1922, p. 6.

⁹⁹ "Will The Tom-Tom Displace Jazz?", *Des Moines Capital* [IO], 26 March, 1922, p. 1. The article also appeared in the *Wichita Daily Times* [KS], 12 March 1922, p. 34.



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In the early twentieth century no country had a closer association with tom-toms than Haiti. When John Houston Craige first approached Port au Prince in 1912, his initial impressions were sensory. He smelt tropical perfumes mingled with hideous stench, heard occasional outcries and gunshots, and inevitably he heard drums: "The syncopated thump of innumerable tom-toms floated to us over the water, blended with the shrill piping near at hand of bloodthirsty malaria mosquitoes that hung in clouds about our ship as we rocked at anchor".¹⁰¹

An early-twentieth-century Baptist report on Haiti made the usual string of associations between tom-tom, vodou, and cannibalism:

Though Haiti – called the Queen Island – is richest as regards soil and minerals in the Caribbean Sea, the people themselves – materially and socially – are in a most wretched and deplorable state. Destitution is seen everywhere. In connection with the voodoo worship, to which they are summoned by the sound of the tom-tom from hill and vale, bush and grove, the devil devotees work themselves into a frenzy, very much like devil possession. During these ceremonies, which are most immoral and revolting, fowls are killed, and even at times the blood and lives of innocent children offered, to slake the thirst and pacify the anger of the demon god, whom they in their ignorance have been taught for centuries to fear and dread.¹⁰²

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¹⁰⁰ *Danville Bee* [VI], 23 January 1928, p. 12.

¹⁰¹ John Houston Craige, *Cannibal Cousins*, New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1934, p. 16.

¹⁰² "Haiti for Christ" [c.1915], document submitted to the *Inquiry into occupation and administration of Haiti and Santo Domingo. Hearing[s] before a Select Committee on Haiti and Santo Domingo, United States Senate, Sixty-seventh Congress, first and second sessions, pursuant to S. Res. 112 authorizing a special committee to inquire into the occupation and administration of the territories of the Republic of Haiti and the Dominican Republic*, Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1922, pp. 221-224, at 222.

The beat of the tom-tom became firmly lodged in New York consciousness after the opening night of Eugene O'Neill's play, *The Emperor Jones*, at the Provincetown Playhouse, in its new premises at 133 McDougall Street, just south of Washington Square, on the evening of 1 November 1920, with the black actor Charles Sidney Gilpin, from the Lafayette Players of Harlem, in the title role, the first black actor to perform a major part on a non-musical white stage. The tom-tom beats through the second half of the play, originally at pulse rate, then slowly speeding up as Jones tortures himself in the jungle night. The play was such a success that it had to move to bigger theatres before going on an extended national tour.¹⁰³

O'Neill based the play on stories he'd heard about Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, onetime president of Haiti; he drew on his own experiences in the jungles of Honduras; and the play is set on "an island in the West Indies as yet un-self-determined by White Marines" (almost certainly a reference to James Weldon Johnson's recent articles in *The Nation* called "Self-Determining Haiti"). So the tom-tom here is a West Indian drum, though the figure of the Congo Witch-Doctor takes the references back to the supposed source in Africa. Both Hubert Harrison and Claude McKay wrote appreciative reviews of O'Neill's play.¹⁰⁴

In probably the most sophisticated early analysis of jazz (though his sense of history is less secure), Gilbert Seldes recalls O'Neill's play:

To any one who inherits several thousand centuries of civilization, none of the things the negro offers can matter unless they are apprehended by the mind as well as by the body and the spirit. The beat of the tom-tom affects the feet and the pulse, I am sure; in *Emperor Jones* the throbbing of the drum affected our minds and our sensibilities at once.¹⁰⁵

And in February 1925 the play could still provide the reference point for W. E. B. Du Bois when he contributed "Africa's Answer" (with striking illustrations by Winold

