

Developing a Focused Practice Routine for Drum Set Players

By Dr. Sherrie Maricle

Iowa Bandmasters Association Conference May 10 -12, 2018

8 General Practice Areas to Consider

1. Technique
2. Time
3. Independence (Interdependence)
4. Stylistic Interpretation
5. Reading
6. Kicks, Fills & Set-Ups
7. Soloing
8. Listening

Develop a Daily or Weekly Routine for Your Students based on:

1. Learning Style (s)
2. Musical Level - Age
3. Attention Span
4. Goals – Personal and Professional
5. Time Constraints and Personal Obligations
6. Practice Environment
7. Play Time, not Practice



1. Basic Technique

These 3 suggestions will help create a strong technical foundation on which to build creative musical ideas and the ability to respond to “the music” as desired and inspired.

A. Practice the standard **26 drum rudiments** and their variations orchestrated around the drum set while playing ¼ notes on the BD & HH on 2 + 4 or a Samba pattern in your feet. Play the rudiments using all basic rhythmic subdivisions: whole note, ½ note, ½ note triplet, ¼ note, ¼ triplet, 1/8 note, 1/8 note triplet, 1/16 note, 1/16 note triplet and 1/32 notes. Although rudimental drumming is primarily concerned with single and double stroke combinations, it is also important to practice orchestral or “buzz” rolls. I recommend using *Stick Control* and *Wrist & Finger Control* (Stone) and *Swingin’ the 26* by (Wilcoxon.) for technical development. Add **Dynamics** as they will help develop different aspects of your chops.

B. For developing **single strokes** and a deeper understanding/feel for the basic rhythmic subdivisions mentioned above, In 4/4 with the BD playing ¼ notes and the HH on 2 + 4, set the metronome between 60 - 80 and play 4 measures on the SD, then repeat and orchestrate around the drum set. Segue between each division and keep all transitions seamless and flowing. Increase the tempo as your chops develop. You can also play this exercise with double strokes and/or paradiddle sticking. Eventually you can add quintuplets and septuplets in their appropriate sequential order.

C. Bass Drum and Hi-Hat technique can be developed by practicing the single stroke exercise described above. Keep steady ¼ notes with one foot, while the other plays the subdivisions. You should also include the bass drum and hi-hat as elements of the orchestrations you create for exercise A.

If you want to play jazz and other acoustic music, it’s very important to practice with **brushes** as well as sticks. While you can apply these 3 exercises to brush playing, definitely study the unique characteristics and technical requirements for proper brush playing.

* I recommend Steve Smith’s DVD, *Drum Set Technique & History of the US Beat* and JoJo Mayer’s *Secret Weapons for the Modern Drummer* for ideas on technical and musical development.

2. Basic Time

All drummers know that their primary function is to keep good *time*. You may have all the technique in the world, but if you can’t lay down a groove that feels good, you have little hope for musical success. As Baby Dodds said, “*you must play for the benefit of the band.*” Time-keeping is a skill that should develop into an intuitive (natural) ability. Good time creates a stability of feel and flow that should be established on the downbeat and stop on the cutoff. It is not only an essential element of the basic beat pattern throughout ensemble and solo sections, but also necessary for fills, kicks and drum solos. The TIME should NEVER STOP, no matter what musical event is taking place.

Practice Basic Time in a variety of styles at various tempos, with a metronome. It is very important to practice your “time” for several minutes...not measures! To this end, check out *Mr. Click II*, a dbl CD 3-4 minute tracks from ¼ = 40 to ¼ = 180. The *Turn it Up & Lay it Down* Cds are also great as are many of the numerous play-a-longs currently available. Suggestions for practicing basic time:

- A.** Within a select style, practice a basic groove for 2 - 8 minutes, until it feels natural and easy.
- B.** Alternate phrases between a set tempo and double time; then double time again; Reverse the pattern.
- C.** Alternate phrases of varying feels; 16 measures of Swing into 16 measures of Samba.
- D.** Alternate phrases of time with phrases of soloing; trading 4’s or 8’s or entire choruses.

All components of your time should flow together in a smooth and connected manner. Conceptualize legato for “all time,” even if you’re playing staccato.

