Cajon and Djembe: The Basics

by Mark Shelton

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by Mark Shelton

Capable of thumping bass tones and crackling highs, the djembe and cajon are percussion brothers from different continents. Powerful, portable, and possessing a variety of timbres, these instruments are well-suited to a variety of musical settings.

The cajon and djembe can perform in situations with drum set and full rhythm section or in intimate settings without drum set. Both instruments are especially effective when the instrumental texture is somewhat sparse (and without a kick drum and other competing bass frequencies).

The Box

Rooted in the traditions of "found sound," the cajon originated in South America with the practice of drumming on a box or drawer. The basic cajon of today retains its box shape but with a sound hole in the back

Cajons come in two basic models: flamenco and traditional.

The flamenco-style instrument includes cords which rest against the rear of the front panel (main playing surface). When this panel is struck, the cords buzz against the wood to add a snare-like buzz to the tone.
The traditional version (without the "snare cords") produces the old-school "box" sound.

Mike the cajon with one microphone behind the sound hole in back and another near the playing surface. Miking only the sound hole is often sufficient. A piece of foam rubber resting on the bottom (inside) may help absorb some unwanted ring when miking.

With bass tones produced at the center of the front panel and crisp highs at the upper corners, you can coax a meaty groove from "the box." Most cajons have screws near the corners of the front panel. Loosen the screws to raise the corners away from the side panels. This slight gap will allow for a better slap tone. Try inserting thin card stock (as a shim) to increase the gap and "soup up the slap."

Sub-Saharan Super Drum

The West Africans got it right when they used a tree trunk and animal hide to build a drum that could produce a frequency spectrum from thundering bass tones to penetrating highs--with ample volume for outdoor playing.

The traditional African djembe incorporates a natural skin head with a rope-tension tuning system. The synthetic head found on the modern version is not as susceptible to weather changes and its screw-style tensioning makes for easy adjustments.

The center of the head struck with either the flat or cupped palm delivers the bass tones while the middle and high frequency tones are found closer to the rim.

Experiment with playing these tones using strokes that lift off the head (allowing ring) and strokes that remain on the head momentarily (muffled).

Mike the djembe on top of the head AND at the opening of the shell so that the full range of frequencies can be heard.

Get A Groove

As with all rhythm section instruments, parts for the djembe and cajon can run the gamut from simple to complex. These notated examples will work on either instrument and might serve as a catalyst for composing your own.

Here is an easy-going groove that works at a variety of tempos. Try it with an acoustic guitarist strumming eighth notes and hear how the simplicity fills quite a bit of sonic space.



With the variety of tones available, you can re-orchestrate drum set patterns for cajon and/or djembe. This alt rock groove was inspired by the drum set version found on Carl Albrecht's DVD, *Drum Grooves For Worship*. Notice how the kick drum rhythm is covered verbatim by the cajon/djembe bass tone and the snare part is duplicated by a high-pitched accent.



Using this groove as a template, try creating a djembe/cajon version from a favorite drum set pattern. The most important parts to transfer are the kick and snare. Toss in some ghost notes to fill some space and imply hi-hat or ride cymbal.

Experiment with the cajon and djembe to discover more timbres for your sound palette. Knuckles, fists, fingernails, wire brushes, and bundled dowels can all be used to produce a variety of tone colors.

Although highly skilled players are capable of jaw-dropping technical feats on both cajon and djembe, most worship music can be accompanied with simple patterns on these user-friendly instruments. Develop some basic skills on cajon and djembe and be ready to bring their beautiful flavors into a worship setting.

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Cajon & Djembe: Paradiddles, Permutations, and Patterns

by Mark Shelton

Although their musical roots are connected to different continents, the cajon and djembe have some compelling similarities. Both the South American “box” and the West African “super drum” are capable of significant volume and possess booming bass tones along with keen-edged highs. You get all that power and all those frequencies packed into instruments that are quite portable and do not require much space on stage. There are enough commonalities between the two percussive brothers that some information on “groove creation” can be applicable to both cajon and djembe.

