

# 16 Keys for Music Success

By Michael Burris 10/4/2020

Over 50 years of drumming and 22 years of teaching, I've learned many things that will save you a lot of time, money, and effort. Instead of going on the long scenic route trying to reinvent the wheel, try following this map for a more direct, faster route:

- 1. Simply model excellence!** There's just not enough time or energy to reinvent the wheel. Walmart's founder Sam Walton said: "Most everything I've done I've copied from someone else," and Michael Jordan said: "I built my talents on the shoulders of other's talents – I evolved from them." Lessons with a competent teacher will save you a lot of money, time, and energy in the long run. Another set of trained eyes can help you fix your technique before you've ingrained it into muscle memory, will help you stay on track with your music goals, will help you see "the big picture" and "the end from the beginning," will motivate you to actually play more during the week, will keep you from "majoring in the minors" but instead focus on "the main things," will keep you from getting stuck in a rut (only depth distinguishes a rut from a grave), will add some variety to spice up your life from the "same-old-same-old" routines, will light a fire under you to get the rocket off the launch pad, will help you be accountable to another person so you aren't side-tracked by the "tyranny of the urgent" or "mood of the moment," and will help you keep going until you cross the finish line instead of becoming only a statistic after you quit. A skilled teacher is your best investment! In addition, build a music library of "the best of the best" teachers and learn how to read music well enough that you can glean the "best from the best of the best!" Reading music is also so important if you want to play with others in a band. Sure you may find others who only "play by ear," but the chances aren't that great nowadays. Because I can compose my parts from other people's music, even "on the fly" looking over their shoulder, I get a lot more calls for gigs! And I can pull my charts out from my accordion file and play a gig with 1 day of notice! If you want to play in a studio, concert band, or orchestra you will have to be a music reader! To get started, read Tony Robbins' *The Key to Success? Model the Best – Model Strategies That Work*, Agile Lean Life's *Learn How to Model Successful People to Accelerate Your Own Success*, Bigger Pockets' *Modeling Successful People – Four Keys to Achieve Almost Any Goal* by Douglas Dowell, and anything about Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP)'s *Modeling*. For more info on reading music, check out: Drum Ambition's *Why is Reading Music Important?*, Modern Drummer's *MD Education Team Weighs in on: Reading Music*, and Drumming Review's *Drum Sheet Music – The Basics of Reading and Writing Explained*.
- 2. Watch yourself in a mirror – this is your next best teacher!** "A picture is worth a 1000 words!" With a mirror you can immediately see the problem and fix it before your technique flaws become ingrained into muscle memory, which takes a lot more time and effort to fix! I wrap 1-3 bungee cords around my floor mirrors – 1 for maximum-height accents, 1 for soft, horizontal-level taps and grace/ghost-notes, and optionally 1 in the middle for unaccented Flams, Drags, and other unaccented compound-strokes. Having a good teacher will help you nail this down! For starters, read Disc Makers blog *Mirror, Mirror – How Watching Yourself Perform Can Elevate Your Music*, Bass Books' *Essential Secrets 50 – Practice in Front of a*

*Mirror*, Gordy Knudtson's *Drum Technique – Pt 6 – Using Mirrors*, Drum Forum's *Setting Up a Mirror in Your Practice Space*, and Troy's Drum Tips' *Practice in Front of a Mirror*.

