



"If a drummer can learn to listen, relax, and play a simple beat well, all of the other stuff will come flowing out when and how it's supposed to."

PETER ERSKINE:
*drumming on
a human scale*

Drummer Peter Erskine started young and never stopped. He played with legendary jazz bandleader/composer Stan Kenton while still a teen, and then went on to collaborate with such greats as Steely Dan, Weather Report, Joni Mitchell, Diana Krall, Chick Corea, Kate Bush, Chet Baker, Maynard Ferguson, the Yellowjackets, conductor Simon Rattle, and almost countless others. But despite a discography that reads like a history of modern music, Erskine is a modest soul who stresses the simple things in drumming: Listening. Relaxing. Being human. We recently chatted with Peter about the things that inspire him as a musician.

When young players look to you for advice, what do you try to impart?

While there are a million possibilities when it comes to playing the drums, it all seems to boil down to some very basic basics. If a drummer can learn to listen, relax, and play a simple beat well, all of the other stuff will come flowing out when and how it's supposed to.

You've managed to perfect extraordinary technique without becoming merely a "technical" player.

Thank you, but my technique is far from extraordinary! Being a "technical" player was never a danger for me. The guys at the local drum shop who stood at the counter all day playing rudiments always intimidated me. As much as I admired Buddy Rich, I knew I'd never be that kind of drummer. I've resigned myself to trying to play in as relaxed a manner as possible. If I have anything going for me technically, it's that I can usually maximize my expression by playing efficiently.

To what extent should players mold themselves to fit a particular situation, and to what extent should they simply be themselves?

I used to think that I had to leave my stamp on a musical situation. Now I have the confidence to simply serve the music. The music will always tell you what to play. It's simpler than people think. If you can play time and observe basic musicality, you needn't torture yourself with the question of "What do I do?"

Do you have any advice on playing with—rather than against—a bassist?

Listen, and allow them room to do their thing. If a bassist begins to do something rhythmically complex, it's most likely because there's a good, solid pulse at that moment. Don't "Mickey Mouse" or jump on their bandwagon when they play contrapuntally.

Tell us about your relationship with Yamaha.

I've played Yamaha drums for over 20 years, and Yamaha has always listened to my needs and advice and replied with improved products. I have a couple of older maple kits that I still use for recording work. I'm also a big fan of the newer Maple Absolute drum sets. There's always ample "headroom" for me to express myself dynamically on a Yamaha maple drum. That being said, I also enjoy the mahogany shell Manu Katché Junior kit. The 16" bass drum is a joy to play, and drums are great for live-sounding rooms. They also fit perfectly into my car trunk.

What about your signature snare?

The Peter Erskine 10"x4" Sopranino and 12"x4" Soprano snare drums are terrific add-ons for any kit. These beautifully made drums can be positioned anywhere in a setup. They sound cool as high-pitched toms or timbale-like drums, and the second snare's crack allows for great rhythmic accenting. We're also working on a variation of that theme that will really blow a lot of minds! Meanwhile, Yamaha is reintroducing my FreeStanding StickBag with a built-in accessory tray and a lower price.

Because you started out so young, you got to play with some of the greats of earlier generations. How did those experiences shape you?

I learned to play in an ensemble and get along with other musicians as human beings. But even though the jazz tradition is filled with examples of older players leading the young, I must say that I learned the most about drumming from my wife and children. They taught me about life and appreciating the full beauty of being truly grateful for what I do.

Peter Erskine's recent releases include "The London Concert by the Don Grolnick Group", proceeds from which are donated to the Cure for Lymphoma Foundation in the late pianist's name. You can learn more