¹⁰³ In a 27 November 1962 interview George Greenberg, a Provincetown Playhouse stagehand and later stage manager reported that the drums were kept in the cellar upstage and gradually moved until they were beneath the middle of the house (William Warren Vilhauer, "A History and Evaluation of the Provincetown Players", State University of Iowa Ph. D., 1965, p. 285). He also recalls O'Neill – complaining about how poorly the drums were used in the Broadway production – saying that at the Provincetown you could hardly hear them when they started. He says that on Broadway they used a thunder drum on wheels pushed by two small black boys; though Sheaffer has O'Neill playing on the actual tom-tom used after a Broadway performance (Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill, Son and Artist*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1973, p. 141).

¹⁰⁴ Cf. "The monotonous beating of a big drum filled the air with muffled shocks and a lingering vibration. A steady droning sound of many men chanting each to himself some weird incantation came out from the black, flat wall of the woods as the humming of bees comes out of a hive, and had a strange narcotic effect upon my half-awake senses... The vision seemed to enter the house with me – the stretcher, the phantom-bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshippers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart – the heart of a conquering darkness. It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush which, it seemed to me, I would have to keep back alone for the salvation of another soul" (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*).

¹⁰⁵ Gilbert Seldes, "Toujours Jazz", in his *The Seven Lively Arts*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924, pp. 81-108, at 98 [orig. in *The Dial*, August 1923].

Reiss) to a series in *The Forum* called “What is Civilization?”, offering what is probably his most sympathetic account of jazz:

What is African music? Have you heard the tom-tom in O’Neill’s “Emperor Jones”? Below this ecstasy of Fear runs that rhythmic obligato, – low, sombre, fateful, tremendous; full of deep expression and infinite meaning; have you dancing in your soul and have you heard a Negro orchestra playing Jazz? Your head may revolt, your ancient conventions scream in protest, but your heart and body leap to rhythm. It is a new and mighty art which Africa gave America and America is giving the world.¹⁰⁶

The popularity of *The Emperor Jones* made the word tom-tom current in all kinds of unsuspected corners of discourse. A Philadelphia judge asking for donations could say that charity runs through every page of Jewish history “[l]ike the incessant beating of the tom-tom in the play called ‘Emperor Jones’”.¹⁰⁷

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The origins and significance of jazz were extensively discussed almost as soon as the word itself became commonplace. It seems to have been broadly accepted that at least the rhythmic element of jazz had an African origin: the young Sierra Leonean composer and ethnomusicologist, Nicholas G. J. Ballanta, was in New York in the early 1920s writing the first well-informed articles about the connections between African music and jazz, which he felt to lie exclusively in rhythm. For some, this African element connoted a threat to civilised values. In January 1921 the Friends of the Indian, meeting in Philadelphia, adopted a resolution that would forbid Indian youths and girls from jazz dancing on the grounds that the drums and the saxophone “stir atavistic memories of the tom-tom and the shriek of the victim at the stake”.¹⁰⁸ Don Knowlton’s unsympathetic “The Anatomy of Jazz” has a similar resort: “the beat of the tom-tom which drives savages into orgiastic ecstasies and the beat of the drum which sets the pace for the dance orchestra are identical. Jazz serves primitive rhythm on a civilized platter”.¹⁰⁹ A more sympathetic classic literary underlining of the connection came when *The Living Age* published a chapter out of the forthcoming translation of René Maran’s novel, *Batouala*, with its dramatic invocation of an African jungle: “The tom-tom of the *l’inghas!* What does it say? Wild bulls, frightened by the fire, are galloping toward the village of Nibani – what next?”¹¹⁰ Here again tom-tom refers to a generic drum sound rather than to a *kind of* drum.

When bootleg music – “wild jazz coupled with risqué versification” – was discovered by an assiduous researcher in Kansas City, the music inevitably “began with a moaning tom-tom beat”.¹¹¹ When the young Boston composer W. Franke

¹⁰⁶ W. E. B. Dubois, “Africa’s Answer”, *The Forum*, LXXIII (February 1925), 185-86, at 185.

