

Play It Like You Mean It

by Jeremy Hummel

In his June '06 *MD* cover story, Chad Smith of The Red Hot Chili Peppers said, "You have to play with confidence. You have to *own* the drums." This is a concept that I've been trying to drive home to my students, and to other drummers. Whether at lessons in my house or at a performance in a club, I've witnessed far too many drummers who come off as hesitant. The drumset is one instrument that is *not* meant to be played hesitantly.

I realize that we all have different personalities, with varying degrees of confidence. I also understand that when one is learning something new, confidence doesn't play too big of a role. But once you figure out a new groove or pattern, or learn a song, you've got to reach down inside and *own* that part or groove.

One way I've tried to explain this is to use a comparison to athletes. Think of the first few times that you play through a new part or song as "preparation for the game." In football, when Sunday comes around, those guys are *prepared*. They play with confidence, letting it all hang out. They are using their instincts rather than conscious thought, which they're able to do because of their preparation.

It's Not How Hard You Hit

Playing it like you mean it applies to all styles of music. I've been asked the question, "Does playing with confidence mean playing louder?" My answer is, "Only if that's what's appropriate for the music." Confident playing isn't measured by your volume, but by the passion, life, and soul you inject into the music.

Let's take one example: a gig at which you are merely an accompanist. I recently started gigging with a singer/songwriter named Bret Alexander. We're going out as a duo, playing some small rooms where my tools include a small kit, a djembe, and some shakers and other percussion instruments. Even when I'm simply providing a pulse with a pair of shakers, I try to approach every note with heart

and soul. It's important to realize that you can play at low volumes and still be confident within the music.

Remember, the musicians you're playing with are relying on you to provide the foundation. Drummers are the engine that drives *all* genres of music. Why else are the drums tracked first in the studio? Why else do bands go outside of their own group to get a session drummer? One reason is because it's quicker than trying to "correct" a sub-par drummer. But more importantly, the experienced and confident session guy will ultimately make the track sound better.

Where Does YOUR Fire And Confidence Come From?

I sometimes ask myself if having fire and passion in one's playing is something that can be learned. Or is it an intangible quality that you either have or you don't? While I do believe that many of the great drummers are born with it, I also think that fire and passion in one's playing can be improved. Here are a few suggestions.

Immerse yourself in music of all kinds. I'm floored by the number of young musicians who, when asked to name some of their favorite bands, can cite only one or two artists. Exposure to your craft is key!

Bring your emotions to the drums. Everyday life experiences are fantastic motivations for soulful playing. For example, the obvious one would be if someone had "done you wrong" recently. You could tear into your kit at that night's show or rehearsal and put some vengeance into your playing.

On the other hand, maybe something really exciting has happened to you (new girlfriend...new gig...you won the lottery...), causing you to approach your drumming with a

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Basics

joyful exuberance. The point is to use what's going on in your life to express yourself on your instrument.

Make us believe! Drummers and singers are generally the ones who sell a song. The music can move a listener when the vocalist delivers a performance with conviction. The next time your band plays a song, ask yourself if you're *drumming* with conviction. Would you feel it if you were a spectator or a listener, rather than the player? If the drummer doesn't provide a groove that shakes butts or makes heads bob, the chances for success are much slimmer.

You've Played That Song 10,000 Times

It's one thing to play with a newly found—or rediscovered—passion. It's another to maintain that passion in the face of brutal repetition. Those of us who have played in cover bands sometimes despair at how many more times we must sit through “Mustang Sally,” “Old Time Rock 'N' Roll,” “Born To Be Wild,” “Smoke On The Water”...you get the point. Even on the best of gigs, if you're doing original material several nights a week, or sticking to the same set list whenever you perform, monotony can set in. Here are some ways to remedy the situation.

“I'm just glad to be here.” I spent a little over two years in a blues band, and after the first six months I was sure that if I had to play Stevie Ray Vaughan's “Pride

& Joy” one more time, I was going to go crazy. But then I'd stop and think to myself, “Hey, at least you've got a gig.” We were playing three to four nights a week steadily throughout the year. Having a gig is something to be thankful for in itself.

“Tonight, I'm really going to lock in with the bass player.” You woke up in a bad mood and ran around like a headless chicken just to make the gig on time. You're tired, and frankly, you really don't feel like playing tonight. To make matters worse, there are only twenty-five people in the club. What do you do?

Make a conscious decision to lock in with the bass player and create a deeper pocket than the two of you have ever had before. There may only be twenty-five people listening, but every single one of them is going to dig it. Remember, it's not the people who *didn't* show up that matter, it's the ones who *did*.

“My goal tonight is to have everyone on the dance floor.” Granted, this should be your mentality every time out, but sometimes that stiff dude at the back table just won't get off his ass to dance. Tonight, it's going to happen!

“Let's try something new.” Another approach would be to try a few new fills or other subtle nuances in the songs. It shouldn't be anything too obvious or wild enough to throw your bandmates off. Just a bit of spice to keep things interesting for you.

It Ain't About The Notes

So you don't have the best chops in the world. Who cares? The band hired you for a reason. Even if you're just laying down 2 and 4, you should play that groove like you'll never play drums again. The passion, personality, and confidence you invoke is what gives the music life.

A hesitant drummer can make a great band mediocre. A confident drummer can make a mediocre band sound great. Play it like you mean 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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