

Ergonomics of the Jazz Drum Set

Ben Snyder

Abstract

The drum set has served as the rhythm section of an ensemble for almost twelve decades now. In that time, its general appearance and setup has gone relatively unchanged. Through oral history interviews and journalized research, a conclusion will be made that understands how this market has been progressing economically. The type of gear that is being requested by performers today in the New York jazz scene will also be examined. Research found that there is an idea of cyclical trend movements within the drumming community of what type of equipment is popular to use. We are currently in a time where gear popularized in the 1950s and 1960s is now coming back into popularity with today's drummers. From a manufacturer's perspective, this means that the new gear being created is really just a modern interpretation and imitation of what has already been done before. Despite other products such as electronics coming to fruition with the progression of technology, they are predicted to be another possible fad of a type of gear that will go out of popularity, as people continue to demand a certain type of gear from a certain time period to facilitate their musical needs.

Introduction

According to George Grove, author of *The New Grove Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians*, "Drums are the world's oldest and most ubiquitous musical instruments, and the basic design has remained virtually unchanged for thousands of years" (Grove, 2019). Thus, the question arises of why such a basic and archaic musical instrument has maintained presence throughout the development of music over the course of human existence. Furthermore, it is interesting to see how such a basic device has developed its own advanced economic market consisting of hundreds of independent manufacturers, being fueled by thousands of professionals who have devoted their lives to the process of developing this instrument. This project will

explore these factors as it delves into the area of jazz drumsets in the 21st century, the goal being to provide a thorough analysis of the products being manufactured for this scene and develop an estimation of the economic trends in this niche market. Through research and oral history interviews in the fields of performance, education, and manufacturing, I hope to achieve some kind of tangible conclusion to my questions.

Methods and Results

In order to have come to any conclusion about the current or future climate of the economy of this niche area, I had to get a solid understanding of how the industry works. I wanted to understand what was going on inside the heads of the manufacturers and the consumers. To do

this, I interviewed Paul Murr and Daniel Glass, two prominent session and live performers of jazz and modern music. I also interviewed Mike Dawson, a self-proclaimed “gear head” who serves as a product reviewer and editor for *Modern Drummer Magazine*. When interviewing Mike, I gathered a strong understanding of what people look for with their gear.

“I don’t get complimented on my playing; I get complimented on the sounds” (Dawson, 2019).

We discussed many aspects such as how gear needs have changed, what types of gear have come and gone out of fashion, and why some products have lasted for so long.

“I think a simplified setup might be the trend that I’m noticing. One or two cymbals, one or two toms, just basic setups” (Dawson, 2019).

With Paul Murr, I delved into the ideas of sound- what makes a drummer want to buy a product? Paul’s understanding was that the working percussionist does not (or should not) care about the look of their products, but rather the sound that they create. Paul emphasized his own obsession with finding good sounds when it came to cymbals and noted that it’s one of the main parts of a drum set people should look to improve first.

“I always tell students that you can make entry, mid-level drum kits sound pretty good, but you can’t make stamped cymbals sound good, you know? Cheap cymbals sound like cheap cymbals and you can’t do anything, any modifications, to them to make ‘em sound better” (Murr, 2019).

Glass, a more traditional jazz player who has gotten his fame from playing older styles of jazz drumming, emphasized the idea of

finding gear that matches the style of music that you’re playing.

“If you play older stuff on modern gear, it’s very difficult to understand how to play them, because the gear does not match what you’re trying to do technically” (Glass, 2019).

Overall, interviewees seemed to come to the conclusion that the drum set will always remain a “drum set”.

“I think you gotta have some kind of instrument that is on the floor covering the low end and something in the middle for the mid-range and then you got some kind of instrument that can give you sense of melody, whether it be toms or something that sounds like toms. You got some kind of metallic instruments that represent time keeping and accents [...] but I think once you completely deconstruct those roles, it ceases to be a drumset” (Dawson, 2019).

The definition of what makes up the kit might change, but the principal of what types of sounds you need will always be there. Another theme seemed to be that the innovations being made today seem to be highly influenced and directed by the gear that is still being used and has stayed around from the 1950s and 1960s.

*“I think things are cyclical” (Glass, 2019).
“Sure 100%” (Murr, 2019).*

“I mean again, you look at the guys who are making all the real records. What are they using in the studio- Gretsch, Ludwig, Rodger, you know? They’re using old classic stuff so yeah, I think it’s inevitable...” (Dawson, 2019).

Will there always be a person sitting behind an acoustic drum set? “I hope,” says Paul Murr, who states the fundamental physical

role of the drum is to push air, which electronic triggers can't do.

Conclusion

With the development of jazz music and the music scene in general in our culture, we have seen the role of the drum set move from a traditional background instrument, to being a frontline instrument fundamental to the music we hear and play. Despite the general look of the drumset not changing much, the quality and craftsmanship of the instruments has improved.

The basis of gear trends being cyclical has confirmed the idea that since our roots of New York jazz come from a progression during the early to mid-1900's, all innovations will be based on and be applicable to the drum set as it was fashioned during those time periods. As for how jazz has changed and what jazz music is today, the argument is ongoing amongst musicians and jazz elitists. As far as the drummers are concerned, they just want to perform the music to the best of their abilities.

References

- Dawson, M. (n.d.). Daniel Glass: examining the drumset's century-long tale of change. Retrieved March 31, 2019,
- Green, B. (1967). Drumset ergonomics: Part 1: An introduction. *Modern Drummer*, vol. Retrieved March 31, 2019,
- Grove, George (January 2001). Sadie, E. (649,). *The New Grove Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians* (2nd ed.). Retrieved March 31, 2019,
- McCabe, A. (2018). "A Brief History of The Drum Set." Retrieved March 31, 2019.

Recommended Citation

Snyder, B. (2019). Ergonomics of the jazz drum set. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com>