

Into the Mysterious...

There are several techniques, usually associated with “technical” drummers that have been misunderstood forever. Every year, all the popular drum publications spend time talking about “the one-handed roll”. Let’s define what this is.

First, let’s acknowledge that the word “roll” means different things to different people. Often when a drummer plays a fill, it might be described as “rolling around the drums”. Usually, we’re talking about medium tempo 16th notes. (for example, a metronome setting of 120 beats per minute) Others may think of a roll as being either a fairly “closed” single or double-stroke roll, or perhaps a press roll.

It IS possible for example, to manipulate a stick with your fingers, in such a way that you can play “fast”, and make a sound similar to a “roll”. This can also be done in the form of a press roll. The drawback to these techniques is that they’re mainly “finger” techniques, and as such, are usually only effective at very low volume. Those techniques are discussed separately.

The sound I’m referring to here is usually heard in medium to fast tunes, and at medium to loud volumes. It’s often a pattern like one of these below, where one hand is playing the “roll”, and the other hand (or foot) is playing some accents. For example:



or this.



You might notice that in almost every case, when someone is doing the “one-handed roll”, that there other hand (or foot) is doing “something”. In other words, you won’t see a person do the thing we’re talking about by picking up a single stick and playing this “roll” out in the open on a snare drum. It’s because what’s really being played is the example below. If it’s done cleanly, it can be quite convincing, and in normal 60hz lighting, it’ll be hard to pick up visually.



or this.



This same technique, once you get it down, can even be done at faster tempos, with triplets, for example. This is what most people will hear:



The way to do it convincingly is to play this:



Of course, to make these more interesting, you should alternate between different drums, and/or play some of the notes with your feet. This creates more musical, linear sounds. And, as with every drum technique, you should learn to play everything with *both* hands.

But there's more...

If you've seen the incredible cymbals-only solo that Buddy Rich played on the live concert videotape from the 1982 Montreal Jazz Festival, you've seen the left hand technique I'm about to refer to. At one point in his solo, Buddy begins playing what amounts to 16th notes, at a tempo of about 120 (or 8th notes at about 240) with his left hand, on the top hi-hat cymbal, while playing an entirely different "melody" with his right hand. Buddy had his own way of doing it, and it sounds GREAT...totally even, and obviously completely controlled. It's a useful technique in drumming, even if you don't execute it with the finesse or speed of Buddy Rich, and I'll explain why. Don't think about "how fast it is". Think about *the sound*. When you hear and see something played in a drum solo, it has one effect on your ears. But this same technique has an entirely different effect when played as part of a *tune*, with a band. Buddy often played similar things sort of "in the background" while still providing a strong beat with his other hand and his feet. The softer notes lend a texture to that section of the tune that is subtle, until you really zero in on it. It's similar to the "white noise" you get from a cymbal. When you play a ride cymbal, you're usually playing a "beat". But without the "noise" from the cymbal, it would sound a lot more "clunky" and staccato. So, these little fast notes on the snare drum or whatever can lend a flavor to a section of a tune that is very, well... Buddy Rich-ish. You're filling up more of the space, but with an unobtrusive feel that makes everybody feel good. (if done right) This is an *effect*, not a "way of life". Here's how to do it.

These instructions assume a "traditional" grip, so it's different for the right than the left. If you play only matched grip, then you have only one of these techniques to learn. First, put your right stick down, and think only about your left, for this first section. You need to be able to clearly hear every note you play, to learn to play this cleanly.

Think about playing a medium tempo shuffle rhythm, (constant swing eighth notes) accenting slightly on two and four. Don't play loud rimshots, just make a slight wrist accent. *Raise* your hand slightly just before the accent, and *lower* it slightly to make the accent. This is pretty normal. Now, the next part is really important. Play the same sound, but REVERSE your wrist motions. *Lower* your hand slightly just before the accent, and *raise* it on the accent. Notice anything ?

With most of us, the wrist *rising* accent produces a bigger acoustical sound from a drum. Although we should all be perfect, the fact is that most of us slightly choke the stick on a wrist *descending* accent. Some of this comes from the natural tendency to rest the stick on the drum head or the rim. Ok, now the second part of this technique...

Holding the stick normally, drop it onto the drum head and let it bounce 3 or 4 times. If you do this for a few minutes, you'll find that although this is a "gravity" technique, you can control this bounce enough to make all 3 or 4 notes sound even. Have you ever thought that if you could "jump in there" fast enough, say after 4 bounces, that you could make a quick wrist turn, causing the stick to bounce *another* 3 or 4 times, in tempo? YOU CAN! That's precisely the concept. And, combined with learning to do this with either a wrist-rising or wrist-descending stroke, as I just discussed above, you have the method of playing the "one-handed roll".

With these two things in mind, start playing the shuffle rhythm again, and gradually think about removing the "swing" from the notes. In other words, make the notes more and more even, until you're now propelling the stick playing straight eighths or sixteenths. You may find it useful to play this technique away from the center of the head, for a little faster rebound and a little more resonance. It takes time...Be patient.

It's important that you're willing to do this softly. At it's best, this is not a "powerhouse" technique, volume-wise. Used in combination with your other hand and both feet it CAN be, but by itself, it's a soft to medium volume technique, and that's plenty, for the effect it's used for.