

Basic Rhythms for Belly Dancers

Hearing the Rhythm, Dancing the Drum



Sponsored by Jessica Crockett of BellyHam
Created by Eliza Evans
Facilitated by Jessica and Eliza

Basic Drum Sounds

On the drum, the center is referred to as “Dum,” as it produces a deep, resonant tone. The edges create higher, brighter sounds: “Tek” on the right and “Ka” on the left if you’re right handed. Rather than focusing on perfect technique right away, try exploring the sounds your drum can make; use an open hand, a single finger, or multiple fingers, and notice how each changes the tone. There are many instructional videos that demonstrate specific techniques, but you can also experiment and discover what feels and sounds best to you. Initially, the goal is to create, hear, and feel the deep Dum and the lighter, sharper Tek and Ka.



Dancing the Drum



When I first tried bellydance, I joined a troupe my friends were starting. At my first rehearsal, I looked at myself in the mirror, thought “I can’t do this in front of people” and quit. Over the next year, though, as I watched my friends dance, I realized that for me, it wasn’t about the dancer; it was about expressing the music.

When dancing to drums, you can think of yourself as expressing the sounds and patterns. Dums tend to feel grounded, moving down and toward the center of the body, while Tekes and Kas are lighter and can travel up and out. This isn’t a rule, but a helpful way to begin connecting movement to sound. When this connection clicks, it can be quite striking; it looks as though the dancer is embodying the music or making the drum sounds with their movements. If you watch a dancer with the sound off and can almost hear the music based solely on their movements, this is an example of dancing the drum.

Understanding Counts and Phrases

A simple way to find the downbeat is to tap your foot steadily: when your foot touches the floor, you're usually on the downbeat (the numbers), and when your foot lifts, you're on the offbeat (the "and"). This can help you feel where the rhythm lands and how the sounds fit between those points, making it easier to stay grounded and in time.



One way to find the "1" is to listen for the end of a phrase; the point where the music feels like it completes a thought and begins again. It often feels like a small breath or release before the next cycle starts. It can also help to notice how the music is organized into sections: introduction, verse, chorus, break, etc. Or without vocals, you can often break them down into A, B, C, etc. sections. Listening for repeats and patterns (for example, A-B-C-B-C-A) will make it easier to recognize where phrases resolve and return to the beginning.

Learning Drum Patterns



Memorizing the basic drum patterns for common Middle Eastern rhythms can be a helpful way to build familiarity and confidence as a dancer. Many belly dance pieces use these rhythms repeatedly, so the more you recognize them, the easier it becomes to hear and interpret the music. There are many ways to practice and remember these patterns. One simple approach is to write them out in a table, with the counts (1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &) in one row and the corresponding Dum, Tek, and Ka sounds aligned beneath like this:

Maksum

1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	5	&	6	&	7	&	8	&
D	T		T	D		T		D	T		T	D		T	

Mnemonics can also be very effective (remember "gotta-dance, gotta-dance, got-a-chick-en-in-my-pants" which is the same as the common zil pattern 1-2-1, 1-2-1, 1-2-1-2-1-2-1). You can say rhythms out loud, clap them, or walk them to help internalize both the structure and the feel. At the same time, it's not necessary to memorize rhythm names or patterns unless you want to work with professional drummers, play the drum

yourself, or study the music more deeply. Simply becoming familiar with how they sound and feel is often enough.

Resources

The links below provide examples of some of the rhythms we explored in class and are a great way to learn and practice. Listening repeatedly will help you recognize each rhythm and internalize its feel. One especially clear and accessible teacher on YouTube is Artem Uzunov, whose videos break rhythms down in a way that is easy to hear and follow.



As mentioned in the workshop, feel free to start with just the Dum, then add a Tek or two when you feel ready, and finally incorporate the Ka; once you're comfortable with the rhythms, using a metronome can help you stay steady and consistent.

Baladi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22VfnU5dUj4>

Maksum

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7G5r8JcfnC>

Saidi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAct66z6CXA>

Chiftetelli

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsEDDcsvB-c>

Karshilama

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Spl7dR5Y68

Samaii

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJNZg0q3PIY>

Here are a couple of the drummers I mentioned who I've studied with and admire tremendously!

Souhail Kaspar - <http://www.neareastmusic.com>

Issam Houshan - <https://www.tablabyissam.com>