

Speaking Softly and Carrying Big Sticks

When playing drums with sticks, you have fewer basic strokes from which to draw when compared to hand drumming. But this deficit doesn't mean that you're limited in what you can do. Drumsets overcome this deficit by providing more drums to get a larger variety of sounds. (Check out Chapter 4 for more on all the stroke options that hand drums provide.) But before you can hit the drum with a stick, you need to know how to hold the sticks.

Holding the sticks

Two basic ways to hold the drumsticks exist: *matched grip* and *traditional grip*. The right-hand position is the same for both these grips, but the left hand's position varies greatly.



Many people want to know which grip is better, the traditional grip or the matched grip. The answer really depends on who you ask. Personally (and I'm not alone here), I suggest the matched grip for most beginners. This grip takes less time to get comfortable with and allows you to play any kind of drum or music that you want. The matched grip also takes fewer muscles to perform a stroke. And you're better able to get a consistent sound between the two sticks using this grip.

On the other hand, if you already know how to play with the traditional grip, you really have no reason to stop using it. The fact is that both grips allow you to play the drums equally well (I sometimes switch between grips when I play).

Traditional grip

The *traditional grip* comes from military drumming. In military bands, a strap held the snare drum over the shoulder, and it rested on the left leg. The drum was tilted with the left side higher than the right. Because the left side was raised up and closer to the left arm, the drummer needed to use a different technique with the left hand. You hold your right hand the same way you do with the matched grip technique, which I describe in the next section.

To hold the sticks in the traditional grip with your left hand, take a look at Figure 3-6. You can see that the left hand basically grips the stick between the thumb and index finger (cozy it up to the inside corner) about a quarter of the way up from the butt end of the stick. This is the *fulcrum* of the grip, and the stick pivots from here. The stick cradles between the middle and ring fingers. The middle and index fingers wrap gently over the stick. These fingers control the lateral movement of the stick. To make the stroke, twist your wrist and rotate your arm from the elbow.



The important thing to remember about the traditional grip is that the stick rests *loosely* in your hand. You apply only enough pressure on the stick at its fulcrum (the thumb–index finger point) to keep it from flying out as you play. To keep the stick from flying out of your hand, squeeze the stick slightly when it hits the drum and release the pressure after it bounces off the head.



Figure 3-6:
Holding the
drumsticks
with the
traditional
grip.

Matched grip

The *matched grip* is the most common stick-holding technique used today. The matched grip developed as alternate ways of drumming appeared. Early rock 'n' roll drummers started using the same grip for both hands because they didn't have the constraints of the drum's position to contend with. Also, drum corps drummers started holding the snare drum in front of them with support at the waist. The drum no longer hung to the side, making the matched grip possible.

You hold both sticks the same way in the matched grip, as you can see in Figure 3-7a. Hold the stick between your thumb and index finger at the last knuckle joint of your finger (see Figure 3-7b), about a quarter of the way from the back end of the stick. The rest of the fingers curl around the stick and lightly hold it in place (see Figure 3-7c). The stick pivots from your index finger–thumb point while the fingers control the movement from beneath. Move the stick straight up and down to make the stick stroke.



One trick to holding the sticks with the matched grip is to think of your finger-tips. If you use your fingertips, you can feel the drum better. You can also do some advanced techniques that allow you to play faster and with less effort. In Figure 3-7a you can see the gap between the thumb and finger (it looks like an

oval space). This gap lets you know that you're holding the stick correctly. Take a look at Figure 3-8 — you don't see a gap. This person isn't using his fintips. This position limits what he can do on the drum.



Figure 3-7:
Holding the
sticks with
the matched
grip.



Figure 3-8:
A common,
but less-
effective
way to hold
the sticks.

Getting a good grip

I learned to hold the sticks in the way shown in Figure 3-8 (the less-effective matched grip). For nearly ten years, while studying classical and jazz music, I worked my chops using this technique. I felt pretty comfortable and became quite accomplished at rudimental drumming (I even won a few awards). But the day I showed up for my first class with Joe Porcaro at the

Musician's Institute, he suggested that I switch my grip from the one shown in Figure 3-8 to the grip shown in Figure 3-7. It took me weeks to get comfortable with this new grip, but after about a month, I was a believer. I played faster and with less effort, and I was able to play just as loud. Thanks Joe!

