Box Of Rhythm: Learn To Play The Cajon



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Chapter 1

Powerful, portable, and possessing an assortment of timbres, the simple cajon is well-suited to a variety of musical settings. Capable of producing thumping bass tones along with crackling highs, the cajon can convey the impression of a drum set in a box. Although the instrument can function in a full rhythm section alongside a drum set, it is especially effective in a more intimate setting with a sparse instrumental texture.

Rooted in the traditions of "found sound," the cajon originated in South America with the practice of drumming on a box or drawer. It is easy to imagine how a simple crate could be used as a makeshift drum and eventually evolve into a recognized, commercially-manufactured percussion instrument. The basic cajon of today retains its traditional box shape but with a sound hole in the back

Cajon Flavors

Cajons come in two basic types: flamenco and traditional (also called Peruvian).

The flamenco-style instrument includes cords or snares which rest against the rear of the front plate (main playing surface). When this panel is struck, the cords/snares vibrate against the wood to add a snare-like buzz to the tone.

The traditional version (without the snare device) produces the old-school "box" sound.

Which type of cajon is right for you? It comes down to a matter of personal taste. My first cajon was a traditional instrument, but eventually I invested in a flamenco box. Nowadays my traditional instrument is used primarily for my solo shows while the snare-equipped cajon is my choice for ensemble work.

It is possible to have both types in one cajon. Some companies are producing adjustable snare cajons with the ability to change the snare tension against the front plate or completely turn off the snares. Check out the Echoslap Adjustable Snare Cajon from CNZ Audio, the LP Adjustable Cajon, and the Snarecraft series from Meinl.

Cajon Hacks

You can begin playing your cajon right after you take it out of its box. However, there are a couple of minor adjustments that I recommend:

• The top corners of the front plate are used for the "slap tone." A small tweak will "soup up your slap." The front plate of the cajon is usually attached with screws. Remove the screws in the top corner areas so that a gap is created between the front plate top corners and the side panels. I suggest using tape to attach the screws to the inside floor of the box in case you need them later. (I doubt you will.) This slight gap will allow for a better slap tone. Try inserting thin card stock to increase the gap. Check out my video tutorial on this little cajon hack (Cajon: Soup Up The Slap) on the Worship Training website.

• Cut a piece of foam rubber that will fit the inside floor of the cajon. Experiment with the foam rubber and observe how it affects the tone. This pad can assist in absorbing unwanted frequencies and muffling nonessential ringing--especially when miking. If you use a microphone inside the cajon, the foam rubber provides a soft surface for mike placement. The foam rubber pad is lightweight along with being easy to install or remove.

Cajon Tones: The Basics

The cajon can produce a wide spectrum of timbres. Focus first on the two basic sounds: the bass tone and the slap.

Sit comfortably on the cajon. The front plate is facing forward. Your legs should be spread so that you have full access to the front plate.

Play the bass tone by striking the center area of the front plate with your palm. Experiment with how much force to apply to bring out the bass frequencies. Think about moving the air inside the box when you strike. Try producing even-volume bass tones between the right hand and the left hand. After gaining proficiency with the flat palm, use a cupped palm to play the bass tone. You will hear a slight difference between the two methods; the flat palm will deliver more attack and the cupped palm will produce a “rounded” sound. Master both techniques.

The slap tone can be played on either of the top corners of the front plate. Use a relaxed open hand and keep your fingers together. Strike a front plate corner with the front area of the fingers (see photo). Do not use the palm. With the correct amount of force, you will hear a slap. Practice so that you gain control of equal volume slaps between the two hands. Use the video referenced earlier to hear examples of the slap tone.

In most playing situations, you will bring your hand off the cajon immediately after striking, but invest some practice time in learning to keep your hand in contact with the front plate momentarily after striking.

This exercise below should be practiced in 4/4 time with the notated hand permutations. Work for consistent bass and slap sounds. After mastery in 4/4, try playing the exercise in cut time.



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

Although highly-skilled players are capable of jaw-dropping technical feats on cajon, most worship music can be accompanied with simple patterns on this user-friendly instrument. Develop the basic tones on your cajon and be ready to dive deeper with the next chapter.



