



DRUM LESSONS

FACULTY ESSAY
by Paul Wertico

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Of all the musical instruments, drums are probably the most misunderstood.

the drummer invokes images of physical coordination, grace, energy and rhythm. Others look at a drummer and fantasize about what extra-musical opportunities and escapades he or she must have experienced. To the more enlightened, the drummer represents the heart and soul of any band, its driving force and thus its musical conductor in many ways. Actually, all of the above scenarios are valid in some respects, depending on the music and the circumstances.

During my professional career, I've been both a performer and an instructor. I've played the drums around the world as a member of the Pat Metheny Group from 1983 until 2001 and have been fortunate to receive seven Grammy Awards and several gold records. Currently, I'm head of Jazz and Contemporary Music Studies in Roosevelt's

To some people, a drummer spends his or her life just hitting things and making a lot of noise. To others,

Chicago College of Performing Arts (CCPA) and actively perform and record with many different artists around the globe. With over 40 years of private teaching experience, I've taught a wide variety of students, ranging from high school and college level players, to highly successful professionals (Glenn Kotche from the band Wilco, Jeff Quay from Blue Man Group and even players from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra). In addition, some of my students have been surgeons, anesthesiologists, psychiatrists, lawyers and even a champion race car driver.

During all those years, I've always made it my policy to never tell students that they "don't have it" or that they'll "never amount to anything" because if they want to play drums, then they should play drums. A beautiful thing about music is that it's very accepting of different concepts and abilities. Just because you can't play jazz doesn't necessarily mean that you can't play rock or blues.

It's my job to find "the key that opens the door" for each individual based on his or her talent, practice habits and musical interests. Rather than just going through a preset routine or following some rigid curriculum procedures, I always try to evaluate and "diagnose" students on an individual basis and then "prescribe" what I think they need on a lesson-by-lesson basis.

For instance, my CCPA students consistently practice for many hours every day and as a result they improve by leaps and bounds. They come back for their next lesson prepared and hungry for more. As a teacher, it's gratifying and inspiring to see such huge improvements on a consistent basis.


Other students (those who are professionals in other areas) sometimes don't have time to practice, so it's my job to give them what they need during each lesson, while realizing that the next time I see them, a few of them may have improved only by what they learned at their last lesson. One student, a surgeon who possesses a good amount of natural musical talent, but has absolutely no time to practice, refers to his weekly lessons as the "pearl of the day." He dreams of retirement when he'll be able to spend all the time he wants with the hobby he loves so much.

A drummer's primary responsibility is to "keep time" and to give "life" to a tempo. Each type of beat gives a song a certain style and identity and makes people want to move and dance. Next time you're at a wedding and want to dance a cha-cha, if the drummer plays the cha-cha beat correctly, you'll have fun dancing, but if the drummer doesn't know how to play a cha-cha beat and plays an overly complicated swing groove instead, then good luck trying to dance a cha-cha to that!

In fact, one of the things that makes a cha-cha, a cha-cha... a rock beat, a rock beat... and a song, a song... is what the drummer plays. Each of these rhythms has a certain feel and requires the drummer to have coordination and independence of his or her limbs in order to play the beat correctly.



Paul Wertico performs at an outdoor concert in Chicago in 1982.

A man with light-colored hair, wearing a black button-down shirt, is seated in a black office chair. He is looking directly at the camera with a thoughtful expression, his right hand resting on his chin. A silver laptop is open on his lap. In the foreground, a drum set is visible, including a snare drum and a cymbal. The background shows a studio setting with a white wall and some equipment. The text is overlaid in the top right corner.

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To become successful in almost any area of music, the drummer must first learn how to “feel” and maintain a steady tempo. This essential skill can be learned through repeated practice with a metronome or a sequencer or by playing along with various recordings that have solid time and then “hearing” and memorizing exactly that tempo. This is accomplished both by mental concentration and through muscle memory.

Some students are gifted with a better sense of tempo than others, much like some people have a natural sense of pitch. Possessing these abilities from birth gives students an advantage, but these skills can also be taught. One other great way to hone one’s sense of tempo is by playing with fellow musicians who have a good feel and sense of time.

