

Feeding the Imagination

Bill Bruford

Most musicians work within a comfort zone, determined in part by what it is they think they can do well, and in part by a series of real or imagined “rules.” Nothing unreasonable about that, but big leaps forward can occasionally be achieved by deliberately placing yourself in a situation that’s new to you. This can be as simple as limiting the instruments you use on a given piece, or as scary as working in a style with which you are almost completely unfamiliar. The aim is to hear and watch yourself react “outside of the box.” You’ll need to trust that your innate musicality will come up with something, and that something may surprise you with its appropriateness (Where did that come from?). You’ll need to remember that nothing you are or are not doing is as critical to the outsiders, your colleagues, as it is to you, especially if you haven’t told them you are hopelessly out of your depth.

INGREDIENTS:

3 heaping tablespoons of imagination (sometimes hard to find in your local supermarket)
 2 pints of active listening (across all genres)
 16 oz. of fearlessness
 1 lemon, sliced

SERVES:

All creative musicians.

Recipe

Mix the imagination and active listening for several months. Be sure to avoid all contact with prejudice. Let sit. Put in oven and bake to produce a thick skin of about three inches deep, impervious to humiliation. Spoon in the fearlessness for courage. Add sliced lemon to taste. Will deliver a zesty tang and a sharp jolt to the system.

Mostly, with some minor variations, we bring a pre-prepared part, or template, to the music. That rhythm ‘n’ blues shuffle we’ve worked so hard on will suit nicely there; that Garibaldi funk thing will do for this song for the time being, until we can think of something more original, which we somehow never quite get around to. It’s all workman like, but nothing to set the house on fire. As a creative musician you’ll want to improve on that, and it will help immeasurably if you are in on the construction of the music from the ground floor up. When I started, band members sat around for hours in rehearsal rooms bashing out bits and pieces of ideas, riffs, sounds, hoping that someone would jump on something and breathe life into the spark. That’s hopelessly old-fashioned and expensive to do now, but a rehearsal band, even if it never does any gigs, is a wonderful tool to have—a way to hear your wackiest ideas realized.

What you are looking for here is a safe environment to experiment, to imagine the unimaginable, and then to feed the results back into your more regular work. If you hear yourself playing straight eighth notes on the hi-hat for a while, stop it, and put some holes in! If you play anything that continuously at me for more than a minute I'm going to stop listening, because my brain has said, "Uh-oh, nothing happening here. I'll listen to something else."

Usually, stopping doing something is at least twice as effective as doing something. When you've found out what I'm talking about, take that to your next session with another artist, and just do it until you're told not to. Trust me, they'll love it (whatever "it" may be, at this point). From this, your confidence will leap forward—you and your idea survived; it really wasn't so bad!

It may be that your highly effective practice-room idea—smokin' as it is with just one drummer—needs amending to "sit" right with a whole band. Great: amend it! Don't give up. Persevere until it feels good. Now that you see that the easy part of this was a lot more difficult than you thought, and the difficult stuff was easier than you thought, you can make the appropriate changes next time.

Much of this has to do with the broad brush on the bigger picture. It's remarkably easy to get lost in the nuts and bolts of music making—the details—while failing to see that even if the details are, finally, all correct, the music isn't adding up to much. I wish I had ten bucks for every brilliant sounding demo I've heard: perfect sounding vocals on an immaculate recording on a state-of-the-art home-recording system, drums good enough to eat, latest plug-ins and outboard effects all ticking away nicely, everything in time and ticketyboo, but completely devoid of the slightest whiff of anything original. I'd rather have a good idea poorly played than a terrible idea well executed, but it should be possible to have strong ideas well played. There is more to this music thing than just "getting it right"—what Frank Zappa called "industrial correctness." I'm sure when Pink Floyd added "found sound" and industrial noise into their tracks, influenced by the "musique concrète" movement, or the Beatles added a sitar, or King Crimson used two guitarists, but *neither would play any chords, only single lines*, the people who were thinking this stuff up weren't thinking about industrial correctness. No one is expecting you to be wholly original—if you were, we'd probably not recognize it as music—but it may be possible to stir up and mix the ingredients in an original way.

Same with our individual instrument, in this case the drumkit, and how we perceive its role and function in the music. Electronic drums in jazz? Are you out of your mind? I don't know, but let's find out. A rock group without cymbals or hi-hats? Why? I don't know, but let's see what happens. Two drummers hammering away in different meters? But what if half the audience dances to one and the other half dances to the other? It'll probably be great!

