

# Learning to play the dhol – diary write up



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This opportunity arose from my work with the steering committee of the St. Albans Mela, which was formed to look at various aspects which we believed to help steer us towards having a Mela in St. Albans. The idea of a Mela in St. Albans is part of a larger project called Fuze which was also set up earlier this year (with lots of lottery funding!) to make people more culturally aware and to promote cultural diversity.

As part of the project a music workshop called “ Drumming Up A Storm” was set up, where young people could come along and learn how to play an instrument, the aim being that these young people would form their own band and play at the Mela. However, this unfortunately wasn't the case as we didn't have enough musical talent or time to sort out a band write a song or two.....

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.. there just wasn't enough time. The eventuality was that the young people who attended these sessions would be part of an already established band or group and to the aid came S.

W. Storm and his band Island Fury and Bee 2 from The Heritage of Punjab (a. k. a. T-HOP) to “ Fuze” the Soca music from Storm's Band and mix it up with some Bhangra (namely the Dhol). I was going to learn the Dhol for two reasons, firstly, its something I've always wanted to do and secondly, my uncle's wedding is taking place at the end of August and I want to play there.

So what is a Dhol? How do you play a dhol? Where does it come from? The “ DHOL” is a traditional North Indian instrument made from a large barrel

shaped wooden shell, with a special application on the inner surface- a mixture of tar, clay and sand (known as dholak mixture) which lowers the pitch and provides a well defined tone. It has two skins on either side, which are made from goats hide. Rope is then woven thorough the edge of both skins and they are tensioned to produced a bass and treble sound. It is extremely loud and is played with 2 sticks made from cane - one curved beater and one flat stick which provide an exciting combination of thumps and slaps.

Long ago, during the Mogul empire in the late 16th Century a primitive form of the Dhol was played in war; called a " Nagara" (the equivalent to side drummers in British Battalions). However, although it was loud, it was only one sided. Before the privilege of telephones, the Dhol was later taken to villages and town criers used them to " drum up crowds" and read out notices or make formal announcements. Although the Dhol is seen to be from the Punjab area of the Indian sub-continent, it is played all over Asia from Armenia to Afghanistan and to the southern tip of India. Punjab means " Land of Five Rivers".

As it has five rivers running through it, the soil is very fertile and as a result people came and settled in the rich area. Traditionally, during the start of summer, the people of Punjab would celebrate a good harvest by dancing and singing songs related to celebration to the " Dhol" and " Tumbi" (meaning " King" - a single stringed instrument plucked and fingered by the neck). The songs would include descriptive lyrics that would relate to the dance that entailed. The dance actions adopted by those who tended to the crops mimicked their activities in the fields - cutting the corn, digging or

sewing seeds. The lyrics to the songs, were about getting drunk, being merry and generally socialising.

This Dance form became the traditional root of Folk Dance in the Punjab Bhangra was born! I originate from Pakistan from the province called NWFP (North Western Frontier Province) and am from a Pathan (from a Pushto speaking area). Although the Dhol is more commonly played by the Khattack tribe, to a distinct beat, of which the Khattack dance is performed. In our tribe (the Awan) it is usually used to accompany wedding songs/wedding festivals, however, in other parts of Pakistan and India, it is played in festivals, fairs, folk dances and even wrestling bouts! But hang on a minute? After talking to my instructor (Bee 2) he told me to visit The Ministry of Dhol Website where I would find everything I would need to know about the Dhol - and well I was certainly surprised, it seems as if everything I had researched was rubbish!" The Dhol" from The Ministry of Dhol website ([www.ministryofdhol.com](http://www.ministryofdhol.com))

The Dhol is a common Percussion Instrument that is used to accompany Punjabi Folk Music. It originates from the North India Region. A barrel shaped drum made of Hard Wood which is carved out of a single block from a tree trunk. Usually about 20-26 inches long, it is harnessed around the shoulders using a thick cotton belt. There are usually 3 types of Wood, used to make a Dhol: AMBH - Mango Tree SHESHAM - Similar to Teak TALLI - Similar to Mahogany The harder the Wood the Sharper, Louder and Clearer the sound.

Each side of the Dhol has Goat Skins covering the open ends, one for the bass and one for the treble. The skins are laced together with one piece of

cotton rope threaded through the edges of both skins. This is the more authentic way. The Modern day trend with Dhol's is to have a Plastic Western Drum Skin on the treble end, tensioned by metal nut adjusted hooks.

