



PRACTICAL TIPS FOR YOUNG DRUMMERS

by John Chandler

Objectives

At any music store, you will find many books which specifically teach basic rhythms, rock drumming, set playing, drum solos, and general aspects of drumming. But there are the things that a new drummer just starting to play usually has to learn the hard way, by experience. Most band directors in the high schools and colleges are not drummers, and are unable to help the young drummer in the practical aspects of playing drums. This guide will provide information about these practical aspects to aid the young drummer to play, whether it is in a stage band, a combo, or a dance band.

Many high school drummers are very good rock drummers but they have difficulty playing straight ahead jazz, dance jobs, shows, and other types of jobs that a drummer may be asked to play. Some drummers have a narrow view "I don't want to play anything but rock or rock-jazz!" A COMPLETE DRUMMER LEARNS TO PLAY ALL KINDS OF MUSIC. The more adaptable, the more they will play. Before getting a chance to play jazz, the commercial dance jobs may be the only place to play. Many jazz musicians today started out playing commercial dance jobs. Professional jazz musicians sometime have to play commercial jobs to eat between the jazz gigs. So, the name of the game is learn, be flexible, and adapt to whatever comes along.

Drum Teachers

When looking for drum teachers, to learn stage band or commercial band playing, find local drummers who play or have played jazz, dances, and shows. The fundamental drum teachers are great for concert and marching bands, but unless they have actual experience in playing jazz or dance jobs, they won't help you very much on drum set.

Drum Fundamental/Advanced Books

Many drummers start out playing only a snare drum in the school concert band, study the basic books, and take lessons from conventional symphonic oriented teachers. There is nothing wrong with that, but don't lose your perspective with all the formal books and teaching. Only by actual playing are you going to learn how to play with a stage band, a combo, a show band, or a dance band. That is not in books.

Magazines

There are several fine magazines which drummers may buy which will provide a continuing insight in what is happening today in the music world, the jazz world, and the drummer's side of the business. PERCUSSIVE NOTES MAGAZINE regularly carried clinic columns and articles on drum set playing. DOWNBEAT MAGAZINE is found on the newsstands and provides information about music and musicians in the jazz world. Another new magazine focusing on drum set playing is THE MODERN DRUMMER. A recent addition to music is "JAZZ" which covers the world of Jazz.

Listening, Watching, and Talking with Other Drummers

The more contact you have with other drummers (high school, college, and top professional drummers), the more you will learn. Shop talk with other drummers will clear up many questions on playing the drums. Make an effort to hear big time drummers with Kenton, Basie, Ferguson and others when they are in your area. A picture is worth a thousand words. Seeing a top drummer play is far more educational than reading books. Observe the mistakes of other drummers, and their good points, so this knowledge may be used to improve your playing.

Jazz Clinics

Some schools in your area have jazz clinics during the year. Make an effort to attend them. In the summer, there are jazz clinics held in different parts of the country, such as the Stan Kenton Jazz Clinics, Jamey Aebersold Combo Clinics, and the National Jazz Camps. These are usually on a live-in basis and last for about a week. A week at one of these clinics will improve your knowledge and playing.

Basic Functions of Drummers

Due to the difference today in the background of drummers from those in the 1940's and 50's, the young drummer often has a misguided idea of a drummer's functions playing in a stage band, combo, or dance band. This is due primarily to the rock drumming influence where most young drummers start. Playing soft instead of loud or louder seldom is required in rock bands. However, playing in a stage band, combo, or dance band is another story.

Drummers in the 1930's and 40's, and even early 50's, evolved from the dance side and approached playing in bands from a different perspective. They learned that a drummer's primary function is: TO KEEP TIME, BACK-UP SOLOISTS AND PROVIDE A FOUNDATION FOR THE BAND. This is basically still true today. Fills, drum breaks, and playing all over the drums are not the important thing. The drummer is there to hold the band together. At all times, the drummer's playing must blend and be compatible with the soloists and the rest of the band. A drummer is primarily in an accompanying role. Too often, some drummers think that their function is to continually play solos and play over the band and it's soloists.

KINDS OF MUSIC/JAZZ STYLES

Different Kinds of Music

Many musicians, even some professional musicians live in their own small part of the music scene, and have a closed mind as to what way a drummer should play. There are many different kinds of groups (concert bands, big dance bands, small combos, jazz ensembles, etc.) playing different types of music, (classical, commercial, jazz, etc.).