Although I am certainly biased, I believe there are many reasons young people should consider choosing a career as a professional drummer or, at the very least, take up playing the drums as a hobby. Here are my top reasons:

A healthy lifestyle • U2 band drummer Larry Mullen is more fit than European soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo, according to an article in the *Irish Independent Herald* newspaper. Research has shown that every time the U2 drummer rocks his way through a 90-minute performance on stage, he burns more calories than most top athletes. Scientists connected musicians, including Blondie’s drummer Clem Burke, to equipment measuring their heart rate, oxygen up-take and the levels of lactic acid in their blood as they played a set. The stress on their bodies as they played was then compared to that of top athletes. It was found that the drummers’ heart rates were raised to as high as 190 beats per minute and they could burn off 600 calories in a performance. Many drummers typically burn 400 to 600 calories per hour. The British government hopes this research will help develop programs for overweight children who are not interested in sports.

Playing creative music helps develop problem-solving abilities • In life, we’re always going to find ourselves in new and unfamiliar circumstances. I’ve discovered that musicians often adapt better to different situations than people who are used to a certain type of “stability” in their lives. By taking an improvisational “jazz attitude” to life in general, a person can learn how to embrace the unknown and make something out of nothing. And even though change can be frightening to a lot of people, musicians are able to deal with things as they come.

A chance to continually improve and never be bored • Musicians learn how to truly express themselves by striving for artistic growth and then by sharing their discoveries with others. Part of the beauty of doing this is the journey itself. Many people in this day and age seem to want to arrive “there” immediately, without fully understanding and appreciating the process of actually getting “there.” A lot of things nowadays are about instant gratification and quick fixes. That is not

what being a creative musician is about. As an artist, you have to have patience and dedication. As a musician, I look at my personal journey through my art and use it as a gauge for my life.

Many people can’t even walk and chew gum at the same time, but drummers can handle multi-tasking easily • Drummers not only have to use all four limbs at once, but they also have to keep time, make the composition and performance flow, create an appropriate and supportive drum part, remember the song’s form and structure and anticipate the future. In addition, they must be open to anything unexpected and be able to back up and inspire soloists. Some even sing while playing the drums.

Self-expression • Playing the drums allows people to express themselves through sound and motion. It’s an amazing way to tell the world what you know and feel. When there’s a connection between the drummer, the other musicians and the audience, it’s a truly magical feeling that can’t be adequately described in words.

A chance to make people happy • By performing at weddings, bar mitzvahs, private parties and other events, musicians perform a critical role in people’s most important and memorable events. That’s a big responsibility and it can be very gratifying to know that you helped make someone’s special day into a day with beautiful and lasting memories.

The ability to work with others • To be a successful musician, you must learn how to work with others on stage and off. One of the best compliments drummers can get is when other musicians tell them that it was “so easy to play with them” and that the other musicians felt like “they could play things they’ve never played before.”

You never know when the “plane will go down” Since there’s no real security in life and you never know when a particular day might be your last, why not live your life to its fullest and follow your life’s passion doing something you truly love to do?

Finally, I’ve found that whether playing a live gig or recording in the studio, you have no real idea whom you’re affecting, or whom you’ll affect in the future.

An extraordinary thing happened when I was playing with the Pat Metheny Group in Italy. At the time, the country was racked by several kidnappings. A young man came to one of our shows and told us that for two years he was held for ransom in a cave and didn’t know if he was going to survive. He said what got him through that unimaginable ordeal was thinking about our music. It’s amazing to think that the music we make can have such a powerful effect on people’s lives. **R**

Paul Wertico is assistant professor and head of Jazz and Contemporary Music Studies at the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt. He gained an international reputation as a member of the Pat Metheny Group where he performed on 10 recordings and four videos and won seven Grammy Awards. In reviews, his playing has been compared to that of an “impressionist painter,” “an inspired madman,” a “restless innovator,” and “a true legend of jazz drums.” He also was one of the Chicago Tribune’s “Chicagoans of the Year” in 2004. His latest DVD, Paul Wertico: Drum Philosophy, was released by Alfred Music Publishing and his latest CD, Impressions of a City, featuring his new band Paul Wertico’s Mid-East/Mid-West Alliance, is on the Chicago Sessions label. Before becoming a full-time faculty member at Roosevelt in 2008, Wertico served on the faculty of the percussion and jazz studies programs at Northwestern University for nearly two decades. He has written educational articles for magazines such as Modern Drummer, DRUM!, Drums & Drumming, Drum Tracks and Downbeat.

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