

# Playing the Djembe

Sources: <http://www.afrodrumming.com/djembe-history.php>  
<http://freepercussionlessons.com/how-to-play-the-djembe-the-basics/>

According to the Bambara people in Mali, the name of the djembe comes from the saying "Anke djé, anke bé" which translates to "everyone gather together in peace" and defines the drum's purpose. In the Bambara language, "djé" is the verb for "gather" and "bé" translates as "peace." Great drummers make the drum SING...and use it to tell a story. *Music IS Language!!*



## Early History & Social Context

Its exact origins are largely unknown, but it is widely acknowledged that the drum originated with the Mandinka (Maninke) people of western Africa in around 1300 AD.

In west African society, certain instruments such as the balafon, the kora and the ngonï are subject to hereditary restrictions, meaning that they may only be played by members of the griot (historian/storyteller) caste. The djembe is not a griot instrument and there are no restrictions on who may become a djembefola.

In daily life, various events are accompanied by unique songs and dances, usually sung by the griot, accompanied by drummers, singers and dancers. Songs tell of great leaders, like King Sundiata, or praise certain professions, like the cobblers or hunters.

The djembe is primarily the instrument of dance used at marriages, baptisms, and funerals. Songs are also played during the ploughing, sowing and the harvest, used for courtship rituals and even to settle disputes among the men of the village. **The djembe is traditionally played by men,** and it is still uncommon for women to play the djembe in West Africa (exceptions include **Salimata Diabaté** and **Monette Marino-Keita**).

## Since 1950

In the 1950s the djembe's increased popularity outside of its homeland is credited to the world tours of *Les Ballet Africains* led by **Fodeba Keita**.

Around that time, a Nigerian percussionist named **Babatunde Olatunji** released *Drums of Passion*, an album of African drumming songs.

## Musical Terms:

TIMBRE - the quality of sound, studied by exploring the contrast between sound groups

DYNAMICS – the loudness of sound, studied through following a conductor

Students will also practice RHYTHM and IMPROVISATION by improvising a one bar pattern.

# Hand Positions for Playing the Djembe

With your drum tilted so that the head is slanted away from you place your hands on the drum so that your fingers are almost touching so that your hands form a “V” shape. In other words you don’t want your hands in a parallel position.

Your shoulders should be down and relaxed. Remember this: No tension is required to play the Djembe!...Now you’re ready to play the drum!

## Three Sounds: Base, Open, and Slap

The Base Sound of the djembe is produced by playing the drum in its center with a flat hand. This base stroke comes from the shoulder so that the weight of your arm aides in the production of a deep resonant tone. Don’t let your hand stick to the drum, but rather let it bounce of the head as soon as you make the stroke. This will ensure that you let the head vibrate to its fullest.

The Open Tone which is the melodic tone of the djembe is created by playing near the edge of the djembe with your fingers. The open tone is produced with a relaxed stroke and is higher in pitch to the base tone.

The Djembe Slap is played with the fingers as well but your hand hits the rim of the drum at the knuckles and the fingers are allowed to “slap” the head. This slapping will produce a very high pitch on a well-tuned djembe. Keep your fingers apart and loose.

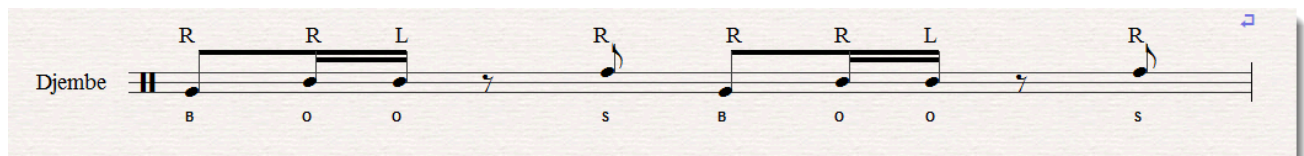
The basic sounds are played "open", meaning that the hands rebound immediately after a strike, so the contact time with the skin is as short as possible.

DON’T force the sound! Always play in a relaxed manner to produce the best sound. Practice playing all three of the basic djembe sounds so that you can be consistent with both hands.

## Djembe Casa Rhythm

Here’s how to play the Djembe Casa Rhythm that Aldo plays in the “Free Lessons” video. There are three sounds that you play and the sounds are noted underneath the rhythm. B is for Base Tone; O is for Open Tone; and S is for the Slap Tone.

The letters on the top of the rhythm suggest which hand is best to play the rhythm but you can play it with the opposite hands if you are more comfortable doing so. R=Right and L=Left



The image shows a musical staff for Djembe. The staff is labeled "Djembe" on the left. It contains two measures of music. The first measure has three notes: a quarter note labeled "R" above and "B" below, a quarter note labeled "R" above and "O" below, and a quarter note labeled "L" above and "O" below. The second measure has a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note labeled "R" above and "S" below, a quarter note labeled "R" above and "B" below, a quarter note labeled "R" above and "O" below, a quarter note labeled "L" above and "O" below, a quarter rest, and a quarter note labeled "R" above and "S" below. A small blue square icon is in the top right corner of the staff area.

## RULES:

Obey the beat. Take turns. Leave space for others. Stop on cue. LISTEN!!