Understanding drumstick strokes

The drumming world has basically four drumstick strokes: the basic stroke, rim-shot, rim-tap, and dead-sticking. Discover more about each in the following sections.

Basic stroke

The *basic stroke* is the standard way to approach the drum, as well as the way you hit it most of the time, regardless of the volume. The best sound that's made from a drum hit with a stick is from the very center of the head. The closer you hit the drum toward the rim, the more *overtones* (multiples of the fundamental tone) it produces and the less clear the sound. Figure 3-9 shows you the basic stroke.



Figure 3-9:
The basic
stick stroke.

Within the basic stroke, you see two special notations (check out Chapter 2 to see what the musical notation looks like for each):

- ✓ The first is the *grace note* (the miniature note on the staff). You play the grace note very softly. Like the muted tone, it's often nearly inaudible. The best way to get this sound is to lift your stick off the head only about an inch. Doing so forces low volume.
- ✓ The second special notation for the basic stroke is the *accent*. You make this note when you really hit the drum (go ahead and smack it!). Instead of lifting the stick just an inch off the head, you want to lift it a foot or more, depending on the overall volume that you're playing.

Rim-shot

The rim-shot is often associated with a loud sound, but you can play rim-shots at any volume. The trick is to hit the drum away from the center of the head and strike the *rim* (the metal hoop that holds the head on the drum) at the same time that you hit the head. Doing so creates overtones and gives the drum a higher pitched sound. By moving the tip of the stick closer to the rim, you get a thinner and quieter sound. (For rock drummers, you often want to hit the center of the drum when you do a rim-shot. This position gives you that extra punch to cut through even the most obnoxious guitar solo.) Figure 3-10 shows the stick placement for the rim-shot.



Positioning for volume control

Rudimental drummers (drumstick players who focus on playing the rudiments) have a concept called *positioning*. Positioning simply relates to how far you lift your sticks off the drum's head when you play to create a specific volume. Positioning allows a drummer to consistently repeat a volume day after day. The following are the basics for positioning:

- ✓ For low volumes like those marked *piano* (p), and for grace notes, lift your stick about an inch off the drum.
- ✓ For moderate volumes, such as those marked with a *mezzo forte* (mf), lift your stick about six inches off the head.

- ✓ For louder volumes like *forte* (f), start your sticks about 12 inches from the drumhead.
- ✓ For really loud playing, such as those marked *fortissimo* (ff), lift your sticks 18–24 inches.

Of course, these distances vary depending on the speed at which you're asked to play. (To see what those dynamic markings look like in music, check out Chapter 2.)

To play accented notes, go to the next higher position. For example, if a piece of music is marked as *mezzo forte*, you play the unaccented notes at about six inches from the head and accented notes about 12 inches.



Figure 3-10:
Getting the
rim-shot
right.

Cross-stick

Another rim stroke is the rim-tap or cross-stick (sometimes mistakenly called a rim-shot). Like its name implies, this is a quiet stroke used in jazz, Latin music, and ballads. With this stroke, you turn your stick around, place the tip against the drum head close to the rim, and pivot the stick up to strike the drum. With the tip pressed into the drum, you drive the bottom end of the stick into the opposite rim. Many people rest their left hand on the head while they hold the stick. Doing so helps dampen the overtone when the stick hits the rim. See Figure 3-11 for the rim-tap.



Figure 3-11:
The rim-tap
or cross-
stick.

Dead-sticking

Another commonly used technique is called *dead-sticking*. Dead-sticking is just pressing the stick into the surface after you hit the drum. With this

technique, your index finger presses on the top of the stick. Figure 3-12 shows you how to hold the stick for dead-sticking. You use this technique mainly on traditional stick-struck drums and rarely on a drumset. The idea is to mute the head (or shell) after you hit it.



Figure 3-12:
Dead-
sticking
technique.

Painting a Variety of Textures with Brushes

Most drummers who play contemporary music think of playing only with sticks, but there are many more textures that you can create on a stick-played drum by using brushes. Brushes soften the sound of the drum and are often used in jazz drumming and some quieter styles, such as ballads in small clubs.



