

## Sound Within Rock Art

Janet Lever

This paper came together after a series of experiences in the field and at the kitchen table. Through recording rock art and redrawing the tracings, I have noticed, when tapping with a pen, marking each peck, a rhythm is created, and after working a few hours, a trance state occurred. I observed at another site in southeast Colorado, while measuring and counting ground-stone surfaces, that a bedrock mortar had been deftly transformed into a zoomorph. It occurred to me that here was a place where ritual and art intersected. I started looking at other ground-stone sites; these rock surfaces were abraded, incised, pecked, drilled, deeply ground, and painted. There was something beyond food processing going on here! (1) (2)

David Lewis-Williams, in an essay called "Rock Art and Ritual" suggests that rituals involving altered states of consciousness were implicated in a series of four stages in the production and consumption of rock art:

1. The acquisition of some of the art's subject matter (as in a vision quest).
2. The making of paint (3).
3. The painting or pecking of the images themselves.
4. The use of the paintings or petroglyphs once made.

Rock art sites have a certain energy within and around them. How often have we seen hand prints from a later culture "relating to" earlier images? The negative and extreme response to this is in bullet holes and spray paint—offensive and discordant! I was recently reminded of the acoustic properties of these sites; echoes are easily created, and silence and sound seem acute.

Excerpt from *A Natural History of the Senses*:

When we sing, not only do our vocal cords vibrate, but so do some of our bones . . . our pupils dilate and our endorphin levels rise; music engages the whole body and there is a healing power to it.

Walking through the cave of Tuc d'Audobert, we noticed broken stalactites

(4A)—appropriate percussion instruments. Silence is powerful within the caves; singing resonates within rounded chambers. I know; I dared to sing. As toolmakers we were busy striking, rubbing, scraping, shaking, swinging, making noise. From rhythmic sound to sacred dance, there was a natural progression. Man created accompaniment with clapping hands and implements of wood, bone, skin and stone. (4B)

What we call sound is really an onrushing, cresting and withdrawing wave of air molecules that begins with the movement of any object, however large or small, and ripples out in all directions . . . waves of sound roll like tides to our ears, where they make the eardrum vibrate; this in turn moves three colorfully named bones (hammer, anvil, stirrup). The three bones press fluid in the inner ear against membranes that brush tiny hairs, trigger nearby nerve cells, and telegraph messages to the brain: WE HEAR!

(Ackerman 1990)

Here are some images of what I suggest are heightened awareness to sound and vibration (5).

For nine months we live in the womb, listening to the orchestra of our mother, entrained with her. Then we are born and the first thing that happens is a massive dose of rhythm. Our lungs begin pumping, our heart beat settles into its steady pulse; our senses begin scanning; vibrations rush in our eyes and ears, up the nose, into the mouth, pulsing against the newborn skin.

(Hart 1990) (6)

After a mind-altering evening of listening to Bela Bartok, I came up with these thoughts: If music and rhythm are about time, and visual images are about timelessness, then what happens at the confluence of the two constructs? What ritual connects the heartbeat and the footstep with the planetary rhythms and the greater powers? We experience solar, lunar, and circadian cycles. All biological functioning is affected by light and dark. Our nervous system synchronizes our

internal machinery to the patterns and currents of our world. Despite all our power and progress, we are still part of nature. I propose that the creation of rock art is such a ritual, connecting man to the worlds of nature and spirit. (7)

Returning to the landscape we are familiar with here in the Southwest, what sounds do you associate with your experience at rock art sites? Is it the silence of rock, the sound of falling water, a rattlesnake warning, a deer passing, the rustling leaves, a chorus of voices from the stone, and, of course, that flute player? We need to listen.

Shamans are drummers, rhythmists, and trance-masters who have understood something fundamental about the nature of the drum. A shaman sings the songs that alert his spirit allies. His trance deepens until the soul slips out of this body and flies across the world to the tree that stands at the center of the universe. Then he begins to climb into the branches; his destination is the heavens or down to the roots, the underworld. The songs and dances of the shaman imitate animal allies that the shaman commands.

"This I think is the drum's function. It sets up a ripple in time, ensuring that the shaman can find his way back from timelessness" (Hart 1990). (9)

The danger to the shaman who has ridden the drum out of his body is not so much being lost in space as being lost in time. In a sense, the drum functions as an extension of the heart that is beating in the shaman's empty body, back here in human time.

I think these images in certain rock art are about time and timelessness. Petroglyphs on stone do not move! They interact with the rock surface and are slowly weathering back to the original rock. It is difficult not to think of stories, rituals and prayers made by the creators of these stone canvases. We are still trying to mediate our particular voice with the greater silence that surrounds the living world. (10)

So now with a little humor and some dear rock-art voices, I would like to visit some landscapes, some sound-scapes. (11)

DRUM by Linda Hogan  
Inside the dark human waters  
of our mothers  
inside the blue drum of skin

that beats the slow song of our tribes  
we knew the drifts of continents  
and moving tides.

We are the people who left water  
to enter a dry world.

We have survived soldiers and drought,  
survived hunger  
and living  
inside the unmapped terrain  
of loneliness.

That is why we have thirst.

It is why

when we love

we remember our lives in water,  
that other lives fall through us  
like fishing swimming in an endless sea,  
that we are walking another way  
than time,

to new life, backward

to deliver ourselves to rain and river,  
this water

that will become other water

this blood that will become other blood  
and is the oldest place

the deepest world

the skin of water

that knows the drum before a hand meets it.

## References

Ackerman, Diane. *A Natural History of the Senses*. 1990.

Hart, Mickey. *Drumming at the Edge of Magic*. 1990.

Hogan, Linda. *The Book of Medicines*. 1993.

Lewis-Williams, J. David. *Rock Art and Ritual: South Africa and Beyond*. 1994.