


Didgeridoo: A Look into Aboriginal Culture

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract

The Australian didgeridoo has always been an essential aspect for Aboriginal culture and an international icon for these indigenous people. Through my study abroad trip to Australia, I was able to become acquainted with the Aboriginal people, their culture, and the overall culture of Australia. By creating my own authentic didgeridoo, I was able to learn more about the Aboriginal way of life as well as the meaning this instrument has in their culture while at the same time artistically express one of the many wonderful experiences I had while in Australia.

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Introduction

For my senior honor thesis, I decided to create an authentic Australian didgeridoo. The experience of making this amazing instrument was both challenging and very rewarding. The following sections of this paper describe the history and meaning behind the didgeridoo, my reasons for crafting the instrument, and the processes I went through to create the didgeridoo.

History/Meaning Behind the Didgeridoo

The Australian didgeridoo or Yidaki as it is sometimes referred to was originally used by Aboriginal groups in the Northern areas of Australia. Some people believe that the use of the didgeridoo by the Aboriginal people dates back 40,000 years, but historians believe that the instrument may only date back 2,000 years as before this time there have been no images of individuals playing the didgeridoo discovered. While the didgeridoo was mainly used in the Northern Territory in the beginning, the didgeridoo soon spread throughout the entire continent of Australia. The spread of this instrument is mainly attributed to the Aboriginal trade networks and the arrival of the English.

Traditionally the didgeridoo was crafted from eucalyptus trees that had been attacked by colonies of termites. The termites naturally hollowed out the limbs and trunks of the tree by eating the wood from the inside out. After the hollowing process was complete, the crafter of the instrument would chop down the piece of wood, remove the bark covering, smooth the surface, chisel out the mouthpiece, and finally mould beeswax around the exterior of the mouthpiece. After the didgeridoo had gone

through all of these processes, the instrument was ready to be played at ceremonies and other Aboriginal gatherings.

Reasons for Crafting the Didgeridoo

I decided to make an authentic didgeridoo in order to reflect upon and visually express my experiences I had while studying abroad in Australia during the Spring 2003 semester at Ball State University. While during my trip to Australia, I had the opportunity to meet with one of the women elders in a local Aboriginal tribe in New South Wales. The elder told me about her culture and about how symbolic the didgeridoo is for the Aboriginal people. The didgeridoo not only is a vital instrument for Aboriginal ceremonies, but the instrument is also an international icon for these ancient people.

When crafting the didgeridoo, I didn't have much of an opportunity to make an artistic statement until I began to paint the instrument. When choosing the paint colors, I decided to use very earthy and natural colors. These types of colors are used in almost all of the didgeridoos that are constructed by the Aboriginal people. Also, these earthy tones remind me how down to earth and respectful of nature the Aboriginal people are in their everyday lives. Next, I decided to paint colorful bands on both ends of the didgeridoo in order to help incorporate all of the numerous colors from my pallet. Also, strips of color are traditionally painted on both ends of the didgeridoo, and I wanted to adhere to the traditional designs of the instrument. Finally, I painted turtles on the didgeridoo in order to portray an experience I had while in Australia. The turtles painted on the instrument represent the turtles that I

was able to see and hold at a zoo in Tasmania. The trip to the Tasmanian zoo was one of the most memorable experiences for me and that is why I chose to portray an aspect from it on my didgeridoo.

Processes of Crafting the Didgeridoo

Creating the didgeridoo involved numerous processes that all occupied a considerable amount of time. The first step I had to take was actually ordering the unfinished piece of termite-hollowed wood from Australia. I ordered the product from an Australian company named *Didgeswedoo* through the internet. The product cost approximately \$150.00 which included shipping and handling, and it took approximately one week to arrive at my house in Anderson, Indiana. Then, after it arrived, I began to sand the piece of wood. I first used 50 grit sandpaper, and then I finished it with an 80 grit sandpaper. I found this process the hardest of all because the piece of wood was so rough and coarse in its original state and because the piece of wood was eucalyptus which is a very hard wood that is very difficult to sand. Next, when the sanding was completed, I used a wax pencil to fill in some of the holes on the didgeridoo. The wax helps to completely seal the instrument which in turn helps to produce a better quality sound. After this, I chiseled out both ends of the didgeridoo with a hammer and a chisel. This helps to create a better airflow through the instrument which also helps to produce a better sound. Next, I began to form the mouthpiece for the didgeridoo. In order to do this, I started by forming thin strips of beeswax around the inside of one of the openings. After I formed a large buildup of the strips of beeswax, I dipped the end of the instrument in a can of heated, liquid beeswax. This then formed the outer mouthpiece that you can visually see on the

didgeridoo. Finally, all I had left to do was paint and spray on a protective finish. For the paint job, I used tape to help paint on the colorful strips, and I used a paper cutout of a turtle to trace the image of the animal onto the body of the instrument. The protective finish was then sprayed on last to help seal the paint, and I used steel wool to sand and shine the finish.

In order to help you visualize the processes that I went through to make the didgeridoo, I have included a photo journal at the end of this paper. The photographs document all of the steps that I have described to you above. The three month project of making the didgeridoo from start to finish is much easier to understand when reviewing the photographs, and I hope that these pictures will even interest you in making your own didgeridoo.

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