Brushes work only on *coated heads*. *Clear heads* don't have any texture for the brushes to rub against, so if you intend to use brushes on your drums, make sure that you use one of the coated varieties. Chapter 20 has more on coated versus uncoated heads.

Getting to know brush styles

There are a variety of types of brushes available. Each produces its own unique sound. Figure 3-13 shows a couple of the more common styles of brushes. The ones on the left are wire brushes, and the ones on the right are plastic brushes. You can also find wooden brushes that have larger diameter "brushes" than the plastic ones you see in Figure 3-13. As a general rule, the thinner the brush material, the softer the sound you get. So, the wire brush provides the softest

sound while the wooden brush has a much louder, almost stick-like sound to it. The plastic brush material creates a sound in between these other two.

Aside from different brush materials, you can find brushes with different tools on the end of the handle. These tools include a rubber mallet (seen in the wire brush in Figure 3-13) and a wire ring (not shown) and are used to add accents or alternate textures on drums or cymbals.



Figure 3-13:
Brushes
create a
more
mellow
sound on a
drum than a
stick does.

Getting a grip on brushing techniques

There are tons of ways to play brushes, limited only by your imagination. However, you can find a handful of techniques that are pretty common, two of which I talk about in this section. You can use brushes two ways:

- ✓ **Hit it:** You can strike the drum with the brush in the same manner as you do a stick. This provides a softer sound than a stick but still contains the attack of the brush hitting the head.
- ✓ **Slide it:** By sliding the brush along the surface of the drumhead, you create a sustained (*legato*) sound that is quiet and has no attack like the one you get by hitting the head. You do this by sliding the brushes along the drumhead, often in a circular motion.



Dozens of different brush techniques use one or both of these approaches, and a few really good books and videos dig deeply into a bunch of them. Here are two videos that I particularly like:

- ✓ Ed Thigpen's *The Essence of Brushes*
- ✓ Clayton Cameron's *The Living Art of Brushes*

Sampling a slow-tempo technique

Ballads, some jazz standards, and other quiet, slow-tempo songs sound great when played with a pair of brushes. For these types of songs, you rarely hit the drum with the brush; instead, both hands use a circular sliding motion. Figure 3-14 shows the basic movement. This technique essentially consists of overlapping circles at a tempo where each beat of the measure equals one time around the circle. Your left hand moves in a counterclockwise direction while your right hand moves in a clockwise direction. This circular pattern keeps your brushes from getting tangled up with one another.

The key to masking this pattern groove (creating a musical sound) is to give a little extra push when you hit the top of the circle where the beat of the music happens. You do this by pressing down slightly harder on the head as you round the top of the circle and speeding up over the first third of the circle. You can hear a sample of this sound by checking out the slow-tempo brush pattern in Chapter 9.

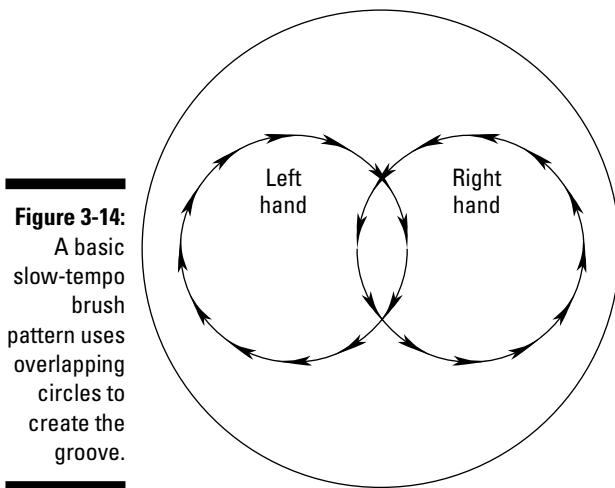


Figure 3-14:
A basic slow-tempo brush pattern uses overlapping circles to create the groove.

