

Writing About Music

BY RICK MATTINGLY

For about 30 years now, a major part of my career has involved writing and editing articles and books about music—mostly about drums and percussion. But when I was majoring in music in college, that was not part of the plan. I thought my career would comprise playing and teaching, so I never took journalism or writing courses.

Ultimately, it was my knowledge of drumming and percussion that led to my writing and editing career. I discovered that when writing about music, it is more important that the writer have an in-depth understanding of the subject matter than that he or she be an exceptional writer. For that reason, editors of music-related publications often prefer to hire a musician who has good, basic writing skills over a journalist who does not have an adequate understanding of music.

When teaching journalism classes at both the college and high school levels, I have advised students who want to pursue careers in journalism to not major in journalism. Rather, they should minor in journalism and major in the subject they most want to write about. The people who have the best careers in journalism are experts at something, such as politics, law, sports, or the arts. To me, people who know how to write well but who are not knowledgeable about a particular subject are comparable to musicians who practice scales and rudiments but never learn to play a song. They have great technique but can't apply it to anything.

By contrast, many people are extremely knowledgeable about something but assume that one has to have a journalism or English degree to get a writing assignment. Granted, you must be able to write clearly and competently, but your knowledge of the subject is more important than your writing style. Most publications have editors who can smooth out rough writing, but they need writers who can give them accurate, insightful material to work with.

In terms of drums and percussion, many PAS members are extremely qualified to write articles. You may have no desire to make

most of your living doing that, as I have done at times, but people in the arts generally have to construct their own careers from a variety of elements, and writing about your chosen art can be one of those elements.

WHY WRITE?

I never set out to make my living as a writer or editor. When I first contacted *Modern Drummer* magazine about writing articles, my goal was to add credibility to my teaching career. I was

company full time. Something similar could happen for others, but my goal here isn't to aim PN readers toward full-time careers in publishing; rather, it's to discuss ways in which writing about music can be part of a percussion- or music-based career.

For those who are teaching (or who plan to teach in the future), being published is a huge advantage. Many colleges and universities require their professors to be published, and, as an editor, I've worked with several people who write articles for that reason alone. They might make very little money from their writing, but it's worth it in terms of getting (and keeping) a good school job. Even if the school doesn't require you to be published, having published articles

on your resume will help you stand out from the crowd when going on interviews.

Many teachers get published in "scholarly" journals, often published by universities. Getting published in such journals will satisfy a school's publication requirement, and it will look good on a resume, but most of those journals don't pay the author a cent. Still, if it gets you a job or helps you keep one, it's worth it.

With drums and percussion, however, there are more options. There are several consumer magazines (*Modern Drummer*, *Drum!*, *Rhythm* [UK], *Traps*) that pay for articles, and even our artform's scholarly journal, *Percussive Notes*, gives authors a small stipend.

There can be other benefits to writing. When I first started writing for *Modern Drummer*, I did a lot of method-book reviews. Once again, it was that "expertise" thing; I was a drum teacher who taught from quite a few different books, and in the course of earning my degrees I had studied from a wide range of methods. So I had a pretty good idea of what was out there and how new books would fit in. *Modern Drummer* started sending me a lot of the new publications that were being released, and as a teacher (and perpetual student), that was worth as much as the money I got for the reviews. Granted, some of the books were junk, but then one day I found a copy of a brand-new book by Rick Latham called *Advanced Funk Studies* in



fresh out of college, had a gig with the Louisville Orchestra, and gave drum lessons at a local music store. I was one of many local teachers, and while my orchestra credentials and master's degree in percussion gave me credibility with a lot of parents, a lot of students were more interested in studying with one of the local rock drummers who were teaching around town. So I figured that writing for *Modern Drummer* from time to time would get my name out there and help me compete.

Also, I had a bachelor's degree in Music Ed., which had earned me a K-12 teaching certificate. So looking ahead to a time when I might pursue a school job, I figured that having some articles published would be to my advantage.

In my case, freelancing for *Modern Drummer* evolved into my being hired by the

my mailbox. I was the first guy in town to know about that book, and I teach from it to this day.

Likewise, many of the *Percussive Notes* reviewers are teachers, and they are thrilled to be able to check out the latest method books and solo and ensemble music. (And with music reviews, the reviewer generally gets to keep whatever he or she reviews.)

