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RECORDING'S

DRUM COLUMN

In this month's Drum Column we tackle one approach to a nagging problem that plagues some sessions: why, after all our hard work, do our drum sounds suck?

IS LESS ONCE AGAIN THE NEW MORE?

By Nick Barrow Hill

It's time to record some drums. Maybe you have a home studio and all of your best drum mics are set up and ready to go. Or, maybe instead, you have time booked in a studio where you are paying by the hour and you need to maximize your investment. You have rehearsed countless hours to get everyone ready for the recording session and you just want the drums to sound like the heavens have opened up and the biggest, baddest drum tones ever imagined have found their way onto your recording.

You record everything the best you possibly can, you stack on some killer bass, nasty guitars, keys, background vocals, percussion, gritty lead vocals and anything else you can think of to make this the best recording ever. You then move onto mixing and you quickly realize you have succeeded in creating a nice massive wall of sound, but your drum tones aren't nearly cutting through the track like what you dreamed of, and they aren't even close to those of your favorite records. Compared to where you started, you can't even really hear the ring of the toms you worked so hard to sculpt out. You spend days tweaking the mix and trying to eq the overheads to better accent the cymbal work or killer tom fills your drummer worked to perfect, but still... no luck. What gives?

If ain't easy

With so many types of drums and the various woods, sizes, heads, rooms, drummers, etc., etc., trying to get great drum sounds can be an overwhelming task if we really stop and think over the sheer amount of different factors and choices that can come into play when we set out to record drums. Countless magazine articles and books have been written on how to properly or better record drums. Whether it be mic placements or mic choices, or where and how to set up your stereo overheads and ambient room mics, most of these suggestions and tips can add real helpful information to aid in our decision making process.

Add to this the new art of drum replacement and drum triggering, and it opens up even more options and considerations for us to craft better sounding drum tracks. So now we take all this into consideration and we still find ourselves coming up short in our sonic quest for the drummer's Holy Grail. Where do we turn?

The devil in the details

I am always interested in new and better "technical" ways to get better drum sounds, but what if we get "big

picture" for a second and ask ourselves, "Have I really thought enough about creating or helping to create better drum parts?" Is there too much going on to let the song sing through?

Simply put, we have all been guilty of overplaying and drummers are usually top offenders. As recording musicians, many of us find ourselves overproducing our tracks sometimes simply *because we can*. These thick and large concoctions of sounds might be great in theory, but are they truly helping to serve as a vehicle for the song? Sonic "space" is meant to be a friend in our tone-making quest, not an enemy... and drum parts are key in determining so many crucial things.



TIMBALAND:
Master of
Less is More

Do we have a great groove to dance to or are we killing it with unnecessary fills? Can we hear the lead vocal or are we beating it to death with cymbals? Are we in sync with the dynamic ebb and flow of the song and not stepping all over everything with our best Neil Peart imitations? All of these questions should be asked to help determine if it's our drum *part*, not our recording technique, that needs to be put into question.

We have all heard it said before: "It's not what you play, it's what you *don't* play that sometimes makes everything come to life." This may be a perfect credo to follow to help sober up your drum mixes save your songs.

Who did it right?

There are great models to mold ourselves after with this idea, both modern and old school. Take AC/DC's classic tune "Back in Black", for example. This song works everywhere from concert halls to pro sports games to disco clubs, and those drum tones are just ringing right on through the track no matter how you break it down. There are very few cymbal hits, a whole

lotta groove going on under a great riff and even better song. We have no problem hearing and feeling the drums because the part is so *supportive*. Through this great use of space, we really get to *feel* a great rock tune and in turn, we can actually *hear* how great the drum tones really are.

Another great example that I like referencing nowadays is Hip Hop and Urban beatsmith Timbaland. For years he has been doing so much more with so much less that it's almost embarrassing how ridiculously huge his drum grooves and tones are with so little going on. The rhythm parts are brilliant in their simplicity, and producers and musicians of all genres could help their tracks out tremendously by analyzing how this modern genius arranges his drum grooves.

Less is his main ingredient it seems, and the "how and where" he chooses to create space with his drum parts actually help force great drum tones into focus. Consequently, when these drum tones are supporting great songs, the end product never has a problem packing dance floors in the process.

It can be difficult sometimes to edit ourselves and even tougher to get a bandmate to tone down his drum fills to serve our recordings. But in the end, we hopefully all can agree that we want our recordings to have longevity and connect with an audience.

Clearing out our garage of all the excess junk helps us to actually pull our cars in and use the room for what it was intended (or to use it as a recording studio, but that's another story). Clear out a bunch of drum excess on your tracks and you might find those toms are ringing through like never before, people are grooving much easier, and your vocals get to sit on top and guide the way.

Perhaps we can all challenge ourselves (and our bandmates) to apply the less-is-more mentality to see what we can create as a group in the process. In doing so, maybe this will force us to dig deeper for better parts, better songs, and in the end, create space for better recordings! 🎧

Rick Barrio Dill of Shark Eating Dog Productions performs and produces while based in his Upstream Studios in Los Angeles when he's not touring with bands like 2nd Day Crush. Check him out at www.myspace.com/dillmyspacegimmick or write to him via talkback@recordingmag.com.

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