¹⁰⁷ “Judge Stern’s Appeal to Philadelphia Jews”, *The Jewish Exponent*, 23 January 1925, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ *New York Times*, 22 January 1921, p. 00.

¹⁰⁹ Don Knowlton, “The Anatomy of Jazz”, *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, 1 December 1925, p. 00.

¹¹⁰ *The Living Age*, 4 February 1922, p. 00.

¹¹¹ “Risqué Phonograph Discs Being Distributed Wide-Spread”, *Billings Gazette* [MT], 15 June 1926, p. 7.

Harling defended jazz as “the pulse of America”, the secretary of the Lord’s Day Alliance, the Rev. Martin D. Kneeland, called it “Ethiopia transplanted. It’s the tom-tom of the jungle all over again.”¹¹² Harlem intrigued white journalists because it was, as one of them put it, “within commuting distance of the jungle”. He was reporting on a meeting place of Ba-Kuba adherents, which provided evidence that “the mysteries of voodoo” had not been cleared away “by contact with this sophisticated capital of modern industry”. On the contrary, “the beat of the tom-tom still rings in the ears of black men who have become janitors and elevator men in modern buildings”.¹¹³

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The early 1920s saw plenty of US explorations of the countries to its south, many of which – like Haiti – were now under US control. In 1923 Richard A. Loederer followed the US marines to Haiti and produced a long report on a visit to Henri Christophe’s citadel at Sans Souci for the *New York Times* under the title “A Voodoo Castle in Haiti”. His opening sentences set the scene:

“It’s a devil’s cult, this voodooism. Yes, sir, a devil’s cult.” Uncle Dave, former Haitian Brigadier General and now tool-keeper of an American-owned cotton gin in Port au Prince, shuddered slightly as far away sounded the tom-tom of drums, calling the people together in some remote part of the jungle.¹¹⁴

Predictably the US occupation brought forth further iterations of the usual clichés, as here from a returned Administrator, who is pictured with a rebel rifle and two drums described as tom-toms:

CANTONIAN SEES HAITI'S FURY
John E. Lamielle Has Heard Tom Toms Beaten in Cries of War



“We knew that trouble was brewing. From the distant hills we could hear the faint echo of the tom-tom calling the natives together. That echo always presaged trouble as somehow no matter what his religious convictions were when living a normal life, the black Haitian always reverts to voodooism when there is war in the offing”.¹¹⁵

Or here from an ex-Marine turned popular writer:

The negroes surrounded us and sat down in the form of a nice black circle. . . . A few rods away a Haitian stood beside the gasoline drum and hammered out the Haitian jungle song – the rhythmic beating of a tom-tom. . . . The tom-tom can easily drive a white man mad. They also

drive the blacks mad, for they can work themselves into a frenzy to the tune of the tomtoms. Another black man built a bonfire near the gasoline drum, so that when darkness fell the whole scene became one from darkest Africa. . . . But this was Santo Domingo, the land of

¹¹² “One Scores; Other Defends Jazz”, *Fitchburg Sentinel* [MA], 29 January 1926, p. 10.

¹¹³ Gilbert Swan, “In New York”, *Anniston Star* [AL], 13 May 1929, p. 4.

¹¹⁴ Richard A. Loederer, “A Voodoo Castle in Haiti”, *New York Times*, 27 May 1923.