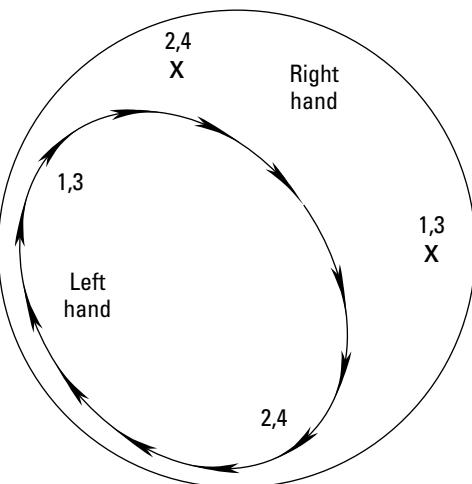
Making sense of medium- and fast-tempo techniques

Medium- and fast-tempo brushwork often consists of both the sliding movement and hitting the head with the brush. The pattern illustrated in Figure 3-15 has the left hand sliding around the head in a circle over the course of

two beats. On beats 1 and 3 your left hand is positioned in the 10 o'clock point of the head and beats 2 and 4 are played while positioned in the 4 o'clock point. You want an even swishing-type sound as you move around this circle with the brushes.

The right hand plays the song's hi-hat pattern rhythm while moving from left to right in the upper portion of the head. The 1 and 3 beats are played at the 2 o'clock position and the 2 and 4 are played in the 10 o'clock position. Moving your strokes this way keeps your right and left brushes from hitting each other. Chapter 9 has a few grooves that use this technique.

Figure 3-15:
Medium-
and fast-
tempo brush
patterns use
both sliding
and hitting
movements.



Forging a Foundation with Rudiments

As a drummer, your main challenge is to develop a fluid, relaxed sound. The only way to do this is to play the drum. After you get comfortable making the basic sounds on a drum, you can focus on being able to actually *play* it. What you need at this point is hand-to-hand coordination. The following are some tried-and-true exercises, called *rudiments*, to help you develop this skill.

Rudiments are sticking patterns traditionally used by military bands and classical percussionists. The role of rudiments is to help drummers become fluent in a variety of sticking patterns. Percussionists developed rudiments as a way to teach the basics of hand-to-hand coordination. Rudiments represent the foundations for all drumming, whether you play an African *djembe* or a classical *snare drum*.

Figure 3-16 illustrates the most basic and commonly used rudiments — the rudimentary rudiments, if you will. (You can find all 26 American Standard Rudiments on the Cheat Sheet in the front of the book.) No matter how you feel about these classical exercises, you will end up playing a few of them whether you like them or not. So, you may as well know what they are.

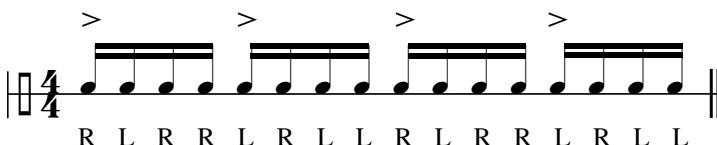
1. Single Stroke Roll



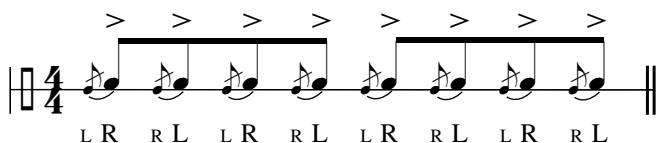
2. Double Stroke Roll



3. Paradiddle

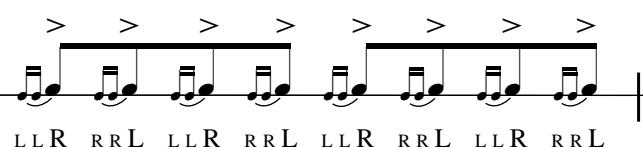


4. Flam



5. Ruff

Figure 3-16:
Rudimen-
tary
rudiments.





The traditional way to practice these rudiments is to start out really slowly and gradually build up speed until you hit the maximum speed that you can play them and still be in control. Hold that tempo for a few minutes and then slowly reduce your speed until you're back where you started. You'll find that over time, your maximum speed increases. Another way to practice rudiments is to set your metronome (or play along to some music) at a comfortable tempo and play steadily for a few minutes or longer.

The single-stroke roll

This set of strokes is pretty simple: just RLRL (“R” is for your right hand and “L” is for your left hand). The key here is to make sure that both hands sound the same when they hit the drum and that you keep the time between each note even. As silly as it may seem to practice this simple stroke, the single-stroke roll is the foundation upon which you build all your drumming skills. With a solid single-stroke roll, the rest of the rudiments (and everything else you play) will be easier.

