

EDGE

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Advancing the Gig

by Brendan Buckley

A freelance musician can sometimes get a call to perform with one artist for eight months straight. Other times, he or she could get called to perform with eight different artists within one week. It helps to have a system of organization to handle this type of workload. Over the years, I have developed my own process that enables me to assimilate tons of songs and bounce from one job to the next. Here are a few key points to consider.

The Details:

Firstly, the details could always use some clarification. Let's say a phone call or email comes in asking, "Are you available from February 15th through the 20th?" That does not tell me very much about the job. Therefore, I often begin by digging for more information. What is this mystery gig? Are the proposed dates for rehearsals, a concert, a couple of recording sessions? Will this event take place in Los Angeles, or somewhere out of town? And if the job is out of town, when would I need to leave, and when would I return? Also, keep in mind the issue of time zones, and the international date line. For instance, it takes an extra day to fly west over the Pacific Ocean but, on the contrary, you land the same day you take off if flying from Shanghai to Chicago. Who else

is on this gig? The 'hang' is often as important as the music. What is the pay? Would it be hourly, daily, weekly? What are the travel arrangements? Would we be driving in a van to San Francisco, or flying to Barcelona? Is there some type of cancellation policy between now and then if the entire project falls through or gets postponed? It's considerate and professional if they offer somewhere between 50-100% of the income in the case of a cancellation.

The Music:

Now that you've accepted the gig, the next step of the process would be to get ahold of the music. Normally, a batch of MP3s is sent to me by email. However, for recording sessions, I might receive entire Pro Tools files via a service such as WeTransfer. I like to put all the music

in a playlist form on iTunes. And, if possible, I prefer to get a set-list order too. That helps me later on while trying to memorize the music. I'll sync up my iPod (yep, still use one of those) so that I can take this music around with me on car rides, hikes, or plane flights.

The Learning:

Now comes the real 'homework' of the job. I set aside a period of time to chart out all of the songs. First, I start with a stack of plain white printer paper (although I have been known to use a napkin, a torn sheet from a journal, or the backside of junk mail), a black pen, good headphones that allow me to distinguish kick drum patterns and bass lines, and any tap-tempo metronome. Then I go down the list of songs, writing out charts using my own version of notation and

hieroglyphics. My charts are usually as detailed as they need to be, but not unnecessarily detailed. I still follow a system similar to the one that I learned for reading high school Big Band/Jazz charts. Left-to-right, top-to-bottom, with sections like: introduction, verse, pre-chorus, chorus, bridge, solo, outro, etc. How many bars are in each section? Include rests, accents, and unison figures. Jot down dynamics (ppp vs fff). I notate specific beats and signature drum fills. What would my hands be doing at any given time? RH on closed hi-hat and LH on cross-stick. Or RH on ride cymbal and LH on snare drum. Or RH on floor tom and LH on tambourine. I notate the tempo markings. And, if time allows, I will even check out alternate versions of the songs (remixes, live versions, cover versions) on Spotify or YouTube.

Part #2 of this learning process takes place on the actual drum set. I take my folder of charts, throw on the headphones, and play along with the iPod, seeing how the songs feel on the instrument. At first, I approach the songs exactly like the album versions (as note-for-note as possible). Then, I gradually adjust them in ways that I believe would make them even more musical. That might mean changing the subdivision of the hi-hat from 16ths to 8ths, or adding ghost notes to the snare part, or simplifying the kick drum pattern, or coming up with an alternate drum fill that does not clash with the acoustic guitar part or the vocal melody. In general, I prefer to have all of the songs learned well enough to the point where I can do them exactly like the record, or differently from the recorded versions in case the artist, producer, or Musical Director requests a fresh approach. Brainstorm for multiple options. The artist could either be completely sold on their album version, or they could be utterly bored with it. You can't be sure, so it's a good idea to have choices.

Part #3 of the learning process is the memorization. Even though I've been working on my reading since I was in middle school, I prefer to not read any charts on stage or during recording sessions. Staring at a page makes me feel as though I have not internalized the music. Therefore, I go through a process of memorization. It's a good brain

exercise (like Sudoku)! First, I spend a good deal of time running through the music in headphones while staring at my charts. Then, I close the folder and spend time playing the music, still with headphones, but without the charts. This can be a bit bumpy at first, but it helps highlight the trickiest parts of the songs. Finally, I will switch from the iPod to a metronome, and just play through all of the songs with only a click track while singing the melody and arrangements in my head. This can be the toughest part, but it's only when I do this that I feel as though I actually know the songs. It's as though I am inside all of the phrasing. And, practically speaking, if things go wrong on stage (bad monitor mix, guitarist breaks a string, singer gets lost), I'll know exactly where we are, and I'll be able to hold everyone together. As a drummer, you are often steering the ship!