Chapter 2: Ghost Notes and Grooves

Ghost notes are an important part of the cajon skill set. These delicate snippets of sound are often more like a whisper than a full tone. Very soft, yet audible, they slyly hint at pitch or rhythm. Ghost notes might be played by a saxophonist to connect primary pitches in a melody or used by a drum set player to add additional texture and rhythmic interest to a groove. Though barely discernible at times, ghost notes add a special spice to a musical passage when wisely applied.

Ghost notes can be played on any of the surfaces of the cajon. Let's focus on the front plate since it is the main playing area. To play a ghost note, simply strike anywhere on the front plate with significantly less force (velocity) than you would use to play a "regular" tone. Think of the ghost note as merely a light touch. Experiment with ghosted bass tones at the center of the front plate and ghosted slaps on the upper corners.

In my cajon playing, I use a range of volumes within the context of ghost notes. Sometimes I want the ghost tone to just barely speak while other moments call for more volume. Work on mastering subtle dynamic shadings of ghost notes along with experimenting with the delicate sounds on various areas of the front plate.

Once you are comfortable with producing ghost notes, practice the exercise below. Work on playing even-volume sounds first and later experiment with inserting slight volume changes to give the exercise some character.

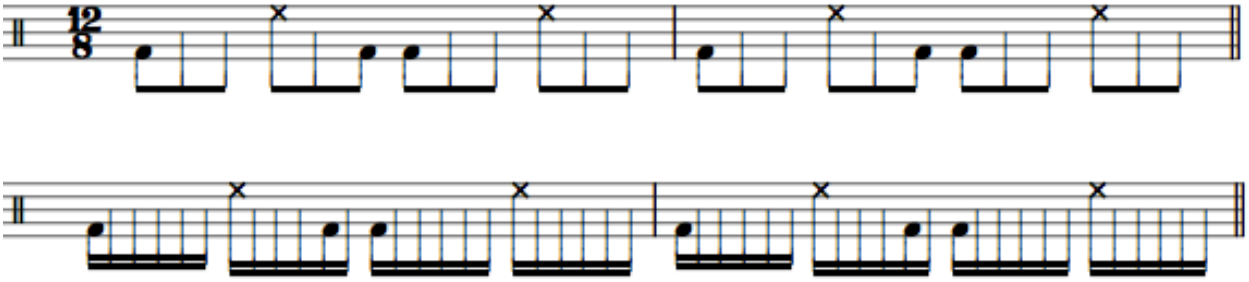


After you have developed control of the bass tone, slap tone, and ghost notes, it is time to bring those sounds together into grooves.

Groove #1 and Groove #2 place the kick and snare elements of a 4/4 rock beat onto the cajon's bass tones and slaps. Ghost notes are added to fill in subdivisions.



Groove #3 and Groove #4 are common 12/8 patterns. As in to the previous grooves, the ghost notes act as fillers between the bass tones and slaps.



Practice the grooves first with even-volume ghost notes and later add subtle shadings.
Try playing the ghost notes in various areas of the front plate.

Many of the "drumset-in-a-box" patterns that I play are created in the same manner as the grooves above with the bass tone substituting for kick drum, the accented slap tone mimicking snare drum, and the ghost notes filling in spaces while implying high-hat or ride cymbal rhythms.

An upcoming chapter will explore methods for creating grooves for the cajon. As this chapter closes, below is a pattern that will come in handy for a double-time or two-beat feel.



