

## **My Year with the Note** by Dennis Hoffmann

Playing with a big band is one of the greatest thrills any drummer can have, especially when the band is one of the best in the world. For the past year, I've had the privilege of performing with the Airmen of Note, the premier jazz band of the United States Air Force. As a member of the United States Air Force Band in Washington, D.C., my primary job is performing with a jazz trio called the Diplomats, and throughout my five year career I have performed with almost all of the different performing units within the Air Force Band. Over the past fourteen months, I have played with the Airmen of Note on four concert tours, two recordings, and numerous local concerts and clinics, all the while learning as much as I could about the art form and constantly working to improve my playing. As a classically trained percussionist, I had never felt very confident in my ability to "drive" a big band, and I hope that some of the things I've learned can help those who may feel the same.

**The hi-hat is king.** Most drummers talk about that perfect ride cymbal (either they have it or they're looking for it.) Sure, it's important to have a clear ride and some other great sounding cymbals, but the band focuses on the hi-hat. Keeping a solid 2 and 4 on the hats can make all the difference in keeping a big band together. Be sure the person farthest from the kit on the band stand can hear the hi-hat clearly while the whole band is playing. Make whatever adjustments are necessary, whether it's playing more aggressively, adjusting the angle of the bottom cymbal, or trying different cymbals. Keep the hi-hat going during fills and solos, and don't let tricky passages cause you to stop playing a strong 2 and 4.

**Know the style.** Every style is characterized by certain types of fills, time keeping, and dynamic level. Listening to recordings is the best way to learn these characteristics. If you're playing a Count Basie chart, check out Sonny Payne's playing. If it's a Thad Jones arrangement, listen to Mel Lewis (I recommend listening to Mel no matter what style you're playing.) During my time with the Airmen of Note, we recorded a Glen Miller disc, and studying those recordings gave me a better understanding of the style as well as some insight into the history of big band swing. It's also important to have a working knowledge of latin styles. When a chart says "Latin" on the top, you can't just play straight eighths and hit a cowbell every so often. Know the difference between Brazilian music (samba, bossa nova) and Afro-Cuban (songo, cha-cha, mambo.) Check out the bass player's part – that will usually give some guidance as to what "latin" style the arranger was looking for.

**Keep it simple.** In this case, I'm mainly talking about the fills used to set-up the band figures. Part of the drummer's job in a big band is to make the horn players comfortable when they have to play syncopated entrances. In order to do this, don't make every fill and set-up sound like you tossed your kit down a flight of stairs. Use simple, two-note fills on the snare or bass drum to set up the horn figures. If a certain passage is tripping you up, just play time through it. The horn players will feel much better hearing some nice strong time rather than a bunch of out-of-time drum junk. Simple is always better when it comes to playing with a large group.

**Sometimes you have to play REAL LOUD (or real soft).** Coming from a jazz trio, this one took some time for me. Thirteen of the finest horn players in the world can put out a lot of sound, especially when the adrenaline starts pumping and lead trumpet players start playing two octaves above everyone else. The drummer is responsible more than anyone else for the dynamic contrast within a piece of music. Playing very softly will bring the overall volume of the band down, because they'll have to stop wailing in order to hear the time. Listen to the soloists, and build choruses dynamically just as you would with a small group. Don't be shy either; play with enough energy during the screaming sections to make a real impact. The size of your drums can help your cause – use a 20" or 22" bass drum and larger toms than you would with a small group. Exaggerate the dynamics as much as possible – it will make the whole band do the same.

**Lock up with your bass player.** He or she should be your best friend in the band. Let's face it – the pianist and/or guitarist are in the rhythm section for comping and solo work, so it's up to you two to keep the whole thing in time. If you're lucky enough to play with a fantastic bass player like I was, then your job can be pretty easy. Still, we would rehearse apart from the band, playing "time" and talking about the tunes and how we would approach them. The ride cymbal pattern is an extension of the walking bass line, so it's imperative that those two "lock up". When a drummer and bassist are in sync, the rest of the band (and the audience) can feel comfortable. And that's why we're here, right?

**Always have a metronome on the stand.** And of course, use it. I was responsible for counting off the majority of tunes during rehearsals and performances, so I always wanted to be sure to get the tempos correct. There's nothing better than having someone say "Did we do that tune faster today?" and then turning on that little machine and having it be exactly the same tempo as the day before. Always use the metronome when you practice. Not many of us are gifted with perfect time (I know I'm not) and it is human nature to speed things up as we learn them. Practicing with a metronome makes you aware of your tendencies, and you can work to correct these in your practice sessions and rehearsals. Also, recording your rehearsals is always a good idea. Check your time by lining up your metronome with the recording. It may hurt a little, but trust me - it's good for you.

I hope that these suggestions will be beneficial, whether you are a beginner or have a few years of playing under your belt. My experiences with the Note have taught me a great deal and have deepened my appreciation for all the big band drummers I have always admired. I thank all the guys (and girl) of the Airmen of Note for teaching me so much and for allowing me to be a part of one of the finest big bands in the world.