

# Master Strokes

## By Richard Best

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### *How to practice*

#### 1. **Always practice with a purpose**

Make sure you know *why* you're practicing the things you intend to practice, and avoid mindlessly repeating exercises or routines that have no particular goal.

#### 2. **Use a metronome**

Just about everybody's sense of time can be improved, so working with a metronome is always appropriate. I suggest using it no more than a quarter to a third of the time -- it's equally important that you don't get dependent on it.

#### 3. **Practice what you're not good at**

If you do something well and comfortably then there's not much point in having it on your practice schedule. Stick with new stuff and the things that are giving you trouble.

#### 4. **Keep up on the basics**

Spend some time polishing the 'meat & potatoes' -- doubles, singles, buzz rolls, basic grooves ... the stuff you use all the time.

#### 5. **Practice 'SMART'**

- a. Specific: Know what it is that you're working on. Write it down.
- b. Measurable: Have a solid objective and write it down, e.g. "To work through all of the 'Zen of Disco Drumming' book in six weeks." (You either get there or you don't.)
- c. Achievable: It has to be something that's humanly possible in the amount of time you have. To set a goal of being as fast as Barret Deems or Derrick Roddy in a week and a half is not realistic. Dream big, but set your immediate targets where they can be reached.
- d. Relevant: How does it fit into the grand scheme? Will the technique you intend to work on make you a better drummer and musician or is it just 'busy work'?
- e. Time Framed: This applies to both time spent and when it's to be accomplished: "I will practice my basic rock beats every day, 5 minutes each, for one month."

#### 6. **Practice stuff that's useful**

As Buddy Rich said, "Why practice something you're not going to use?" 'Nuff said. (See 4.d.)

#### 7. **Practice stuff that's hard**

Working on difficult material will actually spill over into other areas. After working on the 'next-to-impossible' for a bit, the extremely hard becomes almost easy by comparison.

#### 8. **Practice very slowly**

We all want to play fast, and sometimes speed will be necessary. But speed comes gradually, and it cannot develop where there is a lack of control. A great principle is to practice everything as slowly as you can stand it, with the metronome set at 40-60 bpm. Once you become comfortable with a new technique, you can begin to work on it at faster tempos. And watch out for your personal 'comfort tempos', which can lead to an autopilot approach. Better to pick a tempo that forces you to concentrate to keep it together, and that usually means slow it down.

**9. Practice very fast**

You will sometimes need to play very quickly, so don't concentrate only on control at the expense of speed. Spend some time moving your basic beats and patterns up the metronome scale. You don't want to enter a situation where the tempo is so fast that you can't do what you need to do.

**10. Practice on pads**

There are several reasons for using practice pads. Portability and convenience come to mind, as does noise level. Add to this the health of your ears, which will suffer if you don't give them a break from live drums. A big advantage is that a pad lets you hear your strokes much better. Try playing alternating flams for a few minutes and you'll see.

**11. Practice on drums**

Yes, practice pads are a great invention, but they do not have the same feel and response as live drums. You need to play the drums in order to, well ... play the drums. Don't become a monster practice pad player who is unaccustomed to real drums. And remember to wear your hearing protectors.

**12. Practice with music**

That's what it's all about. You should also practice different styles of music. When you get a call for a gig, they'll ask you if you can play a certain type of music, not if you know certain figures and rudiments. There are 'music minus one' recordings available, or just play along with some of your favourite bands' recordings or downloaded tracks.

**13. KISS: Keep It Short And Simple**

Simplifying things can help you to understand and keep it together. If you're working on a new pattern that involves all four limbs, try adding one part at a time. Maybe drop the cymbal or hi-hat or both to concentrate on the interaction between the snare and bass drum, and add the other bits only when the foundation is solid.

**14. Practice stuff you're interested in**

Just heard a cool figure? Go ahead and analyse it, then hit the practice room -- make it your own. The people we listen to today learned by imitating the people they admired, who learned by studying the people they admired, and so on. Ironically, the more 'borrowed' material you master, the more individual your style will become!

**15. Try to play as much as you practice**

Don't become a practice addict. The end goal is to play live music, so get out there and play every chance you get.

*"Music is supposed to be fun -- have fun when you practice" - Jamey Aebersold*