Paradiddles and Permutations

Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (Tenth Edition) gives one definition of permutation as “an ordered arrangement of a set of objects.” Many of the snare drum rudiments are based on permutations of right and left hand movements. One of the basic hand permutations is the paradiddle (RLRR or LRLL).

Playing permutations with your hands in a “fixed position” to the playing surface can serve as a catalyst to create grooves on the djembe and cajon. By fixed position, I mean that one hand remains near and plays only on the bass tone area while the other hand plays only on the high pitch area.

Play the two examples (FIGURE 1 & 2) using the permutations beneath the score with your hands in a fixed position of right/bass tone and left/high pitch. The first one is the ubiquitous paradiddle and the other is its inverted cousin.





Give a slight accent on the downbeats and you might start to feel these permutations morph into a groove--or perhaps into something that could be used as a fill.

Experiment with the permutations below and then figure out some on your own.
RLLR RLLR RLLR RLLR
RLRL RLLR RLRL RLLR
LRLR RLRR LRLR RLRR

Keep in mind that you can apply this method to other rhythms and time signatures. (Try paradiddles with a measure of 12/8.)

A great resource for ALL percussionists is *Stick Control* by George L. Stone. The first five pages of notation alone contain close to a hundred permutations. Playing the opening section of this famous book (on cajon or djembe) will give you many groove ideas--while improving your basic drumming technique.

Patterns

Since both instruments are capable of producing a broad spectrum of frequencies and tones, it is possible to re-orchestrate drum set patterns for both djembe and cajon. These “drum set-emulative” versions come in handy when the instrumental texture is somewhat sparse and there is no drum set being played. The cajon and djembe can shine in those moments where the song breaks down to only a few players or when the entire worship team consists of a single percussionist along with a guy playing guitar and singing.

Transferring a drum set part to cajon/djembe was discussed briefly in the previous issue. An “alt rock” groove was shown notated for drum set along with an adaptation for cajon or djembe. Seeing the two versions together can give insight into how to condense kick, snare, high hat, and ride down to a one-instrument rendering.

Continuing in that vein, I am sharing a few basic patterns that might be useful for both performance and analysis. Observe how it is not necessary (or practical) to include all the notes from the drum set groove when making the conversion to cajon or djembe.

Sixteenth Rock

The stream of sixteenths drives and defines this fundamental pattern. Tap the high pitches lightly except for the accents which imply the snare drum back beat.



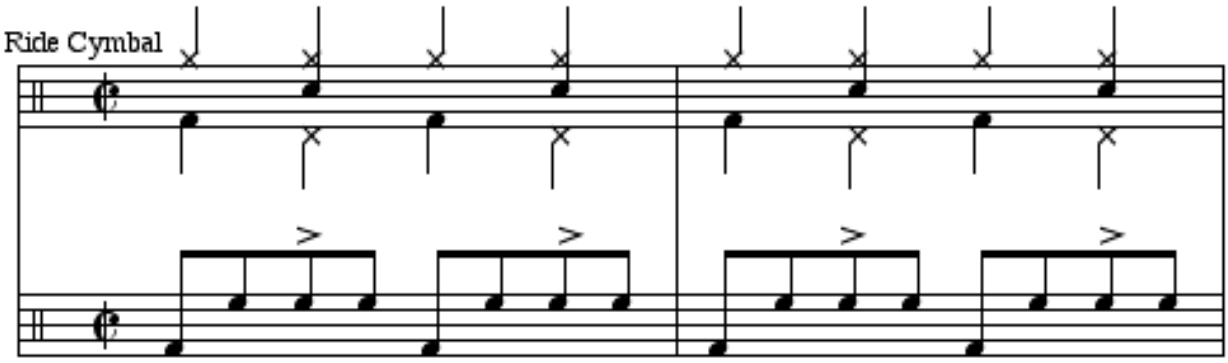
Cadence Groove

Several popular worship songs have made use of a marching/cadence pattern.



Two Beat

The time-honored two beat is heard in many settings including Broadway show tunes, folk, patriotic, pop, and gospel. In the cajon/djembe version, I have added some notes not found in the drum set part. Play the second and fourth eighth notes in each grouping as ghost notes to give the groove a bit more fullness.



