

DRUM ROLE

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Music is the universal language of emotion. From joy to anger, music is a medium for people from all corners of the world to express their feelings. In music, one of the best ways to relieve stress and “let it out” is to bang on a drum set. Of all the instruments, the drums would be the ones you would think would be the least relaxing. Walk into any music store and you can see the clerks wincing any time a customer sits behind a set. Yet, playing the drums is strangely relieving. In a band scenario, a drummer must stay relaxed to deal with the rigors of playing a live show. The drummer is an essential part of every band, and a relaxed, level headed drummer can make the difference between playing your garage or Times Square. Yet exactly what role does the drummer play in a band?

Research shows that the most prevalent part of drumming is the role of the actual drummer in the band. According to Street Directory, “The Importance of a Drummer,” the drummer is the backbone of the band (Street). Sitting on what’s called a throne (the seat), a drummer overlooks the progress and is an essential part of every musical group, ranking above even the guitars. Michael Erlewine, author of the All Music Guide to Rock explains why a drummer is so critical. According to Erlewine, a band cannot function without a drummer because “A drummer keeps the rhythm and tempo of the band, an off beat drummer can easily lead the band astray” (Erlewine). If the drummer plays too fast or too slow, the band cannot keep a steady rhythm. A drummer is so important that if a guitarist messes up the band can keep playing, but if the drummer messes up, the band

has to stop. “There is simply no way to hide or cover up poor drumming skills” (Street). In this sense, the drummer is the most important part of the band, but also the weakest, for if he makes a mistake everyone knows it. “A band is only as good as it’s weakest member, which is the drummer” (Street). Most musicians will agree that when looking for accompaniment percussion is usually the first thing that comes to mind. Besides keeping the rhythm and controlling the band in a show, the drummer lays the foundation for a song. A house cannot stand without a solid, stable foundation and a song would be horrible without a strong beat, which is provided by a drummer. Ashley Brown, editor of The Illustrated History of Popular Music gives an insight into what happens when a drummer goes astray. “Jack Irons [from the Red Hot Chili Peppers] was asked to leave multiple times because of poor rhythm, he was finally fired once the band got big. This proves that no matter how famous a band gets, the drummer will always be scrutinized” (Brown). Though there are cases, like Jack Iron’s, in which the drummer is asked to leave because of poor rhythm, there are also cases in which a drummer cannot improvise. Pete Best was the Beatles’ original drummer, but due to his lack of ability to improvise to cover up some minor blunders on stage he was replaced in August 1962 by Ringo Starr. “There is no denying the importance of a drummer and for the Beatles finding a permanent one proved to be a problem” (Erlewine). Total confidence in his abilities, steady rhythm and good sense are all important components of a great drummer.

I spoke with a real drummer, Mr. Pardue, and interviewed him on certain things that I thought were necessary to know before actually tackling a drum set. He also strengthened the thought that a drummer is the most important part of a band. I asked him why he thought so: “The drummer’s primary role is to be the glue that holds a band

together. He is many times responsible for starting a song by providing stick clicks or an introductory drum 'fill' to establish the tempo of a song. It's also his/her job to maintain that tempo throughout a song. Every drummer at some points struggles with tempo. The tendency is to play faster as the song increases in volume.” He goes on to say how a band is a cake and a drummer is the icing between the layers. It gets a bit confusing, but I figured it out. A drummer not only keeps rhythm, starts a song and sets the tempo, but he also manages the band.

To be a drummer, rhythm is of great importance. Yet, having rhythm consists of many things. Surprisingly, one of these is balance. Having balance is essential to any good drummer (Brown). I can vouch from personal experience that if you get too into the song and your smashing away you can easily lose your balance from twisting around so much and fall out of the throne. For beginners a large stable, non twisting throne is recommended. Also to develop a sense of rhythm, there are things called drum machines, which are different from electric drum sets. A drum machine is used to keep tempo and rhythm in measures with any kind of count you want (4/4, 2/4 etc). These machines are great to develop a sense of rhythm, but nothing can nurture rhythm like actually playing the drums. Electric drum sets on the other hand, are also good for beginners because they aren't as expensive and a headset can be connected to them which allow just the drummer to hear. This is a blessing for anyone who lives with a fledgling drummer because nobody wants to hear an off beat newbie on a real set (Expert Village).

Now that you have rhythm and an understanding of why a drummer is so important to a band we can get to the fun stuff. “Real drums, sometimes called classic drums, have the authentic loud sound of rock and roll, yet can also be the quiet tap of jazz

or the bassy sound of hip hop”(Expert Village). A classic drum set is made up of two basic components: drums and cymbals. Your basic set has a high-hat cymbal, a bass drum, a snare drum, a crash cymbal, a floor tom, and one or two tom-toms. A high hat is composed of two cymbals one on top of the other, attached to a rod which is connected to a pedal. This pedal moves the rod up and down and clashes the cymbals together. A snare drum has a sort of chain attached to the bottom, and when taut, this chain vibrates giving the snare its snap. Bass drums are played with pedals and can be booming or a short thud. Toms are basically your ‘George of the Jungle’ drums and are used for filler. Cymbals accent the music (Expert Village).