3. **Don't be afraid to venture out!** Why not go out on a limb – that's where the fruit is! Yes, I teach my students to collect the “best of the best” drum books, CDs, and DVDs, and to play them cover to cover. But I teach them to “glean the best” from them: to really think about what's being presented, to see relationships between exercises that may not even be stated, and to look for methods or systems that are embedded in the drills. Then I tell them to take it further, to extrapolate, to build on it, to add “variations” on the “themes,” and to create new methods and new systems by using their imaginations! Why? Robert Frost in the poem *The Road Not Taken* famously wrote, “Two roads diverged in yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both. And being one traveler, long I stood and looked down one as far as I could to where it bent in the undergrowth; Then took the other, as just as fair, and having perhaps the better claim, because it was grassy and wanted wear; Though as for that the passing there had worn them really about the same, and both that morning equally lay in leaves no step had trodden black. Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back. I shall be telling this with a sigh somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” I've learned so much about music and drumming because I've followed this advice in playing and teaching. I also agree with Lucille Ball of the show *I love Lucy*, “I'd rather regret the things I've done than regret the things I haven't done.” Therefore, it's better to try Henry David Thoreau advice: “If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.” Go beyond what others are doing! To get inspired, check out: The Hr Capitalist's *About Innovation – Why are Some Cover Bands So Good But Never Make It?*, The Interro Band's *Eight Innovators in Drumming*, Reddit's thread on *Innovation in Music (And the Importance of It)*, and Daily Hunt's *Why Adventure is Important in Our Life*.
4. **Really know WHY you are playing!** I've found the line in the movie *The Matrix Reloaded* that says “Without WHY, without power, [you're just] another link in the chain” to unfortunately be true for students that aren't crystal clear why they are drumming, let alone taking lessons. When “it gets tough,” they aren't the ones who “get going.” Therefore, I keep my “reason” and goals ever before me, because I can just as easily get lost in the hamster cage's treadmill going nowhere fast. How true is Proverbs 29:18 “Without vision, the people perish!” So, tape your mission statement on the front of your music folder. It's also a good idea to keep there some Specific, Measurable Actions (SMA's) with deadlines that will get you there quicker. Remember what was inscribed in a church in Sussex, England in 1730: “A vision without a task is but a dream, a task without a vision is drudgery, but a vision and a task is the hope of the world.” I've also found that although it may seem at the time that “the path of least resistance” is to agree with other's opinions about your “passion” and abandon it for their more “logical” objectives, in the long wrong you will find theirs to be “the path of greatest resistance,” because you're violating nature's law of “doing from being,” of actions naturally flowing from identity. It's funny what James Allen Hightower noted: “There's nothing in the middle of the road but yellow stripes and dead armadillos,” so after 60 years of doing jobs, I agree with Leo Buscaglia, “The easiest thing to be in the world is you; the hardest is to be what other people want you to be.” For too many of my 50+ years of drumming I've

had the “goal-post” of “being skilled, sounding great, and being a successful player and teacher” because a lot of this was based on the goals and expectations of others. Not too long ago, I was freed from this prison when I had a Divine vision of a little boy totally captivated and “in joy” while building a sandcastle on the beach. Seeing the proud smile of the dad, I turned back to see myself playing my drums throughout my childhood in a sandbox. When I turned back to the man’s smile I knew it was my Heavenly Father’s and He said, “There’s no place I’d rather have you be and do – play as long as you want.” I’ve had subsequent times when God told me who I am NOT (any of the people I tried to be for a list of degrees and careers I’ve had, even being a “skilled, professional musician and teacher”) and who I am (“an anointed musician who will play in My courts along with many others” – it’s the glorious music people have heard all around them in heaven!). Well, that was certainly freeing! I think Oprah Winfrey understood “being and doing” because she wrote: “It is possible to do whatever you choose, if you get to know who you are and are willing to work with a power greater than yourself to do it.” For a more on this, read Stephen Covey’s *The Passion of Vision*, Laurie Beth Jones’ *The Path – Creating Your Missions Statement for Work and for Life*, The Aligned Life’s *3 Ways to Support Your Divine Purpose*, The Practical Disciple’s *9 Benefits of Knowing Your Purpose*, Life Designer’s *The Importance & Power of Knowing Your God-Given Identity*, Russell Conwell’s *Acres of Diamonds*, James Allen’s *As a Man Thinketh*, Leo Babauta’s *The Magical Power of Focus* and *10 Mindful Habits to Build the Power of Focus – with Action Items*, Tony Mayo’s *Guidelines for Writing Your Goals*, and Mike Delgado’s *Why Deadlines Matter*.