At one point in my career I was reviewing CDs for the local newspaper. I was the only reviewer doing jazz, so I got all the jazz CDs that were sent to the paper. Typically, I'd pick up about a dozen CDs a couple of times per month and the editor would tell me to pick out one or two for review. But they were all mine to keep. That was definitely worth more than what they paid for a review! Some publications will only send you the material they want you to review, but it can still be a good way to build your CD, DVD, or publications collection.

TYPES OF ARTICLES

There are a wide variety of opportunities for writing about music. Here are several that I've been involved with writing and/or editing over the years.

- **Instructional articles:** Many of the "player" magazines (magazines aimed at musicians rather than publications aimed at "fans") often run instructional articles. Most of the good ones I've seen have been written by teachers, because they are used to explaining things to students. Basically, think of an article as a single lesson. Keep the text clear and simple and include musical examples.
- **Method books:** Many instructors come up with new approaches to teaching in the course of giving lessons. If you have a unique system for teaching something, perhaps you have a book in you. But make sure it is genuinely unique. Over the years, I've probably evaluated a couple of hundred manuscripts that were submitted to *Modern Drummer* or Hal Leonard. I can't begin to remember how many variations of *Stick Control* I've seen (and rejected). Don't just rewrite something that is already out there. Come up with a new twist or an original subject.

Also, make sure your idea can be developed enough to fill a book. I've seen book manuscripts that had a lot of "filler." The author would have been better off writing a good magazine article. In fact, that's how some books have started out. Peter Erskine's book *Drum Concepts and Techniques* was built on a series of articles he wrote for *Modern Drummer* in the late 1980s.

- **Historical articles:** Are you doing research for a term paper, thesis, or dissertation? You

might be able to extract a magazine article or two from all that research.

Back when I was at *Modern Drummer*, I got a letter one day from a college student asking for permission to use quotes from an interview I had done with Philly Joe Jones for a paper he was writing for a class. I was happy to grant permission, and I asked him to send me a copy when it was finished. (It was the first time I had ever seen my name as a source in a bibliography!) His paper turned out to be a very perceptive analysis of Jones's style, and after some editing we ran it in *Modern*

If you are an expert on drumming and percussion, there can be opportunities for you to share your knowledge through articles and books, and you can supplement your income in the process.

Drummer. He went on to write other articles for us. Many of the articles in *Percussive Notes* are drawn from research papers. Sometimes we'll just use a section of a long dissertation, and we sometimes do some editing so it reads more like a magazine article than a scholarly paper, but if you've already done all the work for a school assignment, consider "repackaging" it for other publication opportunities.

- **Celebrity profiles and interviews:** When I became an editor at *Modern Drummer*, I found out very quickly that our best interviews came from authors who were also drummers. We wanted our interview subjects to "talk drums," and so they needed to be talking with an interviewer who knew what questions to ask and who understood what the subject was talking about. We also needed writers who could listen to a drummer's work on CD or see the drummer live and understand what made that drummer unique, and then be able to write about it for an audience of knowledgeable readers. Once again, knowledge of the subject was much more important than a lively writing style. This is certainly true of *Percussive Notes*, and I'm sure the editors of other drum-related publications would agree. Approach the subject as though you are taking a lesson so that readers can learn from your article. That's what the serious music publications are looking for.

- **CD/video/live performance reviews:** Many magazines and newspapers run CD and live performance reviews. You sometimes have only a couple of hours (or less) to write a live performance review for a newspaper, so you need to be very comfortable with your writing before taking on something like that.

When writing reviews, know your audience. Let's say you are writing a review of a

rock CD. If you are writing it for a drumming publication, you'll want to talk a lot about the drummer. If you are writing for a newspaper, you should focus more on the singer and the lyrics. Don't dwell on the drummer unless he or she is really the focus of the music. If you are writing a jazz review for *Modern Drummer*, you can assume the readership is very knowledgeable about jazz, so you would probably be safe in saying that a certain drummer's fills were "Elvinish." But if you're writing it for your local newspaper, you'll have a lot of readers who might not

understand such a reference. (You don't have to omit the reference, just explain it better: "The drummer's fills recalled those of jazz great Elvin Jones, known for his playing in the John Coltrane Quartet.")