The Gear:

Ok, so we've confirmed the dates for this upcoming performance and we've learned all of the music. Now we have to organize the logistics of the equipment. You'll probably have to find out if the venue/studio has its own backline or will you rent a drum kit? Or do you need to bring your own gear to the gig? Then, according to the music, I will decide on drum sound options. The kick drum size, and its tuning. The amount of toms, and their sizes. Coated Ambassadors vs. Clear Pinstripes? A metal or wood snare drum? How about a side snare drum turned off and cranked like a timbale, or should it be deep and chunky? Which cymbals would work well, and how many? Maybe an extra mounted hi-hat would be cool. Double pedal? Are there mounted percussion elements that would add to the music, such as tambourines, cowbells, rototoms, more cowbells? Of course, we'll need a gong bass drum. Trashy cymbal effects and cymbal stacks are in vogue. So are treated drum heads with elements like car keys, jingles, splash cymbals, drum wallets, BigFatSnares, and Keplinger metal creations. Should I add a few electronic trigger pads and trigger pedals? Maybe I could use some alternate stick choices like brushes, rods, maracas, or jingle sticks. Maybe a song would sound better if I left the drum set altogether and only played cajón, or marching snare, or pandeiro. Will

we have in-ear monitors? Will there be computer tracks? Will I be asked to run them?

The Look:

At some point, the topic of 'Look' will probably come up and a person called a 'Stylist' will probably tell you to "wear all black" and "just look cool." Rock & Roll.

The Show:

Countless articles have been written about the professionalism needed to maintain a career as a working musician. This includes concepts such as 'punctuality', 'getting along with others', and 'not vomiting in the artist's dressing room or getting arrested at the airport.' Assuming we've already read and internalized these nuggets, I'll just skip ahead to showtime. Hint: I like to write my own set-lists and tape them where I can see them. It's a habit that makes me comfortable. On these set-lists, I will often scribble a note for each song such as, "count off the guitarist for this one", or "switch to mallets", or "don't forget those crazy hits at the end." These are just reminders to glance at from time to time. And, beyond learning the songs, I also take the time to walk through the moments that occur between the songs. For instance, does the singer tell a story or joke between songs #2 and #3? Or, is there a non-stop segue between songs 7-8-9? I like to be in charge of the time between the songs in order to help keep a good flow. It's almost a choreography that I develop: tighten the loose snare drum lugs here, drink a sip of water, fix the hi-hat clutch, switch to brushes, add a sizzle chain to the ride cymbal, switch the patches on my sampler, crack an inside joke at the bass player. This all happens seamlessly during the few seconds between songs. Beyond that, I would say: (1) shake hands with all the band and crew members before you go on. So many people are in their own worlds before a show. Smart phones, ugh! This is a team effort. (2) Expect that things will go wrong on stage, and embrace those moments. They can be a whole lot of fun! And, (3) hug and celebrate with your gang of musicians once the show is completed. It's not just a collection of songs. It's an event!

The Compensation:

Lastly, get paid. This sounds simple, but it's important. And you'd be surprised how difficult this part can be. For musicians, it's not common to get paid before you do the work. Therefore, you'll probably have to type up and send an invoice. There is a myriad of ways to transfer payment such as: direct deposit, PayPal, Western Union, cash, or "the check is in the mail." Keep track of all outstanding payments because certain people will space out and forget.

I hope this gives you a brief look into what I do to prepare for a performance. You'll find that most pro drummers out there have a similar approach and work ethic. And keep in mind this helpful sports quote: "Don't practice until you get it right. Practice until you can't get it wrong."

Here's an example of a sample drum rider that I have sent to a rental company:

Brendan Buckley:
Drum Rider (Shelby Lynne 2016 U.S. Tour)

DW (Jazz, Classics, or Collector's Maple series):

- 14"x22" bass drum (hole in front head, with pillow inside)
- 9"x13" rack tom (on snare stand)
- 16"x16" floor tom (on 3 legs)
- 6"x14" black nickel snare drum
- 5"x13" titanium snare drum

DW Hardware:

- cymbal boom stands (x5)
- snare drum stands (x3)
- hi-hat stand
- DW5002 double pedal (x2)
- throne

Sabian Cymbals:

- 15" Artisan hi-hats (or HHX)
- 22" Artisan ride cymbal (or HHX)
- 18" Artisan crash (or Evolution)
- 19" Evolution crash (or HHX)
- 19" HHX Extreme crash
- 8" splash

Remo Drum Heads:

- Coated Ambassadors on all tops
- Clear Ambassadors on all bottoms
- Powerstroke 3 on bass drum batter side

Vic Firth sticks:

- 5A wood tips
- T1 Timpani mallets
- Heritage wire brushes

LP:

- mounted cyclops tambourine
- shaker

Accessories:

- drum rug
- gaff tape
- drum key
- towel
- water
- miniature electric fan



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INSIDE ||| BRENDAN BUCKLEY

