

Playing Someone Else's Kit

Creating A Positive Experience

by Jeremy Hummel

Over the years I've heard many drummers complain that their performance suffered when they couldn't use their own kit. This sentiment has always puzzled me. The truth of the matter is that we need to remember where the music actually comes from. In this article, I will explain not only why this happens but also how to dispense with this crutch.

I begin by offering three very important words: Get over it. I know, I know. Right now you're thinking, *But I spend all my time practicing on these drums, with this sound and these cymbal heights. I'm more comfortable with my drums than with anything else.*

I can sympathize to some degree, but is it more important to be comfortable with our gear or with our playing? In other words, have you ever thought about what people are actually saying when they blame a subpar performance on someone else's equipment? This may seem harsh, but when I hear that type of complaint, I question how good a musician the person is to begin with.

A DIFFERENT VIEW

My viewpoint on this issue stems from my childhood. My father is a guitarist, and he often held his band's rehearsals at our house. He had a rotating cast of drummers who always seemed to have great gear. I was excited when someone new joined the band, because it meant I could experiment with a new setup. Over the years I saw everything from double bass Rogers kits to groovy blue acrylic Ludwigs to sets that had Octobans and Paiste cymbals positioned so high I could barely reach them.

Getting the chance to play these different kits enabled me to change my approach to the drums on a regular basis. Some days I pretended I was Tommy Aldridge. Other days I was



Stewart Copeland. All of these setups and different sounds had a huge influence on my drumming diversity. Equally important, they forced me to be adaptable. And I embraced it.

I realize that not everyone has the same opportunities to get comfortable playing on different kits. But I've come across far too many people who have learned to play their drums set up just one way. Remember, music comes from *inside* you. So you really should be able to make even a toy drumkit sound fantastic.

WHAT TO DO

The first thing I do when I have to play someone else's kit is introduce myself to the other drummer and thank him for letting me use his drums. First off, I'm usually quite happy when I don't have to load in all of my gear. More important, this introduction breaks the ice and helps soften up the owner to allow me to make some small adjustments to the kit. (If the drums are set up for a right-handed player and you're a lefty, now would be a good time to disclose that information!) And I try to be just as accommo-

dating when someone is sharing my kit. Unless the other drummer is a complete jerk, I try to give a little. There might be some pieces you're firm on because they get too out of whack when you change their position (like your throne). But that's why I use memory locks. "Sure, you can adjust that stand, because I can just put it back later," I'll often say.

DISCOVERING NEW SOUNDS

We're all gearheads, right? When we play different equipment, it can turn us on to a new cymbal, snare, drum-head model, and so on. If you play on someone's gear that's the polar opposite of your own, you may even find that it actually suits your band's sound better than what you've been using. For example, maybe that deeper, thuddier snare on the borrowed kit fits the music better than your tight and poppy one. Or maybe the other drummer's big, washy crashes give more weight to the louder sections of the songs than the smaller cymbals and splashes you brought with you.

There are so many new products coming out all the time. So why not take advantage of the chance to try out

someone else's gear and see what it sounds like? Something as simple as a different bass drum head can make a big difference in your sound.

Now, there's also a factor well known to many big-city drummers, and that's the house kit, which is usually a bass drum and toms that are shared by all of the drummers on a multi-band bill in order to minimize changeover time. The house kit, often but not always a budget model, presents challenges of its own, most of them related to the fact that a revolving cast of drummers are positioning, tuning, and then smacking the drums, over and over every night. Badly pitted heads can be only the beginning; many of us have dealt with gashed kick or floor tom skins.

But here's the thing: If you can confront a kit with balky tom holders, a giant bass drum that forces you to position your snare too far away, and a floor tom that's four inches smaller than your own, and you *still* manage to get your style across, you'll have the confidence to play on any setup under the sun, with no excuses.

DIFFERENT METHODS FOR DIFFERENT SOUNDS

Some people can be anal-retentive about what I consider to be the wrong things. For example, I've had a student think he couldn't play a particular tune without a China cymbal.

"But the fill ends with a hit on the China," he said. My response: "Well, let's try to make that crash sound like a China!" Then I demonstrated numerous ways to strike cymbals. Simply consider the point of attack and the velocity of the stick when it hits the cymbal. Are you trying to achieve a quick, staccato sound or more of an open, washy tone? In many cases, both can be achieved with the same cymbal.

Another powerful tool is what I call implied sound. This means that if a surface is struck with the right technique, and the performer *believes* the surface will produce the sound that's in his or her mind, the listener will receive the same signal. Try this experiment. Go to your kit and get into a Latin vibe. Suppose you want to do some soloing that sounds like you're playing timbales, but all you have is your toms. If you get some rimshots going or you try muffling the drumhead with the tip of one stick while striking with the other, the desired sound can be achieved. I use this idea often when I'm playing on someone's kit and the floor tom is tuned higher than what I hear in my head. In that situation, I strike the drum to create an open sound, pulling out as many of the undertones as possible.

EXPRESS YOURSELF

Playing music is a form of expression. Have you ever experimented with just one sound source to hear all you could get out of it? Grammy winner Steve Mitchell often talks to his students about taking a hi-hat or one drum into the woods (or even another room) and seeing how many different sounds can be brought out of it. Steve also talks about what he calls the truth kit. As he explains, "I heard about the truth kit from a fellow drummer in the '70s. He said that all you really need is a snare, bass drum, hi-hat, and ride cymbal. This minimal setup will get the job done, and the 'truth' of whether or not someone can play will be revealed." The point is, when we get too hung up on our personal gear, we're saying that the kit plays us rather than we play the kit.

It's a good exercise to consider your gear and your playing style in order to be sure you're able to play a foreign kit without becoming frustrated. Maybe you'll have to ditch some of those fast fusion fills when the toms are big and loose, or maybe you won't have the ability to set up three splashes for those quick accents—but maybe you'll find the vibe doesn't suffer for it a bit.

Obviously, we all like playing our own gear the best. But I hope the ideas in this article will help you gain a fresh perspective the next time you have to play on someone else's kit. Think of it this way—if Jimi Hendrix or Stevie Ray Vaughan sat in with a band and jammed on a cheap guitar ordered from a Sears catalog, would it still be Jimi or Stevie Ray? Absolutely. If *you* have to play on someone else's kit, is it still you playing? Absolutely!

Jeremy Hummel was an original member of Breaking Benjamin. He helped that group achieve platinum status with its second release, *We Are Not Alone*. He has since turned his efforts to session work and drum instruction in Pennsylvania. Jeremy can be reached at his website, jeremyhummel.com.



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