

Eight Tips To Improve Your Feel

by Robert Biesewig



This is true for every drummer as it is for every musician. How you feel and therefore how you play the music is one of the main factors that determine how you will connect with other musicians and which ultimately results in how the group or band sounds altogether.

Of course you might have an impressive skill set and people might admire your speed. You might get a gig just because of that...In the long run however, you will connect to the people that are on the same page, your page. This is how groups and networks are being build, how a working combination of people always shows up together on stage - The personal click is a key factor.

Since most people believe that your “feeling” is a predetermined talent, god-given destiny or maybe even a racial thing, there is basically nothing you can do about it. One might also argue that there are no real exercises that could help you to get better in “feeling”, since there is no indicator of feel. Who can really say which feeling is the best?

Right. No. Yes, it is true that feel is probably as subjective as taste, but it is also manipulatable just like taste. Just think of all the stuff you didn't like to eat as a kid but you are enjoying now.

Avocado, broccoli, coffee, bitter chocolate, etc...

While people might think this is a natural progression and it will just happen overnight, this natural progression is actually a result of shifts in your awareness as you grow older and the continuous curiosity that leads you on to try the things again and again.

What I am saying is this: You can influence your feel or your taste, if you are aware of the mechanisms. Creating habits and sticking to certain routines will definitely help to speed up the process. It's one thing to be technically able to play a groove, but a whole different ball game to make people move, especially your fellow musicians on stage.

This is in no way a short cut to a better groove. These are just some ideas you can directly incorporate and make them your own. Always be creative with these tips, take them to another level, be inspired and keep inspiring.

1. How you walk

Most people just walk. Maybe they think about how they look when they see themselves in a shopping window, a mirror or on camera, but most people are just unaware of how they walk.

Your movements mirror your personality, your body is following your nerves, which are following the huge amount of impulses and commandos that your brain is firing every second.

Becoming aware of your movements will help you to discover some secrets about your personality and is key to eventually change or manipulate them which will lead to improving your musicianship aka feel.

EXERCISES:

A: Try to walk in BPM. Whether you are listening to music, a metronome or determining your speed by talking or singing or counting out loud. Aligning your steps to a measurable beat, rhythm or melody, will strengthen your inner clock. You could also come up with your own cardio, interval playlist and jogg "in time".

B: Try walking in different measures and subdivisions. How would walking in 3/4 feel like? How 7/8. Count out loud, always.

C: Try to physically feel polyrhythms like 4 against 3 and 2 against 3 idioms. Personally the most effective exercise I discovered for myself was counting or singing odd rhythms against my steps. I would for instance walk in 4 and count 3 against it (or clap/snap/tick/click whatever feels good). After I had realized how powerful this is I started throwing all kinds of odds against my steps. You can do this anytime and everywhere you walk.

2. How you talk

You might have guessed it. If you can walk you can dance, if you can talk you can sing. Maybe this is not entirely true when you add taste to the equation, but generally speaking talking and walking are major requirements and basics of dancing and singing - or making music in general.

Once you become aware of how you communicate, you will be able to make changes. Are you a fast talker, do you talk before you finish your thoughts, do you talk a lot or not enough, are you yelling or whispering the whole time... Being aware of your speech is helping your feel for rhythm and melody. It is important to listen to yourself and others in order to establish great communication. You might even realize that people you enjoy talking to either have a beautiful voice, speak a lot of wisdom (sense) or talk in a way that relaxes you. This is what you want to achieve musically in a band. It's a conversation, always.

EXERCISES:

A: Practice dynamics and speeds when talking. Reading out loud helps, but actually using different techniques within a conversation will immediately demonstrate how impactful this is... Watch how people react when you all of a sudden start to speak very quietly for example.

B: Practice talking in rhythms and patterns. This is also brilliant if you want to improve site reading. Just start a monolog about anything but stick to a certain rhythm you're reading at the same time.

TIPP: Syncopation by Ted Reed.

3. How you analyze

Whether you are a beginner, intermediate or professional musician (drummer), analyzing music while you're listening to it becomes a habit. Whether this is a good or a bad habit is completely in your own hands

Most musicians will listen to music focusing on their own instrument primarily in order to get inspired, to study or to prepare for a show.

While it is absolutely necessary to nail your own part, you will probably become a better musician quicker, when you focus first on the rest of the music. You are already paying so much attention to your instrument when you shed or practice, try to focus on the other players first, while you analyze. This will also give you a good idea how your part fits the music...everything is in relation. Imagine playing music in a band, if you're not paying attention to your fellows, why are you playing with them in first place. Learn the different feels of your surrounding, it will make you a better musician. Communication is key, always!

Usually my routine looks a little bit like this:

- First time I listen, I really try to just listen to the music in total. Is there a vibe, what is it. What do I feel? Happy, sad, angry, cool...?
- Secondly, I try figuring out the message. Of course lyrics tell you a lot, but does the music really underline what was being said.
- I thirdly still believe that bass players are my best friends, they always try to support what I am saying, and, if advanced, they just make the foundation much stronger and help carrying everybody in the band. They get my full attention while listening to the song the third time.
- It really depends on the importance of their part, I will listen as many times as possible until I have heard what every player has to say in a song.
- In Hip Hop, lyrics are the key (before mumble of course). Rap is such a rhythmical sport. Only when you know what the MC is talking about, you can fully support him or her.

EXERCISE: All of the above. Go back to your favourite songs and write down what you are hearing for the first time.

4. How you emulate

Just like we have to learn how to speak, read, write, we have to learn how to listen and how to answer and to react. This is not just character or horoscope, it is training, failure, practice and repetition. You are never lost or stuck in your way, with critical reflection of ones actions and self awareness, change is always possible.

