

Mike Haid interview on “Time” for Modern Drummer 2007

1) What does a drummers “time” mean to the feel of the music?

Plenty. For the average listener, the effect of an individual drummer’s time on the music is mostly subliminal, but none the less powerful for that. When James Taylor uses Steve Gadd for a sublimely relaxing evening of his material, my wife is going to enjoy “the feel” of the music, and thus probably the “feel” of the whole evening.. If he’d used Paul Motion or the guy from Meshuggah--guys with a different sense of time-- she’d have got a different, and maybe less appropriate feel for the music. The leader is trying to find a drummer who will impart the correct time, and thus feel, for the music.

2) How do you deal with working with various time feels of other musicians?

Within reason, I start swimming the way everyone else is swimming. If you play with the Drummers of Dakhar, no-one’s talking about the beat being pushed, pulled, laid back, rushed. Your participation in the beat that day is offered, join with us, or don’t. It’s a social thing, as indeed I think all music making should be. There is nothing right or wrong about it. Its like breathing. Basically, whatever makes the music work.

3) Behind the beat, on the beat, on top of the beat, pushed, pulled, laidback, dragged, rushed; How does your body clock naturally feel the time?

My body clock is too busy dealing with jet-lag. I think I approach each piece on an ad-hoc basis—some I’ll do edgy, pushy; some, I hope, relaxed and easy. If I had to pick one of the above, I’d say generally that I play on the beat.

4) Is it important to play or practice to a click?

I think its important to practise exercises with a click, certainly for the beginner, so you hear the subdivisions accurately. But you wouldn’t want to be practising jazz with a click. Personally I can’t stand performing with a click-somehow all your concentration goes on that and you stop listening to anybody else. And that’s only OK if it’s the kind of music where you don’t have to, or don’t want to, listen to anyone else. Believe me, I’ve tried both! When the click is happening, the only thing that can happen to you, the drummer, is bad. The music can never go anywhere or get anywhere-its tethered by its neck to a stake, like a goat.

Sometimes, particularly with odd metres, its good to find the slowest lowest common denominator in the pulse, and that becomes the anchor. So if its an odd number I’m usually banging my foot on a quarter note, waiting for the rhythm to come round again on the right side of the beat. When you can do that, it makes it feel very secure, especially if the bass player can tap his foot through it too. Then the tempo isn’t going to go anywhere.

5) Does the heartbeat of natural human rhythm give the music more life and organic flexibility?

Naturally. Its perfectly normal in speech to breathe, slow, get excited, move forward a bit, so why not in music? The only kind of music I can listen to must breathe, or I feel asphyxiated. When we grew up in progressive rock, we assumed “orchestral time”— if there had been a conductor, we would have followed him. Moving the time forward and back a bit between sections was not an issue until the arrival of the Linn Drum Machine in the mid 70s, which appeared over night, like a rash on the producer’s arm. My ability, to play metronomically improved instantly, mostly out of sheer terror. Now the producer had a machine, which said you were either “in time” or “out of time”, and by heck, he was going to use it. Producers turned into little fascists behind the glass, stopping the take at measure two because he “thought” he had heard a 3 millisecond flam between bass drum and click. Studio stuff was a nightmare for a while.

6) Are there different time feels for different musical styles? (example:the time feel for country music versus the time felt in hip hop music, or jazz, or metal, or blues?)

I think there used to be, but with the general homogenisation of music, and the general agreement that the click rules, most genres are blurring, just to be in “click time”. With ProTools of course, you can always put it “in time”, at the risk of losing any expression in the playing. For a classic example of an album computered to death, try “Union” by Yes—a leader in the field.

7) Does an Eastern World drummer feel time differently than a Western World drummer? Or, is solid time universal?

The placement and choice of beats of a Jamaican drummer tends to make it feel behind the beat; the placement and choice of beats of a Tony Williams tends to make it feel up on the beat, even though both may be in in perfect metronomic time. To my mind, cultural differences bring a far more interesting bearing on the music than an attempt to analyse global differences in time feel in isolation - as if that were possible. The time feel is so entwined with cultural expectations that the two are inextricable.

8) What can a drummer do to improve, or focus, their time (internal clock)?

Specifically give each note, including rests, its full value. It’s by “hurrying on” to the next note - easy to do with a fast decay instrument like percussion - that the tempo creeps forward.

More generally, a lot has to do with just being aware of your responsibility as you play. The Flow of Time, in the cosmic sense, was doing just fine until you showed up. If you want to impose yourself on the flow of time by cutting it into beats, by all means do so, but be careful. If you interrupt this flow, everything’s going to go pear-shaped. The great drummers can play with the

flow of time, super-imposing pulses, making it seem to stretch, slow, quicken; exerting tension and release. The modest drummer can cut time into beats quite neatly and leave time undisturbed, a neutral effect. The beginner may stumble and interrupt the flow of time, and hence the music, and will have left a net negative effect. That's usually where we all start!