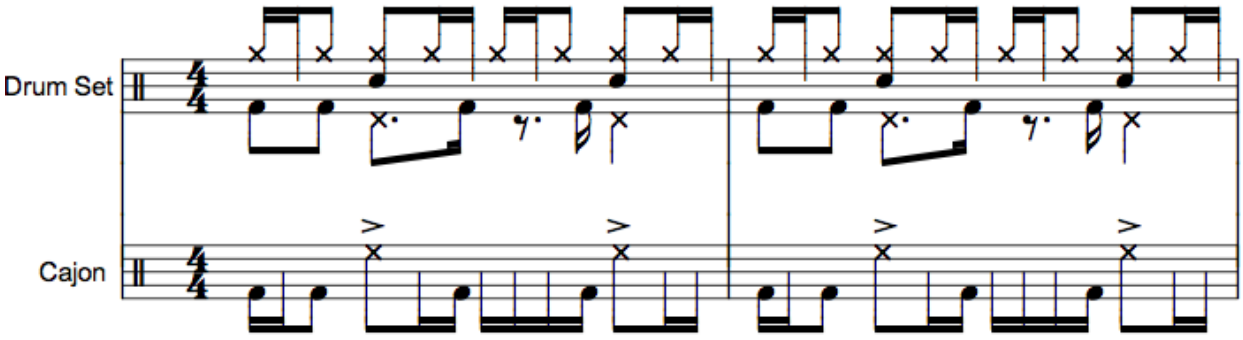
Chapter 3 Cajon-Only Grooves

The percussion instrument that was inspired by drumming on a box contains a boxful of tone colors along with a broad spectrum of frequencies. In previous articles, three of the basic sounds have been explored. Using no more than this trio of tones, it is possible to create full-sounding rhythm patterns suitable for accompanying songs. The grooves featured in this article will provide examples of 'cajon-only' patterns constructed with only a few basic sounds.
Let's start with an easy-going groove that works at a variety of tempos and contains only two sounds: the bass tone and corner slap. Try playing it along with an acoustic guitarist strumming eighth notes and hear how the simple rhythm pattern fills quite a bit of sonic space.



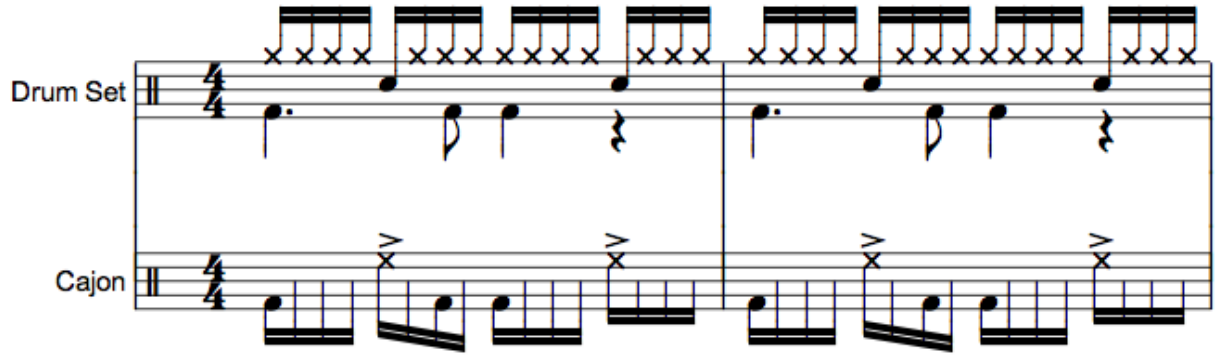
It is common to orchestrate drum set patterns for the cajon. The alt-rock groove below was inspired by the drum set version found on Carl Albrecht's DVD *Drum Grooves For Worship*. Notice how the kick drum rhythm is covered exactly by the cajon's bass tone and the snare part is duplicated by a corner-slapped accent. Ghost notes fill in the sixteenth subdivisions while implying the high-hat sound.

Please note that stems without noteheads indicate rhythm for ghost notes.