3. Basic Independence

Independence allows you to respond freely to the music you are playing. An excellent book for practicing independence is *Syncopation* by Ted Reed. I suggest practicing within the context of a basic groove while reading the written lines:

1. On the Snare Drum
2. On the Bass Drum
3. 1/8 notes on the SD, 1/4 notes on the BD
4. 1/8 notes on the BD, 1/4 notes on the SD. Tom-Toms can be substituted for the SD at your discretion.

If you want to further expand these exercises read the written lines:

1. On the Hi-Hat
2. 1/4 notes on the HH, 1/8 notes on the BD
3. 1/4 notes on the BD, 1/8 notes on the HH.
4. You may exchange any foot part for any hand part in either a predetermined pattern or improvised.

One of my favorite books for practicing independence is *Stick Control* by George Lawrence Stone. Within the context of a basic groove play all notes marked with an “R” (right) on the BD. Simultaneously take all notes marked with an “L” (left) and play it on the SD or Tom-Toms. You may also practice the “R” and “L” as BD and HH parts or exchange any “L” note (in a predetermined pattern or improvised) between the HH and SD/Toms. Obviously numerous variations are possible.

4. Basic Stylistic Interpretation

This seems obvious, but you have to know the style in which you are playing. Precise stylistic interpretation allows you to be “true” to the intention of the music. As a general starting point, stylistic interpretation can be as simple as deciding if the music is Jazz, Rock, Latin or some other general style.

However, in order to achieve authentic style within these general categories much deeper study is required. There are literally dozens, if not hundreds of musical styles. For example **JAZZ** includes Dixieland, Swing, Be-Bop, Hard Bop, Fusion etc. **ROCK** includes 1950’s, Rock-n-Roll, Motown, Funk, Hip-Hop, etc. **LATIN** includes Samba, Bossa Nova, Baiiao, Mambo, Salsa, Mozambique, etc. Musical styles are constantly being invented and redefined. The following books are excellent sources for studying prevalent styles of music. *Afro-Cuban Rhythms for Drum set* by Frank Malabe and Bob Weiner, *The Art of Bop Drumming* and *Beyond Bop Drumming* by John Riley, *Advanced Funk Studies* by Rick Latham, and *Brazilian Rhythms for Drum Set* by Duduka Da Fonseca and Bob Weiner.

The best way to interpret, understand and dig deep into various styles of music is to listen daily as part of your practice regime and identify what musical elements define that style. Exercise: select a general genre, like jazz and play a specific groove/exercise with several variations. For example, interpret as Dixieland, Swing, Be-Bop, Post-Bop or by specific player’s styles; Dodds, Krupa, Philly Jo, Elvin, Blakey, Max Roach, Buddy, etc. Check out Daniel Glass’s DVDs *From Ragtime to Rock* and *The Century Project* for a comprehensive overview of musical styles from the drum set. Tommy Igoe’s *Groove Essentials* is also an excellent source for identifying basic styles and grooves.

5. Basic Reading

Reading is a required skill for all serious musicians in most of today’s musical environments. One way to become a good reader is to read (sight read) a lot of music during your practice sessions; don’t practice,

just read and if you make a mistake keep going. Recovering from mistakes is an important aspect of being a successful reader. The music you choose to “sight-read” should be played in a pre-determined style and tempo. It should be musical...not simply notes without a context.

A common ability shared by good readers is the immediate recognition of rhythmic motives, phrases and groups of rhythmic figures. When you acquire this ability, your identification of, and reaction to, “the music,” will be instantaneous and precise. Two excellent books for practicing basic reading are *Syncopation* by Ted Reed and *Modern Reading Text in 4/4* by Louis Bellson. For beginners simply read the exercises as written on the SD and Toms; add simple BD and HH accompaniment if possible. Use the suggestions in the Independence section of this document to practice reading within various grooves.

