

Do-It-Yourself Percussion, Part 4

Maraca Rods

by Glenn Kotche

This column is dedicated to providing drummers and percussionists with simple and inexpensive do-it-yourself projects for building and modifying instruments and accessories. This month's project is maraca rods.

Maraca rods are created by affixing lightweight shakers to the ends of commercially available multi-rod sticks. This results in a sympathetic shaker sound when the rods are played on the drums. Maraca rods can also be played like maracas to get only the shaker sound. I encourage you to experiment with your own ideas, but the following method is the one that I've had the most luck with.

Gathering Your Materials

You'll need a pair of rods, in the brand and model of your choice. You'll also need two ping-pong balls, some sort of shot or similar shaker-fill material, a couple of inches of heat-shrink tubing, and some super glue.

Many different materials can be used as the shaking component, including rice, corn, BB's, and peppercorns. However, I strongly recommend shotgun shot. These are the extremely small metal pellets that are used in most commercially available shakers and eggs. Your best

bet for finding shot is at a sporting goods store that has hunting accessories. Or you can try the Internet. It's usually possible to find a large bag or tube (20–25 lbs.) for under \$15. Since the amount needed for this project is quite small, I recommend sharing the bulk purchase with some other drummers, if possible.

The ping-pong balls can also be found at a sporting goods store, and sometimes at toy, dollar discount, and department stores. Heat-shrink tubing is a soft rubber tubing that can be easily cut. It will be used here as a seal. You'll want to get at least the 3/4"-diameter size in order for it to fit around the rod. The tubing can be found at hardware and electronics stores.

Putting 'Em Together

To begin the project, use a pencil to trace the back end of the rod onto the ping-pong ball, being sure to do this away from the seam of the ball. You'll wind up with a circle about the size of a penny traced onto the ball. This is the portion of the ball that needs to be removed. You can use a drill with a sharp bit to puncture and rout out the hole, or use a small, sharp knife to puncture the ball and cut out the circle. Whichever method you use, be careful!

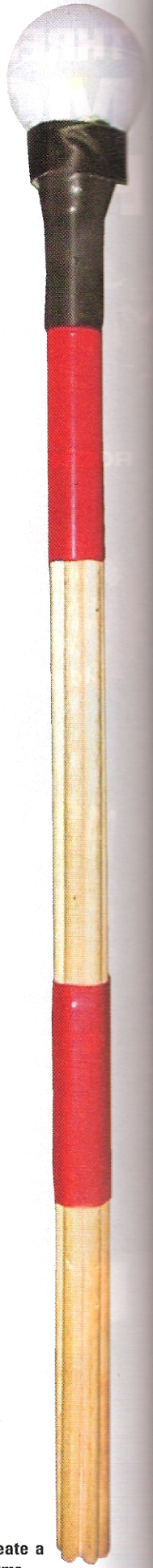
The next step is to put some shot into the ball. The amount is up to you, but be careful not to use too much, since that will adversely affect the balance of the rod. I recommend about a teaspoon's worth.

Now you need to fit the back end of the rod inside the hole in the ball, inserting it about 1/4" to 1/2". Use the super glue to careful-



The materials needed to build maraca rods are inexpensive and easy to come by.

The finished maraca rod can be used to create a variety of percussion effects on and off the drums.



ly seal the rod to the ping-pong ball. Allow the glue to dry thoroughly.

The next step is to cut about a 1" portion of the heat-shrink tubing and slide it over the rod until it firmly meets the ping-pong ball. Make sure the tubing is snug against the ball. Heat the tubing with a heat gun or common blow dryer, until it shrinks to form a tight seal. Be aware that too much heat can deform and melt the ping-pong ball, so use just enough for the tubing to shrink.

That's all there is to it. You should now have a functioning maraca rod.

Variations On A Theme

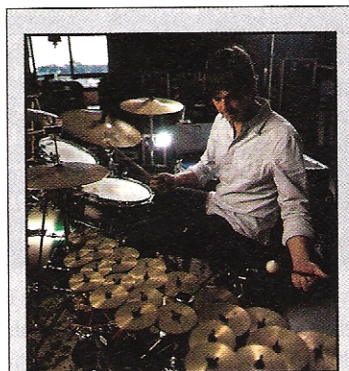
The ping-pong ball maraca idea can be used with any type of stick or mallet. However, since the shaker is relatively quiet, I've found that it works best on rods or non-retractable brushes. This pairing allows the shaker part to be heard. Additionally, the balls tend to last much longer when used in lower-volume situations.

You should be able to get used to the added weight of the maraca rods with relative ease. Some drummers who like to hold their sticks at the very ends will find it necessary to choke up a bit. I don't recommend using the ping-pong ball ends as mallets, since the thin plastic shells of the balls dent easily, and the balls can break if hit against rims and cymbals. However, it is this very thinness of the plastic shell that gives the shaker a good sound, while making it light enough to attach to a rod.

This simple DIY project can provide you with interesting and useful sonic effects. Maraca rods are easy to create, and they're fun to play. Give 'em a try.



This close-up shows how the heat-shrink tubing helps seal the ball to the end of the rod.



Glenn Kotche is the drummer/percussionist for eclectic rock band Wilco.



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