5. **Make it really, really fun – if it isn’t, you won’t do it for long!** But if you can “become like a little child” who can’t wait to play, who you have to coax to come inside after a day of playing outside, then you’ve found the “real gift” of drumming – not the so-called “gift” of natural ability, talent, or skill! So find ways to make what you want to do really, really fun! It’s no coincidence that Jesus taught so many times that you needed to “become like a little child to ‘see’ the Kingdom of God.” I’ve found this childlike “inner joy” to be the only “goal-post” that doesn’t keep moving every time you get close to it. However, if “skill and pride of accomplishment” is your objective, as soon as you think you are there and pat yourself on the back, it won’t be long before you see somebody else that has accomplished a lot more with a lot more skill. This rollercoaster between pride and disillusionment is no way to live! But if that Divine gift of childlike “joy within” you get from curiously and creatively exploring music becomes your “goal-post,” you can “kick that ball through the goal” every time you practice, you will then always feel like a success, you will then find peace or contentment instead of restless striving, you will then feel grateful, you will then become addicted to practice more and more, and the ironic “icing on top of the cake” is that you will then become more skilled and accomplished! This is truly a Divine adventure! In fact, I’m starting to favor the term “play” instead of “practice” to remind myself of the better attitude and the resultant gratitude! Look up why the great composers Bach and Handel signed their manuscripts “Soli Deo Gloria.” George Lucas, the maker of Star Wars, said “You have to find something that you love enough to be able to take risks, jump over the hurdles, and break through the brick walls that are always going to be placed in front of you. If you don’t have that kind of feeling for what it is you’re doing, you’ll stop at the first giant hurdle.” How true! Earl Nightingale said, “We are at our very best, and we are happiest, when we are fully engaged in work we enjoy on the journey toward the goal we’ve established for ourselves.” Now, I used to think that “joy” and “love” were two different things until I had some Divine visions and dreams that revealed that joy is part of love, just as many facets reflect the light of a

diamond, and that when you bite into a piece of fruit you're overwhelmed with one initial flavor, but then another reveals itself, and then later another – like a fine wine “opens up” and “finishes” to reveal its subtleties. I was also shown that childlike curiosity, fascination, experimentation, and adventure are all facets of God's unconditional love as He long explored the invention of music that we simply are discovering. Apparently that's what the apostle Paul was trying to describe in Galatians 5:22-23 and 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 of the New Testament about the nature of Divine love. And it's no coincidence that “peace or contentment” is included in the descriptions and that “gratitude or thankfulness” as our response is the essence of “worship” in the original Greek language. That's what I profoundly feel after nearly every practice session and I wish for you! For a start, read Reformed Blogmatics' *That Your Joy May Be Full – A Theology of Happiness*, Bible.org's *The Joy of God*, Wikipedia's *Fruit of the Holy Spirit*, Rachel Mareshah Morrison's *God + Music = Joy*, Psychology Today's *Music, Emotions, and Pleasure Intermingle to Create Joy*, Huffpost's *Music and Joy* blog by Tom Morris, and Cuedin's *The Power of Music – How Music Creates Joy and Relieves Stress* by Mary Rogelstad.