¹¹⁵ John E. Lamielle, quoted in Maud M. Howells, “Cantonian Sees Haiti’s Fury”, *Canton Daily News* [OH], 15 December 1929, Section 4, p. 6.

quadroons! That didn't help, though, for the only brown-skinned people present were Garcia and Nicolai. . . .The rest were negroes . . . and negroes had skinned the men I recalled.¹¹⁶

That association between Haiti, tom-toms, and vodou, sometimes with cannibalism thrown in for good measure, was established as soon as North Americans started travelling to the island of Hispaniola. This is one of the most popular travel-writers of the day, Harry Franck, still on his boat in the harbour:

Port au Prince is not, as it appears from far out in the bay, heaped up at the base of a mountain wall, but stretches leisurely up a gentle, but constant slope that turns mountainous well behind the city. Off and on through the night we had heard the muffled beating of tom-toms, or some equally artistic instrument, and occasionally a care-free burst of laughter, that could only come from negro throats, had floated to us across the water.¹¹⁷

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In 1926 *Tom-Tom* became, for the first time, the title of a book: John Vandercook's study of the Saramaka of Suriname (Dutch Guiana), notable in part for the photograph of a sculpture of a tom-tom player done by his wife, Margaret Metzger Vandercook (1899-1936). "The tom-tom is never loud. Its tone is so low one must listen intently for its sound scarce two hundred yards away. But, curiously, the notes are just as clear two miles farther through the trees, so exquisite is the perfection of the witch-man's pitch. The tom-tom is a purposeful thing. It is the supremely important possession of the forest people. The rhythm which it sounds is the key to the vast, incommunicable soul of the jungle."¹¹⁸



Sometimes, when the drum beats, the voice of the woods grows almost quiet. The red monkeys quit their howling to heed the witch-man's master rhythm. When hungry tigers come too near a Saramacca town the old men can pound a tune upon their drums that will send the beasts back in silence to the far-away places where they are wont to hide. When the drums beat out some certain sounds, even the shrieking insects scratch upon a lower note.

The tom-tom is the negro's master skill. While they have their drums they will never be afraid - for they can, in a flash, create a new emotion that quells in an instant all transient fears.

Nor do they ever forget the jungle rhythm, no matter how much time and circumstance may alter the old memories.¹¹⁹

Even in a Harlem play, the rhythm emerges through a black actor:

¹¹⁶ Arthur J. Burks, *Land of the Checkerboard Families*, New York: Coward-McCann, 1932, p. 138.

¹¹⁷ Harry A. Franck, *Roaming through the West Indies*, New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1920, pp. 108-09.

¹¹⁸ Vandercook, "Tom-Tom", pp. 248.

¹¹⁹ Vandercook, "Tom-Tom", pp. 256.

Suddenly, in the midst of a set speech, he reached under the table and seized a short length of broomstick that had been placed there for just such an emergency. He stopped his speech, lifted the stick high over his head, and brought it down with a terrific crash upon the table. Then he lifted it again and brought it down once more, then again, and again, and again, and again.

The chorus women ceased their smirking. The audience, astonished, stopped whispering and were immediately attentive. Faster and faster the big black pounded the table, in flawless time. In a moment a curious electric mood filled the auditorium. The comedian said nothing, but now his body was moving, slightly but truly, in time to the beating of the stick. Then the troupe around him took it up, began to sway and lurch, slowly, then faster and faster, utterly without consciousness, completely rapt [...]

The rhythm was irresistible. Even I, in the balcony, foreign to such things from birth and by every experience of life, could not fail to feel it. I felt half-choked. The walls of the building seemed to close in, softly, and the harsh electric lights gave way to let a mood of forest moonlight in. The seas were bridged, Harlem for the instant was far away and the strange beating of the black man's stick seemed to sound the steady wash of wind among the ancient, long-forgotten trees. Mulattoes, blacks, rich and poor, for the moment were again one people with one destiny – harked back against their will to another place ages and a world away. The air was hushed. There was no sound except the steady, quick, quick beat of stick on table.