Play around with these permutations and patterns. Improvise on them and create variations. Build up your stockpile of grooves so that when the worship leader requests some cajon or djembe--you're ready to deliver.

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Cajon and Djembe: Accessorize The Groove

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The broad frequency range and variety of tone colors of both the cajon and djembe make these instruments great choices in a scaled-down instrumentation.

Although the South American box and the West African super drum can each provide plenty of percussive power, there are methods that can add complementary sounds to a cajon or djembe-based groove without losing that intimate/reduced instrumentation vibe.

Along with a sampling of accessory items to help “soup up” the groove, some patterns that incorporate peripheral gear are included for study. These models can be used in songs and might spark your creativity as you practice and analyze the parts. All the grooves are appropriate for either cajon or djembe.

Shaker and Headless (Shake) Tambourine

A very simple and effective way to add another layer of sound to a cajon/djembe pattern is simply playing a shaker or headless tambourine. A steady stream of eighths or sixteenths at the higher end of the frequency spectrum is a nice complement to the lower sounds from the cajon/djembe. In preparation to accompany singer-songwriter/ worship leader Mark Harris, I transcribed the 6/8 Ballad Groove from Mark’s recording of “An Offering.”



Finger Shot (TM)

Have you ever wanted to continue a shaker part while you played an intricate two-handed djembe rhythm? Easier than growing an extra arm from your stomach, slip on a couple of Finger Shots (tm) from Latin Percussion and voilá!--shaker AND djembe. These miniature shakers produce sound ONLY on downstrokes so that each downward hand movement on the djembe or cajon is doubled with a shaker sound. These little items are handy for moving from shaker to djembe, cajon, congas, or bongos without losing the shaker line. Learn the Sixteenth Rock Groove as written and then experiment with your hands moving in a steady stream of sixteenths (activating the shaker sound) but deleting or ghosting some of the djembe/cajon notes.



Brushes and Bundled Dowels

Brushes and bundled dowels (Blasticks (tm), Acousticks (tm), Bundlz (tm), etc.) can be used to great effect on both cajon and djembe. The stirs and scrapes of wire or nylon brushes transfer well to the djembe and those brushes (or bundled dowels) can lay down a train groove on the cajon. Hold either implement in your non-dominant hand to play the 4/4 Ballad Groove.



Hi-Hat

Incorporating the hi-hat into a djembe/cajon pattern will probably be an easy matter for most percussionists. Play quarters or eighth “chicks” with your foot or use your hand to strike an “open fry.” (Be careful with that hand on the cymbals!) An added bonus is the ability to utilize the slushy crash effect using your hand on the partially opened hi-hat cymbals. Players who are adept at the heel splash technique can employ that method on Hi-Hat Funk Groove (Figure 4) and completely avoid using the hand on the open fry.



Gajate Bracket (TM)

The percussion work of Richie Gajate-Garcia has been associated with the music of Phil Collins, Diana Ross, Sting, Frankie Valli, and more. Along with his achievements as a player, Richie was a collaborator with Latin Percussion in the development of the Gajate Bracket. This device allows for mounting certain instruments so that a kick drum pedal can be used for striking. Invest in a Gajate bracket and you can easily add cowbell, block, or tambourine while keeping both hands free for drumming.

Foot Tambourine

Simple but effective: the Foot Tambourine from Meinl fastens onto your foot with an elastic strap and allows you to jingle away with every tap of your toes. Capable of a fair amount of volume and easy to toss in your mallet case, the Foot Tambourine is a budget-friendly way to bring some sparkle to a djembe or cajon pattern.

Mount a tambourine on a Gajate bracket or use the Foot Tambourine and accent the backbeat in this easy Foot Tamb Shuffle Groove.



The suggestions in this article are but a few of the ways to expand the timbral and groove potential using outboard gear with the djembe and cajon. Invest some practice time in experimenting. A glance at whatever is on your trap table can spark your ingenuity. Perusing a percussion instrument website might get your creative juices flowing. Can that implement be held in an unconventional manner? Is there a different way to manipulate the sound of the djembe? What can enhance this basic cajon pattern? Improvise on and re-orchestrate these grooves--and make up new patterns. Get creative for the glory of God.

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