6. **Ensure that you outflow as much as you inflow!** Even if a pond has a spring's trickle feeding it to compensate for evaporation, without an outflow the pond will stagnate, stink, and eventually die. I saw this once in a Divine dream! My friend and I unplugged it and it flowed out like a river, and when we looked back a river was flowing into it! The same will happen with your “inflow time” of personal music study and playing. Right away find a way to regularly “outflow” your playing to others – your husband/wife, parents, or friends. Then learn to play with others in a band and perform! When you've created more avenues for “outflow,” you will notice the “inflow” has also increased into a river! To get started, read The Cross-Eyed Pianist's *Benefits of Performing*, The Music Studio's *What Are You Practicing For? – The Benefits of Performing*, Science Mag's *The Benefits of Band Class*, Music Advisor's *Top Benefits of Playing in a Band*, The Ledger's *Educators Say High School Band Students Have Advantages in Several Ways*, and Squarespace's *Benefits of Being in Band*.
7. **Time-wasters can rob you of your dreams!** We all have 168 hours in a week. Maybe we should all have a “death clock” for our remaining life or at least one for each week, like Star Trek's Leonard Nimoy had. The difference between those you successfully reach their goals and those who don't is simply how they use those 168 hours, and often how they use small blocks of time! Henry Ford said, “Most people get ahead during the time that others waste.” Napoleon bragged that the “reason I defeated the Russians is because they didn't know the value of 5 minutes.” How do you eat an elephant? Of course, one bite at a time! Here's some things I've seen people spend a lot of time on that produce very few lasting, tangible results: “caught in the web” surfing/browsing the internet's world-wide-web, compulsively reading the news, addicted to social media, mesmerized by TV, and playing video games. Without a clear target to aim at, the arrows you shoot are just going every which way, and for that reason it's not the safest place to be around such people! Alice in Wonderland asked the Cheshire cat, “Which fork in the road do I take?” He responded, “Where do you want to go?” She said, “I don't know.” “Then,” said the cat, “it doesn't matter.” Sure everybody needs a “little downtime,” but when you have a resounding “YES” pounding within your heart, your “fire within” makes it a lot easier to limit those distractions, or take advantage of them! But how? I developed faster drumming fingers while watching my favorite TV shows and during long road trips by doing my stick and finger-waiving exercises! I learned many of the

PAS 40 standard rudiments on my practice pad or got inspired reading Modern Drummer magazines during my bathroom breaks. I often watch YouTube drum videos or create my gig playlists at my kitchen table during meals. When I'm doing yard work, I'm reviewing my playlists to get those tunes deeper within me. I'm listening to music and humming the rhythms even as I'm composing this document. And when I do sit down at my day job, I often tap out sticking patterns on my leg. In other words, you will find time to do what you care most about! Einstein agreed, "When a man is sufficiently motivated, discipline will take care of itself." It's no coincidence that "self-control" is one of the facets or descriptions of Divine love in Galatians 5:22-23 in the New Testament! For starters, read The Dream Catcher's *5 Time Wasters You Should Avoid to be Successful*, Mission.org's *You're Wasting Your Spare Time And It's Killing Your Success*, Life Hack's *Top 20 Time Wasters and the Top Worthwhile Activities*, and Living Your Best's *15 Time Wasters Successful People Avoid*.