Different Kinds of Jazz

There is not just one kind of jazz but several. Playing drums for one type of jazz group may not fit other kinds. Despite this fact, music/jazz educators, band directors, and even professional drummers, may say, "Play this one way—PERIOD." Dixieland Jazz, and Modern Jazz (such as in the Dave Brubeck style) are two entirely different types of Jazz. Playing drums for Thad Jones and Count Basie requires different styles and variations. A DRUMMER HAS TO ADAPT TO THE SPECIFIC STYLE AND GROUP.

Different Styles of Drumming

Different styles of drumming are there to be played depending on the type of group and music played. The Modern Jazz Drumming Concept is not playing continuous after beats with the left hand on the snare, and not playing the bass drum foot pedal for steady rhythm, instead using them primarily for kick beats and accents. The Basie style of music is good swing jazz, but as a basic fundamental, playing drums for Basie, requires the after beat rim shot. Drummers in other jazz groups also use the after beat rim shot at times. The after beat is also a basic part of Dixieland Jazz and the 30's/40's swing style of drumming. You must play differently in combos from the way played in big bands. If you are not familiar with the different styles of music, jazz, drumming, arrangements, and tunes, you can't play properly.

Rhythm Sections—High Schools, Colleges, and elsewhere

Again, the problem of adapting is necessary for drummers playing in a rhythm section. The OPTIMUM SITUATION is where the entire rhythm section has all top musicians fully able

to hold up their end. However, in high schools, or colleges; the optimum seldom exists. This even happens on professional gigs, sometimes. The NORMAL SITUATION in that one or more of the rhythm section (piano, bass, guitar, or drums) maybe poor musicians. The others in the rhythm section must make up for this deficiency. This happens quite often in high school and college stage bands. A drummer must adapt, sometimes take charge, which requires using the bass drum foot pedal, playing rhythm to hold things together. THIS IS A REALISTIC APPROACH, which describes the way things often are. Band directors get frustrated over poor rhythm sections. It is like the blind leading the blind in some rhythm sections.

Adaptability/Flexibility

From the above discussion, it must now be obvious that the name of the game is for a drummer to play all different styles and kinds of music. Narrow or closed minds won't make the scene either. You must have a broad outlook and perspective. Most of all, you must be flexible and adapt to the particular situation and the kind of group in which you are playing.

Drum Equipment

One very important item not to neglect is getting good equipment and keeping it in proper repair.

School Drum Equipment

If you use the school's drum equipment, try to get your director to replace any worn out parts. Even good drummers have difficulty playing on poor equipment.

Buying Drum Sets

The following is basic for a complete drum set: snare drum; snare drum stand; bass drum; bass drum foot pedal; high-hat stand; cymbal stands for a minimum of one crash and one ride cymbals; one or two floor tom-toms; and one or two tom-toms mounted on the bass drum. The cymbals you buy are very important to your playing, so select carefully. A sizzle cymbal may be added, if you wish. But, basically, you need two high-hat cymbals, one crash and one ride cymbal. A good drum seat is a necessity too. Cases for your tom-toms, snare drum, and bass drum, are also needed. A trap case is a necessity. A cymbal case, which will hold all of your cymbals, is another item which should be considered. The size of the bass drum, tom-toms, and snare, should be decided only after you study the possible sizes and discuss with other drummers/drum teachers what sizes are being used today.

Stick Bags

This type of bag is on sale at most music instrument stores, into which all your sticks, brushes, mallets, etc., may be placed. It then zips up and may be carried by a leather strap. It opens up and hooks on the large floor tom-tom with the sticks in a position to be used. This is preferred over putting them on the bass drum or trap case. All professional drummers use them.

Sticks, Brushes and Mallets

Check with music stores and other drummers as to what size sticks, brushes, and mallets are normally used to play different types of music. The size, kind and weight is then up to you. Use whatever is most comfortable to you, even if they are smaller or larger than what someone else uses. But remember the type of groups you are playing with as to sticks used. Big bands require heavier sticks than combos. A good set of brushes are needed. Different sized mallets may be bought depending on your need for them.

Drum Carts

A major problem all drummers have is moving their drums from place to place. The solution is either to buy a cart or build one. Buy wood, rollers, and rope from the lumber store and build your own. It will be worth the effort. It will also save your back and time!

Sliding Drums

Many drummers have trouble with their bass drum sliding as the drum set is played. This problem may be easily eliminated. Go to the nearest department store (automotive department) and buy a rubber car floor mat. Place it under the bass drum and the sliding will stop. Some drummers use a rug. For added support, spikes may be bought from the music instrument store which attach to the front of your bass drum. The problem with spikes is that they tear up a floor and can't be used in certain places.

