

# **Innovative Percussion<sup>®</sup> Inc.**

The Musical Big Band Drummer

Ed Soph

## The Musical Big Band Drummer

Ed Soph



Have you ever heard a passive/aggressive big band drummer? You probably have. This is the drummer who plays loudly and assuredly when there are figures to be read, but timidly and repetitively when there is nothing to read other than “Play 12 bars

time behind trumpet solo.” Often, one sees this drummer counting while playing those twelve bars. When written figures reappear on the chart, the drummer comes back to life with an exuberance expressed with over-playing accents and cymbal crashes, and fills with no relationship to the band figures that those fills are supposed to connect.

“Passive/aggressive” drummers play only with their eyes. They are literal, unimaginative, and unmusical. But they are good readers and counters.

Unfortunately, this type of player is becoming more the rule than the exception, and it is not difficult to understand why. All kinds of materials are used to educate young jazz drummers except the music they are learning to play. Instruction is visual, not aural, especially in the hands of teachers who are products of such a curriculum.

The reality of the situation is that everyone can read but not everyone can hear. Aurally based curricula would produce fewer but better teachers. Those teachers would have the aural perceptions of a player as well as the visual tools of an educator.

Musical big band drummers learn to play with music by listening to it. This is not an argument against books, but a book is not a musical end in itself, and any book is only as good as the experience and the musicality of the individual teaching from it. That is where the problem lies. The ability to read a book on big band drumming should not give one license to teach big band drumming.

Visually oriented teaching does not encourage musical insight, musical imagination and individuality or musical playing. Reading is the least important of the three general areas of expertise

required for playing musically in a big band, yet it is often given the most importance, usually by those who have not progressed beyond the level of learning. The other two areas, interpretation and improvisation, are based upon aural skills. The ability to listen distinguishes a musical reader, interpreter and improviser.

Below are some qualities that make a big band drummer musical. Listen for them in the playing of artists ranging from Chick Webb, Davey Tough, Don Lamond, Buddy Rich, Sonny Oayne, and Jo Jones to Jeff Hamilton, Butch Miles, John Riley, Jon con Ohlen, Jim Rupp and Mel Lewis. You won't “hear” these concepts in a book.

1. Drummers must have consistency of time and dynamics within the drumset before they can play musically within the rhythm section and the ensemble. Why? A musical rhythm section plays in time and is dynamically balanced. All components of the section – piano, bass, guitar, vibes, etc. – play in time and are equally heard. Likewise, the components of the drumset must mirror the other instruments of the rhythm section.

For example, the comping of the piano or guitar is analogous to the rhythms of the ride cymbal and, depending on style, the soft “four on the floor” played on the bass drum. The sections of the ensemble play in time together and are dynamically balanced, as is the rhythm section.

2. The drummer must produce a good sound. The horns and the other instruments of the rhythm section play with clear articulation, inflection, and intonation. So must the drummer. This can mean playing the ride or hi-hat in the proper area with the appropriate part of the stick to get the clearest definition: playing the snare drum consistently just off the center of the head to get a clear, articulate attack; and making sure that the “chick” of the hi-hats is heard on the other side of the band.

3. Drum figures and the improvised figures created to set them up or connect them (fills) can sound like the horn figures and phrases they relate to and complement. Many big band drummers use the rhythmic vocabulary of the chart itself – the horn figures- as material for their interpretation and improvisation. Even a drummer's improvised figures can sound like part of the written arrangement when they musically reflect the rhythmic and dynamic nature of the ensemble's figures.

4. Musical big band drummers may delineate the form of the tune by changing the orchestration of their time playing and by playing rhythmic turn-around to accompany the harmonic turn-arounds of the music.

5. Through the use of accents, rimshots, buzzes, flams, and ghost notes, as well as shoulder accents on the cymbals, the drummer can shape and phrase rhythmic figures to sound like legato or staccato horn articulations and phrases, not simply linear drum rhythms.

6. A musical drummer voices ensemble figures on the set according to attack (long or short), according to which section or sections of the ensemble are playing the figures and in what register (high, mid, low) they are playing and according to dynamic level. A musical drummer hears that a saxophone section forte is not the same as a trumpet section forte, and plays with the dynamic sensitivity that comes with that understanding.

7. A musical drummer knows that the part also shows what the ensemble is not playing. A “reader” plays only what is written, does not know how to accompany soloists when the big band becomes a combo, and plays stock patterns and licks that have no rhythmic or dynamic relevance to the ensemble’s figures. This is the sort of formulaic playing that is the result of rule-based, visual teaching.

8. A musical drummer is both a big band drummer and a combo drummer.

9. Musical drummers are good listeners who let the music tell them what to play and how to play it.

10. Musical drummers listen to what they are reading.

The next time you listen to a musical drummer, ask yourself why that drummer sounds so good. You’ll hear the drummer observing some of the points given above, but more importantly, you will form your own conclusions and begin to educate yourself aurally. That is the first step in becoming a musical player and a musical teacher.

*Ed Soph is an Associate Professor of Music in the percussion department at the University of North Texas. In addition to his duties at UNT, he is in much demand as a performer, adjudicator, and clinician. Soph’s big band experience includes the North Texas One O’Clock Lab Band and the bands of Stan Kenton, Woody Herman, Bill Watrous, and Clark Terry.*

*This article has been reprinted by permission of the Percussive Arts Society Inc., 701 NW Ferris, Lawton, OK 73507-5442; Email: [percarts@pas.org](mailto:percarts@pas.org); Web: [www.pas.org](http://www.pas.org).*

**Innovative  
Percussion<sup>®</sup>  
Inc.**  
[www.innovativepercussion.com](http://www.innovativepercussion.com)