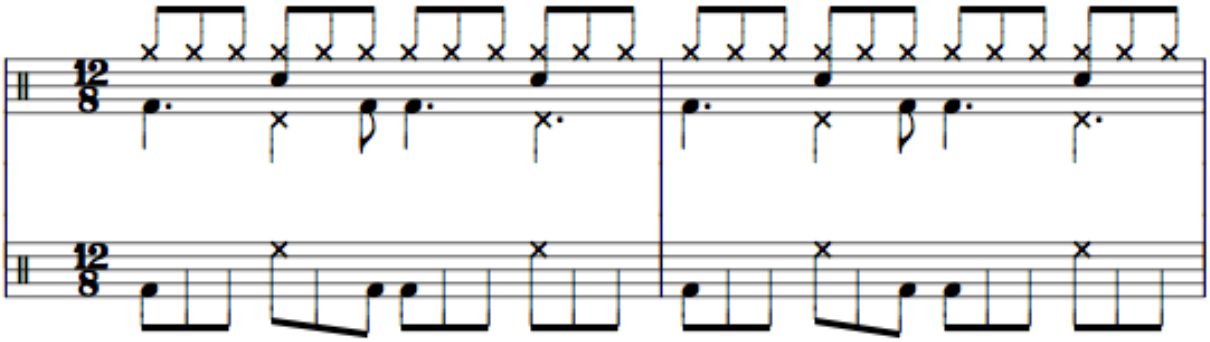


Continuing with the drum set to cajon conversion idea, I am sharing a few simple patterns that will be useful for both performance and analysis. Notice that these are cajon-only (no additional percussion) and contain no more than three sounds. Observe how it is not necessary (or practical) to include all the notes from the drum set groove when making the transformation to a pattern for cajon. The most important drum set parts to transfer are usually the kick and snare rhythms. As you practice these patterns, experiment with playing the ghost notes in different areas of the front plate.

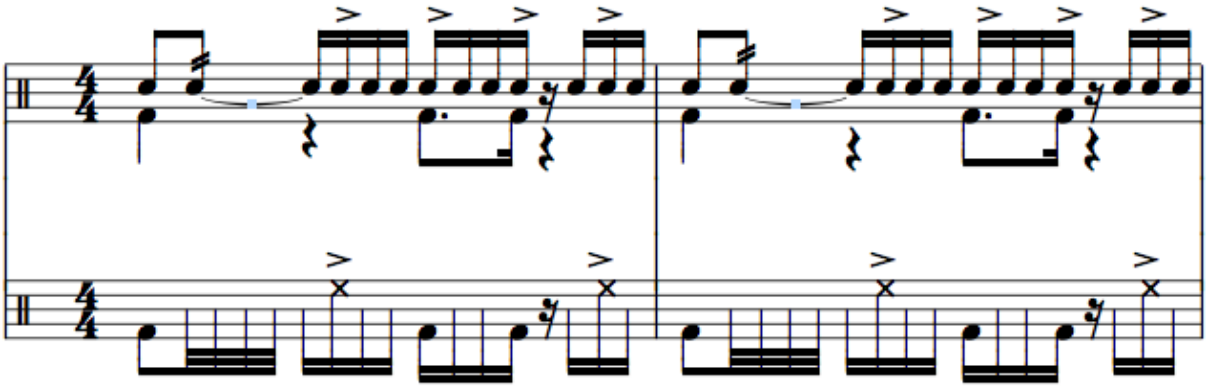
Sixteenth Rock Groove
An uninterrupted stream of sixteenths drives and defines this classic rock groove.



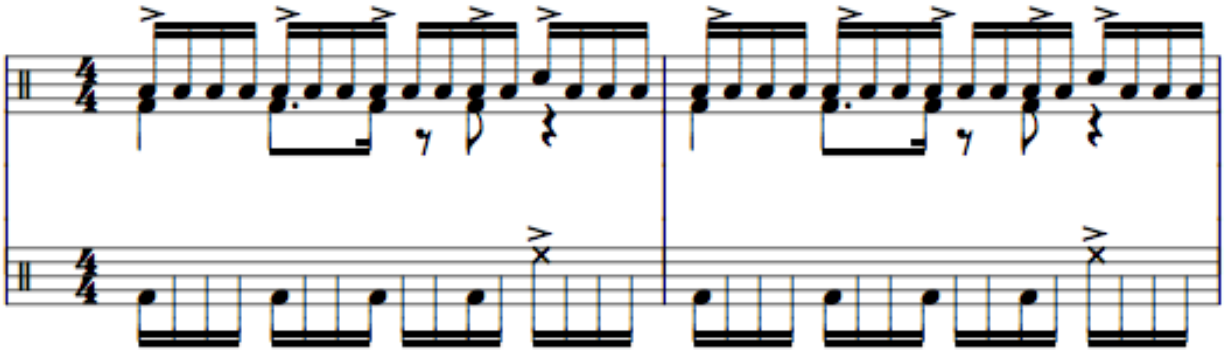
12/8 Groove
Blues, Gospel, and Modern Worship. This one will come in handy!



Cadence Groove
Many popular worship songs have made use of a marching cadence pattern.



Tribal Tom Groove
After you are comfortable with this groove, practice it with different placement of the accents.



Using these examples as a guide, work on creating cajon versions from your favorite drum set patterns. Improvise on your creations and compose variations. Learn to transcribe drum set parts and develop the ability to quickly convert them to cajon grooves. Build up your stockpile of "box grooves" so that when the worship leader requests some cajon, you're ready to deliver.

