

Drum Care

Here are some suggestions to help care for your drums. A drum that is uncared for is usually a drum that is not played. The best thing for your drum is to play it, but there are a few things that you can do to help keep it healthy.

The Body

Unless you have a synthetic drum the shell will most likely be wood. Most drum makers seal the wood with a varnish or oil, which slows the movement of moisture in and out the body reducing the possibility of cracking. However it is always good to feed the wood, just as you would a piece of antique furniture. Do this by polishing it with oil (linseed oil, teak oil, lemon oil ect.). As the moisture comes out of the drum it is replaced by the oils you are putting into the wood. If the drum has been made well it will have been sealed inside and out making this maintenance a luxury, but probably not necessary.

If you do get a crack it most likely will appear at the base of the drum, where it makes contact to the ground. Generally a crack here will not affect the sound; however, it should be filled to avoid it spreading further up the drum. A mixture of wood or epoxy glue with wood filler that is close to the color of your drum, or sawdust shavings, works well. Work the mixture into the crack pressing to insure that the crack is filled. Then wipe excess residue away and let dry for twenty-four hours. Sand and re-stain if you wish and you should have a pretty invisible repair. If you do get a crack on the bowl follow the same procedure. In the event the crack is hard to get to you may have to remove the drumhead. The concern with a crack on the bowl is that if it goes right through the wall of the shell it will leak air. This will stop the instrument from functioning properly resulting in a loss of bass response and an overall muted sound.

The Head

Most West African drums use either Goat skin or Cow skin. Cow skin is thicker and tougher and is generally on drums that use a stick such as the Dununba or Dundun. Goat is common to most hand drums. An exception to this is Latin style, or new world drums such as the Bongo or Conga drums which are hand drums, but have cow skin for the heads. This is why they tend to have lugs instead of rope for tuning because of the very thick cow skin that is used.

Goat skin heads will either have the hair removed by chemicals or by hand. Chemically de-haired skins generally look processed with a bleached white appearance. In some cases they can give the appearance of paper or a synthetic. A skin shaved by hand will have some hair left at the edge of the drum, where the rings prevent it from being shaved. As well the appearance will be a darker more natural color. Areas of the skin may have marks left from the scraping.

Chemically de-haired skins tend to be more brittle due to the absence of any natural oils left in the skin. This tends to produce a brighter sound from the drum. Depending on the sound you like, and the kind of drum you are putting a head on, this bright sound is not

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necessarily a bad thing. Skins that are de-haired by hand tend to have a bit of an oily feel to them from the presence of the natural oils in the skin. This makes them suppler and therefore durable. But ultimately they produce a tone that is a bit deeper with more body to it. In either case both skins work well and the differences are choices of luxury if your choices are limited to what is available.

Dry Hands Dry Head

Many people will ask if they should put a moisturizing agent on the drumhead to keep it from drying out. I only recommend this if the drum is not being played. For the most part your hands are a bigger problem than the drumhead. Because the drumhead will have a tendency to absorb the oils out of your hand, your hands will dry out even after a single session of drumming. You may notice white lines appearing along the creases of your palms, this is an indication of moisture loss. If you use a moisturizer on your hand before playing it will protect your hands, and allow the drum to draw the amount of oils it needs out of your hand without damaging your skin. This prevents the drumhead from getting too much oil on it, such as can happen when oils are applied directly to the drumhead, which will cause it to collect a lot of dirt and to potentially stretch too much as it becomes more and more supple from the build up of oil.

In terms of recommending a good moisturizing agent most hand creams will work. Avoid hand creams that are excessively oily or waxy. Also avoid petroleum based products such as Vaseline. The best we have found is Shea Butter which is from a nut found in West Africa. It has excellent healing qualities for your skin and will keep your drumhead happy as well. Using shea butter, or other oils, can prevent your skin from being as affected by changing moisture levels in the air. Depending on the kind of drum you have and where you live this may or may not be a concern.

Should your drumhead get a small nick or split you can get quite a few more beats out of it if you use a little glue to prevent it from spreading further. I use crazy glue, just a small drop and then gently sand it after it has set.

HEAT AND COLD

I have played the hand drum for almost twenty years in the northern climes of Western Canada. In all that time I have never seen a drum damaged by cold but have seen many a drumhead split from excessive heat.

One would think that as it gets warmer the drumhead should expand getting looser. Conversely, as it gets colder the drumhead should contract getting progressively tighter. But in fact the opposite is true. As the temperature rises the moisture is drawn out of the head into the surrounding air causing it to contract. As the temperature drops moisture is drawn back into the drumhead causing it to stretch. Therefore it is important to de-tune your drumhead if it is exposed to higher temperatures. In the summer you may have problems if you leave your drum in your car or in the sun. But even in the winter it can be a problem if you leave your drum in front of a window on a sunny day, or by a hot air vent and it is tuned really tight so there is no more give to the skin. To manage changing

temperatures always allow your drum to acclimatize to room temperature before playing or tightening.

Tuning your drum

People often are surprised to find that the rope tensioned drums of West Africa such as the Djembe or Ashiko are tunable. The tuning system is often referred to as the Mali Weave and upon first appearances can look pretty daunting, but is really very simple. Many people shy away from drums that use this system which may prevent them from experiencing some amazing drums. To me it is like buying a pair of shoes based on whether they have laces or Velcro...whatever.

It is not usual to tune a hand drum to a pitch. There are exceptions to this such as with congas which are often played in pairs or in groups of three. In this case they may be tuned in thirds to each other, or to the fundamental pitch of the instruments that they are accompanying. However, generally tuning your drum has more to do with getting the skin to respond to your hand correctly and to reduce the amount of ring the head produces when struck.

The drumhead should be tight enough that it allows the hand to bounce easily. As well the head needs to be tight enough that the sustain of the note is short in duration. A very loose drumhead will feel soggy and on the bass note have more of a boing than a boom. On the middle or slap tones it will continue to ring after it is struck giving us the church bell phenomena as I like to call it. A lot of un-tuned drums played together become an incessant drone that clutters the rhythm and impedes communication. See the diagram for the Mali Weave, or drop into your hand drum specialist to get some hands on guidance.

It should be noted that most West African hand drums are tuned pretty tight compared to frame drums or bass drums. If you like to keep your drum tuned in the traditional way be aware of two things. One, your drum head will not last as long and will be more susceptible to splitting. Secondly it will be necessary to de-tune it if you have to leave it where temperatures may be unpredictable. This is not such a big deal as the drum need only be de-tuned enough to allow the head to stretch a little if it gets warm.