

Fresher Fills

Creating Magic Moments In Music

by Jeremy Hummel

In my March '06 *MD* article, I discussed approaches to conceiving drum parts, with the emphasis being on different ways to come up with a groove that complements the song. Another subject that comes up frequently among my students and other drummers is how to play fresher fills.



Grooves and fills are two different entities. Grooves occur for an extended period of time in the song. In fact, a groove is the basic feel that the tune is based on. Fills, on the other hand, are moments—blasts of energy, exclamation points, or perhaps a few subtle hits to set up a new section. Where grooves are the sentences, fills are the punctuation.

Searching For Something New

Drummers are always looking to play some new fills rather than the same old thing. I've talked to many people who feel that their fills are stagnant, lacking excitement or originality. This frequently occurs because we often play what we know rather than risk "messing up" or not sounding good immediately.

I believe that lack of originality is the result of one of two factors. Either our musical library doesn't have enough information, or there is *too much thinking*

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involved. I've done experiments with my students on this matter, and I've noticed a common theme.

Here's the scenario: I'll ask the student to play a basic groove for four or eight bars, with a fill at the end of the section (as one would play to transition from a verse to a chorus). In most cases, what happens is that while the student is playing the verse groove,

the thought process begins: "What am I going to play for the fill?" As soon as that thought becomes a factor, nine times out of ten the student will play something he or she has already performed hundreds of times.

Ya Gotta Let Go

When in doubt or pressed, we usually go with what we know. Familiarity can be a comforting feeling. But drumming and music are like life: If you want some excitement, you sometimes have to allow yourself to let go and be in the moment. Playing the same fill all the time is like going to your favorite Italian restaurant and only ever ordering the spaghetti. If you want a fresh, unique experience, you need to be willing to try something different on the menu.

I realize that spontaneity may not come easily to everyone. If it did, we'd never have the problem of coming up with new things. For many people, it's simply a matter of getting started in a new direction. Hopefully, this article will help you with this.

Getting Started

To begin with, start somewhere different. I think we all have a favorite place to go at the beginning of our fills. In rock music, it tends to be the snare drum. Try kicking things off on one of the toms or the hi-hat. Or perhaps start the fill with a bass drum hit and a cymbal crash. We usually just think of crashes coming at the end of phrases, but they can be used anywhere—if it's done tastefully. A good reference for putting crashes at different spots is Josh Freese on either of his recordings with A Perfect Circle, or on Chris Cornell's *Euphoria Morning*.

Next, how about using some different stickings? For example, if you're used to doing all single strokes around the kit, try doing double strokes—or a combination of the two.

Another concept that could really help to change things up is to simply place accents at different spots. It's very common to accent on the "1" or on the quarter notes. Instead, try coming into the fill with a subtle or softer double stroke on the snare, and then putting the emphasis on the "&" or the "2." A great way to help with this is to revisit your rudiments and incorporate accent displacement, starting with single, double, and triple paradiddles. The options are endless.

Rudimentally Speaking

I love showing students who are just starting out how rudiments can be applied to the drumkit. They usually have a look of amazement, because this is stuff they don't teach in most schools. For example, the next time you're at your kit, try doing a single paradiddle (RLRR LRL) by putting the ride cymbal and bass drum together for each "R" and using your snare for each "L." Start off slow, but once you speed it up and get it going fluidly, it sounds really cool. Want a tribal feel? Put your hands on the toms instead of the ride and snare. This is something you can do with the whole drumkit. Experiment with different tones. Challenge yourself by adding accents, changing hand and feet placements, and so forth.

Variety Is The Spice

Some other options you can employ within your fills are syncopation, call & response (repeating your hand pattern with your feet), and melodic variety. (Instead of always descending on the fill, try starting with the lower pitches and moving your way up.) In addition, use *all* of your gear. We don't spend all that money on accessories like blocks, bells, and mounted tambourines just to hit each of them once a week.

How about playing a fill for longer than you are accustomed to doing? I tried this a few years ago at the behest of a producer, and it definitely forced me into trying some new things. I had become used to the standard practice of playing a fill over two beats (half a bar of four). I was surprised to discover what filling over two extra beats could spawn.

Check Yourself Out

Okay, now that you hopefully have some different approaches, put some of these ideas to use and record yourself playing freely. Before or after you've done your practice exercises, let go of your inhibitions and your habitual tendencies. Play from your heart and *not* from your head. This should actually be part of your practice regimen.

The key to this experiment is to play without a net. Express yourself! If what you are doing is premeditated, it's probably going to be the same ol' thing. If you let go, I think you'll be surprised when you listen back. Even if you only hear one thing that is new or exciting, that is an accomplishment. Perhaps you can take that fill and use it again, or tweak it until you love it. Maybe it's just a matter of shifting a floor tom hit or changing the placement of a cymbal crash or two.

Remember, drum icons such as Keith Moon, John Bonham, and Tony Williams often played by the seat of their pants. How about Stewart Copeland on those early Police records? Do you think he was analyzing what was coming next? Or Bonham on Zeppelin's

How The West Was Won live recordings? Sometimes it bordered on a train wreck, but most of the time, it was spectacular. (And let's be honest: Even when it *was* a train wreck, did we really care?)

Do Your Homework

Finally, I can't stress enough the importance of having a strong library of musical ideas to draw from. Those ideas and concepts can then be expanded on by your imagination. If you've been listening to mostly the same style of music lately, it's always a good idea to step outside that box.

When I need some inspiration for a different approach, I listen to music that is *not* in the genre I'm working on. For example, if I'm working on a rock project, I may get out my Dave Weckl or Dennis Chambers CDs. If I'm involved in a funk situation, I might put on some jazz with Bill Stewart.

I hope some of these ideas will assist you in your creative endeavors. Part of the fun of creating is hearing something come to life. Whether it's conceiving drum parts or trying new fills, there are no boundaries. It's not about right and wrong, it's about what comes from your heart. Have fun!

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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