Chapter 4 Cajon-Plus Grooves

The ability to produce a variety of tones ranging from thumping bass to crackling slaps makes the cajon a unique stand-alone instrument. Why lug around anything else when you have a drum set in a box?

Oh, come on! We're percussionists—the spice purveyors in music. Let's add a little extra flavor to a cajon-based groove.

While a previous article explored 'cajon-only' grooves, the following sections will provide steps for including additional percussion instruments into 'cajon-centric' rhythm patterns. Don't worry. I won't require you to lug around too much extra gear. Remember that I'm a percussionist, too

A fair amount of sonic territory can be covered on the cajon using just one hand. With practice, you can lay down a fairly active kick/snare rhythm with a single paw moving between the bass tone and corner slap. Your other hand is available for tasks such as playing another percussion instrument or holding your coffee mug. Let's stay with percussion, but don't forget the coffee idea.

The following exercises will lead you into playing a ‘cajon-plus’ groove with both similar and contrasting motions while requiring multi-limb independence. If this type of coordination is a challenge, consult my article “Pat Your Head, Rub Your Stomach” for several helpful exercises.

Play the rhythm below with one hand. You can use either one, but I suggest your non-dominant hand.



When comfortable playing the pattern repeatedly, move on to the next score. This pattern adds a rhythm for the other hand (notated on top of the staff). Use a striking motion on a mounted tambourine or ride cymbal.



This variation adds more activity in the top line.



Thus far, both hands have been engaged in striking motions. Things can get a bit more challenging when dissimilar motions are involved. Go back to the previous exercise, but play the top line on a shake tambourine or a shaker.

After mastering the shaken eighths, move on to sixteenths below. Listen carefully to make sure all parts are aligned correctly.



The previous chapter in this series showed how I converted an alt-rock groove for drum set into a cajon version. Here is the same groove (found on Carl Albrecht's DVD *Drum Grooves For Worship*) adapted into a cajon-plus version. Notice how the kick drum rhythm is covered exactly by the cajon's bass tone and the snare back beats are duplicated by a corner-slapped accent. The shaker notes fill in the sixteenth subdivisions while implying the ride cymbal and ghosted snare parts.

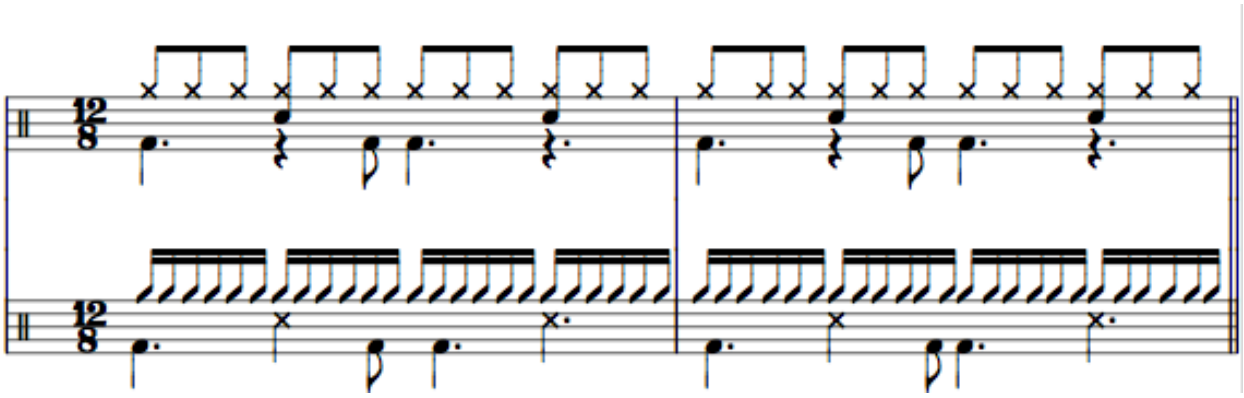


The following examples demonstrate possibilities for adapting drum set grooves into 'cajon-plus' patterns.

If you are playing modern worship music, eventually a half-time groove will be required. This rhythm is spread over two measures.



Get inspiration for creating both 12/8 and 6/8 cajon grooves with this sample rhythm.



One of my first drum set teachers passed this funk groove on to me. I'm sharing Greg Stover's funky rhythm along with my cajon adaptation.



