

RAINSTICKS

Rainsticks have become a very popular novelty musical instrument in the last 30 years. Stories concerning the origin of the rainstick are numerous. Some say that the instrument was invented by the Aztecs, and that it later spread throughout Central and South America. This is probably not the case, since rainsticks are not found archaeologically or in Spanish accounts. Furthermore, the Aztec Empire (destroyed by the Spanish in 1521) was short-lived and came late in the history of the Americas. It is more likely, as reported by some musicians from Mexico who recall the event, that the rainstick was introduced into popular Mexican music (notably in the area around Cuernavaca) sometime in the 1960s.

Other claims for the origin of the rainstick say that the Diaguita Indians of Chile used the instrument to bring rain. Certainly the Diaguita, farmers who live in the Atacama Desert area of northern Chile and Argentina, need precipitation, since their area is some of the driest in the world. Many of the rainsticks purchased today are made by the Diaguita who use the dead stalks of a cactus to make the instruments. Thorns from the plant are pressed into the dead wood. It is the pebbles hitting against these thorns as they fall down the tube that create the rain-like sound. Early accounts of the Diaguita people, however, do not list the rainstick in their material culture inventory.

It seems more likely that the origins of the rainstick as a musical instrument is the stick or tubular rattle.

Researchers at the turn of the century describe tubular rattles very similar to the rainstick which were made and used by the Cuna of Panama; the Colorado of Ecuador; the Macushí, Uachmiri, and Yauapery of northern Amazonia; and the Huichol of northern Mexico. There are also wooden stick rattles filled with seeds or pebbles found archaeologically along the coast of Peru, but it is not clear whether these date from the Inca period or earlier (6000 B.C. - A.D. 1500).

The historic tubular rattles are made of either whole reeds (such as bamboo) or plaited reed strips. Closed on both ends and filled with pebbles or hard seeds, they have palm needles stuck into the walls of the tube so that the sound is "very like the patter of rain." In the Huichol examples, the septa or interior membranes at the joints of the bamboo are pierced, creating the same effect. The Huichol use the tubular rattle in ceremonies associated with rain, it is reported, but no Huichol tubular rattles have been collected.

There is some speculation that the thorns or needles piercing the tubular rattle is an idea introduced by enslaved African peoples. Tubular rattles, pierced with iron nails, are common in West Africa, especially among the Togo and Pangwe (the sources of many of the slaves of the Americas). As early as 1619, 50% of the 60,000 inhabitants of Lima, Peru, were enslaved people from West Africa. It is likely that the indigenous peoples of South America, especially the hunters-gatherers of the upper Amazon and the farmers of northern Chile and Argentina, would have come in contact with the slaves beginning around 1537 because of trade routes running through these areas. The indigenous people could easily have adopted the idea of piercing the tubular rattle with thorns to create a new sound and instrument. Four hundred years of use in South America could easily have obscured the origin of the instrument.

Some scholars and Mexican musicians suggest that the rainstick was introduced into popular music in that country from South America. Some say the popularity of Andean music, which uses the rainstick, fostered its adoption. Other people suggest that the ecology movement to save the Amazon rainforests, which began in the 1960s, brought the rainstick forward as a symbol for the rainforest. Whatever the case, the rainstick has become a popular musical instrument and has been adopted by many musicians around the world.