The Fine Art of Listening
Making Yourself More Marketable

By Rick Van Horn

There’s no question that a musician’s talent is primarily judged by how well he or she plays. But a large portion of that same musician’s quality—and marketability—depends on how well he or she listens.

How many times have you heard a well-known player complimented for having “big ears”? I’m not referring to hat supports here; I’m talking about that player’s ability to listen to everything that’s happening in his or her musical environment, assimilate it, and translate it into just the right thing to play—or not to play, as the case may be.

I once judged a drumming competition that was like a scientifically controlled experiment. Each drummer played the same tunes, with the same band, through the same sound system, for the same audience. Each one played on his own kit, and each played in both solo and ensemble spots. Although all of the contestants had an abundance of chops, there was a clear difference between them in terms of musicality. That difference was mainly how they did or didn’t listen to what was going on around them.

**KEEPING THINGS FRESH**

The greatest danger facing a working musician is complacency. When you play in the same venues frequently, and when you play the same basic repertoire for extended periods of time, it’s very easy for creative apathy to set in. You have a tendency to settle into a routine that may be very comfortable—but not particularly exciting or interesting. That lack of excitement or interest will immediately be perceived by your audience, your bandmates, and your employer.

A long-term club gig or an extended tour can be compared to a long-running Broadway musical. How do the cast members of *Phantom of the Opera* keep their performance fresh and vital in a show that’s been running for twelve years? They do it by employing a theatrical concept called “the illusion of the first time.” Simply put, it means that you approach each performance as if it’s the first time you’re doing it. All aspects—creative, emotional, and technical—are freshly dealt with every time. Working drummers should strenuously apply this same concept to listening.

**BEFORE THE BAND STARTS**

The place to start applying “the illusion of the first time” is on your drums, before the band ever starts. If, for example, you’re playing a long-term gig where you leave your kit set up, you should listen to the tuning of your drums each night as if you had just set them up in a new room. Remember, over a period of time a gradual decline in drumhead condition, tuning quality, and other factors can take place. This can happen so gradually that you may not notice it from night to night. At the start of each gig the drums will sound pretty much like they did at the end of the night before. The problem is that they may not sound the way you’d like them to ideally; it’s just what you’ve gotten used to over the course of the engagement.

On the other hand, if you come in each night and listen to the kit as if it were the first time you’d heard it, you’ll keep the tuning at its optimum—and thereby produce your best sound. Listen for heads that are unevenly tensioned or going dead. Listen for rattles or squeaks in lugs or pedals. Listen for cymbals that are losing their brightness and projection due to accumulating dirt.

Taking whatever steps are necessary to keep your sound fresh will go a long way toward keeping your playing fresh, as well.

**PLAYING WITH THE BAND**

Think of all the factors that combine to create a band’s performance. These include each player’s individual part, how all those parts are combined, the balance of individual volume levels, the “feel” and sense of time, the inspirational nature of solos, and the “lock” in the ensemble work—especially in the rhythm section. And while you can just let each of these elements “run its course” from gig to gig, you can also approach everything with a fresh perspective each night. By doing that you can create an exciting, original performance that overcomes your own complacency and also projects your best efforts to your audience.

The way to make sure that everything is working together in your band is to listen to everything else first and to yourself second. It’s simple physics: You can’t relate your playing to that of the rest of the band if you can’t hear the rest of the band. Listen to the ensemble balance, and adjust your own volume level so that you provide either the support or the leadership that’s called for at that moment. If it’s your turn to shine, then shine brightly. But be prepared to sit back and groove quietly when it’s someone else’s turn.

I’m not suggesting that every style of music should be played softly. Appropriate volume levels depend on the style of music, the size of the venue, and many other factors. But if everyone in a group is listening to everyone else first, it’s easier to maintain a proper balance.

You’ll also find that there are often subtle nuances in the playing of others that you can “latch onto” in your own playing. This can lead to the sort of musical interplay that’s always enjoyable (and that can help overcome the monotony of frequently played tunes). But you have to be listening for those nuances in order to catch them.

**ADDITIONAL BENEFITS**

There’s a political benefit to listening, too. You’ll get along better with the other members of your band if they realize that you’re actively listening to their playing and trying to support them. 

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gency." If you can hear that the vocalist is having throat problems, you can adjust your volume level—which, in turn, will likely bring the band’s overall volume down. If the guitar player breaks a string during a solo, you might be able to cue in someone else to cover (or even do so yourself). It’s even possible to make complete arrangement changes "on the fly" when everyone is listening to everyone else and communicating on stage.

PRACTICING THE ART

Listening is an art. And, as is the case with any other art form, you must practice it constantly in order to achieve a high level of proficiency at it. For the working drummer, the benefits of developing listening skills are enormous. Without them, even the most adept player is merely a technician. With them, that player truly becomes an artist.

Rick Van Horn was an editor at Modern Drummer magazine for 24 years, and his articles have also appeared in Australia’s Drumscene and Italy’s Percussioni. He tours with 1960s group Jay & The Americans, playing dates across the U.S. and Canada. As an educator, Rick has presented clinics and drum performances around the world, including the Cape Breton International Drum Festival. He’s a faculty member for the KoSA International Percussion Workshops, and he’s on the faculty at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, where he teaches undergraduate classes on how to be a working drummer and graduate classes on music journalism.

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Louie Bellson is a legend; he was a true innovator of drumming, an outstanding composer and arranger. He gave us a lifetime of music and endearing friendship that we will cherish forever. Our sympathy and love go out to the Bellson family. We will miss this True Gentleman.

From the Remo family.