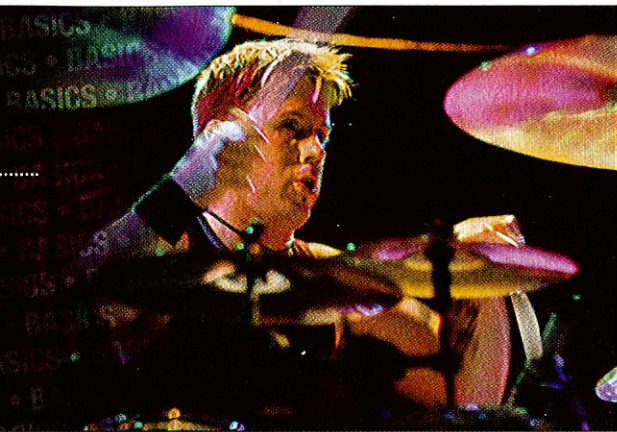


How To Be A More Musical Drummer

Tips To Keep In Mind For Playing With A Band

by Jeremy Hummel



We've heard it many times before, how important it is to be musical when playing drums, or any instrument for that matter. What really gives us drummers an opportunity to do this is the fact that we can manually control our dynamic levels. But what does it really mean—this term “musical”? Let's examine some techniques and ideas to help understand this better.

Playing Under The Music

In its purest form, music is an expressive conversation—not only among bandmates, but also with the audience. A good conversation is one that allows space for all to be heard at his or her appropriate times. Being musical is about selecting the right words or “textures” within the conversation. It's also about when to lay low and listen—or to rise and embellish what another is trying to say.

For example, do you know what it means to play “under” the music? Let's use a number scale of one to ten (with ten being the loudest) to better illustrate this. Suppose the band is on eight; are you comfortable playing on six? To use a visual aide, imagine that you're in the ocean. The band's dynamic level is at sea level. You would be playing just underwater. Another idea is to think of “tucking yourself inside the music.”

In one of the bands I perform with, there's a bass player who is so solid that I sometimes enjoy playing just under him dynamically. He's usually playing only half notes or 8th notes, but because the *tone* and *timing* are impeccably strong, I don't feel as though I have to “control the time” as much. It allows me to do anything I want. I can play above, below, paint around the beat, etc.

Which Color Sounds Good Here?

When you're playing with others, strive to get musical sounds or textures pertaining to the context of the music. For example, if you're in the verse section of a tune and want to do some hi-hat work à la Stewart Copeland, Dennis Chambers, or

Carter Beauford, it's usually best to use the tip of the stick on top of the cymbals, rather than the shoulder on the edge of the cymbal. While neither is right or wrong, the former is generally more pleasing to the ear and, technically speaking, provides a better bounce.

If required, can you “feather” the bass drum rather than accent every hit? The idea here is to be “felt” rather than “heard.”

Try sometimes to play a kick-snare-hat beat with one of those elements on a lesser volume than the other two. For example, play the bass drum and hi-hat normally and the snare softer. It's not easy to do!

Can you play a crash cymbal without bashing it? Crashes have many uses other than acting as an exclamation point. There are swells, swipes across the edge, etc.

Are the fills there to make musical transitions and be complementary to the song? Or are they there because we need to throw in the hippest thing we've been working on? Hmm.

But...My Band Plays Loud!

I know that some of you are out there thinking, “Yeah, this sounds great for the jazz and soft rock guys, but I play in a heavy rock band. How does this apply to me?” Even though you might play mostly at high volumes, musical also means “plays

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well with others.” For example, do you get a sense that your bandmates are locked in and grooving? Are they enjoying the music? Remember, much of how good the music *feels* is dependent on the drummer.

I sometimes like to do what I call “checks and balances,” where I'll look around at each member of the band for positive signs. It could be something as simple as a head bobbing in time, letting you know he's feeling it; or an ear-to-ear smile (though for some reason it seems to have become uncool to smile onstage—I'm not sure why).

Here's a big one—if you're in a band that utilizes the guitar

solo, make the solo a real event for the guitarist. Sometimes it seems as though musicians use the guitar solo as an opportunity for *everybody* to solo. Drummers will sometimes play extra fills and cymbal crashes simply because there are no vocals. By giving your bandmates and, most importantly, the song some space to shine, the band not only sounds better, they'll consider you their favorite drummer to play with!

In many of the great rock guitar solos, the most the drummer does is accent or embellish here and there. A good example of this would be "Sweet Child O' Mine" by Guns 'N Roses. Steven Adler simply played a nice pocket groove while accenting with the band.

Busy Vs. Simplistic

If you're playing fairly simple or straight-ahead beats, there's a multitude of ways to make things interesting. One of my favorite songs to play along with is Steve Jordan on John Mayer's "Vultures" (which can be found on his discs *Continuum* and *Try!*). Within this one song, techniques such as playing under the music can be experimented with, as Steve certainly does. Additionally, there's much to be learned by noticing where he accents the hi-hat, and in realizing that there are barely any fills.

Another one to check out is Brad Wilk on Audioslave's "Like A Stone." Notice how the groove is simultaneously driving *and* lilting. This is mainly due to the hip accents on the hi-hat.

For the busier players, I recommend sinking your teeth into Jose Pasillas of Incubus or Rush's Neil Peart (to name two). These guys have always been creative and busy, yet I never felt they got in the way of the music.



In The End...

There is a thought I like to keep in mind and often share with students: "It's best to *complement* the music, rather than *complicate* it." I'm not suggesting technical proficiency doesn't have its place. But it's to be musical to know when to use it.

Jeremy Hummel was an original member of Breaking Benjamin. He helped that group achieve platinum status with their second release, *We Are Not Alone*. He has since turned his efforts to session work and drum instruction in Pennsylvania. Jeremy can be reached at his Web site, www.jeremyhummel.com.



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