



# Composing on the Drumset

Simple Ways to Bring More Intention to Your Grooves by Robert Brian

I believe that as drummers we have the ability to create music and compose on our instrument in more ways than in the conventional manner. We learn good technique through the rudiments, but alongside that type of practice there are possibilities in creating our own ideas by approaching the drumkit in a more tonal way.

## THE CONCEPT

The notion of composing on the drumset began for me when I got into a headspace where I pictured the individual sounds of the kit as separate entities. I see the individual drums and cymbals, and their unique tones and frequencies, as similar to a string or horn section or a choir.

For instance, I think of the sound of the floor tom as a low-end brass section consisting of euphoniums and bass trombones, or as a bass guitar. So when I use the floor tom in a groove, I know it will bring weight and depth to my sound that could prove very useful—if that's what I'm hearing in my musical mind for that particular part.



When I incorporate the other toms, I think of them as having the smooth, melodic sound of French horns or voices.



I think of the cymbals as being bright and snappy, like a James Brown-style trumpet section. If I play a crash and then choke it right away, it becomes a very staccato sound, similar to a quick horn stab in a funk tune. If I allow the cymbal to ring, it becomes like a sustained note. By moving between these two ideas, I can create all kinds of dramatic rhythmic effects. Try playing the following exercise using a choked or sustained crash on beat 1.



When I play bass drum under a cymbal note, I hear that as bass guitar supporting horn stabs.



Play the exercises at different speeds to completely understand the way they can be applied in different styles and feels. Think visually, using light and shade, to develop a greater understanding of dynamics. This will create more drama and tension and release in your drumming. It's crucial that we learn to control the dynamics in order to tell more complete and mature stories on the drumset.

## THE RESULT

With these ideas in place, it's up to you to start hearing and creating your own rhythmic soundscapes. Some of these concepts will help you develop solo drum compositions, but they should also make you think of ways that the tones on the kit can add depth and weight to strengthen your band's songs. Open your mind to the possibilities of what the drums can bring to the music, other than the obvious parts that first spring to mind.

Every drummer has a different way of approaching the instrument, and that alone makes every drum part/composition you play sound unique. Try any and every idea that comes into your head; you never know which ones are going to sound great and ultimately shape who you are as a drummer. Record the patterns that you come up with or write them down, as this helps build a backlog of ideas for future use. (Most songwriters do the same thing, collecting dozens of half-finished songs.) Use your imagination to explore all the tonal and rhythmic possibilities of the drumset. The music will be far richer for it.

**Robert Brian** is a U.K.-based drummer who's played with Peter Gabriel, Jason Rebello, Andy Partridge, Modern English, Jamie Cullum, and others. For the past six years he's toured and recorded with the punk legend Siouxsie Sioux. Excerpts from Brian's new DVD, *Technique and Musicality*, are posted at [robertbrian.co.uk](http://robertbrian.co.uk).