8. **Continue feeding what you want to grow – whatever you focus on will expand!** That's what Esther Jno-Charles observed and that "energy flows where attention goes." It's like a magnifying glass that turns the sun's warm rays into a blazing fire! I also agree with Francois Rabelais who said, "Life abhors a vacuum." Once you stop doing something, not only will inertia keep your body at rest because of the laws of physics, but almost every bit of trivial "dust" from your life will get sucked into fill that void in your schedule. The key to progress is to keep physics' energy of momentum working for you by staying in motion – staying on schedule. If you water and feed a plant on a schedule, it will usually grow great. But once you upset that schedule much, you can suddenly lose the plant – I don't know how many I've killed that way, and some by too much water! I've seen the same with drum students: too many enthusiastic students fade away like dying flowers because they didn't regularly practice, and cramming in too much before a gig can really damage your body and you'll space out under the pressure of performing. Music-making requires deep muscle memory and coordination like any sport, so you can't "cram" like it's a school test! If you skip even 2 days of practice, it's like starting over from scratch! You know it only takes 21 days in a row to create a habit? Since we are all creatures of habit, whether we admit it or not, wouldn't it be smarter to choose good habits to be enslaved to? Aristotle was right when he said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." What's stamped on pop bottles is right on: "No Deposit, No Return." There is no way around this Scripture: "Do not deceive yourselves – a man shall reap what he sows." Every farmer knows it! If you want to succeed in music, then find a way to make practicing a good habit by keeping your appointment with yourself – treat practice time as a "sacred space" by turning your phone off. Find a way to keep having fun! Find every way to feed your mind with music, and then watch your playing grow! To think more about this, read Hey Sigmund's *What You Focus On Is What Becomes Powerful – Why Your Thoughts and Feelings Matter*, Positivity Strategist's *What You Focus on, Grows – PS001*, Medium.com's *The Science Behind Why You 'Attract' What You Focus On* by Jari Roomer, and A Life Beyond Limits' *NLP – What You Focus Upon Grows*.
9. **Master the Fundamentals!** Stephen Covey said, "The main thing is to the keep the main things the main things." However, I've seen too many drummers "major in the minors." Michael Jordon nailed it: "You can practice shooting 8 hours a day, but if your technique is wrong, then all you become is very good at shooting the wrong way. Get the fundamentals down and the level of everything you do will rise." It's really important to lay a solid foundation before trying to build a "house of music" on top of

it or the slightest wind may topple it! Remember the 3 little pigs! For that reason, focus on these fundamentals: sight-reading note-for-note and from simplified charts, subdivisions of time and key rhythmic vocabulary for straight & swung time, counting & singing of notes, hand & foot technique, basic physics of drumming, basics of open & closed music texture, playing “in time” to a metronome, RL etc. “linear” combinations for stick control, accent control to differentiate the 6 stroke types, rudiments (at least 40 P.A.S. ones) and their “builder” exercises with basic drum set application, basic drum set independence time-keeping ostinatos while reading a limb’s “melody” part, standard beats for different genres to “fake it until you make it,” basic FRL etc. “linear” time-keeping, using crashes for accents and basic figures, using fills (including FRL etc. “linear” fills) for breaks in time or to setup figures, motion studies for fills, basic brush patterns, basic double bass time-keeping and fills, and 1-4 bar soloing. I teach a pyramid of priorities regarding drumming to music: “If you S.E.D. it right, it will keep you out of the D.E.S.” – 80% Support (locking into the time feel and key figures of the band), 15% Embellish (adding ghost-notes, compound-strokes, and rolls to thicken the texture and help in phrasing), and 5% Dialogue (call & response with the other musicians in the holes using fills and solos). For starters, read: Rhythm Note’s *Drumming Basics – 15 Skills Every Drummer Should Master*, Modern Drummer’s *Fundamentals of Drumming*, Vic Firth’s *40 Essential Rudiments*, PAS’s *Drum Set Fundamentals*, and Stack Exchange’s blog *What is the Most Effective, Structured Way for an Adult Beginner to Learn Drums Without a Teacher?*