After studying and practicing these examples, try creating cajon-plus versions based on your favorite drum set patterns. Improvise on your creations and compose variations. You won't have to lug around too much extra gear in order to spice up the groove.

Chapter 5 Ideas for Further Growth

From its humble roots as a mere box, the cajon has evolved through the creativity of musicians into a bona fide member of the percussion family. Generations of players and composers have developed and expanded the tone and technical possibilities of the instrument--with no end in sight.

As this five-part series of tutorials concludes, this chapter gathers together a variety of ideas to assist you in further study along with info about some of my favorite "outboard gear" for adding extra flavor to a cajon groove.

Permutations and Rudiments

Gaining mastery of an assortment of hand permutations and rudiments will improve your technical prowess while serving as a "lick catalyst" for your cajon vocabulary.

Play the following Right/Left permutation with your right hand playing bass tones and your left striking corner slaps. Use a rhythm of steady eighths or sixteens and you will hear the permutation slide into a groove.

RLRL RLLR RLRL RLLR

Experiment with the permutations below and then create your own.

RLLR RLLR RLLR RLLR
LRLR RLRR LRLR RLRR
RLRL RRLR RLRL RRLR
RRLR LLRL RRLR LLRL

The classic drumming book *Stick Control* by George L. Stone will assist you in developing control of permutations. The first five pages of notation alone contain close to a hundred right and left combinations. Playing the opening section of this famous book will give you many groove ideas for the cajon while improving your basic drumming technique.

How about tossing a pataflafla into a cajon groove or spicing up a fill with a triple ratamacue? Studying rudiments will build your drumming skill and the classic licks can be applied to the cajon.

Download a free copy of The Percussive Arts Society International Drum Rudiments at www.pas.org.

Finger Shots

Have you ever wanted to add a shaker part to a cajon groove but both of your upper body limbs were already occupied with a two-handed rhythm? Easier than growing an extra arm from your stomach, slip on a couple of Finger Shots from Latin Percussion (LP) and voilá!--shaker and cajon. These miniature shakers produce sound ONLY on downstrokes so that each downward hand motion on cajon is doubled with a shaker sound. These little items are handy for adding a shaker line to djembe, congas, or bongos parts as well as cajon. Learn the sixteenth rock groove below with a Finger Shot on each hand and enjoy the steady shaker accompaniment.



Foot Tambourine

The Foot Tambourine from Meinl fastens onto your foot with an elastic strap and allows you to add some jingle with every tap of your toes. Capable of a delivering a good dose of volume and easy to toss in your mallet case, the Foot Tambourine is a budget-friendly way to bring some sparkle to a cajon pattern.

Strap on a Foot Tambourine and accent the backbeat in this easy shuffle groove



Brushes and Bundled Dowels

Brushes and bundled rods can be used to great effect on cajon. Either of those implements can be used to lay down a convincing train groove on the box. Hold either a brush or bundled rods in your non-dominant hand as you learn the following rhythm pattern.



While I urge you to explore extended tonal and technical possibilities for cajon-based performance, be mindful that much of the cajon's appeal lies in the instrument's simplicity. A fitting choice is often the simple and obvious one. It might be an uncomplicated rhythm played on a wooden box.

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About the Author:

Mark Shelton has presented hundreds of arts-in-education performances as a percussion soloist and as leader of the world music ensemble Tin Roof Tango. From the early days of his career as Visiting Artist at Coastal Carolina Community College to his current work as a soloist, clinician, sideman, and entrepreneur, Mark has created programs, products, and educational services for a variety of ages and topics. An active freelance musician, his performance credits include percussion work with Gateway Worship, North Carolina Symphony, Strata Big Band, Dallas Winds, Daystar Singers and Band, Shreveport Symphony, TALEA, Wichita Falls Orchestra and the Metroplex Marimba Band. Mark has appeared as a featured artist at the North Carolina and West Texas Days of Percussion, the Percussive Arts Society International Convention, and state music educator conventions in Texas, Florida, and Nebraska. Articles by Mark have been published in Worship Musician!, Percussive Notes, Activate!, and Dulcimer Players News. His solo albums, Music From My Galaxy and Handpan Serenade are available on iTunes, Amazon Music, and Spotify.

www.marksheltonmusic.com