Note that most "serious" music magazines publish serious reviews that show respect for their readers. Such reviews tend to be consumer guides

that help readers decide if they want to purchase a particular DVD, CD, or publication.

If there is a quality issue, the reviewer should certainly make the readers aware of it. But give them enough information in the review that they can decide if this is something that they will like; don't just tell them whether or not you like it. Just as one example, you might personally have no use for a book of extremely simple etudes. But it might be the perfect thing for a beginning student or a teacher of beginning students. Your job is not so much to pass judgment as it is to analyze.

- **Equipment/instrument/music software reviews:** Some publications review new products. Doing such reviews requires that you have a good knowledge of what is already on the market so you can evaluate how this product fits in. Once again, the best product reviews are written by players for players. I always take the approach, "What would I want to know about this product that would help me decide whether or not to buy it?" In fact, that ties in with my general approach to writing articles: I always try to write something that I would want to read myself.

As with new music reviews, reviewing products can be a great way to keep up on new advancements in gear. At one point, I was reviewing a lot of drumheads for *Modern Drummer*. It was great being able to mount all those different heads on my own drums to see how they sounded, and I learned a lot about tuning in the process.

Of course, the big question a lot of people ask about reviewing products is: Do you get to keep all that stuff? In terms of big items (drumsets, cymbals, congas, electronics, etc.), no. But companies don't usually want "little" stuff back, like a bottle of cymbal cleaner or

drumsticks that you've bashed away with while doing the review. Be ethical, though. Write an honest review whether you are allowed to keep the item or not.

Also, with products, it's often not a matter of proclaiming something to be good or bad as it is explaining the product in such a way that a consumer can decide if this product is what he or she has been looking for. For example, each of the top cymbal makers produces a wide range of models. Two different cymbals manufactured by the same company can both be made very well but sound totally different. Your job is not to review the cymbal based on your own taste, but to understand all the different types of cymbals and who tends to use them well enough that you can explain that, for example, "This cymbal has a bright, pingy sound that will cut through loud volumes in a rock band," or "The dry, low-pitched sound of this ride will make it popular with jazz drummers who favor the 'old K' sound."

- Other music writing: Other types of writing you might get involved with include: liner notes for CDs or DVDs; program notes; bios, resumes, and personal profiles; promotional material and press releases for yourself or others; Website content for yourself or others. With some of these, you might make some money. With others, you might save some money because you won't have to hire someone to do it for you. But either way, projects such as these can enhance your career in various ways.

FINAL TIPS

If you are an expert on drumming and percussion, there can be opportunities for you to share your knowledge with others through articles and books, thereby establishing credentials that can help you get various types of jobs, and you can possibly supplement your income in the process. Remember, your knowledge is your biggest asset. In terms of writing, be clear and concise. Buy a book by Strunk and White called *The Elements of Style* and read it every six months. (It's not very long.)

Before you propose an article to a magazine, get familiar with that publication. See what kinds of articles they publish and how they are written. At first, don't worry about how much you will be paid. Musicians generally start out playing for free in school ensembles and jam sessions; once they have some experience, they can start playing for money. It's the same with writing. At first, get published wherever you can: school newspaper, scholarly journal, or one of those "freebie" tabloid publications that most cities have. Once you have some experience and some published clips, you will be in a position to query a national magazine.

Writing is just like playing: the more you

do it, the better you get. Most PAS members already have the expertise, or they are well on their way to getting it. Writing is a great way to use it.

Rick Mattingly is Editor of *Percussive Notes* and teaches percussion and journalism at St. Xavier High School in Louisville, Kentucky. His articles have appeared in *Percussive Notes*, *Modern Drummer*, *Modern Percussionist*, *Down Beat*, *Jazziz*, *Musician*, *Pointe*, and *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*. He is author of *All About Drums*, *The Drummer's Time*, *Creative Timekeeping*, and *The Hal Leonard Snare Drum Method*, and co-author (with Rod Morgenstein) of *The Drumset Musician* (all published by Hal Leonard), and has edited instructional books by Peter Erskine, Joe Morello, Gary Chester, Nancy Zeltsman, Jack DeJohnette, Bob Moses, Bill Bruford, and others.

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