- 10. Stay in motion – keep moving!** Just as inertia and momentum apply to your practice schedule, they apply to the physics of your playing. When playing sticking patterns, rudiments, and accents using the 6 stroke types, you should always be immediately moving the stick to the position it needs to be for the next time it plays, so your hands never stop to become a victim of inertia but stay in motion to take advantage of the energy of momentum. When playing on the drum set, the hands should also stay in motion toward their next destination, and preferably in a somewhat circular motion so that the sticks never have to stop. That’s what I teach in my “Motion Studies” for Linear Time-keeping and Fills. It behooves the student to read more about the physics of drumming to work with it instead of against it, so check out: Wikipedia’s *Inertia*, Wikipedia’s *Momentum*, Drum Magazine’s *Anatomy of Drumming – It’s Not All In the Wrist*, Gary Chester’s *New Breed* discussion about symmetrical hand domains in drum set playing, Academia’s *Open-Handed and Circular Motion Drumming*, Paul Elliott Drums’ *Drum Technique & Ergonomics* Parts 4-9, Modern Drummer’s *The Reinvention of Neil Peart* and *Starting Over*, YouTube’s *The “System” by Freddie Gruber* shown by Neal Sausen, and Joyo Mayers *Secret Weapons for the Modern Drummer*.
- 11. If you can say it, you can play it!** The mind becomes focused in order to speak out of your mouth, thus weeding out many distracting thoughts, and your body follows the programming of your mind. Thus, to get physically coordinated, you first have to get mentally coordinated. Moving your mouth will move much more of your brain to learn rhythm faster! The New Testament’s book of James compares controlling one’s speech to a bit in a horse’s mouth that guides its whole body, or a small rudder that guides large ships even against strong winds, or a tiny spark that can set a whole forest ablaze.” Now, if you count the rhythms, you get the logical, left-brain involved. But if you sing the rhythms, then the artistic, right-brain is working. Therefore, don’t just listen to music as it goes “in one ear and out the other,” but really listen! You’ll be in good company because Ernest Hemingway said, “I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully.” I was told in a Divine vision while drumming that

“Music is like a sunset. If you don’t quickly walk past it but observe its great beauty and many aspects that make for such beauty, you may be filled with wonder and joy. In so doing you may even feel gratitude, becoming aware of Me, the Creator of it. You may even recognize Me through My handiwork, but more importantly My joy in creating it, My beauty, My love, and then, just then you can share in this with Me. Then you begin to know Me. Will you really observe it, will you explore its many colors with Me and share in My joy? I always give you the opportunity.” I totally agree with Sidney Lanier, “Music is love in search of a word.” Therefore, try actively listening by counting what you hear, singing its rhythms, or better yet, tonally vocalizing the counts to get the whole brain to program your body to then do it! Specifically, count/sing accents louder and rests softer (even as a whisper), and carry out the length of long notes (1/4, Dotted-1/4, 1/2, Dotted 1/2, and whole) or ties. Think like a musician so they will stop making fun of drummers being ignorant! For more ideas, read: Elephant Drum’s *If You Can Say It, You Can Play It*, Dancing Hands’ *Say It and Play It*, Wikipedia’s *Kodaly Method*, Make Moments Matter’s *Rhythm Syllable Systems – What to Use and Why*, Essential-Music-Practice’s *Count Out Loud*, The Vault’s *The Importance of Say-as-You-Play in Teaching Rhythm Notation*, Hoffman Academy’s *Counting Rhythms*, Melodics’ *Introduction to Counting Rhythm*, and Wikipedia’s *Count Singing*.

**12. Play it against a ruler of time – use a metronome!** Then you will be able to play with other musicians that have this common ruler for each meter or time-signature. Sadly I’ve seen too many musicians who practiced on their own without a metronome or looped track that floundered on stage. 95% of the drummer’s job is to support and slightly embellish steady time-keeping for the rest of the band instead of being swayed by others or their emotions. Also, when drummers play fills in the other 5% of the time, they have to get back to count 1 with the others! Grooves need to also line up with the beat/pulse and subdivisions of time, so metronomes help you hear and feel the music’s metric emphasis. I’ve also found metronomes to be extremely motivating because I can set small beat-per-minute (bpm) goals and achieve them, and then my practice time is so much more interesting! It’s also a great way to set goals and monitor progress. Finally, I have to write the tempo (bpm) on the top of all my sheet music for gigs, punch this into my flashing metronome, click off the tempo to start the band, and keep them from rushing or dragging, which many of them will do without me reeling them back in. For more reasons, read Wikipedia’s *Metronome*, Modern Drummer *Education Team Weighs in on: Practicing with a Metronome*, and Eric Barfield’s *20 Reasons Why You Should Use a Metronome*.