The History of Dhol as we know it, stems from the fact that the Dhol had its own relevant use in the State of Punjab. As far as we know, a drum was used to communicate the sound/threat of an approaching Army to a village, through a particular beat. Although the drum used to do this was called a Nagara it is however, a relative of the Dhol. In an attempt not to contradict ourselves we cannot give you a full history of the Dhol, merely because nobody actually knows the true background for this instrument and also because the Dhol is one of the oldest instruments. It is all very good saying that the Dhol was used for many activities in the past however this would be just speculation.

What we can provide you with is a more recent biography of the Dhol. The Dhol as we know it today is still used as a celebratory tool. It is still used in the ' After Harvest Celebrations' in India in which people sing and dance to the beat of the Dhol. In the more Western countries the Dhol still has its place in Joyous Occasions, these being Weddings Parties, Birthdays and any other social gathering. Although the style of playing in India is very folk orientated (Desi), many Dhol players outside of India have a more diverse custom to playing. The style used by ourselves is more contemporary and collaborative, in the sense that many of the beats that we play descend from the Benaras Gharana of Tabla and also, quite simply from a western drum kit.

This is the Treble side. This is played with a thinflexible cane called a “ Thili”  
This is the Bass side. This is played with a heaviermore rigid stick called a “  
Dagah” Know that I had found out everything I needed to know about a Dhol  
the next thing would be to buy one! I again consulted my instructor (I was  
using his dhol for the first 2 sessions, and he advised me on buying a Dhol -  
what dhol to buy and what not to. (a series of e-mails, phone conversations,  
faxes were used to construct this conversationThis is what he told me: Bee 2:  
When buying a dhol you want to make sure you don't get a cheap imitation.  
There are many versions of the Dhol and some of the painted Dhols can be a  
disguise for repair and/or to conceal broken parts in the wood or even cracks  
that may have developed.

The most common places you'll find these types of drums are from some  
shops in India. The wood is usually repaired and covered in dark colour paint  
then spotted with dark yellow or green speckles. Quite often they also use  
metal tacks that are filed down, rather like large staples either side of a  
crack. Another important thing to look out for is to make sure the drum is  
perfectly round. Drums made in India sometimesget stored on top of each  
other or something heavy is put on top. In the heat this will reshape the  
drum to an egg shape, particularly with lighter or thinner wood.

The drum, is no longer round so when mounting a manufactured round  
(plastic) skin, it won't fitMe: What's a Plastic skin? Bee 2: You'll get a better  
sound with the plastic than the goat skin, it sounds crisper and sweeter. You  
should also look out for (and this is something no one thinks about) is “  
termites” or other wood peasts. These are real pain, as you have to look very  
carefully at the wood grain and examine the pores for any tiny holes. The

only way to treat this is by getting someone to lay the drum sideways then pour petroleum spirit or methylated spirits on it, whilst rolling the drum so it is completely covered.

This will ensure that all or the termites or wood eating pests that live in the wood will die. Me: How much should I pay for a Dhol? Bee 2: This is probably the bit that's you wanted to know first. Well, the Dhol Foundation has done extensive research with all of the importers of Dhols in the UK. The table below should give you a rough indication of price ranges.

Remember the ranges of different prices are only approximate and should NOT be taken as an accurate figure. They are guidelines only; some shops will vary their prices due to overheads or location. For Dhols over £250.00, the Dhol Foundation recommend that you get a Lifetime assurance on the wood.

These guidelines are for UK importers only Examples are of Dhol, Dhol case and wheels, second hand Dhols, Umbh, Kiker, Shisam and Tali dhols (Tali being the best Umbh the worst): Estimated Price (£) Type Of Dhol  
 50 - 75 Umbh  
 80 - 125 Umbh/Kiker  
 130 - 185 Kiker  
 190 - 225 Shisham/Kiker  
 230 - 285 Shisam  
 290 - 325 Shisham/Tali  
 330 - 385 Nearly New Tali  
 390 - 450 + New Tali  
 Me: Where can I buy the (Thili) thin stick? Bee 2: This can be hard to get hold of. There are some materials that can be used in place of the original wood, which is in fact Cane. Lucky for the Dhol Foundation, we are endorsed by Jas Musicals and Made of Music so our sticks are the real thing and we have a regular supply. Most of the good shops that import the Dhols, should

sell them. The normal price is around 50p and we wouldn't recommend you pay more than that.

