

# Teaching Jazz Drumset

By Paul Buyer

Ed Shaughnessy, legendary drummer for Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* band and PAS Hall of Famer, famously said, "In rock, the drumset is built from the bottom up. In jazz, it's built from the top down." To Shaughnessy, the *bottom up* was the danceable beat provided by the bass drum and snare drum. The *top down* was the swing feel of the ride cymbal and crisp time of the hi-hat. In my studio, this quote always begins the first jazz drumset lesson. It has an immediate impact and inspires students to look at the drumset differently than they ever have before.

Over the years, I have noticed the majority of college percussionists who come to me with drumset experience do not necessarily have a strong jazz background. Even some that played in their high school jazz band played mostly rock, funk, and Latin tunes and are often unfamiliar with jazz legends such as "Papa" Jo Jones, Mel Lewis, Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Louie Bellson, Max Roach, Art Blakey, Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, Roy Haynes, Joe Morello, Peter Erskine, Ed Shaughnessy, John Riley, Ed Soph, and many others.

This was certainly the case for me. Without a high school jazz band, my drumset experience was limited to basketball pep band and a garage band my friends and I formed that played alternative rock. In college, I was expected to not only become a well-rounded percussionist, but a well-rounded drumset player, which meant developing skills and learning grooves in a variety of musical styles. By committing to private lessons and deliberate practice, I eventually earned the opportunity to play drums in my college's second jazz band, as well as jazz combos and the University Singers show choir band.

This article is written to help drumset students, drumset teachers, and band directors develop a foundational approach to jazz drumming. Though the following content is best implemented in the private lesson studio, it can be used in any musical setting.

## LISTENING

A critical component of teaching jazz drumset is listening to music, both live and recorded. In today's digital culture, the art and discipline of listening has become increasingly rare, being replaced by watching YouTube and other online videos.

According to drumset artist, educator, and PAS Hall of Famer Ed Soph, "All kinds of materials are used to educate young jazz drummers except the music they are learning to play. Instruction is visual, not aural. The reality of the situation is that everyone can read but not everyone can hear. Musical big band drummers learn to play the music by listening to it. Listen for [concepts] that make a big band drummer musical. Listen for them in the playing of artists [like] Chick Webb, Buddy Rich, Jo Jones, Butch Miles, and Mel Lewis. You won't 'hear' these concepts in a book."

Many years ago, my professor at the University of Arizona, Gary Cook, told me a great story about how people experience live music. "One of my students came up to me and said, 'Professor Cook, did you see that concert last night?' 'Yes,' I replied, 'and I heard it too!' It was obvious from this exchange that the student watched the performance but did not listen to the music. He was not aware of balance, blend, and intonation. He did not pay attention to precision, alignment, and execution. He did not notice interpretation, phrasing, and expression. Instead, he got swept away watching the ensemble perform. While there is certainly a lot to watch during a concert such as the conductor's gestures, the musicians' body language, and the ensemble's choreography, the essence of attending a concert is about listening to the music.

According to Michael D'Angelo, Lecturer in Jazz Studies at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, "The best resource for any musician is the music itself. The more you listen to the music you want to create, the more it will become a part of you, and of course you have a model for your own development... By recognizing the qualities that make the music successful, it will be easier to incorporate those qualities into your own playing."

A few years ago, I coined a new term, *ear chops*, which is defined as the skills needed to listen to music and other musicians. By developing ear chops through a steady diet of listening over a long period of time, the music you listen to gradually "gets into your system," allowing you to expand your musical vocabulary and grow your confidence. This phenomenon also occurs in writers who read a large number of books by great authors. Over time, it "gets into their system." To learn more, see my article, "Developing Ear Chops" in Volume 1 of the *PAS Educators' Companion* at pas.org.

## FUNDAMENTALS

The fundamentals of jazz drumming include time, comping, fills, soloing, brushes, and reading.

### Time

No skill is more important for drumset than playing in time. Good time is best developed by practicing with a metronome, play-along recordings, or other musicians. Going back to Shaughnessy's quote, time in jazz is played by the ride cymbal and hi-hat, and to develop a swing feel, the ride rhythm should be interpreted in triplets. According to legendary jazz drummer Sid Catlett, "Work on your sense of time and your feeling for the beat. That's the important thing in drumming, and without it all the technique in the world doesn't mean a thing."