**13. Get your head out of the music stand if you’re not reading every note!** If you’re learning exercises, as soon as you can, commit the music to your mind’s eye and also rely on sound memory from counting and singing it and also by the sound of your playing, and move your eyes off the page onto your hands, instrument, and practice mirror to develop visual and tactile motion memory. Now you can focus on placement, technique, and perfect the sound. In performance, you can take it a step further by looking at the other musicians or conductor for cues and also to interact with the audience with some showmanship! For more about this, read: *No Treble’s Why Memorize Music?*, Compose Create’s *Controversial Things We Don’t Discuss – Memorizing Music*, Berklee School of Music’s *Three Degrees of Memory Systems for Music Memorization*, and Eastman School of Music’s *Memorization – A Necessary Chore, or a Path to a More Enjoyable Performance (Audition) Experience?* Concerning playing music in churches, I’ve found it very disconcerting that 95% of the 15 or so church ministries I’ve worked with were still more concerned

about playing every note perfectly from their music “for God” as if they were still part of the Old Covenant Law that placed supreme emphasis on religious performance and merit (aka “might and power” per Zechariah’s prophecy) in order to be “right and pleasing for God,” instead of understanding that the emphasis of New Covenant Grace is playing music “in/by/with My Spirit, says the Lord,” because you already are “in a right and pleasing relationship with God” through Christ by your trusting faith and God’s unmerited grace. For that reason, in playing worship gigs, I recommend using the sheet music only to remember the melody and tempo but then “get your head out of the music stand” to focus completely on the Lord to play in/by/with the Spirit. The difference between playing “by might and power’s skill & professionalism,” even “for God,” versus “in/by/with God’s Spirit because of God” is night versus day! I’ve seen myself and other musicians play miraculously fantastic this way without even trying and being so filled up with joy that you had to peel us off the ceiling afterwards! I’ve also made it a goal to learn how to practice this way and help others do the same, especially since I’ve had many prophecies, dreams, and visions about playing this way – even “seeing” a butterfly of light flitting from one part of my drum set to another immediately before I was compelled to play on it, and then watching myself play amazingly! To learn more about “letting go and letting God” in your playing, check out: David Santistevan’s *What It Means To Be A Prophetic Musician (And How You Can Be One)*, Rodney W. Francis’ *Prophetic Ministry through Musical Instruments and Singers*, *Adventures in God’s Music & Prophecy*, Brian Johnson’s blog *Spontaneous vs. Prophetic Worship*, and listen to artists like Jeremy Riddle, Steffany Gretzinger, Brian Johnson, Bethel Music, Upperroom, Todd White, and Jonathan and Melissa Helser.

**14. Variety is the spice of life!** Don’t get stuck doing the same exercise for too long, get bored and spaced out or get frustrated and end up quitting. Stay fresh by switching gears to another exercise. So much of learning music is like a sport’s cross-training with one exercise helping develop skills for another exercise. Just come back to those earlier exercises and you’ll be more alert and skilled to tackle them. I also try a variety of rhythmic interpretations (straight vs. swung countings), time-displacements, accents, stickings, stick-displacements, and voices (surfaces) to play the rhythm on to spice it up, keep my attention, and make it more applicable to a variety of music genres. If you only play one music genre, you will start to sound like everybody else in that genre – you will be a follower but not a leader. Leaders incorporate elements from other genres into their favorite genre(s). And they are having the most fun and getting the gigs! The founder of Apple said, “Innovation distinguishes a leader from a follower.” I’ve also got way more gigs because I can play any genre or style thrown at me. Also, my students make it through more auditions and get scholarships if they are versatile. For more info, read Marc Dicciani’s *Cross-training – A System for Improving Your Practice and Playing*, Drums Player World’s *How to Be a Versatile and Valuable Drummer*, Freeway Music blog’s *Being a Versatile Musician*, Artist Work’s *Versatile, Multi-Genre Training*, Joy Tunes blog’s *The Advantages of Listening to Different Kinds of Music*, and Sonicbids’ *Is it Worth It to Study Genres You Don’t Play?*