Tuning the Drums

Some drummers are very careless about tuning their drums. Don't leave them so loose they sound like "tubs". Get plastic heads. They don't change with the weather. Particularly, the bass drum is often neglected. Don't muffle it down too much or leave it so loose, so it sounds with a thud.

Left-Handed Drummers

A new drummer sets up and plays based on other drum setups he has seen, which are probably all right-handed setups. This is fine if the drummer is right-handed. However, drummers who are left-handed often don't realize that there is a different way to set up drums for left-handed persons. In this setup, the bass drum foot pedal is played with the left foot, and the high-hat pedal with the right foot. The floor tom-tom then will be on the left. Everything is reversed. The reason for mentioning this is that a left-hander is somewhat handicapped in playing on right handed setups. His left hand is naturally more flexible and control is better than with the right hand. (Author's Note: *This actually happend to the author, who is left-handed.*)

Basic Rhythms

Rock is only one kind of rhythm. There is straight ahead jazz, conventional waltz and jazz waltz; latin; nationality; different times (5, 7, 9, or 11 beats to the measure) and so on. If you are to be a complete player, you must learn to play all of the rhythms. This is where qualified drum teachers can help.

Practicing Alone/Playing with Radio/Records/or Tapes

Practicing your drums alone, is of course, encouraged. Solos and different types of rhythms may be developed this way. However, by playing with records, tapes, or the radio, you will improve your time and playing. If you play too slow or fast, the record, tape, or radio, doesn't go with you. This will help you learn to play steady time, which is a basic requirement for any good drummer. This still doesn't replace actually playing with a band. But, it helps.

Use of Hi-Hat Cymbals

Young drummers often have the tendancy not to play on the hi-hat cymbals effectively. Instead, the ride cymbal, or other cymbals are used all the time. If you watch big band professional drummers, they frequently use the hi-hat cymbals for choruses, particularly on piano or bass choruses. Use different cymbals for different choruses and for different soloists.

Use of Sticks, Brushes, and Mallets

Different size sticks are used for different types of music. For a big band such as Kenton or Ferguson, heavy sticks must be used. For bands such as Basie or Thad Jones, lighter sticks will probably do. In combos, lighter sticks should be used. Mallets are used on cymbals and tom-toms. Brushes are used on ballads and soft arrangements. Brushes are not used often with big bands but are used for a major portion of combo playing. Many young drummers, coming from rock bands, do not know how to play with brushes. Yet, for combo jobs, they are a necessity. Again, adaptability is the word.

A major problem with many young drummers, primarily due to their rock background, is playing soft and with brushes. Dynamics is also a problem with many high school jazz bands. Band directors must work very hard to teach dynamics. Listen to any big professional band such as Basie or Kenton, and you will see the difference. Drummers are there to play behind and back up bands and soloists, not to play so loud that the band or soloist cannot be heard.

Time/Steady Beat/Rhythm

One of the primary things a good drummer must have is a good sense of time and a steady beat. Even in school jazz bands with a director beating time, keeping a steady beat is needed. The drummer who rushes or drags tempos will not last long when he plays with dance bands, jazz groups, or professionals. High school drummers usually do not have a steady beat when they first start playing. They tend to rush or drag. Playing steady tempos and time are learned primarily by experience and working hard to achieve this goal. Many drummers have natural rhythm but it must be developed. As discussed in a previous section on practicing, playing with records, tapes, and the radio will help.

Drum Solos

From drum books, through lessons, and hard work, drum solos are developed. By listening to records of bands with top drummers and watching other drummers play, ideas will form for solos. Solos should be worked out and practiced so you know basically what is going to happen. Playing solos without planning and working at them, seldom result in good solos.

Matched or Conventional Grips/Sticks

There is some difference of opinion over using the matched grip instead of the conventional grip on the sticks. A matched grip is holding both sticks the same as for the right hand. Again the word is learn and adapt or use where appropriate.

Use of the Left Hand on After Beat

It depends again on the type of group involved and the type of music played as to whether the left hand after beat fits or not. For dance bands, Dixieland bands, show bands, and bands with a style such as Basie, the left hand after beat/rim shot is basic. However, in modern jazz, the after beat is not normally used on a regular basis. Instead, varied accents, and other fills should be used. So, adjust.

