

Dave Black: a Publisher's Perspective

By Rick Mattingly

Dave Black serves as Vice President and Editor-in-Chief, School & Church Publications, for Alfred Music Publishing Company. A prolific composer and arranger, more than 60 of his compositions and arrangements have been published by Alfred, Barnhouse, CPP/Belwin, TRN, Highland/Etling, and Warner Bros. Black has written for the bands of Louie Bellson, Sammy Nestico, Bill Watrous, Bobby Shew, Ed Shaughnessy, Gordon Brisker, and the C.S.U., Northridge Jazz Ensemble. In addition, many of his compositions have been used as source/background music on numerous TV shows including *All My Children*, *Coach*, *The Drew Carey Show*, *General Hospital*, *Ellen*, *Grace Under Fire*, *Nightline*, *Roseanne*, and *Good Morning America*, and the movie *Drumline*. Black is the co-author of several best-selling books published by Alfred, including *Alfred's Drum Method, Books 1 & 2*, *Alfred's Beginning Drumset Method*, *Contemporary Brush Techniques*, *Drumset 101*, *Alfred's Kid's Drum Course*, and *Cymbals: A Crash Course*. Black served on the PAS Board of Directors for six years, was a member of the Sustaining Members Advisory Council, and hosted PASIC '91 in Anaheim, California.

Rick Mattingly: *In the 27 years you've been at Alfred, you must have seen hundreds of manuscripts and proposals from people who wanted you to publish their drum or percussion instruction books. Are there common mistakes people make when submitting proposals?*

Dave Black: Very often, a proposal starts out with, "I have never seen anything like this on the market," but when I start flipping through the manuscript, I can name several books that have a similar content and/or approach. So when they say they haven't seen anything like this, they probably haven't done their homework.

Before people propose a book to a publisher, they should go to local music stores and browse the books, and then go to publishers' websites and see what's already in print. You can't write another drum book and expect to get it published unless it has a different twist or element from the ones that are already out there.

Before you take the time to write the book, you should contact the publisher and ask if there is a need for the book you want to write. If so, what would the publisher suggest you do to make it different? Not many people do that kind of groundwork in advance.

Another mistake I often see are people who try to write the bible of whatever subject they're teaching, and they send in a 200-page manuscript. No one is going to publish a book that size. Had they talked to the publisher in advance and asked for a recommended page count, they could have saved themselves a lot of time.

RM: *Based on what I saw when I used to review manuscripts for Hal Leonard, how many times have you seen a manuscript that is basically a rewrite of Stick Control?*



DB: More than I can count. Just in the past two months I had a couple of people submit proposals like that. They will take the same basic rhythms and write out every possible sticking variation. Most of them, I feel, are just trying to ride the coattails of something that is already established and popular. George Lawrence Stone was more than capable of writing out every possible sticking combination had he wanted to, but he was selective. Hundreds of books just seem to be endless sticking permutations, and they become boring and don't appear to have any application to a real musical setting. Even though *Stick Control* has become a staple, with anything that is published now, people expect an audio or video component to be included with the book.

RM: *I often saw books that came from teachers who said, "Instead of students having to buy several different drum books, this one book has everything they need!" It would have a little bit about reading, a little bit about rudiments, a couple of pages of Stick Control-type exercises, a little bit of rock drumset, a little bit of jazz drumset, a little bit about fills, a little double bass, a little odd-time stuff—a little bit of a lot of things, but not enough of anything.*

DB: Right. The typical cover letter I often receive will say something like, "I've been teaching for 25 years, but I've never found one book that has what I need, so I've been writing out my own exercises for years and using them with my students, and everybody says I should get this published." But everything in it is just like the material in countless other books. It may all be valid, but they are not adding any new element. And with a book that size, the price might end up being too cost prohibitive for a student to afford. Of course, name recognition can be a factor. Alfred is not necessarily looking to publish a new drumset method, but if Steve Gadd wanted to write one, I would do it in a heartbeat, even if it had similar material, because there are people who would buy it simply because Steve wrote it.

RM: *What do the good proposals contain?*

DB: A new idea or a different spin on an old idea. A recent example is Steve Fidyk's new book, *Big Band Drumming at First Sight*. There have been other books about interpreting big band drum charts, but he came up with a system of being able to look at drum parts at a glance in order to make them easier to read the first time through. The audio CD he created includes full-band versions with and without drums, as well as isolated beat and ensemble figure transcriptions featuring three styles of loop examples. This gives the student the ability to be able to work on just those figures and really get them down. Fidyk was really able to dissect big band charts in a new way. So it was a different take on that subject, and that's what I look for.