The double-stroke roll

RRLL is all you need to know for the double-stroke roll, but as you play this rudiment, your technique varies depending on your tempo. At slower speeds, you can make two deliberate strokes, but when you get to a certain point (this speed is different for everyone), you need to start bouncing the stick once to get the second stroke. In order to get the second bounced stroke to sound the same as the first stroke, boost the bounce with the tips of your fingers by bringing your fingers into the stick as it strikes the drum the second time. One good exercise is to play the double-stroke roll at a tempo where the bounces just start and try accenting the second note.



At the fastest speed, the double-stroke roll changes again and turns into the *buzz roll* or *press roll*. The technique for the buzz roll is to press the sticks into the head, creating a “bzzz” sound.



One thing to keep in mind is that as the roll gets faster, your sticks get closer to the drumhead.

The paradiddle

The *paradiddle* is a combination of the single and double stroke rolls. When you play this roll, make sure to evenly space all the strokes (single and double).

The flam

The *flam* is both hands hitting the drum at nearly the same time. The grace note indicates that you should place the stick close to the drumhead and make the sound of the first note softer than the second. Figure 3-17a shows you how the right flam looks, and Figure 3-17b shows you how the left flam looks. In order to do more than one flam in a row, you need to lift up the hand that plays the grace note to prepare for next stroke. You also need to leave the accented note down to prepare for its next stroke.



Figure 3-17:
The flam.

The ruff

The *ruff* is a lot like the *flam* (see the previous section) except that you have two grace notes instead of one before the accented notes. You play these two grace notes with one hand. So to play the *ruff*, do a *flam* with a double stroke.

Getting the Most Out of Your Practice Sessions

Like it or not, you'll spend more time practicing your drums than performing. This is the sad reality of playing a musical instrument. The good news is that you can increase the efficiency and effectiveness of your practice sessions and save yourself tons of time and energy. And, as I explain in this section, all it takes is a few basic skills. Practicing can be fun!

Starting slowly

The idea of starting slowly may seem obvious, but a reminder never hurts. When you're learning something new, always start really slowly. I mean really, *really* slowly. Painstakingly slow. Doing so forces your brain to organize the movement properly. Starting slowly makes playing fast much easier, and you can progress much more quickly than if you start out too fast. Playing slowly takes discipline, but I guarantee that it helps you learn to play new rhythms much quicker and much better in the long run.

Counting out the rhythm

While you're going slowly, count the rhythm out loud. Doing so helps you place each note more precisely than if you don't count out loud. After you get the rhythm down, you don't need to keep counting, but doing so every once in a while to check yourself is a good idea.

Thinking it through first

What do the world's greatest athletes, musicians, scientists, and business people have in common? The ability to effectively visualize their goals. The greatest athletes know that when it comes to practice, your mind doesn't distinguish between actual physical movement and imagined movement. You send the same signals to your muscles, no matter what. This characteristic of the human nervous system is probably your greatest ally. If you can learn to mentally practice effectively, you dramatically reduce the number of hours you sit behind your drum and keep improving even when you can't get to a drum.

The key to developing this skill is being able to clearly visualize your goal. In the case of drumming, imagine yourself at your drum playing the rhythm. Slowly think through all the steps. See your hands and feet moving in your mind. Imagine how the rhythm feels in your body. Play it perfectly in your mind and you'll be able to play it perfectly for real.

Toughing out practice

Becoming good at a musical instrument takes practice and consistency. Try to practice every day. I know that on some days you just don't feel like practicing. My recommendation: Sit down for just 15 minutes. No matter how much you want to stop, stick with it for those 15 minutes. Sometimes, just getting started is the hard part. If you find that after your 15 minutes are up you still don't want to play the drums, you can walk away knowing that you at least gave it a try. Most of the time though, you'll find that you want to keep practicing.

Knowing when to stop

I know. In the previous section I told you to stick it out when practicing. Now I'm suggesting that you stop playing sometimes. Stopping is the hardest thing to do when practicing (aside from starting on those tough days). Often, you get so wrapped up in the desire to get something perfect that you keep trying something over and over and without getting it right. In these instances, the best thing to do is to stop and take a break. Move on to something else. Such a break can last five minutes or a whole day. Besides, if you keep doing something over and over again incorrectly, guess what? You'll learn it wrong and have to relearn it later. (Relearning something that you did incorrectly is *much* harder than learning it right in the first place.)

