

More on "The Perfect Drum Sound"

I prefer to write short articles, which are easier to read. But since I'm not a world-famous drummer, whose past history is widely-known, a little background is in order for this one, so you know where my opinions come from.

Although I play jazz almost exclusively today, this article is based on my experiences since 1964, as a full-time working drummer who has played mostly night clubs, performing the usual range of pop music in each era, along with traditional "show band" types, where the motif was typically a lot of medlies, covering virtually all styles. In each case, it was important to play these things authentically, so there were many approaches to both the drum sound and the way the drums were played. For clarity, this discussion is mostly about the drums themselves, and not about various amplification methods and special effects. Those things matter, but you cannot depend on "special mixes", "special drums", your "personal engineer", and so on. When I worked in casinos, for example, there were sometimes up to 6 different acts per day, and we had about 15 minutes between acts, to do simple things like adjust cymbal stands, and perhaps use our own cymbals, snare drum, and bass drum pedal. No time to switch an entire drum set, re-mix, etc..

The evolution of drum sounds in pop culture

There have been many variations on what is expected from the drummer, due to changes in pop culture, and changes in electronics. My father was a drummer, playing everything from jazz to Beatles tunes, on a simple acoustic drum set. As a young man, I was exposed to many great drummers, through recordings, and attending concerts, trade shows, and clinics. These drummers all played relatively-simple acoustic drums, and each had unique sound... something that is often lacking today. There are a huge number of great technical drummers today, but to me, their drum sound is mostly very generic. Business-wise, there is an advantage to that... It's "safe", and is generally "what people expect".

To be competitive, you have to play a variety of styles, in a relaxed enough way that you don't hurt yourself, and often without any amplification. (Hence, my interest in powerful big band and rock drummers.) If you play in symphony orchestras, they often demand very quiet, yet controlled playing. Unmuffled acoustic drums lend themselves well to those differences, but "specialized" equipment often does not.

In the 1970's, playing pop music, we started to mic. the drums, because "disco" became popular, and the sounds were expected to be more synthetic. Physically, I actually had to play harder, because we were muffling the drums to get that flat "disco" sound. In the 80's, there was a time when the drums in pop music were almost entirely electronic, and at one point, I played electronic drums exclusively, (except for the cymbals) It was interesting, from a "geek" point of view, but not satisfying musically. That drove me nuts, and only lasted a few months. To keep the sound acceptable for pop music, I went to a mixture of acoustic drums and electronics, then to acoustic drums with transducers, triggering an electronic "brain", then finally back to acoustic drums exclusively.

In the 80's, we were "simulating" some very hard playing, using electronics. Specifically, we were trying to achieve the sound of big concert acts, but in night clubs that wouldn't tolerate the actual volume of those bands. We weren't actually hitting these electronic pads very hard, because it made no difference. The physical realities of a vibrating stage made the "great dynamic range" of these electronics almost non-existent. (Dancers would trigger the transducers.) It wasn't necessary to play the acoustic drums hard either, since every drum and cymbal had a mic. on it, and usually some reverb. That eventually became boring to everybody, and "gated reverb" became popular, so we were then expected to play hard again, but were forced to sit in plexiglass "aquariums"... sort of an imitation of a studio-type isolation booth. Inside those things, the sound is **horrible**. Three pieces of plexiglass, usually set up on a piece of wood, creates a really harsh, annoying sound for the drummer sitting inside. Most of the casinos had this kind of setup. Lots of harsh, high-end frequencies bouncing around.

Here's a typical studio experience from my youth: (I hope your experiences are completely different.)

The phrase "fix it in the mix" was popular in those days. In the early 1980's, I was playing with a successful "show"-type band, and the leader wanted to do some recording of his original material... "soft-rock", FM radio-type stuff, at that time. So, the management company hired a producer of some very well-known "star" acts, to produce the album. We wrote and rehearsed the material, and took a week off to do the recording. I should mention a pivotal factor here, which is that "becoming famous" has never been my goal. I just always wanted to achieve a certain level of playing, and I have strong opinions about how the drums should sound. If you're more concerned with being a popular studio player, (which is admirable), then the following story won't be relevant for you. Do what the producer wants, and you'll be successful.

On day one in the Orlando studio, the engineer (who had never heard the band) emphasized that I should use the studio drum set, because it was "tuned to the studio". I went into the heavily-carpeted and isolated drum booth, to discover a small 4-piece drum set, equipped with thick, muffled heads. (completely "flat" sound... no resonance.) I tapped on them a little, didn't like the sound, and pulled out a drum key to adjust them. The engineer just happened to hear the sound through his headphones, when I clicked the drum key onto the first lug of a tom, and asked "What are

you doing?". When I said I was going to work on the sound a little, he got extremely agitated, and told me that I shouldn't touch them, because they were "tuned to the studio". I asked "How are they tuned?", to which he responded, "They're tuned to a C sharp chord".

Well... I always carry a chromatic pitch pipe in my stick bag, so I pulled it out, played the notes of a C sharp chord, while tapping on both heads of each drum, and found absolutely nothing similar to a "C sharp chord". When I told the engineer that, he ceased wanting to talk about it, but assured me that "These drums are tuned to the studio", and that "He knew what he was doing", and that "Regardless of the sound in the booth, the drums always sounded great in the final mix.". Separately from that, the leader became panicky, and asked me to "just go along with the guy", which I did. (I was about 25 years old, and felt obligated to do that.) The producer was apparently more interested in avoiding any "conflicts", than in the sound of these recordings, and so off we went. This restriction didn't affect the other players much, since their instruments were electronic.

During the week-long recording, I was never allowed to touch the drums, and I always thought they sounded like cardboard. What's interesting to me is that we were "bought" on the basis of our live sound, and my drums were completely unmuffled, and used thin, coated (Remo "Diplomat") heads. Still, I was constantly reassured that the final mix would be great. When we finished, and later, when the records were produced, the drums sounded exactly like what I had heard during the recording... It was a terrible, flat, cardboard sound, which no one liked. Live and learn.

I'll spare you the details, but this same kind of experience was repeated several times in my early career.

So, what is best approach?

We're all different, so only you can decide. Personally, I would rather be hired with "my sound" being considered as part of "why", than to be hired for reading ability, applied to what I think is bad-sounding drums. Today, if I can't have a say in the way my drums will sound on a recording, I would rather sit at home, and will happily refer the studio to another drummer, with no bad feelings.

Young drummers go through a lot of trauma about getting the sound they want. When I was in my 20's, I spent many band breaks sitting on stage with a drum key in my hand. As I've grown older, I think that the details of "drum tuning" are less and less important. A "good sound" is hugely important, but it's not based so much on details. Personally, I like clean-sounding acoustic drums, with high and low tones, and that's about it. I don't care about specific "pitches", and in fact, don't want any specific pitch to be heard during the music as a rule, because I think it interferes with the band.

Just be your own person, enjoy music, never stop listening and learning, and contribute to whatever music you play, in the most positive way that you can. If you do that sincerely, everyone will know and appreciate it.

- Mike James