

Drumset Co-ordination

Edited version of this interview appeared in Modern Drummer June 2007

1. What books were most essential in developing your coordination?

Jim Chapin: Advanced Techniques for the Modern Drummer. I pretty much ate, drank, and slept with that as a kid. It still has one of the clearest explanations of jazz swing co-ordination, totally applicable today also as hip-hop and funk exercises. I recently spent some time again with it using left hand lead. I don't need many books . Either I'm very slow, or very thorough, but I can usually see a lifetime's work in any book.

2. How did you first begin to practice coordination between your hands, feet, then all four limbs?

Opened the book and started at page one.

3. How did you go about tackling difficult patterns? (Isolating the limbs, start slow, etc.)

4. What exercise or routine made the biggest difference to your overall independence?

Nothing special, but an awareness of how your mind works on left / right control is useful. Some people start opening doors with their left hands, doing domestic chores leading with the left, and, a little more dangerous this, shaving with the "wrong" lead hand. That's not about co-ordination *per se* , but will help develop your weaker side.

5. What tips can you offer the beginning drummer to help develop their coordination and independence? (Are there some general approaches that you've found successful?)

Try to hear it played first, either by your teacher, or your drum machine. Go very slowly. Be patient. We've all done this, even the great guys, and it will come.

6. How important is it to count (either aloud or to yourself) while working on independence exercises?

I think counting out loud, which is closely related to singing, is great on many levels. Counting while playing is, of course, another co-ordination. Counting internally, or better still, out loud, really helps fix the pulse and the various sub-divisions in your brain. The Indian players have that down. But its an exercise to internalise the rhythm; I don't count to myself when playing for real. Too busy listening.

7. Is it possible to practice coordination ideas off the drums before applying them to the kit?

A certain amount of thigh-slapping on the subway and table-tapping at home can be helpful in just getting the limbs to go up and down at the right time, certainly. After that, you have to get to grips with controlling the relative dynamics of the several instruments on the set, in other words, with making music with the material.

8. Do you recall any recordings by drummers that contained fun coordination challenges that you worked on?

Too many to mention. There is a hi-hat thing in measure 5 and 6 of Tony Williams' classic solo on Seven Steps To Heaven (Miles Davis: Columbus 8983) which was the first time I realised the left foot / hat was also going to be an improvising instrument as well, and do more than just go up and down on 2 and 4. A whole extra bunch of work there!

9. How does developing advanced coordination help your overall playing? Also, can it be a distraction, where you're always looking to include all four limbs in every pattern you play?

I think the advanced player knows that if the music requires one instrument playing one repeated pattern, that's what it gets; if it requires a ceaseless flow of unrepeated dialogue between all four limbs all across the set, that's what it gets.

I usually refer to the use of language when I'm thinking about strategies on the drums. If we all played drums as well as we speak, it would be a fine thing. Sometimes one word will do, but sometimes a witty one-off never-to-be-repeated speech full of fancy phrases and a couple of allusions in Greek (?) is needed. I can address you in a deafening monotone with repeated cliché's if you want, but you'll get tired of that pretty quick. Good co-ordination is going to advance and expand your vocabulary, so what you have to say can become richer, varied, more interesting.

10. What inspires you to come up with challenging coordination patterns? (Must you be able to "hear" them first?)

I think hearing the pattern first, before you attempt to play it, is very useful. If your teacher can play it first slowly, so you can hear what it sounds like, or you can programme your drum-machine to do it, that has to help. Its also possible to write down any notes for any of the limbs and try to play them at the same time, from the very simple to the very complex. Personally I like to see the "line-up" of the notes on the paper, clearly showing which limbs, if any, will strike together. My brain seems to "get it" quicker that way. There is a weird moment when you can suddenly do it, and you almost feel a soldering iron in your brain connect some circuit deep down there. Like the moment you learn how to ride a bike. Once you couldn't, then you could, and you're unlikely to forget it. Another weird phenomenon is when you still can't do it, but you have done a lot of preparatory work. You sleep on it, and the next day you can play it straight off. As if the brain needed a quiet time to reflect on what was required, and thus to produce the answer. I think you can be as co-ordinated as heck, of course, but that's still no necessary guarantee of good music, or even that you're a great player.

The aim of all this technique business is to be able to play what you hear, when you want to. When we're speaking, most of us have the necessary tongue, throat, and lips movements on auto-pilot. What we think, we can say – with the exception of a few high government officials. There is no time-lag between the thought and the expression of that thought. That's what you're working on with co-ordination and other technical exercises. Then what becomes of much more interest is not the mechanics of the expression, but the quality of the thought expressed. Drummers who play very fast are a bit like people who speak very fast – I always find myself wishing they'd slow down a bit.