

Intro to Playing the Drumset: 28 Really Important ‘Tips’

Marc Dicciani

<http://dicciani.com/> mdicciani@uarts.edu

The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA

1. **Respect the Music. Know All Styles of Music and Styles of Playing.**

Jazz, R&B, Rock, Metal, Hip-hop, 2nd Line, Cha Cha Cha, Samba, Mozambique, Bossa Nova, etc. are not beats – they are styles of music and playing that are often the result of many decades of development, evolution, and culture. These musics can be part of a religious celebration, social event, dance, custom, or environment that should be understood and studied.

2. **Develop Natural Technique...**the most natural technique where the muscles and limbs are moving correctly and naturally is often the result of just picking up the sticks, holding them in the hands, and playing...matched grip. The goal is to capture the enthusiasm, excitement, and interest the student has in playing the drums. You don't have to teach/learn a lot of technique to get started. Play to music as soon, and as often, as possible.

3. **Listen...all the time, to develop your ears to the language and the nuances.**

a) to recordings and live performances of all musicians...drummers, singers, guitarists, timbaleros, trombonists, etc.;

b) to yourself...record your playing often...even every day. Don't just rely on your 'playing/subjective' ears; learn to trust your 'listening/objective' ears, and be brutally honest with yourself. In other words – learn how to learn, so you can teach yourself.

4. **You already play fast enough;** practice to play music better – not faster, louder, or more complicated.

5. **Try not to think of ‘playing the drums’; think of ‘playing music’.** Listen to the melody, the soloist, the lyrics, and especially the form of the song or arrangement.

6. **You can't learn how to be a good drummer by burying your head in drum books;** you learn to play drums by understanding concepts of playing, listening to yourself and others, and by focusing on the music you're learning and playing. You can certainly read and practice from a drum book, but at some point you have to stop relying on it and try to incorporate those ideas, concepts, and techniques into your own playing.

7. **Practicing is not the goal – playing is the goal.** Don't practice to make your practicing better, practice to make your playing better. Practice smart, and have goals that are musically-driven every time you practice. If you don't practice musically, you won't play musically. Practice things that make you a better drummer and musician, not a better 'practicer'.

8. **The practice pad is not a musical instrument.** Although there are times when it can be used as a tool to focus on certain aspects of technique or coordination, it should never be used as a substitute for playing the drums. Touch, tone, musicality, improvisation, styles, feel, balance, dynamics, interpretation, and developing a unique musical voice on a musical instrument cannot be accomplished on a piece of rubber glued onto a piece of wood.

9. **A drummer is not a metronome.** Playing time that 'feels' and 'sounds' good is not about playing mathematically and metronomically perfect 8th, triplets, 16th, etc. Students should listen closely to great music and great drummers...great feel is not the result of precise execution of computer-perfect notes...it's in the 'cracks'. Many of our musical and drumming heroes never even owned metronomes...they developed good time by practicing and playing music and drums musically.

10. And speaking of metronomes...if you're a drummer, a metronome MIGHT NOT improve your time. Playing with live musicians, music recordings, play-along recordings, sequences, and loops will do more to help your time and your musicality than a click that has no tone and no feel. Learn to be dependent on your own natural internal clock (that we're all born with), not an external non-musical click. If used incorrectly, a metronome can actually hinder the development of your natural time and feel. The more you play to, and with, music, the more you'll develop as a musician; the more you play to and with a metronome, the more you may begin to sound like one and divert your attention away from playing musically. A metronome can be a valuable measuring tool to check tempos, mark progress, identify correct tempos for playing literature and musical styles, and even in developing an ability to play with a click or a click track (something often done in live and recording situations). BUT, drummers must learn to rely on, and develop their own musical time and feel.

11. You can't see music, and it's not on a page, or in a chart, or in a part; you need to MAKE the music. What's not on the page is more important than what is on the page (taken from a quote by Miles Davis). Young drummers should stop looking at the page and start listening – music is aural not visual.

12. Drummers shouldn't play to try to impress other drummers...by learning tricks and playing licks. The people drummers need to impress are the musicians they'll be playing with, and you impress them by listening to what and how they're playing, respecting their space, and playing musically. They're the ones who will be hiring a drummer to play the gig, the tour, and the session.

13. Drumming is not a competition...the goal is not to try to be better than anyone else, but to be the best YOU that you can be. There is plenty of room for all of us, so develop your own style and sound.

14. Sing what you play; play what you sing. The most valuable part of your body to help you play the drums better is not your hands or your feet, it's your ears. Hear the music, hear the ideas, and internalize the music and the feel. Then it will be easy to play that way.

15. When you're practicing...practice; when you're playing...play. There are few situations that are more frustrating than playing a gig or concert, or jamming with someone who is practicing, and who just wants to use you as his/her accompaniment to experiment and work on their licks.