Music truly is the universal language. From the rain forests of South America to the Great Wall of China, drums make up a large part of mankind’s music.

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Personal Interview. James Pardue, December 1, 2008.

PERSONAL INTERVIEW WITH JAMES PARDUE

1. The drummer's primary role is to be the glue that holds a band together. He is many times responsible for starting a song by providing stick clicks or an introductory drum 'fill' to establish the tempo of a song. It's also his/her job to maintain that tempo throughout a song. Every drummer at some points struggles with tempo. The tendency is to play faster as the song increases in volume.

2. I feel that the drummer does lead the band, but I may be biased. I think of a song as a cake. The different layers of the song represent the different instruments. The bass guitar is on the bottom (of course), the rhythm guitar and keyboards are in the middle and the lead guitar is on top. The vocals or melody of the song is the icing. And you can decorate the cake with vocal harmonies, guitar solos, or whatever you want but if you don't put some icing between the layers, the cake will fall over. The drummer is that icing. You don't see him much, he's in the back of the stage just like the icing is inside the cake, but the drummer is very important.

3. That takes practice and some coordination. I don't see how guitarists or keyboardists manipulate their fingers as they do. Drummers optimally would like to be ambidextrous, but we always have a dominant hand. I can do things with my right hand that my left hand could never think about doing. Carter Beauford (Dave Matthews Band) is one of favorite drummers. He is left handed but plays on a right handed setup (there is a difference). He plays his hi-hat open handed (his left hand) where as RH drummers play cross handed (R over L). It freaks me out to watch him play.

4. Maybe take basic lessons, but watch other drummers on video or YouTube. I learned more from watching other drummers than I ever learned from a lesson. Play air drums or I used to play on our loveseat at home before I got my first real set. I would squat on the floor, the left arm was my hi-hat, the snare the left cushion, toms - the back cushions, floor tom - the right cushion, ride cymbal - right arm, and the crash cymbals - the top of the loveseat. Put on some headphones (or put in your buds) and go to it.

5b. Not necessarily. If the music your playing calls for it (Death Metal, Prog Rock, etc.) then yes. Many top drummers don't use them but in metal, most of them do. A double pedal is cheaper, easier to transport, and you don't have to worry about tuning the 2 bass drums to match. I have a double pedal and I don't use it alot. I sprinkle it in on certain beats or drum fills in a song. I can sit there and go dubba-dubba-dubba at 500 mph like Joey Jordison(Slipknot). Believe it or not, I practice double bass while using the bathroom. I'm not a reader,

so I sit there and play the toms on my legs and start moving my feet. My wife thinks I'm crazy, but my set is in our band studio and I can't practice at home.

5a. You had two number 5's. I listen to a song and usually practice it on my steering wheel as I drive. I try to visualize what the drummer is doing in the song. I try to replicate the drummer's fills as close as possible, just because I'm that way, but it's not necessary. I feel like the bass drum rhythm is the most important because it usually flows with the bass guitar. The snare is usually on 2 & 4, but the tom fills are up to the drummer. All drummers use their creative license. I try to make it sound as much like the recordings as I can.

6. I got my first drum set at 5 years old. It was a small set but wasn't a toy. My uncle made me a harness for the snare and many times as my first and second grade class would 'march' to the playground, I would play a cadence. My bother played trombone in the HS marching band but was a decent drummer. He taught me to play. I joined to middle school band in 6th grade but almost switched to trumpet, because I was so bored with the drums as we were learning it. I got my first real drumset in 8th grade. It was a Ludwig Amber Vistalite (clear acrylic) set. It was the same color as the one John Bonham (Zep) used in the movie, "The Song Remains the Same". I played in the band at school and in bands out of school. My first 'band' was a funk band named "Amience." I was the only white guy, which was kind of unusual in that I was the one keeping the rhythm. Then I joined a rock band called 'Overpass.' We played stuff like the Doors, Cars, Van Halen, AC/DC. Our lead singer was Mike Wheless. He's a DJ on WQDR (94.7) in the morning. He's gone country on me. In school I was the 2nd chair percussionist at All-State band my senior year. At NC State, I was drumline captain for 2 years (4th and 5th year???). I wrote several cheers with the cheerleaders that they still use and one cadence I wrote is still used as the band marches in and out of the stadium almost 20 years later. They even recorded it on a CD a few years ago but didn't give me any props. I played in several other bands in college. We played mostly frat parties but some clubs, traveling as far away a Richmond and Wilmington. We never made any money, beacuse we had to rent so much equipment. And I never picked up any girls. I was always the first one at a gig, and the last one to leave. I never had a roadie and had to pack my mess up. If you're in music for girls, stick with guitar. I tried a country band after college. That lasted two weeks. I took about 6 years off from playing in my late 20's. You know - marriage....kid....another kid. I started back playing in a contemporary christian band and I now play in Progressive Rock band, 'The Ambient Noise.' We play music stuff by Yes, Genesis, Rush, Iona (celtic) and my fav Porcupine Tree. Notice, I payed homage to my first band in the name.