“You are what you eat” at least now, in the days of veganism, we have all heard that particular sentence. It’s pretty simply put, but it means of course, that whatever you put in will determine or at least have a major influence on whatever comes out or shows.

In music, your consumption is directly linked to your understanding of it, and therefore to your own playing, If you consume high quality, nutritious, performed by great players, music, you will more likely grow to be a better musician yourself. What would happen if you listen to badly performed music or no music at all (I can’t really name anything right here, but I am of course referring to an Asian phenomenon with more than a billion streams.

EXERCISE: Play along to the music you love every day or every time you practice. Make this at least 50% of your routine. Try to sneak in legendary, great and challenging tunes but don’t force yourself to master those while in play along mode.

Here is for the drummers: Write a list with 100 drummers that have a “legendary” status. Call it a “Must know” list. Start out with these random 20 ;) Try to find out who their favourite fellow musicians are and why? Always look for evidence of chemistry.

1. Tony Williams
2. Buddy Rich
3. Art Blakey
4. Jo Jones
5. Billy Cobham
6. Vinnie Colaiuta
7. Gene Krupa
8. Steve Gadd
9. Louis Belson
10. Dave Weckl
11. Ginger Baker
12. John Bonham
13. Elvin Jones
14. Clyde Stubblefield
15. Jabo Starks
16. Melvin Parker
17. Dennis Chambers
18. Peter Erskine
19. Bernard Purdie
20. Steve Jordan
21. ...
22. ...
23. ...
24.

Of course this list goes on and on. Now, try to research at least 3-5 project, these drummers are known for and add them to your selection of play alongs. Complete this list to a minimum of 100 Drummers.

5. How you balance

Dynamics are very important in music, as they are in life. Everything is Ying and Yang, balance. What goes up, must come down. To transport this rule of nature into your music you actually have endless exercises on dynamics.

I don't want to go into detail or list down particular exercises, since these tips are just meant to inspire, but, try to think about the last routine you have been working on; if you now start playing the same thing in different volumes and velocities, you will recognize an immediate change in feel.

This is something you can reverse-engineer and turn it into something very useful. If you practice on different levels, trying to keep the feel and intensity you felt when it sounded best to you, you will absolutely increase control over your own feel.

This is something I didn't want to believe when I was studying. Being able to control dynamics will increase your overall control and comfort in music. It doesn't mean that you have to play soft. Your awareness of what the music might need sharpens and your "feel-vocabulary" grows.

EXERCISE: Play a groove and start changing the volumes on single Instruments. For example Keep the volume of Kick and Snare but play a very soft and gentle Hi Hat. Rotate through Hi Hat, Left Hand, Right Hand, Kick. Focus on one Limb for 8 bars, then move on to the next.

- A Increase Volume
- B Decrease Volume
- C Rim Shot On\Off
- D Add Accents

6. How slow can you go

That's right. I mean literally practice as slow as possible and only slowly increase the tempo during a practice session. Speed comes with time but feel can't be rushed. Let the notes sink in and keep on going until you really feel where everything fits. This is definitely not a secret but most people are just ignoring it. I get it, it's probably more fun and more impressive to play things fast, but indestructible structures are built on strong foundations.

EXERCISE: Go back to your absolute favourite groove you love to play. Set your click to 28bpm and start playing the beat for 90 seconds without falling asleep. NO FILLS, NO VARIATIONS. 90 Seconds straight, let's go. Send me your results :)

Tip: Try to check in the mirror what the embodiment of the different tempos look like. Observe your movements while you are in slow motion. Record, review, record, review, record...

7. How you count

This is very underrated but probably the most effective habit to build a strong inner "ONE". You want to keep counting out **loud** at all times. This not only improves your feel and rhythmical understanding, it also boosts your independence. Talking or singing while playing is like a fifth limb that wants to fit in. Since independence is not really what we think it is, counting will help you to improve it. Nobody is truly independent, but has actually only learned a variety of different dependencies. Being able to play 3 against 4 doesn't automatically mean that you can play 2 against 3. You still have to practise both.

EXERCISE: Apply these counting variations to everything you play, start out with your favorite grooves and licks:

- A. "one" "two" "three" "four"
- B. "tick" "tick" "tick" "tick"
- C. "one" "and" "two" "and" "three" "and" "four"
- D. - "and" - "and" - "and" - "and"
- E. -"tick" -"tick" -"tick" -"tick"

8. How to proceed

Whatever you do, the moment you decide to do it you should go all the way. In Music this should mean two things.

- A. "Master your craft"
- B. "Play what you mean"

Mastering your craft refers to the technical aspect of making music. This really is training your guns, growing your knowledge, learning new words. In order to keep up in different musical styles, you need to work on your skillset. You don't want to be the guy looking confused in a session when the leader is asking you to play a Bossa Nova.

Play what you mean or "play it how you mean it" refers more to the feel side of things. This is the moment when you actually are letting go of thoughts and just play whatever comes out of you naturally. Let this happen at all times. Now that we are trying to improve our feel, here is a little idea to focus on.

When somebody tells you to play Billy Jean, you will probably listen to it once or twice, figure out the groove (in this case a really basic one) and start playing along to the song. This is all great, but to go a little step further you want to take this beat through all kinds of feels and give it a shot.

So going from straight to swing literally means: Prepare yourself and practice everything inside out, top to bottom, straight and swing. Play shuffles straight and rock grooves swing. Go crazy and get creative. This process will help to make a certain beat really your own and to own your beat.

Be inspired and inspire others. Bless.

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