Then, as suddenly, the comedian threw down his rod, flung back his great head, and roared with laughter. The show went on as before.¹²⁰

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At the conclusion of one of the best-known essays of the Harlem Renaissance, written in 1926, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", the poet Langston Hughes expresses his autonomy as an artist through the expression "The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs". The previous year, in a story published in *Vanity Fair*, the Caribbean writer, Eric Walrond, has his characters drifting into a cabaret called Sonny Decent's:

As if it were hewn out of a tree trunk, is this low, bare, naif, cellar. Unpainted and unadorned. A rough creaking floor, the boards ready to flip through. A primitive coal stove. An incessant boom-booming, tom-tom-ing... Africa undraped!¹²¹

Over the late 1920s Shirley Graham wrote various versions in play and musical theatre form of what eventually became in June 1932 the full-scale opera, *Tom-Tom*:

¹²⁰ Vandercook, "Tom-Tom", pp. 246-8. Relevant here is the opening stanza of Vachel Lindsay's "Congo":

Fat black bucks in a wine-barrel room,
Barrel-house kings, with feet unstable,
Sagged and reeled and pounded on the table,
Pounded on the table,
Beat an empty barrel with the handle of a broom,
Hard as they were able,
Boom, boom, BOOM,
With a silk umbrella and the handle of a broom,
Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM.

¹²¹ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", *The Nation*, 23 June 1926, pp. 692-694, at 694; Eric D. Walrond, "The Adventures of Kit Skyhead and Mistah Beauty: An All-Negro Evening in the Coloured Cabarets of New York", illustrated by Miguel Covarrubias, *Vanity Fair*, 24, no. 1 (March 1925), 52, 100, at 100.

An Epic of Music and the Negro.¹²² In 1926-27 Graham had heard African music played by African students in Paris (from Senegal and Martinique and Algeria) and her uncle and father (both Methodist ministers), and brother (Lorenz) had all worked in Liberia, and her brother also in Haiti, but she must also have been influenced by the debates about jazz in New York in the 1920s, by the continuing reputation of *Emperor Jones*, and by Vandercook's "Tom-Tom". In the programme notes to her opera, Graham wrote: "the beating of the Tom-Tom is the beating of the heart of a people"; and she claimed in a newspaper interview that she called the piece *Tom-Tom* because this was "the earliest of all musical instruments".¹²³ She continued:

As far back as history goes concerning this great continent of Africa, the tom-tom has been the most important and most influential of all musical instruments. All primitive people beat drums, the drum is undoubtedly the oldest musical instrument but no people anywhere have ever equalled the African's proficiency and skill with his tom-tom. The tom-tom is the voice of Africa. It calls the people to worship and to war; it transmitted messages long before the white man thought of telegraphy or radio: it tells of joys and sorrows; it calls the people to the dance or stirs within their breasts the fires of hate and vengeance.

The tom-tom is heard at the beginning and end of the play, as it is in the opera. The next year Graham's essay "Black Man's Music" was introduced by her poem:

A fantasy of sound, scarce heard and yet, insistent as a heart beat in the
night of time.
A song, so irresistible with charm that straight into the soul it sinks,
And breaking down all bars of prejudice and pride, there it remains.
A blare of noise that that crashes as it pulls,
Pale fingers dancing over ivory keys
While naked black feet thump strange rhythms on huge tom-toms.
This is the black man's music.¹²⁴

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When Paul Morand wrote the ultimate primitivist fantasy, the creamy-hued Harlem socialite millionaire protagonist is prompted to shed her clothes, her inhibitions, and any shred of pretence to 'civilised' behaviour by the sound of the tom-tom:

In that dull thudding of the tom-toms she felt once more the same numbness, the same ecstasy, that she sought in Montmartre jazz at the hour of the full blast of intoxication. ... She was sick of being a fake White! Why should she take pride in a progress borrowed from