When you get frustrated, letting go for a while is best so that you don't start resenting your instrument. Also, most times just taking a break allows your mind and body to process what you've been trying to learn. You may be surprised the next time you try the thing that was so hard and you find out that you can play it.



Some days when you sit down to play, you just can't get it right. As frustrating as this fact is, I do have some good news. On the days when you play poorly, you're actually learning and processing the most. So sit back and take joy in the fact that when your playing stinks, you're actually becoming a better drummer. (Of course, this is no fun when the day happens to be the most important gig of your career.)

Chapter 5

Settling In Behind the Drumset

In This Chapter

- ▶ Setting up your drumset
- ▶ Getting comfortable behind the drumset
- ▶ Developing the basic skills needed for playing the drumset

Are you one of those people who wants the guitar player or singer at a club to get out of the way so that you can see what the drummer's doing? At a concert, do you find yourself giving up your tenth-row seats and moving to the nosebleed section behind the band so that you can watch the drummer? Do you love the grace that comes with a nicely played groove or a beautifully executed *fill* (see Chapter 13 for more on fills)? Well, if so, the drumset is the instrument for you (but you probably already knew that or you wouldn't have picked up this book).

This chapter helps you set up your drumset so that you look great sitting behind it. You also get your feet wet, so to speak, and discover how to attack the bass drum and hi-hat pedals. Likewise, you can begin developing the skills necessary to move all four of your limbs (your hands and feet) independently.

Setting Up Your Drumset

You have many ways to set up a drumset. In fact, there are almost as many ways to set up a drumset as there are drumset players. In this section, I help you set up your drums so that they're as comfortable and easy for you to play as possible.

The vast majority of drummers set up their drums right-handed — even many left-handed people (such as myself). So, in this section, I walk you through the right-handed setup (if you intend to drum left-handed, just reverse the positioning of each of the instruments). This is often called playing with a right-hand lead. Playing this way basically means that you play the bass drum with your right foot, the hi-hat pedal with your left foot, the snare drum with your left hand, and the hi-hat or ride cymbal(s) with your right hand. (Your right hand crosses over your left hand in order to play the hi-hats.)

The first thing you want to do is set up your drums as I outline in Chapter 1. You can then go through the rest of this section and make the minor adjustments that fit you.

Sitting on the throne

As you set up your drums, the first and probably most important position is how high you sit on your *throne* (the throne is the stool). The height that you choose depends on your comfort level. For instance, drumming great Vinnie Caliautta (he's played with Frank Zappa and Sting, among many others) sits really low, with his knees way above his hips. I also know some drummers who have their thrones set so high that they're almost standing behind the drums. Although you can play the drums at almost any height, a certain height range does seem to make playing easier and more efficient.



A good rule to follow when adjusting your throne is to have your hips even with or just slightly higher than your knees, so that the top of your thighs is parallel or slightly above parallel to the ground (see Figure 5-1).



Figure 5-1:
A throne fit
for a king or
queen: Your
thighs are
close to
parallel to
the ground.



Having your hips too low causes your muscles to work harder because you have to lift your knees farther in order to make a stroke. You're also more easily thrown off balance when you use both feet. If you sit too high, you have more difficulty generating a lot of power with your feet, especially if you want to play with your heels down.

Positioning the pedals

Getting the pedals adjusted essentially means setting your throne the proper distance away from the bass drum and hi-hat stands. This task is pretty simple. You get the most power, speed, and endurance if your ankle joint lies directly beneath your knee. Figure 5-2 shows you this position.



If your knee sits too far beyond your ankle, you create an uncomfortable stress on your ankle joint when you play. If your knee is farther away from the drum or hi-hat stand than your ankle, your playing will lack power.

Figure 5-2:
Proper
pedal
position:
Place your
knee
directly
above your
ankle.



Securing the snare drum

The snare drum sits on a stand positioned between your legs and is, without a doubt, the drum you hit most often, so its position is very important. With the snare drum stand, you can adjust both the height and angle of the drum. In most cases, you want to have the drum at as flat of an angle as possible and the height such that you can play both rim-shots and open strokes easily (see Chapters 3 and 4 for descriptions of these techniques). Check out Figure 5-3 to see the best position for the snare drum on its stand. Notice how the drum tilts slightly toward you.



