BIG DRUM PROTOCOLS AND TEACHINGS

Protocols

- If a request is made for the drum to be at an event, tobacco should always be offered to the drum keeper. If the tobacco is accepted this is equivalent to signing a contract.
- Tobacco should always be offered to the drum before starting a drum session.
- A protocol thought is that “women are above all” and they should thus be honored. Women can thus sit at the drum excepting for their “moon time”.
- The drum needs to be “fed” once per year i.e. honored with water and a food offering.
- Request permission from the players if you will be recording.
- No alcohol or drugs are allowed near the drum.
- Let the drummers know if alcohol will be served at the event where they are playing.

Teachings and History

Teachings and histories regarding Big Drums and those who drum vary from Nation to Nation. But there are similarities. The following teachings and histories are a culmination of information from various sources.

- The drum has power.
- Every First Nation uses the drum – it symbolizes the heart of the people.
- When the Big Drum is used, prayers should be said thanking the Creator for the universe and all it contains – people, plants, and animals.
- Singing “Hey Ya” is the highest form of address to the Creator.
- Each person at the drum places tobacco on the drum before starting.
- As the drum is a spirit – an animal was given as a sacrifice to become the drum – thank the animal.
- The drum connects you to Mother Earth and all of nature.
- The drum lifts the spirits of the people in attendance, can heal the sick, and brings on laughter.
- Drums get tired and thirsty, too. Hence, water is used to periodically wet a drum, as all living things need water.
- During 1930’s ceremonies were banned and many drum protocols were lost.
- “The Wooden Pail” — settlers brought pails which Native people put hides on to use for drums.
- Drum sticks are usually made of wood but modern ones can be made with a composite.
- Drummers do not sing word songs.
- If you hear a song you are allowed to learn it.
• Learn the meaning of songs before dancing to them.
• There are different drum beats e.g. foot strike, shake, and straight.
• Dance for others who may need it.
• Have respect for yourself.
• Dress respectfully.
• Respect your body.
• Watch people – their comings and goings - as they take care of the community.

With Thanks

Thanks to Irvin and Adele Waskewitch who facilitated the Big Drum Protocol Workshop held at SFU on June 17, 2015.

Thanks to the Indigenous Student Centre for providing the Big Drum with a physical home.

This Big Drum Protocols document was prepared by Rupert Richardson and Karen Matthews, with cultural guidance provided by Irvin and Adele Waskewitch.

The Drum Keeper

The “unofficial” keeper of the Big Drum at Simon Fraser University is Rupert Richardson, Indigenous Graduate Student Coordinator. Questions regarding the drum and the above protocols can be directed to Rupert at 778-782-9927 or rupertr@sfu.ca