



# John "JR" Robinson: Beats, Not Boundaries

John "JR" Robinson doesn't believe in musical categories. "I've just never thought of music that way," he says. "A good downbeat is a good downbeat. And a bad downbeat is—well, something you just don't want to hear."

Not that Robinson has much experience with bad downbeats. After three decades of session work, he reigns as one of the most recorded drummers in history. He's the longtime drummer of choice for Quincy Jones, Barbra Streisand, and David Foster, and he's manned the kit on countless hits: "We Are the World," the Pointer Sisters' "I'm So Excited," Eric

Clapton's "Change the World," Madonna's "Express Yourself," Michael Jackson's "Bad," Lionel Richie's "All Night Long," Steve Winwood's "Higher Love," and many, many more.

JR found his calling early—he was playing professionally by age 10. "I think I got hit by the drummer bolt from God," he chuckles. "My parents had a lot of input, too. My dad was a doctor, but his hobby was violin. And my mother used to sit me down in front of the stereo and play me big band records while explaining the concept of swing. Being introduced to that concept early on had a lot to do with the path I took."

The path led from small-town Iowa to Boston, where Robinson attended the Berklee College of Music. In 1978, he joined famed funk band Rufus. He relocated to LA and quickly became one of the busiest players in town.

JR's ascent as a studio player coincided with the rise of the drum machine. JR holds complex opinions on the role of artificial timekeepers in music. "I've become a master of those devices, but they're just tools—I use them the same way a framer would use a hammer. But I regret the fact that the drum machines forced so many players out of the business." He also argues that an over-reliance on programmed drums makes much modern music feel sterile. "There are so many times when a live part would be hipper than some drum loop. No robot programmer can compete with what happens when you put four brains together in a room. Recording with live rhythm sections is absolutely the greatest, and it always will be."

Robinson has played Yamaha drums since 1981. He's collaborated with the company on several signature snare drums, culminating in the new JR signature snare. "I wanted one snare drum that could do it all, and this is it. It's like driving a Ferrari—it'll do anything."

The 14"x 6½" drum is an innovative hybrid. "It's birch," explains Robinson, "but there's a single-ply layer of bird's-eye maple on the outside. The maple adds to the sound, and it is visually stunning with the beautiful swirls and notches inherent to bird's-eye." In addition to the wood shell, there are copper nails drilled into the bearing edge, imparting some qualities of a metal snare. "And then there's the amber sunburst finish," adds JR. "It's just remarkable."

All the drums in Robinson's new custom kit boast the same striking finish and maple-over-birch construction. "I've been a birch advocate since '81," says JR. "It just sounds warmer, and something about the Japanese birch in these drums just works great with mics. I usually use a 24" bass drum, and my toms are 12", 13", 16", and 18". Most drummers don't use big toms like that, but I have a rock side that makes me want to build the track from the bottom up. I like to get underneath the frequencies of the song, like I'm building a house, and then use the snares and cymbals to blend the top end."

Despite his busy touring and recording schedule, JR still makes time to teach. "I don't run my students through some 12-week program," he says. "I just diagnose their bad habits and give them some direction."

The most common problems JR perceives are groove and confidence issues. "The two things are related," he notes. "I compare it to the work of my father, an optometrist who studied the role of ocular issues in child development. A six-year-old may lose confidence in school because of an undiagnosed vision problem. Once he sees better, his confidence improves. It's like that with drummers and time. If a drummer realizes that he or she can play freely within a confined groove and be confident and relaxed, then he or she can develop the confidence to improve as a drummer."

Robinson also records his own music. His latest release, *Funkshui*, is available through his website, [www.johnjrrobinson.com](http://www.johnjrrobinson.com), and he's finishing up a rock release with his band TRW. "It's a lot of fun," he says. "The day you stop having fun is the day you should stop playing drums. As long as I can play something that makes someone laugh or cry or dance, I'm happy."



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