

# Jem-bays, balofons and a whole new world of percussion

Story by Tom Hay  
Pictures by Adrian Murray

MOST people try and stop children from making noise. Ian Booth does the opposite.

The Bradford-based music teacher and radio host visited Harrogate Theatre with a bewildering array of West African percussion instruments. He then proceeded to place one in the hands of each of the attending 25 children and the few accompanying adults.

Getting everyone to stick to the same rhythms for five minutes was a challenge. Getting the kids to stay quiet after that was harder still. Considering the odds, he did well.

The session started with an introduction to the various Ghanaian and Senegalese instruments. Budding percussionists met the *kaxixi* (pronounced "ka-shi-shi") small baskets filled with pebbles or bottle-tops which make a rattling sound.

Then there were the *axatse* ("ah-hat-say") hollowed-out gourds shaped like butternut squash, with a net of beads which rattles when bashed on the knee to keep rhythm.

And the *balofon* – so exciting it caused a scrabble from the most eager kids – an ingenious instrument which gets its sound from the hollowed-out calabash gourds secured underneath its wooden bars.

Or the *pieces-de-resistance*, the huge, booming *djembe* ("jem-bay") which look like a mutant bongo drum to the untrained eye but sound so loud and compelling that their pounding rhythm genuinely feels like it's tapping into something tribal. According to Ian, everyone always wants to have a go on the *djembe*.

After the introductions, attendees were split into groups dedicated to each instrument and taught a simple rhythm. Once one group had grasped its part, it played while the next group was taught, and so on until the whole room was vibrating. After a few minutes of this, each group moved on to a different instrument.

Considering the youth and inexperience of most of the

musicians, the sound inevitably teetered on the brink of chaos – but it held together surprisingly well. And there were the odd revelatory moments of group focus where the rhythm transcended the basic clunks and clanks of sticks and bells and became music. A testament to the simplicity of the instruments and the common human instinct to create this kind of sound.

Clearly a past master at fair play, Ian ensured everyone had the chance to play each instrument, so nobody went home without taking out the accumulated frustration of a week's schoolwork on a big, bassy drum.

Besides taking his instruments and tuition to colleges, school and individuals for workshops, Ian compiles and presents "World Waves," a weekly programme on BCB 96.7 FM, Bradford's community radio station.

With an interest in world music that spreads beyond West Africa – he also holds workshops on Chinese and Indian music – Ian can be contacted on 01274 542420 or by visiting [www.musiquest.co.uk](http://www.musiquest.co.uk).

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Published in the  
Harrogate Advertiser  
Friday April 1st, 2005

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A new beat – Theo Tuinness in action during the percussion workshop held at Harrogate Theatre. (17030515c)



Above – Ian Booth keeps time on the djembe while youngsters and reporter Tom Hay play the *kaxixi*. (5)  
Right – Deanna English and Nathalie Harris. (17030515t)