It's ironic that the ever greater availability of music we have, the less anyone seems to listen to it. The cheaper it gets, the less anyone values it. The ever-increasing options on what we can do with a drumset seem to produce a current crop of rock drummers all doing roughly the same thing in roughly the same tempo, and certainly in the same time-signature. *And, really, they don't have to.* The slightest departure from convention—playing the bridge on the toms, for example—is jumped on by every other group in the same field, and appears instantly on MTV like a rash overnight. It's extraordinary the extent to which, when we play, we conform to some prescribed notion of what it is that a drummer "should" do.

When I started, the notion of keeping "steady" clock-time, now evidently a matter of life or death, wasn't given much of a premium. Progressive rock groups like Yes and King Crimson

moved in “orchestral time,” as if the drummer were also the conductor. Tempi picked up here and slowed there according to the demands of the music. What felt right was right. Then Roger Linn invented his famous drum machine, and everything was suddenly measured according to the clock, and studios were full of tyrannical producers stopping the drummer because he had a three millisecond flam with his kick drum as measured against the click; “Look, see? Computer says so, right here.”

Before machines, the way a drummer approached the time was as much a part of his makeup and identity as his sound. The jazz guys tended to rush like crazy. Tony Williams was well on top of the beat. Elvin stretched time like it was bubblegum. Steve Gadd played jazz with Chick Corea in an unusually steady tempo gained from years playing with clicks in studios.

If you assume a drummer’s function is to “keep time,” then the convention that a drummer starts at the beginning of a tune and plays all the way through makes sense. If, however, you step back a bit and consider keeping time to be only one of several functions that the drummer may have, then it may be the guitarists who assign themselves the function of keeping the continuum going, and the drummer who stops, starts, adds and removes his weight, comments on proceedings, and generally plays havoc with light and shade. In the King Crimson of the 1980s in which I served, it was usually the guitarists who were first and last to be heard on the track, often unaccompanied by any percussion for short or long passages. Try to find out what you are doing with that darn drumkit thing, and the rest will fall naturally into place.

I was once paid quite well for contributing silence to a track. Admittedly, it was a collective improvisation and a live recording, but my contribution of steady silence affected the course of this instantaneous composition as surely as if I had blasted forth with a juddering onslaught of pneumatic bass drums and machine-gun snare. The music needed no percussion, so I contributed none. I was credited, therefore, with co-composer rights and remunerated accordingly. Quite right, too.

Providing what the music requires—or at least giving it a chance to tell you what it requires rather than what you require—is an underused strategy. You exist to serve the music, the music doesn’t exist to serve you. If the music demands silence, that’s what you provide. If it wants a log-drum and three bass drums, then that’s what you provide. The brilliant Terry Bozzio is hearing a certain kind of music in his head which can only be realized with the gargantuan drum setup he uses. Trust me, he wouldn’t be lugging that lot around unless the music demanded it!

The first technique you will need is imagination, and then an ability to listen actively, imaginatively, and without prejudice. Your primary function is to produce some music; it’s marketing is only a secondary function. All the creative musicians realize this. Try to imagine the complete composition without your drums, without any drums, and then build it up from there on in. I have always tried to produce absolutely tune-specific parts that will only apply or be useable on that one tune, and that one tune only. Ideally the rhythmic part should be entirely listenable and self-sustaining on its own as a little rhythmic composition, were the rest of the band to stop playing.

Ideas? The great drummer of Soft Machine, Robert Wyatt, so the story goes, had his tech set his drums up differently every night, just to keep him on his toes, and to make sure things sounded different. Try treating the drums with mutes, cloths, specialist cymbals on the toms, or a tambourine on the snare drum. Try all those different sticks and mallets you can get

these days. Plenty of hip guys are using “unbalanced” strikers—for example, a shaker-mallet in the left hand and a brush in the right, or a stick in the right and a mallet on the left, or similar unlikely combinations. This has an agreeably “random” effect of making the phrase less predictable.

Less is often more. Try confining yourself to an area of the kit only—say, for example, the woods (drums), and don’t touch those metals (cymbals). Try doing a gig with just the Big Three (bass drum, hi-hat, and snare); that should focus the mind a little. The world won’t stop; heck, the bass player probably won’t notice, and the audience certainly won’t. You see, they care about you and your problems a whole lot less than you think they do, and that’s good news! Means you are a whole lot more free than you thought you were to come up with interesting, fresh and useable ideas—and no excuses! ➤