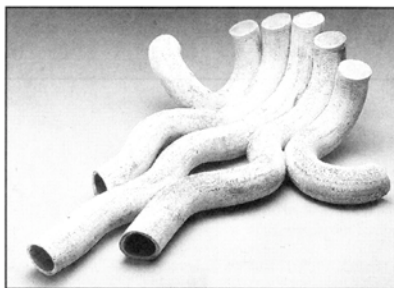




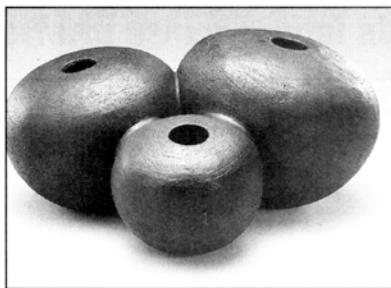
COURTESY PHOTO

Hall created this pretzel didjeridu, which is an ancient wind instrument traditional to certain indigenous cultures from Australia.



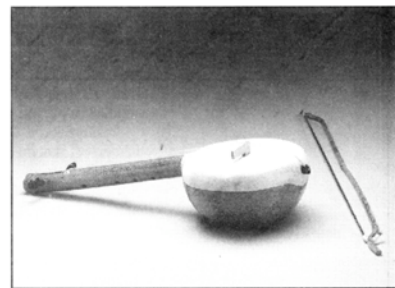
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A set of tuned tubular drums, each with a goat skin head, for Conundrums. The length of each tube determines its pitch.



COURTESY PHOTO

This Triple Clay Pot Drum is a variation on a traditional design. Three interconnected chambers produce a variety of pitches.



COURTESY PHOTO

An original stoneware fiddle inspired by Asian and African designs. The soundbox of the fiddle can also be played as a drum, and the neck can be played as a flute.

Of mud and music

Barry Hall authors book on ceramic instruments

By Judy Powell
NEWS CORRESPONDENT

Transforming mud into music is how Barry Hall makes the earth sing.

The alchemy is not magic, but the result of Hall's fascination with crafting musical instruments out of stoneware clay.

While the two mediums may not appear to intersect, this Westborough father has spent the last 15 years focused on what he calls a "very consuming hobby."

"I'm fascinated by the many different musical sounds that can be produced by clay instruments," Hall said.

"I find it extremely satisfying to be able to convert such a lowly material into a vessel for one of the highest forms of human expressions, music."

While employed in health care benefits at Buck Consultants in Boston, Hall wrote in his spare time "From Mud to Music: Making and Enjoying Ceramic Musical Instruments," which is out this spring.

At 250 pages, the book is one of a few of its kind. Featuring more than 500 color photographs and a 74-minute compact disc, it profiles the work of 100 ceramic artists and their instruments.

"This is part coffee table book, part practical guide on how to build ceramic instruments," he said. "I was motivated to write the

book since I couldn't find anything else like it to answer my questions."

Hall moved to Westborough three years ago with his wife Beth, and then 2-year-old daughter Avery.

He said he was attracted to the town by its reputation for having a strong music program in the public schools.

"We went to the high school to listen to the orchestra play when we first arrived and were very impressed," he said.

Strong praise from someone who not only fashions his own musical instruments, but also writes songs, and leads his own seven-member group performing on these instruments called "The Burnt Earth Ensemble."

"Many of the clay instruments I build are based on traditional designs, such as flutes, pot drums, and goblet drums," he said. "Others are experimental designs or combination instruments."

Hall says it is as difficult to categorize his music as it is to describe his hybrid instruments.

The pretzel didjeridu, for example, resembles a twisted bugle.

"Most traditional didgeridus are constructed from a tree trunk, 4-5 feet long and 2 or more inches in internal diameter, which has been naturally hollowed out by termites," he said. "[My] glazed ceramic didjeridu was built by extruding component pieces of hollow stoneware clay tubing, al-

lowing them to firm to a near leather hard state, and then assembling them, incorporating a wheel-thrown bell."

It can take up to a month for Hall to complete one instrument, time he views as part of the continuum for creating music.

"I've found that no two instruments come out alike. You need to form the clay, let it dry at a controlled rate, and add different pieces at just the right time," he said.

"A lot of musicians have a relationship with their instruments where they are trying to draw out the best sound. Understanding the materials that goes into the instruments makes a huge difference."

Growing up in a family of musicians, Hall comes by his creative passions honestly.

"My dad was a band and orchestra director and my mom was a church organist so you could say I've been into music my whole life."

His introduction to clay came later in life when he took an adult education ceramics course while living in Walnut Creek, Calif. in the early 1990s.

"I was there to learn the basics, but while everybody else was making teapots and mugs, I was trying to create an udu drum.

The udu drum looks like a water jug with a hole in it. Hall becomes animated when describing the tone of the instrument.

"There is nothing quite like a ce-



COURTESY PHOTO

Barry Hall, who crafts musical instruments out of stoneware, plays one of his creations called a didjibodhm. The didjibodhm, a combination didjeridu and frame drum, is a hollow tube that serves as a circular frame for a goat skin drum head. The instrument can be blown as a wind instrument and played as a drum.

ramic drum with goat skin on it," he said.

With ties, literally, to the earth itself, Hall's instruments echo sounds from African, Celtic and Middle Eastern origins.

"The history of instruments made from clay stretches back almost to the dawn of mankind," he said.

"From Mud to Music" explores these historical traditions and world cultures, tracking the evolution of ceramic instruments to

its modern variations and innovations.

It took Hall five years to complete the book, which he dedicated to his parents, and calls a "labor of love."

He said he is looking forward to a May 20 book signing at Tatnuck Bookseller, from 1 to 2 p.m., where he will also demonstrate clay instruments and perform with his wife Beth.

In the meantime, now that the book is published, Hall aims to carve out time toward making

more ceramic instruments.

"For me it is all about discovery. Writing the book just served to reinvigorate my interest," he said. "What continues to motivate me is the exploration and experimentation, and sharing what I've learned."

More information about Hall's ceramic instruments, and the Burnt Earth Ensemble, including their latest CD, can be found at www.BurntEarth.com.

Hall's book, "From Mud to Music," can be purchased at Tatnuck.