If you know anyone on a trip to India, the Desi (Asian) term for cane is "BAINTH". Me: Can I use anything in its place? Bee 2: Some people use Bamboo or the stuff their Mum might use from a garden centre, to stand her plants up. Both these type of sticks are too brittle and will not give you the flexibility you need to create certain sounds. If you're still stuck on what to use, you may want to find some wickers cane. That's the stuff they use to make furniture. If you don't have any joy there you could try old underground pipe cleaning rods.

The old ones were all made from cane. Johnny (Bee 2's friend) has used fibreglass fishing rods for experimental purposes! Me: What can I do to improve my playing? The most important thing to remember is to always practice the beats you know already. When practicing, you will discover more variations on breaks and rhythms you can play. When doing a performance, you should never attempt new patterns your unsure of. Always make sure you keep you head above the water. If you attempt something you're still learning to play, the chances are you'll probably stumble.

You will learn from your mistakes, but depending on situations you should get routine together and stick to that performance. That way you are sure of what you're playing and not waffling your way through. When practicing, you may want to get a friend to play the Dhol with you. Encouragement in pairs will always push you both and provided your both of a similar calibre; you'll discover new patterns.



Don't be afraid to create other sounds on your drum. The same pattern played in a different way (i. e. Closed instead of open sounds or striking the wood with the Bass stick), will make it sound like a new pattern.

Me: How Much Practice should I do? Bee 2: We all have a private lifestyle to live. This will restrict practice times. Always remember, the more you put in to your practice, the more you will receive as a result. This in turn will have a direct effect on your playing. Your personal practice is important to the amount of performance you do. I have a formula for students.

Self Discipline + Motivation + Determination ; Dedication = Great Performance. If you are able to play your drum in your home, then you should ensure at least couple of hours per day. Even if you're limited to what times you can play indoors, you should get half an hours worth of practice in, if possible. If you are unable to play at home here are some methods you could try. a) You could cover the skins of your drum, with a sheet or a thin blanket.

b) You could try kneeling with cushions on either side of your legs. c) After learning the phrases, you could try playing it on your knees with hands. Me: What's the best way to practice? Bee 2: If you learn the Beats phonetically using Bhol (the phrases for each beat Dha = Both Together, Na - Just the treble Ghe = Bass), you should chant the beats to yourself before you play them. I've created a slogan, If you can say it, You can Play it! This method of teaching the students beats was created at the time The Heritage of Panjab was first established back in 1990.

To graduate the learning a syllabus was designed by Johnny Kalsi. It has now grown to a nationwide scale to the extent ALL other Dhol Groups adopted the same method of teaching. Individuals will create shapes or images in their minds. These images will refer to different beats and patterns. Almost like a de-coder that enables you to play what the words in the lesson that are written in sequence to create patterns or cycles.

Me: How old do you have to be to start playing the Dhol - my cousin is interested? Bee 2: The co-ordination lesson, " Mummy Daddy" was made initially for the very young students that are not old enough to understand the (Bhol) phonetic Language. The Heritage of Punjab have students as young as 5 years of age and as old as 35. The lessons are tailor made to individual requirements, so that each person has no pressure to how long it takes them to pick up a lesson. New students are also given this lesson to give the beginner three things from this one simple but effective exercise. i) To get used to holding the sticks. ii) Ensure the correct sounds and overtones are produced.

iii) Make sure all the beats are played evenly and not rushed. Me: How long does it take to learn the Dhol? Bee 2: This has got to be the ultimate question for the famous answer, " How long is a piece of string"? What you have to remember is the more you practice the more you will gain. The self-discipline is probably the most important part of practice. At The Heritage of Punjab we encourage students to look at their drum at home and not ignore it, but to give it a little play each time they pass it. This will enable them to get even a few minutes practice in during a day. Young students will find the television more interesting than practicing.

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We also have a solution for that. We ask the student to place their sticks on top of the TV so when they sit down to watch, they see the sticks and that reminds them to practice, (we hope). There is no real time limit or a way to learn any instrument in a week. The combination of the method: Self Discipline + Motivation + Determination & Dedication, Will help any person practicing any instrument.

Me: If I got a Dhol from India and I want the Plastic skin put on it, what would I need to do? Bee 2: This can be a step-by-step task but in most cases, drums from India always have at least 2 maybe 3 additional problems attached to them. Provided the drum is round you should be able to measure the circumference of the shell and work out the spacing for nine holes so they are evenly positioned. The height is also an important part as to how low the thread of the hook can tighten the rim holding the skin. Have a look at some photos in the gallery to see how we make these conversions. There should also be a separate ring around the rim of the skin, to balance the tension and make it easier to maintain.

