

Do you feel it's important for drummers to learn to play other instruments (piano, bass, guitar, etc.) or should they focus on honing their craft at the kit exclusively?

In addition to practicing the drums, almost anything and everything a drummer does, either through learning and studying or just doing, is going to have an effect on their drumming skill. Of course, some of these pursuits have a more direct and immediate impact on drumming than others. Some of our daily activities affect technique (exercise, playing sports, weight training), musicality (studying composition, listening to melodic phrasing and soloing of vocalists and other instrumentalists), styles (studying humanities and understanding various world cultures), improvisation (practicing yoga and relaxation techniques, or self-expression through other art forms like drawing and acting), timing (learning tap dancing, body movement, and eurhythmics), attention/focus (eating and sleeping properly and minimizing stress in our lives).

Although learning to play another instrument may be seen as having more influence on our drumming than some of the things mentioned above, I believe it is similar. Some highly successful drummers play other instruments; most do not. Of course if you do learn to play another instrument (or sing or compose) it will have some effect on your drumming, but to what degree depends on your goals and purpose. If I want to study composition so that I'm better able to understand, hear, and intuit musical form and harmonic structure when I'm playing drums so that I may adapt more musically in a situation, then that will likely effect my drumming more than if I study composition and counterpoint because I want to compose music similar to Bach's Inventions.

I feel that being able to physically and musically *play* another instrument may not be as important for a drummer as being able to play *with* those other instruments and to recognize their role in an ensemble. If the goal is to understand music, form, and structure better, then it's not necessary to learn to *play* those instruments in order to do that. *Listening intently* to other instruments, including voice, and how those musicians phrase, articulate, and develop melodic lines can help inform and affect how you want to develop your own sense of phrasing on drums in soloing, comping, and creating grooves and patterns. One thing I learned from closely listening to other musicians, especially singers, is how to better make use of space in playing and expression – an important and challenging concept in drumming.

If you decide you want to learn to actually play another instrument, which instrument would it be, and why? Some drummers might argue that it should be bass because of the critical interplay required between bass and drums. In order to better know form and structure, maybe you should learn to play piano. I know an excellent drummer who learned to play pocket trumpet (a very compact trumpet) because it helps him with his composing and arranging, which in turn, he says helps him with his drumming. Once you start down this road, there really is no end! That's why the choice is a completely personal one and should be based on what you want to do and what interests you, not because it will make you a better drummer.

For me personally, learning to play timbales and congas has had an immeasurable effect on my drumming and I absolutely would recommend that to everyone, mostly because of the pleasure I get out of playing those instruments. But is it important? Probably not. Is it helpful? To me, yes. Something else that I recently began doing is painting, which has helped me to visualize and consider balance, structure, and focus in my drumming, and to also think about composition in a non-time-based form of self-expression.

And that's the point here. Most everything you do is going to affect how you approach drums and drumming. If you do decide to learn to play another instrument, I suggest you do so because your primary goal is just that – to learn to play another instrument. But, I wouldn't automatically conclude that learning to play ukulele and rock climb on weekends will profoundly improve your drumming. Whatever you decide to do - paint, cook, exercise, or learn to play guitar, know that there is tremendous intrinsic value in doing so, in and of itself. I will argue that there is nothing that will help improve your playing as quickly and as deeply as dedicated focused musical practice and listening on your primary instrument. Whatever you decide, make sure you just have fun doing it!