**15. Don’t drill in mistakes. Start slow and in form – a little technique goes a long way!** Poor posture and form will hurt your body and tire you out, cutting your practice time short, just as loud playing wears your brain out without ear protection. Start out “slow and in form,” just as my martial arts teachers would always say! This is the key to being able to later play fast with incredible grace, because you will initially be going so slow that you can think about every aspect of your motion to insure it is the most



efficient, eliminating all unnecessary movement and effort that later will keep you from going fast. This is the best time to determine the best technique to achieve the most with the least amount of effort. Once your body is in “automatic pilot” to produce the desired motion and sound at a slow speed, then incrementally bump the tempo up. Before too long, you will be flying! If you make a mistake, don’t drill it into your muscles deeper by staying at the same tempo – drop back until you’ve reliably undone the mistake. Einstein was correct when he said, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.” To get a grip on this, read Bulletproof Musician’s *Is Slow Practice Really Necessary?*, Quora blog’s *What Are the Benefits of Super Slow Drum Practice?*, Drummer World forum’s *Super Slow Practice*, and Dick Hensold’s *How to Play Music Faster – Ideal Practice Methods for Adult Musicians*.

**16. Break it down into bite sizes, focus on “weak links,” and re-build it!** That’s how you will eat that elephant – one bite at a time! When learning rhythms, rudiments, and sticking patterns, it’s important to break it down into simpler parts. Sure, it may be “hard by the yard, but it’s a cinch by the inch.” Rene Descartes advised, “Divide each difficulty into as many parts as necessary to resolve it.” Mark Twain echoed, “The secret of getting started is breaking your complex, overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks, and then starting on the first one.” It’s also important to understand the relationships between these smaller parts because so much of music contains these elements and oftentimes, it is better anyway to “Keep It Simple Stupid” (KISS) to play an uncluttered groove, and then add embellishments to thicken out its texture. So, you’ll end up using all the elements later, but now they will help you “re-build” the pattern properly! Drumline teachers call this drills “Builders” similar to the way George Bernard Shaw thought: “Grain by grain, a loaf; Stone upon stone, a place.” For instance, by playing only one of the hands (i.e., isolating it) at a time, you can better hear each hand’s pattern to help you intertwine them back together into the whole. Or you can strip the pattern of grace-notes, doubles, triples, or any other compound-stroke embellishment, so what’s left is a simple-stroke skeleton. Or you can progressively play the first 2 strokes, then 3, etc. Or you may see some common rhythms or patterns that can act as a “check pattern” to insure the basic hand motions stay the same before adding in the other strokes. When you “break it down” you will often find the “weak link in the chain where it will break” or the “bottleneck in the assembly line that slows production.” Focus on this and the whole thing will quickly improve. Use your imagination to sneak up on the final product! When adding the feet, I often try every 2-limb combination and then every 3-limb combo to finally get to all 4 limbs. Or I may see 2 or 3 limbs that are easy enough to get to “auto-pilot” as I concentrate on counting/singing/playing the other limb(s). Sometimes I work on the hard parts (“weak links”), trying to commit this to memory. Sometimes I play all the limbs together just for what happens in count 1’s slot, then the 2 slot, then 1 + 2, then add in slot 3, etc., progressively moving left to right. To learn more about breakdown, check patterns, builders, and developing independence, read: Liberty Park Music’s *Want to Learn a Piece of Music Quickly and Effectively?*, Drummer World’s *How to Break Down Drums in Songs*, Drumline Chop’s *Lessons and Practice* pages, Percussion.org’s *Check Patterns & Reading Skills*, Thom Hannum’s book *A Percussionist’s Guide to Check Patterns*, Modern Drummer’s Team Weighs in on: *Developing Independence*.

**Enjoy the Journey!**