All the accessories are available to buy individually. It's advisable to have someone there who has done a conversion before. If you don't know what you're doing, DON'T drill holes in your drum without checking with someone who has done it before. So as you may have guessed its not as straight forward as it seems! I decided that the first thing I needed to do was to get myself a Dhol and where better to get one than the Bhangra capital of England; Southall! Well I took a Saturday off work and went to Southall in search of a Dhol, thing is I was going by train time for a little research! My first port of call - thetrainline. comIt was here I discovered the

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following Outward Journey : Sunday June 2nd Station Arriving at Departing  
at Travelling By Service Provider St.

Albans 9: 00 Train Thameslink Rail LTD Farringdon 9: 27 9: 27 Tube London

Underground London Paddington 10: 12 10: 12 Train Thames Trains

LTD Southall 10: 28 There was no way I was travelling so far and for so long by

train when it would only take 45 minutes by car so I dragged dad along and

we went out and brought a Dhol, a case, and the accompanying sticks for

just over £150 - It was a bargain as we got a second hand (nearly new)

Tali!!! Finally I can practise at home, it's been 3 weeks since I started taking

lessons and finally I can make some real head way - time to annoy mum and

dad!!! 2nd July - Well I've been every Monday and Tuesday night for the past

4 weeks and I'm really making progress with the Dhol, a couple of other

people have joined the classes, which is cool coz now I don't feel as if I'm the

only one who isn't very good (I'm in a group of about 10 most of whom

having been playing all their lives), but I'm still doing okay - Geeta - the

dance co-ordinator says I'm doing really well! We've begun to practise the

Dugan - Dha Na Na Ge Na - its quite hard but I'll get it with practise! This is

what we're gonna be playing with Storms band in a few weeks - a few of my

friends are DJ's and well they want me to come and play some Dhol on their

tracks with other people of course - no chance! I'm not that good yet!!! 8th

July - Today's the day where we start to integrate or " fuze" the Dhol with

Storm's Socca band, I personally don't think it will go that well Bhangra and

Socca are so different....

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. Well to my surprise the Dugan went amazingly well with “ Sweet” on of the songs Storm will be playing at the Mela, I’m kind of looking forward to playing on stage!! 9th July - Well I missed Tuesday’s practise I had to go to a youth council meeting - but I understand they learnt a new piece for another song - there’s only 3 weeks left AAAHHHHHHHHHHH- LATER THAT WEEK Well 1 week to go and I’ve been practising the Dugan to perfection - I feel very confident in playing it. Tried to practise what I missed last week I’m just getting used to it, it’s a Double Dugan - Dha Na Dha Na Ge Na Dha Na Na Ge Na - Its long and confusing but I’ll get it 16th July - Well I was practising all last night but I still couldn’t get it - the group was split into 3, those who got it, those who could play the treble and those who could play the bass, There were plenty of people who knew how to play the treble and only a couple who could play the Double Dugan, however, this meant we were seriously lacking in the bass sides of things and me being me - I decided to be a bass person - which wasn’t too difficult, all I had to do was bash the bass side as hard as I could in tune to the Double Dugan everyone else was trying to play! Easy stuff Took Dhol to my friends house to “ mess around” we actually did something quite good but we forgot to record it! Well we spent most of today’s session just talking and not doing anything brilliant - done a little bit of practise. I think everyone’s cool and relaxed about the Mela coming up. I missed Tuesday’s session - too much homework!!! Only 1 week left Sunday - I missed Monday’s session - decided to go bowling ended up at a friends house with Dhol just “ messing around” all night - Created some really good Bhangra Remixes Check out the tape! This is the last session ever before we play on stage at the Mela (although we agreed we’d meet on Friday 19th to have one final practise) The session went well we had a little warm up

session then moved into the other hall to play with the rest of the group, the fusion between Socca and Bhangra sounds unbelievably quite good (Bhangra's better though!!!!)!!! Can't wait for the Mela - sorted out clothes and stuff- hahaaa its going to be so much fun!!!! Well unfortunately the Mela is happening this Sunday (21st July) and I can't finish off my report and enclose the photographs from the Mela but I have enclosed a tape so you can listen to some of the remixes me and my friends produced