WHAT ON EARTH IS THAT THING?!? Did you ever ask this about some of the various contraptions we play on in the back of the band? One of the neat challenges of percussion is that we have to be prepared to play a wide variety of instruments to achieve the exact sound which the composer and conductor are seeking. Many of them require very different techniques. Sometimes, because of the layout of the band, it is akin to setting down your trumpet, running a lap around the band, and then picking up a tuba to play – all within only a one-measure rest! Starting next month, we’ll try to give you an introduction to some of the more interesting percussion instruments which we use. We’ll answer such interesting questions as: Why are orchestra bells different from temple bells, which are different from temple blocks, which are different from wood blocks; Is there any relationship between a pauken and pumpkin; and Why are there so many ways to spell “tympani”?

WHAT ON EARTH IS THAT THING?!? Installment 1: Let’s start out with something as common as the drum set, before we move on the more esoteric percussion instruments. Ric Okun has provided this tutorial:

Around the turn of the century (the last one) most drummers, aside from classical musicians, played in theater orchestra pits. There were usually two or three players who played the snare drum, bass drum and cymbals plus a variety of sound effect instruments such as temple blocks, cow bells, bird calls, whistles, sirens, thunder machines and other “contraptions”. This is where we get the word “traps” , which refers to the collection of non-drum implements that most percussionists have on hand.

As theater owners tried to save money by having fewer musicians, the idea of the bass drum foot pedal was developed. This meant that one player could play both the snare drum and bass drum. This idea was embellished upon by adding a cymbal “clanger” to the pedal which enabled a single player to simultaneously play the bass drum and a hoop-mounted cymbal. This worked well in terms of reducing personnel costs, but meant that the cymbal and bass drum always had to be played on the same beat, and that there was no way of independently varying the cymbal notes.

As the Jazz Age began, and jazz moved from the street bands of New Orleans into clubs, drummers began to assemble sets of drums and cymbals that could easily be transported. Bass drums got smaller and were often surrounded by a curved railing, or console, to which cymbals and tom-toms could be mounted. The earliest tom-toms used in drum sets were of the Chinese variety with both top and bottom and top heads tacked on. The cymbal holders were goose neck affairs from which the cymbals were literally “suspended”. The term “suspended cymbal” is still used to describe a cymbal mounted on a stand as used in concert work. The console also held a trap tray to hold many of the aforementioned traps. There are well known photos of jazz drumming pioneers Baby Dodds and Chick Webb seated behind such rigs.

The problem of separating the striking of the bass drum and cymbal, was solved with the invention of a device that resembled two snow shoes hinged at he heel, with a pair of facing cymbals attached to the front. This evolved into the more formidable low boy or low hat, which is the source of the term “sock cymbal”, because of the proximity of the cymbals to the drummers foot. The extended version of the low boy, the modern day hi hat, finally made the scene in the late 1920’s. Now the cymbals could be played with the foot and hand. Interestingly, some people still refer to the hi hat as a sock cymbal.

As styles of music changed through the next few decades, so did the drum set. Tunable tom-tom heads appeared, first on the top only and then on the bottom. Big band era drummers, personified by Gene Krupa, eliminated the trap table along with most the traps. The large console was replaced by a small consolette mounted to the bass drum shell from which a tom-tom was mounted. Additional tom-toms were place on the floor, supported by legs. During this period, the modern drum set took on its basic characteristics.

As music has evolved from early jazz, to swing, to bebop, to rock (although some would say that this last step was a strange mutation), the drum set has also changed to meet the needs of the new music. Rock players, with their multiple tom-toms and cymbals have brought the 1920’s console back in the form of rack systems to hold their gear. Double bass drums have also become common in rock (although first used by jazz drummer Louis Bellson). More extensive use of closed hi hats, has led to the development of a hi hat that holds the cymbals permanently together.

Probably more than any other instrument, the drum set has changed to meet the requirements of popular music. Who knows what the future will bring? One thing is certain, though: “The Beat Goes On”.