Chart Reading requires you to follow the form (road map) of the piece being played. Drum parts are notated in many ways. There is no “standard” notation that you can study/memorize that will apply to every chart. Some charts are very clear, precise and easy to follow with all necessary information included. Other times parts may be nothing more than a sketch (play 8 bars at letter A, 16 bars at B etc.), a rhythm section lead sheet or a copy of a horn part. Steve Houghton’s book *Studio and Big Band Drumming* provides excellent examples of several possible chart variations. No matter what kind of chart you’re given, you are expected to accurately read the written music and, more importantly, to interpret, improvise, be creative and make the music sound and feel good. Ultimately your goal is to memorize the chart(s) so you no longer have to read. Get the music in your head, and your head out of the music.

6. Basic Kicks, Fills & Set-Ups

To kick, set-up, punch, hit, fill or “catch” a written figure means to accent, support and/or “frame” that figure in a musical and stylistically appropriate manner. Being successful at this requires going well beyond the notation. It requires creativity, improvisation, musical taste, awareness and intention; what is your set-up supposed to accomplish? I’ve divided figure interpretation into 2 categories: **Kicks**, that occur during light ensemble, soli or background sections and may be played as part of the on-going beat pattern and **Fills & Set-ups** occurring during tutti or shout sections. You may be required to “catch” figures from both categories simultaneously. It is up to you to determine what type of kick, hit, punch, fill or set-up is required. Keep in mind your job is to enhance, support and prepare ensemble entrances. Whether it is a trio or big band, the way in which the drummer sets up a shout section or catches the figures of a given chart creates the feel, style, phrasing and dynamics for the entire ensemble. Good set-ups will make the ensemble entrances powerful, clear and precise. A bad set-up may cause a “train wreck”. All kicks, fills, set-ups, punches and hits should be in the style of the music you are playing (no Zeppelin-Bohnam fills for a Count Basie chart) and executed with solid time and a good feel.

Four Basic Ways to Learn How to Set-Up a Band.

1. Find recordings of music for which you have a drum part, listen to them and transcribe what you hear, even if it isn’t 100% accurate. 2. Aurally identify common figures and their accompanying kicks, set-ups, on recordings or from live performances (without the drum part) and memorize them, make them part of your musical vocabulary. You can also transcribe a drum part 3. Isolate select rhythmic motives or phrases (perhaps from a reading exercise) and practice setting-up those motives/phrases within a variety of tempi, styles and musical situations. 4. Write out and memorize a variety of basic set-ups that work for common figures in a variety of musical styles. Your ears are a major factor in developing this drum-centric musical necessity. Transcribing and stealing “licks” is not bad, it is a crucial step in your musical development. Learning is imitation and assimilation, followed by innovation. Mel Lewis, Buddy Rich, Jeff Hamilton, Jo Jones, Sonny Payne, John Von Ohlen, Shadow Wilson and Dennis Mackrel are some of my favorite “Kickers.”

Notation Key

PAS Standardized Drumset Notation



7. Basic Concepts for Soloing

IN-TIME and OUT-OF-TIME are the 2 most Common Soloing Situations for Drummers

An IN-TIME Solo can be any length of time from one measure (solo fill) to soloing on the form of a tune, soloing on a vamp or even an un-structured form. The major, obvious requirement for an in-time solo is that it be in the time (tempo) of the tune you are playing. The time can be manipulated with double-time/half-time, groove alterations (Latin to Swing to Rock) and texture but the underlying pulse should always be identifiable. If you are playing within a specific style or form your solo should reflect and embody characteristics specific to that musical situation. I also suggest playing genre specific “standards” on the drum set, both the melody and improvising. Excellent examples of this style of soloing are Jeff Hamilton’s solo version of *Caravan* on his trio recording, *It’s Hamilton Time* and Ari Hoenig’s arrangement of *Anthropology* from his CD *The Painter*.

An OUT-OF-TIME or OPEN Solo can be one of the most exciting opportunities for a drummer. You are given an empty space of indeterminate length (often indicated by a fermata) and expected to play something AMAZING. An open solo is the perfect opportunity for the drummer to express their *musicality* (connectedness with the music being played), *creativity* (fresh ideas of sound and color) and *technique* (show-off your chops) in any way you choose.

