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Thoughts On Tom Tuning



Among the letters I've received lately was one from a person who asked how I tune my tom-toms to get the sound I do. I replied that getting a particular tom sound is not altogether a matter of tuning. Perhaps this is too obvious, but to me, it's more a matter of choosing the drum, the batter head, the resonant head (if any), what sort of damping (if any), the angle at which the drum is mounted, and especially, how the drum is *struck*. Thus, it's much more than a "turn of the screw." Since this is an often-asked question, it occurred to me that it might make a good subject for an article.

So here I go, ready to offer some thoughts, but with the forewarning that any thoughts on a matter as *subjective* as drum tuning must necessarily be very personal and possibly controversial. So with the usual editorial proviso that "the opinions expressed in this article are not necessarily those of anyone else," I'll get on with it.

Tuning

There are some things about tuning that are generally true. But there's also a good witicism that says: "All generalities are false—including this one!" Wise words. Generally speaking, I believe in the "criss-cross" method of tensioning, that is, working diagonally back and forth around the drum to get an even distribution of tension. I think this is important in producing a pure sound, and to avoid "rings" and "boings" without resorting to damping.

With a little practice, you'll start to feel the tension, starting with your hand pushing down on the center of the loose head, then by resistance to the drumkey, and finally, by pressing your thumb into the head near each lug. Having done it a few thousand times, I'm confident that I could tune my drums from scratch by *feel* alone—without even hearing them.

I also think you can fine tune very accurately by tapping lightly around the circumference of the head, listening for the differences in pitch at each lug, and evening them up as you go around. What

you're trying to do, of course, is get the head in tune with itself. I think that's important in getting the most *note* with the least *noise*. This is a very critical distinction. If, however, the aim is to have *less* tonality (can't imagine why!), then it's probably true what some studio players say—that loosening off one lug will "flatten" the sound somewhat.

I know many people have different ideas on the relationship of the batter head to the resonant head. It seems logical to me, and my experiments have shown, that it's best to tune one to the other as closely as possible—again if you want the purest tonality the drum can produce. Yes, it's certainly possible that you'll get an interesting sound by tuning one above or below the other, and your own experimentation will determine what you like best. But it seems to me that you want the whole drum in tune with itself. I don't suppose this makes much difference, but I tune the bottom one first and then tune the top one to it.

Two Heads Versus One

First, I'll say that I think two heads *are* better than one. Then I'll duck behind a barricade until the storm of invective passes. Then I'll poke my head up and say it again. I've used both ways over the years, even on the same kit for a long time, and certainly both sounds have their uses. Until recently, I used open concert toms together with closed rack toms and thought they worked well together. In my recent mood of reexamining everything about my setup, I decided to try some small double-headed toms in place of the concert toms I've had for 11 years now. I truly didn't believe they would do the same job, but I'm taking *nothing* for granted these days.

Having recorded all the demos for our *Hold Your Fire* album with the open toms, I then put up the closed ones when we got into the studio. To carry it even further, I tried both setups one after the other, to hear exactly what the difference would be, playing a part that was designed for open toms. To my surprise, the closed ones

sounded appreciably better. They had just as much attack as the open ones, but their increased tonality gave them *more* presence. Ironically, this was one experiment I hadn't expected to work. I just wanted to satisfy my curiosity, but once again, I was confronted by the evidence of my own ears. I don't argue with that.

I used to think the choice between the two sounds was for more *attack* in the open drum or more *tonality* in the closed drum. Now I'm not so sure. It seems to me that a well-tuned, well-played closed drum will do anything an open drum will do—and more. The choice between the two—and I stress the word *choice*—is certainly a matter of taste and preference, but I hope I can get away with saying this much.

I think hardly anyone would argue with the statement that a single-headed tom has *one* sound. It doesn't matter how you hit it or where you hit it. It has one voice—one pitch to offer. Therefore, hardly anyone will argue with the position that a double-headed tom has *many* voices, and quite a wide range of possible pitches depending upon how hard it's struck. You can work from the rim to the center of the drum, changing the sound and timbre as you go, and you can hit from softly to thunderously hard, changing the pitch and effect as you go. The sound can range from the shallow attack of a timbale to a rich, throaty voice, if, once again, that's what you want.

For some people, especially in the studio, it's consistency and definition that count. They only want one good sound out of the drum. Fair enough. Or back in the days when I was playing live, without the benefit of microphones, it was certainly easier to hear the drums acoustically with the bottom heads off. Even with microphones, it's faster and easier to get a decent sound happening, especially in the studio. Thus, some engineers prefer this approach.

To be fair, I know from talking to engineers that this often occurs as a result of drummers who come into the studio not knowing how to *really* tune their drums.

Playing in clubs and basements, one can get away with approximate tunings, rings, dissonances, and boings, but you can't have any of that in the microscopic world of the studio. So the engineers are obliged to take the quick, safe route to get as good a sound as they can. That means single heads and/or damping.

Damping


Damping is kind of a nasty word to me when applied to toms. I don't use any at all on mine, though I used to use little strips of gaffer's tape. In retrospect, I can see that, as I learned to tune better and developed my ear to hear fine discrepancies, I used less and less damping, and finally none at all.

At the risk of offending someone, I can now say that I don't have to use it anymore, because I don't have to *hide* anything. Of course, it's always easier (and gives you a feeling of spurious superiority) to look back and say, "I didn't know any better." Hardly anyone will admit a thing like that at the time. I certainly wouldn't have. If someone had said to me, "You only use that tape because you can't tune properly," I would probably have replied with something witty and unprintable.

There is one good damping tip I picked up from Peter Henderson, for someone who wants to use a *bit* of damping without affecting the drum's sound too much. If you make a little pad with some weight to it and then hinge it with some tape at the rim, when you hit the drum, the pad will bounce off the head and thus won't interfere with the sound on impact, but it will still cut off any lingering overtone.

Since we're inviting controversy, what about the good old question of tuning your toms to notes? This is another thing that you hear a lot of people pontificating about, both for and against. But it seems as if *most* drummers reject the idea of painstakingly tuning to piano notes, and just tune to what sounds good to their ears. Of course, it can be argued that you're still tuning to notes, and naturally that's true. Of course, it doesn't make any difference where you get the note—from a piano or your imagination—as long as it's a *good* note!

I know there's a set of intervals in my head that I tune to—something like the melody of "Ebb Tide," I think. It's funny; when I was working with Jeff Berlin, with Ronnie Montrose producing, I was using a rental kit, and as I went through and tuned the toms, Ronnie sat at the piano and figured out the note on each drum. Sure enough, they formed a chord: an F[#] 7th suspended or something—but still a chord. So there you go. "All generalities are false—including this one!"



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