Figure 5-3:
The snare
drum stand
position.

Placing the tom-toms

How high and at what angle you place your mounted tom-toms determine how long your drumheads last and how easily you can reach them. Like the snare drum, you want to keep your tom-toms as close to level as possible. Place them at an angle, but make sure that the angle matches your sticks' angle. You want your stick to hit them at a relatively flat angle so that it doesn't drive tip-first into the head. Figure 5-4 shows a good tom-tom position. Notice how they're not set up so high above the snare drum that you can't reach them, but they're high enough that the rims of the snare and small tom-tom aren't touching.



Figure 5-4:
A good
position for
the tom-
toms.

Adjusting the ride cymbal

Adjusting your cymbals properly allows you to get a variety of sounds from each of them and also lengthens the useful life of your sticks. You want to hit the ride cymbal with either the tip or shoulder (the part that narrows) of your stick. You also want to reach the *bell* (the little “crown” at the center of the cymbal) easily. Figure 5-5 shows you the most popular position for the ride cymbal. In addition to having one on the right side of the drumset, some people put a ride cymbal on the left side near the hi-hats.



Figure 5-5:
A common
ride cymbal
position.

Angling the crash cymbals

Unlike the ride cymbal, the crash cymbals sound best when you strike them on their edge with the shoulder of your stick. This kind of hit chews up your sticks pretty badly, but that's the price you have to pay for a full crash cymbal sound. Check out Figure 5-6 to see one of the many angles at which you can set your crash cymbals.



When you set up your crash cymbals, make sure that you can reach them easily and that they look good from the audience's viewpoint. Some drummers like to position them so that they can be seen by the audience while others like to hide behind their cymbals. Choose the way that you like best.



Figure 5-6:
A good
angle for
your crash
cymbals.



Be careful not to hit the bow of the crash cymbal (located halfway between the center and edge of the cymbal) with the shoulder of your stick (see Figure 5-7). Doing so increases the likelihood that your expensive cymbal will crack.



Figure 5-7:
Don't hit the
crash
cymbals this
way. They'll
crack!

Raising the hi-hats

Playing the hi-hats is easiest when you position them high enough so that you can hit the snare drum with some force and not have your right hand in the

way. Check out Figure 5-8 for an idea about where to position your hi-hats. Notice how, at this height, the shoulder of your right-hand stick can hit the hi-hats toward their edge and leave plenty of room for your left hand to play the snare.



Figure 5-8:
Hi-hat
cymbal
position.

Putting Your Foot Down

Some drummers play with their heels down while others play with their heels up. Each way has advantages, and only you can decide what's best for you. Personally, I almost always play the bass drum with my heel up and play both ways on the hi-hat, depending on the situation. I assume that you'll do the same things with your feet because that's what every drummer I know does. Playing this way is also the most efficient way to play today's music (all styles — yes, even jazz).

Beating the bass drum

Although some people play the bass drum with their heel down, the vast majority of drummers keep their heel up. The heel-up position allows you to play faster, louder, and longer (don't worry — you can still play softly with the heel up, too). Figure 5-9 shows the typical heel-up position. Notice that you apply pressure on the ball of the foot.



Figure 5-9:
The typical
heel-up
position for
the bass
drum.



To make the bass drum stroke, lift your knee and drop your foot into the pedal. If you apply a little forward pressure as you push down on the pedal, you get a solid sound. Most of the time, you want the pedal's beater to bounce off the head of the drum so that it can ring freely.

As you get comfortable playing the bass drum and get a few grooves under your belt, you'll probably want to play some *double strokes* (for more on double strokes, go to Chapter 3). Here's where the heel-up position comes in handy. With it you can play double strokes with very little effort.

Check out Figure 5-10. It shows you how to play a double stroke. Notice the position of the foot in Figure 5-10a. The heel is way up and the pressure is applied on the very front of the ball of the foot and the toes. This is the first stroke. Figure 5-10b shows the second stroke. You can see that the heel is lower and the pressure is more toward the back of the foot's ball. To play the second stroke, move your foot slightly forward as you bring your heel down after the first stroke.

