

# Averted Listening

By Phil Smith

Whether right or wrong, drummers are given the responsibility of being the primary timekeeper in most bands. When tempo problems arise, the drummer is first on the blame list. Whether playing with a click track, loop, sequence, conductor, or live musicians (with no electronic tempo reference), drummers must learn to proportion their hearing correctly in order to play a confident, steady, great-sounding beat.

Tempo issues become a problem if the drummer loses focus of his or her own playing. This tends to be a common issue, since most musicians spend a good amount of time learning to listen to the other musicians in the ensemble. However, there are times when this method of listening can be over used. When this happens, it causes the player's time to be too elastic since the drummer is trying to groove with different elements of the band while losing the focal point of his or her own time feel. Thus, the groove never settles in.

Obviously, listening is one of the most important aspects of playing any instrument. We have to listen to the other players in the band, ourselves, and sometimes a click track, loop, or sequence. When all of those factors are present it often muddies the mix and can lead to serious groove discrepancies. These inconsistencies can ultimately lead to an erosion of confidence and lack of trust in one's skills.

When I began my musical studies, it was routinely drilled into me that I should be listening to the other musicians I was playing with. I soon developed the non-unique skill of being able to hear the other players and completely ignore my own performance. It wasn't until sometime later that I heard myself on tape and realized that I did not have my own playing refined enough to be able to overlook my part. Since that time, I've realized that not listening to yourself can become a habit that's just as detrimental as not listening to the other musicians you are playing with! The selflessness of "over listening" leads to groove weakness and time deficiencies. I had one bassist tell me that I wasn't listening closely enough (to the other players), and therefore we weren't meshing as an ensemble. Little did he or I understand that I wasn't listening enough to my own performance to be able to establish any sense of consistent time.

While continuing to develop as a player, I discovered a new type of listening that would allow me to clearly hear myself while also hearing the other components of the music. This technique is something I've named "averted listening," which basically means being able to listen acutely to yourself while still listening to everything else in your peripheral hearing. This method will allow you

to hear yourself, thus allowing you to establish a groove while meshing with the rest of the ensemble. This is certainly not a new concept. In fact, it would seem probable that all the great drummers of our time possess this skill. I simply feel that it's never been fully addressed in a manner accessible to most students. In other words, averted listening is one of those things that you know is there but is either hard to explain or difficult to learn.

One way that I explain this technique to my students is through the more common term of *averted vision*. One class I took as a college elective was Astronomy. I had always been interested in stars, planets, and other celestial objects and figured it was a good elective to round out my music degree. Much to my disappointment, I soon found out that the course was primarily math-based calculations of red shifts and various formulas used to determine the distance between assorted heavenly bodies. Since most people taking this class had the same preconceived notions I had, half of the class was soon failing miserably.

The instructor decided to give us a chance to earn extra credit by having a nighttime viewing session with the school's high-powered telescope. Upon arriving that night, I stepped up to look through the lens and saw a tiny blue spec that was supposed to be Saturn. When the professor asked if I could see it, I told him that I could, but I could not make out any details (primarily the rings). He told me to look away from the planet and concentrate on a star that was shining just to the upper left. When doing so, the rings of Saturn appeared crystal clear in my peripheral, "averted" vision. By applying this visual concept to listening we can teach ourselves to listen to one instrument while still having a clear focus on another.

Developing averted listening takes patience and experience along with trial and error. As always, listening to recordings of yourself in various playing situations is paramount to achieving success. However, there are a few tips that can help along the way.

When working with a click track I prefer to have an unobtrusive sound such as a hi-hat or a round, soft computer-generated tone. I tend to stay away from sounds that stand out too much such as cowbells or high-pitched, piercing bleeps. After selecting the sound, I then keep the click volume at a comfortable level in the mix. This way, I can clearly hear myself and establish a time feel while still being able to play to the dictated tempo of the click track. This method also allows me to manipulate the click track by playing behind the beat or on top of the beat without the click overstating its tempo.

One key thing to remember when playing with a click track is that your time does not have to be metronomic; rather, it needs to feel good and sound "right" inside the music. Throughout a song there are times when the tempo can slightly adjust forward or backward, which works better than forcing the time to be "perfect."

Even though sequences and loops are electronically generated like a click, the rules of performance are different. Click tracks state a generic tempo. Sequences and loops can have a bias either toward the front or back of the beat. Knowing these tendencies will dictate how you listen to a sequence inside a mix. When first learning the feel of a loop/sequence, you may very well want to bring the volume up a bit and concentrate your hearing equally between yourself and the loop. After blending the correct drum feel with the loop, my preference again is to push the volume of the loop further down in the mix.

Playing in a band without the use of any electronic timekeeping devices is another animal unto itself. First, it's important to remember that the drummer is not solely responsible for the tempo; everyone is responsible for their own time. With that in mind, the drummer must first listen to the count-in (especially if the drummer is doing the count-in) and set the tempo reference. From the initial stating of the tempo, the drummer's listening should hone in on creating a solid tempo and groove. The drummer's primary focus should be listening to himself or herself until the feel is solidly established. *Averted listening* will allow you to hear the other players in the periphery, and once the time has been established, small tweaks can then be made.

After developing your version of averted listening, you can then start breaking the rules if desired. The primary goal of stating your time solidly from the start of a song will bolster your confidence greatly and permit you to begin listening closely to other players, while allowing some of your attention to leave your own performance. When doing this, your time should remain strong enough to allow a greater amount of group interplay and improvisation to occur.

**Phil Smith** is a professional drummer and educator based in Atlanta, Georgia. He has had numerous articles published in various media forms, including *Modern Drummer* magazine and Steve Smith's *Drum Set Technique and the History of the U.S. Beat* DVD. Smith is also the host of the popular drumming podcast *Drummer's Weekly Groovecast*. **PN**