

The sounds of the Outback

Clive Fewins finds the didgeridoo breathes new life into his previously faltering musical career

Relax! Try to make the sort of snorting noise a horse makes, and whatever you do, don't look so tense!" The clear but seemingly impossible orders came from my teacher for the day, a former detective in the Metropolitan Police Murder Squad, Colin Goring.

Colin, 47, is now one of the country's leading names in the didgeridoo business. Four years ago, following the serious illness and eventual death of a close friend, he underwent what he describes as a "life-changing experience", quit the police and set up Aboriginal Arts in Stratford, east London. Here he teaches the didgeridoo and holds monthly workshops.

He also sells genuine Australian Aboriginal didgeridoos and runs a didge club, with free membership, once a month on a Thursday evening, for London-based devotees.

Having encountered a number of "didge" enthusiasts over the years I was keen to discover for myself the assorted delights of this most simple of musical instruments that makes a noise that, when inexpertly played, sounds like a malfunctioning foghorn.

Before the midmorning start of the day's workshop, Colin's time was mine. The noises I produced sounded visceral, primordial, other-worldly perhaps. But – fortunately – not like a foghorn.

"Not bad for a beginner. You'll get there. I've never taught anyone that can't play at all," said Colin, who immediately produced the most amazing combination of sounds by way of encouragement.

Elated, I turned to Dave Chapman, 39, from Ipswich, the first member of the workshop to arrive.

Does this mean the didge is an easy instrument to play? I asked Dave, who has been playing for 10 years and was keen to learn more from Colin's "guest star" for the day, visiting Czech didge master Ondrej Smeykal. Dave, who learnt the trumpet at school, tactfully explained that, while any one didgeridoo is only capable of playing one note, to a beginner it immediately offers a far greater range of sounds than can be produced from any conventional instrument. On the other hand it will not play a scale or a melody in the western sense.

"The challenge," he explained, "is to produce something really worth listening to. That, in my experience, takes a lot of time and commitment."

I returned, hesitantly, to practising my toots and drones – both sounds that can usually be produced within the first hour with the aid of competent instructor.

By this time other members of the 12-strong group were arriving, so I took a welcome rest and was more than content to witness the progress of the other three new members.

To my surprise Api Ascaso, 29, an occupational therapist who comes from Spain, was able to produce quite a sweet sound after only one previous session with Colin. She was also beginning to master "circular



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breathing", the technique that enables you to achieve a continuous sound while playing the didge.

It is this breathing technique that has attracted the attention of the medical world. Australian researchers have found that the form of breathing needed to play the didgeridoo can help alleviate the symptoms of asthma.



Blown away: Clive Fewins gets to grips with his didgeridoo and receives some pointers from teacher Colin Goring

Playing the instrument is also said to help stop snoring and is believed to be a great aid to people with sleep apnoea, a condition that causes the throat to close and breathing to stop, causing sufferers to wake regularly in the night.

For serious players like retired teacher Andy Mapplebeck, 64, another "regular" at Colin's bimonthly workshops, playing the didge is an excellent means of relaxing. "I have practised yoga for many years. I find that playing the didge, with its often unworldly sounds, complements this and helps to balance the body," he says. "I call playing the didge 'sound healing'. People with many kinds of handicap find playing it a healing experience."

Colin, who also teaches didgeridoo in mainstream and special-needs classes at schools, as well as playing in a jazz and blues band, stresses the ability of the instrument to help people understand how their bodies – especially the jaw, cheeks, mouth, tongue and diaphragm – work.

"Deaf and visually impaired people say they can feel the vibrations and respond to this," he says.

"The didgeridoo has been played in an unbroken tradition by the Aborigines in the Northern Territory of Australia for thousands of years: nobody really knows how long," says Ondrej at the beginning of the group session.

"Aboriginal didges are naturally produced – hollowed out from eucalyptus branches by termites.

"Played well, a didge is an amplifier for the body. You can use your voice, sing or make all sorts of noises into it to produce a beautiful haunting sound."

Really? I am in reflective mode as, back at home and banned from the house by my wife, I blast away in the garage at the family didge that has been gathering dust in the loft for many years.

Try as I might, I seem quite unable to produce the rich sound I am told I achieved later in the day at Colin's workshop. There, only a few days ago, this lifelong music lover, who has always failed to produce a single note on any instrument thought that, at last, he might have discovered his musical Shangri-La.

DIDGERIDOOS AND DON'TS

WHERE TO LEARN: Colin can be contacted on 020 8123 1575, or email him via: aboriginalarts.co.uk. Classes across the UK are listed on: thedidgeridooman.co.uk; thenattysshed.co.uk; and aboriginalia.co.uk.

CLASSES: Workshops at Aboriginal Arts take place every two months and cost £40 for four hours. Colin also takes one-to-one didge lessons, priced £20 an hour.

BUYING A DIDGE: The key is to find one that suits your mouth. Avoid

buying online and try before you buy. Most didges sold in this country are not made from eucalyptus wood and do not come from Australia, but are usually perfectly playable.

COSTS: Prices for Colin's authentic Aboriginal didgeridoos start from £90 and £3,000 will buy a highly decorative one from a known maker with a historic pedigree. He advises would-be players to start by spending around £6 on a piece of 32mm or 40mm plastic waste pipe from a builder's merchant. Cut it into

lengths of different sizes and experiment with different sounds. Reduce the diameter to 28mm to 30mm to form a mouthpiece. This is done by using melted beeswax, which you can roll into a sausage and press onto the pipe.