To play the double stroke, play the first stroke on your toes with your heel way up. Then drop your heel and move your foot forward slightly. Kick lightly into the drum. To do triple or quadruple strokes, repeat the first stroke position (heel stays up and foot stays back) for all but the last stroke (heel comes down and foot moves forward).

Playing the hi-hats

You can play the hi-hats either with your heel up or down, depending on what you're doing. Whenever you play the hi-hats with your sticks, you want your heel down. To open the hi-hat, raise your toes slightly and release some of the pressure on the cymbals. Figure 5-11a shows this position.



Figure 5-10:
The double
bass drum
stroke.



How much you lift your toes determines just how much your hi-hats will open and how long they will ring when you hit them. Most of the time you want a full swish sound. To create this sound, don't open the cymbals too much. You have to experiment to find the swish sound that you like best.



Figure 5-11:
The heel-
down hi-hat
position.

At times, you may want to use your left foot to play the hi-hat while you're playing the ride cymbal or another drum with your right hand. In this case, playing with your heel up is the way to go. This technique is pretty much the same as the heel-up bass drum stroke (see the previous section). You can even do double strokes on the hi-hat pedal the same way. Check out Figure 5-11b to see the heel-up hi-hat position

Working Out: Exercises to Improve Your Hand- and Footwork

Being able to move your hands and both feet independently is the foundation of all drumset playing. At this point, you become as much an athlete as a musician. The drumset drummer has the distinction of being the most co-ordinated and physically trained of the musicians in a contemporary musical setting. Sure, the guitar player strums or picks with one hand while fretting with the other and maybe singing too, but the drummer is back there essentially running laps with his or her legs while at the same time using both hands, often doing two different things.



Don't let the other musicians in the band tell you that drumming is easier than playing the guitar. If they do, just tell them to rub their tummy and pat their head while salsa dancing.

The following series of exercises can help you mentally separate each of your limbs. The first group, shown in Figure 5-12, alternates single-stroke patterns (right, left, right, left) among your four limbs. Take a look at the legend at the top of the figure to see which hand or foot plays which note (this legend applies to all the rhythms in Figures 5-12 through 5-17). Start out slowly and gradually build up your speed until you can play them fluidly at a tempo of about 120 beats per minute.

The next set of rhythms (see Figure 5-13) uses double strokes (right, right, left, left) on each of your extremities.

1.

Right hand
Left hand
Right foot
Left foot

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

Figure 5-12:
Single
stroke four-
way
independen-
ce exercise.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

Figure 5-13:
Double
stroke four-
way
independen-
ce exercise.

The rhythms in Figure 5-14 contain some exercises that double up your limbs, which helps you figure out how to use two limbs at the same time. Playing the notes that use a right foot and a right hand together or a left foot/left hand combination is easier than mixing a left hand and right foot or right hand and left foot.

1.



2.



3.



4.



Figure 5-14:
Combination exercises.

The series of rhythms shown in Figure 5-15 uses double strokes and double limbs. Like the rhythms in Figure 5-14, you may find mixing a left foot with a right hand or a left hand with a right foot tricky at first. Just take your time and go slowly. You'll get the hang of it.

1.



2.



3.



4.



Figure 5-15:
Double
stroke
combi-
nations.

5.



6.



The exercises in Figure 5-16 are definitely the most difficult (that's why I put them toward the end of the chapter), utilizing double strokes on each limb but in combinations where you play the first stroke with one limb and the second with another.

Figure 5-16:

Much
harder
combi-
nations.

Figure 5-17 shows you a few more difficult combinations in case you haven't had enough yet.

Figure 5-17:

Another set
of difficult
combos.

I love these exercises and often use them as a warm-up. Some of these rhythms also make cool fills. As you learn the rhythms in the following chapters, you can incorporate them into your drumming by playing three bars of time (your main drum rhythm) and then one of the patterns in this chapter. Doing so helps you get into and out of a fill. (For the full scoop on fills, see Chapter 13.)

You're on your way to becoming one of the few (or many), the proud (or not), the drummers. So sit back and prepare yourself for all the funny looks, snickers, and sometimes outright disrespect that you'll get from all your future dates' parents when they find out that you're a drummer. On the other hand, you'll definitely get more dates playing the drums than, say, the ukulele.