Ideas for Practicing Soloing: Select one basic element of music, such as *rhythm, melody, harmony, dynamics, orchestration, form, sound* (color, touch and balance), *phrasing, emotion, technique*, etc. and explore, develop and manipulate as many aspects of that selected element as possible. As your confidence and ability grows, combine the “elements” together as you choose. Although none of these elements exist in a vacuum, and often occur simultaneously, it’s important to begin simple, be patient, listen and respond to the music. Let your ideas grow slowly and naturally along with your creativity and intuitiveness. Exercise: create a simple rhythmic motive and play it simply on the SD, then orchestrate, then add dynamics, then phrasing, then a specific style, then form, then add rhythmic modulations, etc.

Transcribe, Memorize & Apply small licks, motives, grooves, fills and complete solos from every drummer you hear. Take the elements you love, the ones that speak to you and use them to benefit your unique musical situations. You can also take and apply ideas from all instrumental and vocal solos.

7. Listening

One of the best ways to develop as a player is to listen daily as part of your practice regime. You want to develop a deep reservoir of musical references that you can draw upon in all circumstances to help inform and inspire “the music.” As a drummer you truly need to understand a wide-variety of genres, styles and grooves; what YOU play can make or break the music! I suggest keeping a listening journal. This will help you keep track of areas in your listening that may need more attention. It will also generate an extensive “listening list” to share with others. Below are some general listening categories you should explore, then refine based on your personal and professional goals. Listening to something new will never hurt your talent or creativity, Even if you don’t like something, you will become more informed.

Jazz & Blues
Rock & Pop
World Music
Country & Gospel
Classical & Broadway
Afro-Cuban
Brazilian
Heavy Metal, Hip Hop & Rap

SUGGESTED DVD & METHOD BOOKS

INSTRUCTIONAL DVD/CDs

<i>South American, Caribbean, African and American Jazz for Drum Set Latin Rhythms</i>	Alex Acuna Steve Berrios
<i>Mastering The Art of Afro-Cuban Drumming</i>	Ignacio Berroa
<i>The Living Art of Brushes</i>	Clayton Cameron
<i>Ragtime and Beyond</i>	Herlin Riley
<i>Secret Weapons for the Modern Drummer</i>	JoJo Mayer
<i>Drumset Technique/History of the US Beat</i>	Steve Smith
<i>Turn it Up & Lay it Down Play-a-Long Series</i>	Spencer Strand

HISTORICAL DVD

<i>BUDDY RICH - Jazz Legend, parts 1 and 2</i>	(DCI)
<i>LEGENDS OF JAZZ DRUMMING - parts 1 and 2</i>	(DCI)
<i>From Ragtime to Rock – Daniel Glass</i>	Alfred
<i>The Century Project – Daniel Glass</i>	Alfred

RELATED TEXT BOOKS

<i>Drummin' Men 1 and 2</i>	Burt Koral
<i>Traps the Drum Wonder (Buddy Rich)</i>	Mel Torme

SELECT METHOD BOOKS

JAZZ

<i>Advanced Techniques for the Modern Drummer</i>	Jim Chapin
<i>Groove Essentials</i>	Tommy Igoe
<i>Studio and Big Band Drumming</i>	Steve Houghton
<i>The Art of Bop Drumming and BeBop and Beyond</i>	John Riley

LATIN

<i>Afro-Cuban Rhythms for Drumset</i>Frankie Malabe/Bob Weiner
<i>Brazilian Rhythms for Drumset</i>	DuDuka Da Fonseca/Bob Weiner
<i>Afro/Latin Rhythmic Dictionary</i>	Thomas A. Brown

FUNK/CONTEMPORARY

<i>The New Breed</i>	Gary Chester
<i>Advanced Funk Studies</i>	Rick Latham
<i>Contemporary Drum set Technique</i>	Rick Latham

READING/TECHNIQUE

<i>Modern Reading Text in 4/4</i>	Louis Bellson/Gil Breine
<i>Accent on Accents (Books 1 and 2)</i>	Elliot Fine/Marvin Dahlgren
<i>Syncopation for the Modern Drummer</i>	Ted Reed
<i>Stick Control</i>	George Lawrence Stone
<i>Wrist and Finger Stroke Control</i>	Charley Wilcoxon