

The Perfect Grip

The perfect grip is the one that helps you create the sound you want to create.

Drummers sometimes talk about rudiments, and a rudimental style of playing, based on their traditional experience with that phase of their schooling, which usually happens at the beginning. Rudiments are usually thought of as the 26 or so published "standard" ones that most of us are familiar with. In fact though, a "rudiment" is any bit of technique you repeat, to learn how to do something. In karate, you learn how to stand, (to make use of the energy derived from the floor) before you can "break the brick". That's a rudimentary skill.

One thing that the standard rudiments should teach us is that when you play an accent, (a note that's louder than the notes preceding it) you must raise your wrist somewhat. Therefore, most standard rudiments are organized to provide for a wrist rising stroke, just before the accent. There's something much deeper you can learn from this ! Read on...

A well known book called "Buddy Rich's Modern Interpretation of Snare Drum Rudiments" compiled by Henry Adler, gives another clue. At the beginning of the book, Buddy says "Upon striking the drum, see that the elbow is away from the body, and that the hand is at the same height as that of the elbow." And, "After striking the drum, return the hand immediately to it's original position." He says this about both the right and left hand, although he is playing "traditional" grip. and the book includes photos. You might look at those photos and think "Well that's the old way." After all, this book was first published in 1942. But get access to a video recording of Buddy playing one of those blazingly fast single stroke rolls, and you'll see something that may surprise you. He doesn't just "turn his wrists back and forth" or "move his hands up and down." In fact, you'll see that these rolls are played using two different strokes. Each hand will play one wrist-rising stroke, followed by one wrist-descending stroke. You get two wrist strokes for every one arm movement. *The "elbow away from the body" is the body's natural reaction to a wrist-rising stroke !*

A drum teacher of mine used to say, "Try and think of pulling the sound out of the drum." It was his way of trying to describe to me the wrist-rising stroke. This is one "secret" we should all know. Of course, we should be able to make all our strokes sound the same, both wrist-rising, and wrist-descending. Loose wrists are a must, and you get them through repetition. You'll find that the tip of the stick is almost always moving in the opposite direction of the wrist. If you miss this, you may end up with the idea that all drumming is wrist-descending strokes. The resulting stiff arm movement and tension leads to a stifled drum sound, an inability to play anything in a fluid way, (especially "fast" things) and a lack of endurance. *Flexibility is much more important than strength.*

If you're doing it right, the sticks will "ping", like they did when matching them, in the earlier example. When the sticks are pinging, you'll be getting the maximum sound out of the drum or cymbal, because you're not muffling it with your sticks !

You might realize that the opposite is true. That is, if you want to momentarily mute or muffle a drum or cymbal, all it takes is a slightly firmer grip, forcing the sticks to remain in contact with the surface a bit longer. In the extreme, you can dig the sticks into the drum, greatly muffling it and raising the pitch at the same time. With an unmuffled drum, this contrast is extraordinary, and enables you to sound like you have a lot more equipment than you really have. It's your *range*.

Use a grip that helps you create the sound you want to hear, moment by moment.

Forget about any dispute over whether to use "traditional" versus "matched" grip. They each have their attributes, so learn both, to give yourself the maximum potential. Don't bother with the old "wrists versus fingers" debate either. You'll be using both, if you're really exploring the drums.

Opinions vary about how tightly you should grip the sticks. This is a pointless dispute, that seems to be advocating one perfect way. Some great players have advocated the "Gladstone method", in which you are virtually "throwing" the stick at the drum, gripping it only tightly enough to keep it from flying away. Others recommend "always maintain a firm grip." With all due respect to both schools, I suggest that neither approach is *it*. Each variation will create a different sound, so try everything you can, while observing what others do, and focus on the sound. As always, think about playing drums for a lifetime. However you play, be sure that you can do it for the rest of your life, without hurting yourself physically. You don't have to beat up your body to be a great and powerful drummer.

Play some nice slow, medium volume, relaxed strokes on a snare drum, noting the difference in feel between wrist-rising and wrist-descending. As you do this, experiment with the firmness or "tightness" of your grip, as well as where you strike the drum. (toward the center or toward the rim) With an unmuffled drum, you should immediately hear the differences.

Still images are useful to show where to start, but no still image can really show what happens while you're playing. In addition to the basic wrist turn, there are literally hundreds of little things you'll do to create the sounds you need. Some of these wrist, finger, arm and body movements can be illustrated or explained, but most will develop naturally, as you strive to play certain things. Going to live performances, and viewing videotapes is a great way to learn. If you get frustrated with all these movements, stop and take a deep breath. When you start again, try and approach the movements from a "let it happen" point of view, rather than trying to "make it happen". Often it helps to play with a kind of reckless abandon, to see what happens when you let the sticks and the drums do some of the work. The more skills you have mastered, the better your chances of being loose enough to "let it happen".

What's In a Grip ?

There are a lot of references in this presentation to your grip (s). There are so many wonderful things you can do with just a small grip change, that radically expand your tonal possibilities. These examples are for sticks. Brushes, mallets, and other tools all offer their own possibilities.

- Switch between “traditional” and “matched” grip, to play differently.
- Rotate your wrists while using matched grip, to facilitate different “mallet” techniques
- Play rim clicks, rimshots, stick shots, etc., using the rims and/or your other stick.
- Use one stick as the “controller” to change the pitch or muffle a drum, while striking it with the other stick.
- Apply a little pressure to the head or cymbal, rather than letting the sticks rebound, which results in a muffling effect. If done loudly, it offers a sharper, shorter tone.
- Hold one stick loosely, striking it with the other stick, to initiate controlled bounces.
- Use thousands of different combinations of body, arm, wrist, and finger movement, to create different sounds, and to enable certain techniques to happen.
- Cover the range between the loosest and the tightest grip, to selectively control the tone quality of the sounds you make.
- Cover the range between using your arms and upper body to amplify your power, and reducing your effort to small wrist and finger movements, for the lightest techniques.

You may have different names for some of the above techniques, but these are fairly common ones:

“rim shot”	the sound made by striking the drum head at the same time that the thicker part of the stick strikes the rim. It's what you often hear as the main “back beat” in loud songs, but can be done at any volume.
“rim click”	the sound you make by laying the stick on the drum, and striking the rim with the thick part of the stick. (for example, in Latin tunes)
“stick shot”	Hold the tip of your left stick on the head, toward the center of the head, (lightly) and strike it about 1/3 to 1/2 way up the stick, with your right stick. If done right, produces a very high-pitched “snap”

These are tools to help you expand your range.

Compare this to conversation, If you talk like a robot, you're not going to sound very expressive. On the contrary, everyone universally hears those patterns as “robot”, “stiff”, “dry”, etc.. So don't play drums like that! Buddy Rich once said, while discussing what jazz meant to him, that “Those who emote the most are the best.” The tools we're discussing will help you emote more, by making the sounds you produce more interesting. They give your sound *depth*.