### Comping

As jazz pianists and guitarists know, comping refers to *complementing* or *accompanying*. In jazz drumming, this is done by playing rhythms on snare drum or bass drum to complement or accompany rhythms played by fellow band members. According to drummer Adam Nussbaum, "Concentrate on what the other instrumentalists are doing. So many drummers just listen to other drummers, but if you don't hear the other parts, you're missing what inspired the drummer to play what he's playing."



PHOTO BY RICK MATTINGLY

## Fills

Fills can be very challenging to teach, since they are usually learned from listening to music as well as to other drummers. According to Peter Erskine, a fill is “a short drum solo that is played in time, carries the music forward, is played in the style of the music, and can provide excitement...plus the unexpected.” Remember that fills are musical transitions that should always serve the music—not the drummer. Many years ago, I attended a drumset camp at Capital University where drummer Gary Chaffee taught us a game. He put limits or restrictions on what we could play during a fill, including rhythms, drums, and rudiments. Some examples were “snare drum only, using triplets,” “any drum, using eighth notes only,” and “snare and high tom only, using paradiddles.” This “fill game” forced us to do more with less and use our imagination and creativity. I remember one student who ended *every* fill he played on the floor tom. Gary promptly took the floor tom away!

## Soloing

Without question, soloing is a topic that deserves its own article, but the fundamentals of playing a drum solo can be presented here by discussing the music of the great Max Roach, known as the most melodic drummer ever. According to drummer, educator, and author John Riley, Max’s solos “could afford one the opportunity to play more elaborately and/or more bombastically. However, Max is a mature *musician*, one who is more interested in developing a solo that builds on the moods [of the song he’s playing], rather than using his solo space as a showcase for technical theatrics.” In short, play for the music—not for yourself. The paradox is that *drum solos* are an integral part of jazz, but the *drumset* is not a solo instrument. Rather, it is an ensemble instrument. Always ask yourself what the music needs and what it is hungry for, and then feed it.

## Brushes

Brush playing is a beautiful art form and craft required in jazz drumming. While a variety of techniques, patterns, and approaches exist for playing brushes, it is ultimately up to the teacher to study the best practices, players, and concepts, and create a system for teaching them. According to drummer Tommy Igoe, “I love playing brushes more than I can say—I think brush playing gives you a fresh perspective on ‘time’—and I truly believe *anyone* can play them reasonably well.” Listen to great brush players like Ed Thigpen, Peter Erskine, and Clayton Cameron, and check out their resources at the end of this article. Regardless of which patterns or shapes you choose to create with your brushes, always strive for a legato sound, solid time, and a variety of textures you can contribute to the music.

## Reading

Because drumset charts are only meant to serve as a visual guide, reading skills can sometimes be a double-edged sword. For the drummer who reads well, there is a tendency to follow the chart too literally, as if playing a written snare drum solo with the goal of playing *correctly* or “playing the ink.” This causes the drummer to “play by eye” rather than by ear, resulting in a lack of awareness and ear chops within the ensemble. For the drummer who does not read well, rhythms such as kicks, hits, and section/ensemble figures can easily be missed, resulting in a sub-standard musical product. The ideal is for the drummer to be able to read well *and* possess strong listening/ensemble skills.

## PRACTICE STRATEGIES

Drumset practice is always an interesting topic to discuss with students, as it can easily become more unstructured than other percussion practice regimens and routines. Without question, practicing drumset is fun and a wonderful opportunity to release some aggression, but should not be a jam session. Like marimba, timpani, or even tambourine, it should be disciplined and organized with specific goals to be achieved in the amount of time allotted. There is also a tendency for drumset students to spend too much time practicing what they already know, rather than developing new skills and woodshedding.

In my studio, I highly recommend students take snare drum lessons first, or at least arrive with a strong concert or rudimental background before studying drumset. There are four primary reasons for this. First, snare technique applies directly to drumset playing, especially in the application of the rudiments. Sec-

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ond, it is much more educationally sound to start on one surface than multiple surfaces. Third, it is logical to first develop hand technique before jumping in with four-limb hand/foot coordination. Finally, snare drum study, in the hands of a good teacher, will develop reading skills, which, as already discussed, is an essential skill for today’s drumset player.

