

Can feel be taught?

Playing with good feel is one of the most critical factors in being a good drummer, and I believe that feel can be taught. More accurately, feel can be learned by a student (by the way, we're all students) who is willing to make some very conscious decisions about how serious they are in wanting to do this, and if they're ready to invest the good deal of time and effort required.

I think that good feel is 'style-specific'. By that I mean that if you play rock with a good feel, it doesn't mean that you can just sit down and instantly play any other style with a good feel without having worked on it; but it does mean that you can apply the same process you used to develop your feel in one style to help you learn to play another style with a good feel.

There is no mystery to feel; it can be analyzed, learned, and improved. I've thought a lot about this, and worked with many students in this area. As a result, I've come up three different, but connected, areas of drumming to work on, with respect to feel in a particular style:

1. physical things (touch, tone, tuning, volume balance between sounds/limbs, volume and rhythmic placement of what comes between the quarter or half notes - 8^{ths}, triplets, 16^{ths}, etc.);
2. aural things (listening, imitating, recognizing and hearing the nuances, which are the subtle things that make various styles and genres of music and drumming different or unique);
3. cognitive things (analyzing, knowing, and respecting the music and culture that the music came from).

The place where I start my students is with reading about the history of the music and the people, culture, and the times that gave rise to, and surround the music. Sometimes we buy a drum book that contains lots of rhythms, patterns, and beats of a particular style of music – jazz, Samba, funk, 2nd line, etc., and just jump right in and start playing before reading all the information about the music that's usually contained in the introduction. Playing any style of music with good feel is about much more than just playing the 'beats' or drumset patterns...metal is not a beat, funk is not a beat, and neither is any other style of music. Feel is more about the 'how' than the 'what'. Reading and researching the music builds respect and understanding for the music and the musicians who developed it and play it. That's the first step to playing any style with good feel: respect the music and the culture.

There's not enough space in this mini-article to fully explain all of the aspects I listed above, so I'll just mention the one I believe is the most important in developing good feel – listening. We've all heard beginning students, or remember when we first tried to play a bossa nova, or cha cha cha, or with a big band, and although the rhythms were correct, the feel was lacking. That's because the student hadn't yet invested sufficient

time to learn that particular musical/drumming 'language'. How do you learn that musical language? By listening...over months and years.

The following two ways of listening will help to develop that language necessary for good feel:

- 1) **Listen to the great masters.** Listen closely to how they play a particular style and try to identify what makes their feel so good. If you don't yet have the ability to recognize what's important, it's probably just because you haven't listened enough. Keep listening and it will come to you. The more you listen, the more you will hear, and the more you will be able to imitate, and the more you will understand.
- 2) **Listen to yourself.** Once you can recognize the elements of good feel in a particular style, then you'll be able to listen to recordings of your own playing and hear what's missing. Once you do that, you can then make a concerted effort to improve those things. Whether you use a sophisticated set-up to record your playing, or a simple one, the important thing is to do it and do it often.

So, yes, I think that feel can be taught, and the quickest way to start down that road is through saturating your mind with reading and knowing, and your ears with listening.

Good luck and have fun!