

# Didjeridus

## Fact Sheet



Didjeridu. Image: QM.

### Introduction

The didjeridu (didgeridoo) is a musical instrument that originated from Aboriginal communities of Arnhem Land, northern Australia. It was originally played only by men in ritual ceremonies and to accompany dancing. It is culturally inappropriate for women to play didjeridus. Today the didjeridu is a popular instrument in Australia and around the world, and for many people it has become a symbol of Aboriginal Australia.

### Varieties

Various forms of didjeridus can be made. Flared didjeridus are the most common form and have an end bell that is larger in circumference than the mouthpiece. The forked didjeridu has one mouthpiece but two end bells. Some didjeridus can reach a length of two meters. Other variations include painted didjeridus and those made from different kinds of wood.



Various types of didjeridus. Image: QM, Elspeth Mackenzie.

### Making a Didjeridu

The didjeridu is a trumpet or hollow wooden tube 1-1.5 meters long, which narrows towards one end. The narrower end is the mouthpiece, which is made by applying a coating of hot beeswax or gum from eucalypt trees and molding it around the tube to form a comfortable blowing area. Didjeridus made from eucalypt wood are made by testing trees to find a hollow branch or log, which is then removed and left to sit for several months near a termite mound until the termites have completely hollowed it out. The inside is cleaned out, any holes are plugged and the mouthpiece is added to form the complete instrument.

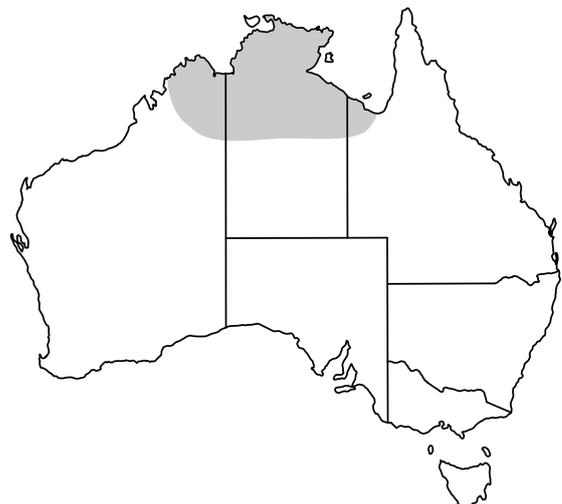
### Playing a Didjeridu

A didjeridu is played by blowing into the mouthpiece through vibrating lips and keeping reserves of air in the cheeks, which are replenished by fast inhalations through the nose. This circular breathing produces a continuous flow of air and therefore a continuous sound. A well-practiced player can produce two notes, one a short, sharp sound above the other constant low drone. The end of the instrument usually rests on the ground or on a support and the hands can either both support the instrument or one can tap the tube while it is being blown.

### Origins

The didjeridu originated in the eastern Kimberley and the northern third of the Northern Territory. There are many conflicting estimates of the origin of the didjeridu, though it is commonly claimed to be the world's oldest wind instrument. Some estimates place the origin of the didjeridu as far back as 40,000 years ago; whilst some researchers consider the didjeridu to have originated more recently, around 1000 years ago. Didjeridus were traded into Queensland across the Gulf of Carpentaria approximately 200 years ago.

Images of didjeridus are found at many Aboriginal rock art sites. Many of these depictions in the Northern Territory have rings around the instruments, suggesting that they may have been made from bamboo, which was only available in the north-west Northern Territory. Many of the more than thirty Aboriginal words for didjeridu also mean bamboo. Whilst the origin of the word didjeridu is unclear, it was probably coined by the Australian anthropologist Herbert Basedow in 1926, after listening to the sounds made by musicians practicing the instrument.



Original distribution of didjeridus. Image: QM, Elspeth Mackenzie.

### Traditional Use

The didjeridu is played only by men and usually accompanies singing. It is often joined with percussion from drums, seed rattles, clappers, stamping sticks, or clapping. The songs played on didjeridus can be well-known ones that match the rhythm of other percussion songs, or they can be improvised by the player. Ritual use includes being made and played during initiation ceremonies, and accompanying songs in a variety of performances such as sunsets, funerals, and clan or children's songs. In non-secret rituals, dancing men decorated with paint may join

with chanting adult males to tell a myth or story.

The sound of a didjeridu is believed to have healing qualities and was used by medicine men to transport people into other-worldly realms. Some sources also mention the didjeridu being used during hunting to imitate an animal call.

## Modern Use

After European invasion of Australia, the popularity and distribution of the didjeridu in Aboriginal communities increased southward. It spread to southern Cape York (north Queensland) during the last 200 years and to central Australia during the 20th Century.

In modern times the didjeridu is made and played throughout Australia by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Musicians and bands that have recently popularised the sound of the didjeridu include Yothu Yindi, Charlie McMahon (with Gondwana) and Xavier Rudd. Many people even make their own didjeridus from lengths of PVC pipe and beeswax. A wide variety of undecorated and painted versions can be found in souvenir shops.

When purchasing a didjeridu it is important to consider buying only from reputable Aboriginal craftsmen. This is important not just for reasons of cultural respect, but also to protect against the unregulated or illegal harvesting of didjeridu timbers for the tourist trade, which are threatened in some areas. Illegal harvesting not only depletes forested areas but can also result in the loss of native wildlife habitat such as tree hollows. When playing the didjeridu it is important to be aware and respectful of their cultural background and restrictions, particularly if visiting Aboriginal communities.

## Further Information

Moyle, A.M., 1981. The Australian Didjeridu: A late musical intrusion, *World Archaeology*, vol. 12, no. 3: pp.321-331.

Jones, T., 1973. The Yiraki (Didjeridu) in N.E. Arnhem Land: Techniques and styles, *The Australian Aboriginal Heritage*, R.M. Berndt and E.S. Phillips (Eds.) Sydney, pp.269-274.

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