One of the advantages of owning engraving programs like Finale and Sibelius, layout programs like InDesign, and the fact that a lot of people have their own studios, is that manuscripts now come in looking like finished books. Seeing handwritten music that's sloppy and poorly laid out can be a turnoff. Submitting books with music that's

already engraved, that are well laid out, and that include nice-sounding audio tracks not only makes a good impression, but makes the manuscript a lot easier to evaluate. I'm more likely to accept a book that's done that way than one that comes in sloppy and will take a lot of work on our end to clean up for publication.

RM: *I saw a couple of proposals in which the author had invented a new system of notation that was said to make learning easier. I always asked, "How does this prepare a student for the real world?"*

DB: I've seen books like that as well. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to sell five copies of a book like that, even if I thought it was a clever idea. I often see something that I think is interesting or unique, but I have to ask if it is the right fit for Alfred. I've seen many things over the years that I thought were good ideas and well thought-out, but I didn't accept them because I knew they wouldn't sell enough copies. So if a publisher rejects something, it doesn't always mean the idea is bad. It might just mean that we don't think it would sell enough, or that is not the right fit for our catalog.

If I get a well-written book by an unknown author, but I don't have room in my production schedule, sometimes I advise the author to self-publish. Your local music stores will probably sell it for a percentage, and you can advertise it on a number of websites or through Facebook. Then, if you get some sales and create some buzz about the book, you can go back to a major publisher and say, "I did this book on my own, it has sold a thousand copies, and several teachers are using it." That would make me take a second look and consider publishing it, because now it has a following and has proven itself in a local market.

The digital press has changed the way we make decisions on what to publish. It has given me the opportunity to publish in areas we haven't touched for years, such as steel drum pieces and percussion ensembles. We didn't publish those types of pieces in the past because with traditional offset printing, you would have to print at least five-hundred copies, or more, in order to get a good print price. If you only sold one-hundred copies the first year, you'd have four-hundred copies that you paid for and would have to warehouse. But with a digital press, if I predict that it's only going to sell one- or two-hundred copies, then I can print one- or two-hundred copies. Something I would have rejected five years ago, because it didn't have a big enough market or was too esoteric, I will now publish because I don't have the expense of having to print hundreds of copies that might never sell.

Also, because of programs like Sibelius and Finale, people are able to send in manuscripts that are already engraved. We will clean it up,

but we don't have to engrave it from scratch, which costs a lot of money. When people submit something in Sibelius or Finale, that keeps our costs down. So that has helped open up more opportunities for people to get published as well. The downside of that is that it has also opened up more opportunities for people to self-publish, which has taken away a piece of the pie for the major publishers.

RM: *What are the pros and cons of self-publishing?*

DB: The most obvious benefit is that they get 100 percent of the profit. They are in complete control of the quality and production and don't have to deal with a publisher who may want them to reduce the size or do major rewrites. With the ability for people to be able to sell things through their own websites and advertise on Facebook and Twitter, they can do pretty well with that.

The disadvantage is that they don't have the money or the muscle that a major publisher has. Self-publishers can't take their books to all the major trade shows and conventions—PASIC, NAMM, MENC, TBA, and so on—and/or get them into music stores all over the world. We have dealers who automatically take everything we put out. It's not easy for self-publishers to be able to get their products into dealers' hands like that. A lot of people get huffy over the fact that they will only make ten percent if they go with a major publisher, but they don't realize how much money we are putting out to produce the book and then to advertise and promote it. I've had a lot of people over the years who self-published and then came back to me after a couple of years and said, "I'm reconsidering this." They are spending a lot of time and money sending out books, they can't get their foot in the door of the major dealers, they haven't been able to recoup what they spent on printing, and so now they want to sell their book to a major publisher.

RM: *Where is the biggest market for instructional books: beginning, intermediate, or advanced?*

DB: Beginning books far outsell intermediate or advanced books. The reason is that everybody has to start with a beginning book of some kind. Once they get through that first book, some will decide that music isn't their thing, and others might feel they've gained enough skills to continue without any additional formal training. If we're selling 20,000 copies of *Alfred's Drum Method, Book 1* per year, *Book 2* will only be selling 3,000 to 4,000 copies.

RM: *So if beginning books are the biggest sellers, does that mean that Alfred is looking to publish more beginning books?*

DB: Not really. We have to have a well-rounded catalog, and so that means a commitment on our part to publish more advanced books.