16. Drumming does not happen in a separate universe. The laws of physics (sound, gravity, bounce, rebound, volume, speed, mass, etc.) and physiology (how our body moves, how our muscles work), apply to everything and everyone, drummer and non-drummer alike. Research, study, and learn how these things apply to drumming...don't just make up stuff.

17. Dynamics...use them wisely and often...they help to color, shape, and structure you playing.

18. Practice doesn't make perfect...it makes permanent. Whatever you practice is what you will become skilled at...practice mistakes and you'll get very good at them; practice unmusically and you'll play that way. Practice to develop your sound, touch, feel, musicality, expression, versatility, and your ability to listen and understand, and that's how you'll play – like a musician.

19. Select and use quality musical instruments - the best that are within your means (drums, heads, sticks, and cymbals). It's better to assemble your drum set slowly with the highest quality equipment you can afford. Use professional equipment and keep in great playing shape: good drums and heads tuned properly, good-sounding cymbals, and sticks that are not chipped or cracked.

20. Consult your best friend - "What If" - often. "What If" – the question that lets you imagine the possibilities of what you can do and to take that to the next level and make it your own. In other words...What If I tried playing this way; What If I tune or set up my drums that way; What If I reversed that sticking, etc. You get the idea...use your imagination and develop your own voice and style.

21. **Let it breath; rests are music, too.** Try not to fill up every eighth note, triplet, or sixteenth note in the song...the other musicians you're playing with have important things to say, as well. Use space and air wisely. Don't call attention to the quantity of notes you're playing but to the quality of what you're playing.

22. **Play with other musicians often...**as often as possible. Surround yourself with positive people with good habits who want to improve just as you do, and you'll all help each other grow together.

23. **Play with great feel...**HOW you play is always more important than WHAT you play. Concentrate on playing to make the music feel good and come to life.

24. **Fills and Solos – maybe, maybe not.** If the music calls for it, then do it, but do it according to the consistent feel of the music. Not all songs or arrangements require drum fills, and when you do play a fill don't try to impress someone, or yourself, with what you can do. Ultimately, the musicians whom you play with, and who want to play with you, will be the most important judges of your playing.

25. **Play inside the volume of the band...**not louder...'nuff said.

26. **We're not the first, and we won't be the last...**drumming is a centuries-old aural tradition with a very rich history filled with great players who were/are important in the development of the instrument and how it is played. Learn as much about what's been handed down to us, so that we can responsibly, honestly, and accurately pass it on the next generation of students of the instrument.

27. **Every song is not at 120 beats per minute.** You can't develop a good feel for playing slow tunes or very fast tunes if you never practice at those tempos. Make sure to vary the tempos at which you practice. And remember, just because a groove, fill, or musical idea sounds good at 110 beats per minute, it doesn't mean it will work at 80 or 175 beats per minute. Different tempos require different ways of playing.

28. **None of us have ever, or will ever, graduate...we're all 'students' of the instrument, and need to be lifelong learners.** I believe some of the best drummers are not the ones who have been *playing* the longest, but the ones who have been *learning* the longest, and who continue to learn throughout their entire lifetime. We all have an incredible potential every time we play, and our greatest limitation is not a lack of blazing technique or the shortcomings of our equipment, but the breadth of our imagination. Keep an open mind to explore your endless capability for expression through the drums, and remember to stay fresh, creative, unique, and a student for life. **We're lucky...**to have found something we love so much, and to be part a large brotherhood of like-minded people around the world who share our enthusiasm and spirit for the instrument. Let's take the time to learn from each other and to help others through this gift we've been given.

Marc is the Director of the School of Music and a Professor of Drumset at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and also a very busy professional drummer and educator. As a drummer, Marc has made concert appearances with a wide variety of artists including Randy Brecker, Jon Faddis, Robin Eubanks, Stanley Clarke, Pat Martino, Christian McBride, Grover Washington, Jr., Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., Mel Torme, Tom Jones, Natalie Cole, Peter Nero, the Boston Pops, Philadelphia Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra, Nashville Symphony, Honolulu Symphony, and the San Diego Symphony. He's worked on studio sessions for NBC, ABC, and CBS television and on recording sessions with Stevie Wonder, Lee Ritenour, and guitarist Jimmy Bruno. He spent many years touring internationally with singer/dancer Ben Vereen, with whom he continues to tour and perform.

Marc has conducted countless clinics at colleges and universities including American University, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Villanova University, University of Southern California, Duquense, Cal State Long Beach, University of Delaware, Temple University, and in England, Chile, Tokyo, Japan, the Netherlands, South Korea, and at many conferences and festivals.

Marc is an artist/clinician for Yamaha Drums, Sabian Cymbals, Regal Tip Drum Sticks, Remo Drum Heads, Latin Percussion, MONO Cases, Ear Molds, and writes for *Modern Drummer*, *PAS Journal*, and *In-Concert* magazines.