One of the most effective practice strategies I use to develop hand/foot coordination is to start with one limb, adding the others in one at a time. For example, when teaching snare or bass drum comping, start with the ride cymbal only. Notice your time. Notice your swing feel and groove. Feel the rebound. Next, add the hi-hat. Notice how these two limbs feel when played precisely together. Third, add the snare drum. Notice the relationship between the snare and ride and snare and hi-hat, as well as your dynamic balance and triplet subdivision. Finally, add the bass drum and follow the same process. Try this approach with a metronome or play-along track.

After starting with one limb, isolate two limbs and mix them up. For example, play ride and snare, hi-hat and bass, or bass and snare. Then add a third limb and finally the fourth. Breaking down the limbs this way, over time, will help develop control, coordination, and independence.

Here are some other practice strategies that I recommend for all percussion instruments, especially drumset:

1. Be consistent and make practicing part of your daily routine. As author John C. Maxwell says, “The secret to your success is found in your daily agenda.”
2. Remember, *how you sound* is more important than *what you play*. Average players play. Excellent players play and listen.
3. Loop each exercise. Looping means stopping after each repetition and starting again. This gives your mind and hands time to relax and focus.
4. Focus when you practice. Be aware, notice, and pay attention to the details of your craft.
5. Practice slowly. Slow practice = fast progress. Fast practice = slow progress. No practice = no progress.
6. Begin with the end in mind. To become a great player, you need to have a great semester every semester. To have a great semester, you need to have a great lesson every week. To have a great lesson every week, you need to have a great practice session every day.

## CONCLUSION

To take a “deep dive” into teaching jazz drumset, listening, fundamentals, and practice strategies are the foundation of a sound educational approach. In addition, students will grow, develop, and improve the most by attending concerts and clinics, taking lessons, watching videos, reading articles and interviews, studying drumset history, and playing with other musicians. As John Riley said so eloquently, the great jazz drummers are “masters of the instrument. They can all really *wow* us from behind the kit. Of even more significance to me, they are also the kinds of players who other instrumentalists seek to have in their bands, because all of these drummers, despite their drumming virtuosity, always consider making *music* their number-one priority.”

## RESOURCES

### Books

*Advanced Techniques for the Modern Drummer*, Jim Chapin  
*The Art of Bop Drumming*, John Riley  
*Beyond Bop Drumming*, John Riley  
*Drummin' Men*, Burt Korall  
*Essential Drum Fills*, Peter Erskine  
*Groove Essentials 1.0 and 2.0*, Tommy Igoe  
*Mel Bay's Studio/Jazz Drum Cookbook*, John Pickering  
*Star Sets*, Jon Cohan  
*Survival Guide for the Modern Drummer*, Jim Riley  
*The Evolution of Jazz Drumming*, Danny Gottlieb  
*The Drummers Time*, Rick Mattingly  
*The Great Jazz Drummers*, Ronald Spagnardi  
*The Jazz Drummer's Workshop*, John Riley  
*Their Time Was the Greatest*, Louis Bellson

### DVDs

*Brushworks*, Clayton Cameron  
*Everything I Know: A Work in Progress*, Peter Erskine  
*Groove Essentials 1.0 and 2.0*, Tommy Igoe  
*Jazz Combo Drumming*, Danny Gottlieb  
*Legends of Jazz Drumming*, hosted by Louis Bellson  
*Secret Weapons for the Modern Drummer*, Jojo Mayer  
*Steve Gadd*, Hudson Music Master Series  
*The Art of Playing Brushes*, Adam Nussbaum and Steve Smith  
*The Century Project*, Daniel Glass  
*The Essence of Brushes*, Ed Thigpen  
*The Master Drummer*, John Riley  
*Traps*, Daniel Glass

### Websites

[drummersresource.com](http://drummersresource.com)  
[drummerworld.com](http://drummerworld.com)  
[pas.org](http://pas.org)  
[vicfirth.com/drumset-history](http://vicfirth.com/drumset-history)  
[vicfirth.com/the-jazz-trio-an-inside-view](http://vicfirth.com/the-jazz-trio-an-inside-view)

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