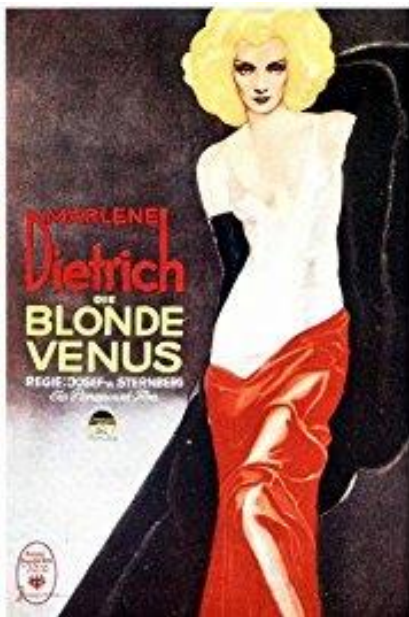
¹²² For example, *Tom-Tom (The African Drum)*. A Music-Drama, Morgan College Choral and Dramatic Clubs [Baltimore], Friday, May 31st, 1928. Program in the Papers of Shirley Graham Dubois, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, MC 476, IV.A.Musical Scores; and *Tom-Tom*, in *The Roots of African American Drama: An Anthology of Early Plays, 1858-1938*, ed. Leo Hamalian and James V. Hatch, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991, pp. 238-286. Annotated versions of the libretto and scores of the opera, *Tom-Tom* are also in the Papers of Shirley Graham Dubois.

¹²³ "'Tom Tom Basis of Negro Music' Says Author", *The Afro-American* [Baltimore], 29 May 1929, p. 10.

¹²⁴ Shirley Graham, "Black Man's Music", *The Crisis*, XL, no. 8 (August 1933), pp. 178-179

others? Her own progress was a return, in an astounding, harmonious union, to the land of her ancestors. ... O the femininity, the vast maternity of this continent! The Negro women are the queens of the black world. She tore off her dress and her necklace, flung her carbine and cartridges on the ground, scattered her money broadcast, leaving the crowd to grovel in its greed in the dust. Mamadu pressed her bare body against his bare breast, rubbing it against his soft skin with its long ribbed scars which intensified the pleasure with their friction. No, the sight of a white woman did not drive him mad, as the Virginia lynchings claim; he took Pamela as he took any other; he had the black man's enormous and indifferent appetite for women, where quantity is all that matters. Swallowed up in the magic circle, she yielded to him, to this dark throng, amid shouts, the explosions of drums and trading-guns, the clash of iron castanets. Pamela Freedman was going back into the womb of Africa. No longer was she worth three million dollars: she was worth three oxen, like the other women. There she was, clapping palm to palm, bent double at every cadence, her feet together and legs tight pressed, her loins held stiff, like all the Negro women. She was one of them now. Good-bye, New York!¹²⁵

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The last word goes to the 'blonde Venus', Marlene Dietrich, who in a classic piece of Hollywood primitivism, emerges from her disturbingly realistic gorilla costume in Josef von Sternberg's 1932 film to sing "Hot Voodoo":

Did you ever happen to hear of voodoo?
Hear it and you won't give a damn what you do
Tom-tom's put me under a sort of hoodoo
And the whole night long
I don't know right from wrong

Hot voodoo, black as mud
Hot voodoo, in my blood
That African tempo has made me a slave
Hot voodoo, dance of sin
Hot voodoo, worse than gin

I'd follow a cave man right into his cave
That beat gives me a wicked sensation
My conscience wants to take a vacation
Got voodoo, head to toes
Hot voodoo, burn my clothes

I want to start dancing, just wearing a smile
Hot voodoo, I'm aflame
I'm really not to blame
That African tempo is meaner than mean
Hot voodoo make me brave

I want to misbehave
I'm beginning to feel like an African queen
Those drums bring up the heaven inside me
I need some great big angel to guide me

¹²⁵ Paul Morand, *Black Magic*, trans. Hamish Miles, New York: Viking Press, 1929, pp. 172-173.

Hot voodoo, makes me wild
Oh fireman, save this child
I'm going to blazes
I want to be bad.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Music by Ralph Rainger, lyrics by Sam Coslow. Josef von Sternberg, dir. *Blonde Venus* (1932).