Use of the Bass Drum Foot Pedal

As in the above discussion of playing after beats regularly with the left hand, the same basic rule governs when to use the bass drum as basic rhythm or just for kick beats. Again, it depends on the band, the type of music, and the situation. In dance bands, Dixieland bands, and show bands, the use of bass drum pedal for basic rhythm is a necessary thing. In modern jazz, when you have a good strong bass player, the bass drum need not be played for rhythm. But, even in Jazz, as mentioned previously, if one or more of the rhythm section is weak or can't keep the beat, the drummer has to play the bass drum for rhythm to hold things together. If you must play the bass drum in jazz, play it softly and then maybe only the first beat or the first and third beats. It should not be heard by the audience. Nothing sounds worse than a bass drum played too loud in any kind of musical group. This destroys the musical sound even in dance bands. If you must or prefer to use the bass drum for rhythm, try to blend it with the bass, so it is not heard directly. A loose bass drum will sound bad even if played softly, whereas a properly tuned bass drum will make all the difference in the world.

A difficult thing for young drummers today is to get experience in holding a steady beat and playing rhythm on the bass drum with the foot pedal for dance jobs, combo jobs and other jobs. Some school band directors blindly tell their drummer, "Don't play the bass drum pedal—PERIOD." As a result, the drummer may never try to use accents or kick beats and doesn't learn to play rhythm with the foot pedal for dance, show or other such jobs. A complete drummer must learn to play the foot pedal for rhythm as it is needed if he is to be adaptable to playing with different types of groups and playing different types of music.

Drum charts for big bands are only general guides to aid you in knowing what is happening and help you learn the arrangement. The drummer in the big band has the most latitude to change or develop from the basic guide written for him.

Too often, beginning drummers ignore the drum chart completely and never have any idea where they are in the arrangement. In a big band, you are more restrained in playing the way you might than in a combo. You must blend with the band, arrangements, and soloists. You must learn the arrangement and know what is happening and what is going to happen. Marking on the drum chart where each sax, trumpet, or solo is, and which section has the specific choruses, will help you fit in with what the band is doing. Trumpet or trombone accents are often cued on the drummer's part which may be followed. After playing an arrangement a few times and reading the chart, you should know the arrangement.

You must decide what fits best in the different portions of the arrangement (ride cymbal, crash cymbal, or high-hat cymbal). Watch the signs on the music as to dynamics and whether it is F, S/z or FF, etc., and play accordingly. A heavier backup is allowed on trumpet or trombone solos, while you must play softer for sax and piano solos. Despite what the arrangement indicates as to using brushes, sticks, hi-hat, ride cymbal, etc., you may find that sticks instead of brushes sound better or vice versa. **LEARN TO PLAY WITH THE BAND FIRST AND LEARN THE ARRANGEMENTS, THEN WORK IN YOUR FILLS AND DRUM BREAKS.** Young drummers sometimes start out trying to play solos and fills all the time. Concentrate on learning to play with the band and the arrangement.

Listen carefully to the band and soloists. This will help you understand the arrangement and the music.

Playing in Big Bands and Combos

You must adjust to whatever kind of band you play with, and play the style that fits. There is a major difference in playing with big bands and playing with combos. In big bands, you must follow the basic arrangement. In a big band, the drummer will normally have a piano, bass, and guitar to help control the rhythm and tempos. However, if one or more of the rhythm players is weak, control may be difficult. Keeping the various sections—sax, trumpet, or trombone, from rushing or dragging is more of a problem in a big band than in a combo.

In a combo, you have more freedom to be creative and improvise. However, you may not have a bass or piano player on the job. It might be a three piece job with drums, guitar, and sax. Brushes are used most of the time on combo jobs. Playing with brushes is a major problem with many young drummers. The drummer must acquire a touch with brushes. The extra tom-toms and equipment may not be necessary on combo jobs.

Summary

It is hoped that the preceding suggestions, guides, and ideas will be helpful. They should broaden your outlook, and help you play better drums. If you learn to recognize the different kinds of music and styles, learn to play them and learn to be flexible, adjust, and adapt to the situations then you will be a complete drummer, who is able to play anywhere, at any time, with anyone.

The Author

John H. "Hap" Chandler has performed in big bands and combos for over 30 years in St. Louis, Omaha, Cleveland, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. In the past few years he has been very concerned over the problems facing young high school and college drummers playing in stage bands, combos, and other types of groups.

Through discussions with Stan Kenton, Gary Hobbs (Kenton's drummer), Butch Miles (Basie's Drummer), and many other leading drummers and leaders, the Practical Tips for Young Drummers article evolved.

An active performer and leader, Chandler's own 19 piece jazz ensemble has been very active in the Northern Virginia area and is in demand for concert engagements.