RM: *That's obviously the other side of the coin. How many ways can you rewrite a beginning book?*

DB: You can't, which is why they don't sell.

When Alfred bought Warner Bros., we acquired the Belwin catalog, the Henry Adler catalog, and everything else Warner published. That makes my job more difficult each year, because how much can the market continue to absorb, and is there anything that hasn't already been done? There's some truth to the saying, "Do we really need another drum book?" But then I see something that's unique or different and I say, "Okay, there's still room."

Once again, name recognition can be a factor. Young drummers of today might not recognize the name Haskell Harr, but if there is a book by a contemporary drummer whose name they recognize, they'll buy that. So that's the advantage of publishing something by a drummer who is current and very visible. Even if the book isn't much different from other books that are on the market, that drummer's name will draw in a new generation.

RM: *What led you and Sandy Feldstein to create Alfred's Drum Method? There were already snare drum methods on the market.*

DB: At that time, the Haskell Harr book had been out for 50 years, and the Roy Burns drum method had been out for 25 years. The two were widely used, but it had been 25 years since a major snare method had come out, so we felt we could update those two books. We introduced rolls in a way that would be easier to understand—particularly the 7-stroke roll. One of the biggest differences was when a new concept was introduced on a page, we provided a Combination Study at the bottom of that page that incorporated what the student had just learned, and then ended each section with a full-length solo that incorporated all the new concepts that had been taught up until that point. Something else that was unique was the fact that we incorporated actual drum parts from Sousa marches and well-known concert band pieces. That was the first book to show how rudiments, such as five-stroke rolls and flams, were used in actual drum parts. We also made an accompanying VHS video that correlated with the book. As you know, drum videos were a fairly new concept in 1987.

RM: *In terms of the educational material Alfred has published in recent years, what percentage are books and what percentage are DVDs?*

DB: It's probably two thirds to one third, but most books include CDs and/or DVDs. Other than something like Zoro's *The Big Gig*, I can't think of very many recent books that haven't been packaged with a DVD or audio CD. And now, with everything going digital, we're starting to put out DVDs that include e-books in pdf format, so you're not having to

piggyback a printed book or pamphlet with the DVD.

RM: *And with the proliferation of devices like the iPad, Kindle, and other digital readers, print, audio, and video are becoming even more integrated. Do you think print-only instructional books are becoming obsolete?*

DB: I do. There will always be people who like to have the physical product in their hands. People like you and me are not going to toss out the libraries we've been collecting for years. But the current generation and the generation that follows will be buying books online because that's the way they grew up. They are already used to buying their music from iTunes, and the same will happen with books.

We've already started adapting many of our best sellers. Ted Reed's *Syncopation* book, *Alfred's Drum Method*, and *Stick Control* are available as downloads through Amazon. Our new band method is available for the iPad, and it has audio and DVD clips that are available under the printed examples, so you just hit the play button and it plays right there. Moving forward, most of the new stuff we will publish will automatically have a digital version, and we will continue to convert older material in our catalog.

RM: *And I know Hal Leonard is doing the same thing.*

DB: Of course; that is the way people are going to purchase music in the future. Within the next five years or so, students will be bringing their iPads to class, putting them on the music stand, and playing from that when the director calls out a piece or a page from a band method. Can you imagine jazz musicians on a gig having *The Real Book* in their iPads, hitting a button, and there's the tune? You can have a thousand tunes stored in that one device rather than having to carry around all of that printed music.

It's going to be interesting to see where this all goes, but it's happening very rapidly. Publishers are all scrambling to keep up with the technology and make it accessible. Otherwise, they're not going to survive because that's the way the younger generation is going to want to buy product.

RM: *Alfred's Drum Method is celebrating its 25th anniversary and has sold over a half-million copies. In addition, several books that Alfred publishes—including George Lawrence Stone's Stick Control, Carmine Appice's Realistic Rock, Zoro's The Commandments of R&B Drumming, and Ed Thigpen's The Sound of Brushes—recently appeared on Modern Drummer magazine's list of "25 Timeless Drum Books." What makes a drum book "timeless"?*

DB: My definition of "timeless" is something that has been around a while, continues to be fundamentally sound, and continues to be

used by generations of teachers and students. Even though newer books have come out on the market that have accompanying audio and video—things that people have come to expect—many of the books on that list have no CDs or DVDs. They are just good, fundamentally sound books that have stood the test of time. PN