

# What's Your Sound?

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## 7 Tips For Developing A Unique Voice On The Drumset

by Marko Djordjevic

All of us are different from one another in many ways, so it seems to be a given that we will sound unique when playing the drumset, much in the way our speaking voice sounds different from everyone else's. But even though the sound of our voice gives us a measure of distinction, it's ultimately the things we say and how we say them that truly distinguish us from one another. The way I see it, music is a creative process that offers the opportunity to contribute something new and unique to the world.

Imitation is a huge part of growing up as a player. We inform our craft by attempting to faithfully re-create the music we like and are inspired by. Each of us is influenced by more people than we can consciously remember, but parts of our musical personality can clearly be traced to one influence or another. Music perpetuates itself through the ages, with each new generation stealing ideas from previous ones and then passing ideas on to the generations that follow.

If it all started and ended with imitation and re-creation, all music would sound the same. Thankfully, music is continually transformed on its way through time by the way it's *interpreted* by each person playing it. In fact, the most prominent performers of completely written out and specifically arranged classical pieces are recognized primarily for their unique ways of interpreting the same exact music. That's what keeps the music fresh, generation after generation.

On an instrument like the drumset, which always involves improvisation on some level, the opportunity to come up with a recognizable voice is practically built in. But how do you go about developing that voice? Here are a few tips from my experiences.



Paul La Rotta

### 1. Acknowledge that you are capable of making a unique musical contribution.

I remember a time when all I wanted was to sound like Dave Weckl, and I was not alone! Just about everyone from my generation went through a Weckl period. But does the world really need a Dave Weckl clone, or a clone of anyone for that matter? A good friend pointed this out to me and led me to dig deeper within myself to find out what I had inside, instead of spending my life trying to play someone else's stuff. This was one of the defining moments of my musical journey.

**2. Consider why you decided to play the drums in the first place.** For whatever reason, you had the desire to become a drummer. Zero in on those notions and feelings, and let them guide you.

**3. Take a creative approach to transcription.** Transcribing is a process where you do your best to understand and then play, as closely as possible, something you hear someone else do. But that's only half the

game. The creative part involves taking apart those licks, grooves, and patterns and altering things such as stickings, sound sources, rhythms, accents, and articulation so that the phrase no longer sounds like the one you started with. The more you do this, the less you will find yourself playing exact quotes from other drummers.

**4. Practice tripping yourself up.** Start by playing a time feel or a flow of solo-oriented ideas. As you play, attempt to execute new phrases you hear in your head, and stay away from the stock things you already know. At first you may be at a loss as to what to play, or you may have difficulty instantly executing something you're hearing. When you make a mistake, stop and work on what caused you trouble. This process adds new musical words to your vocabulary. The more you try to trip yourself up, the better you become at executing your new ideas on the spot.

**5. Work on your sound.** This involves picking the drums, cymbals, sticks, and heads that will produce the right sounds for you. It also involves experi-

menting with tuning to find sounds that suit the way you play and the way you hear your instrument, by itself and in an ensemble context. Also try adding unorthodox elements to your kit or using implements other than drumsticks, brushes, rods, and mallets. I've played with chopsticks on many occasions, and the sound is very interesting and unusual.

**6. Listen actively and attentively to as much music as possible.** The more music you are inspired by and the more influences you have to draw from, the lower the risk of ending up sounding like someone else.

**7. Write original compositions.** I believe composing music is one of the most creative endeavors a human being is capable of. It's a wonderful way to broaden your awareness of some aspects of music that may get bypassed if you're always the performer and not the creator of the material you play. Developing a sense of composition will inevitably affect the way you play your instrument. The best improvisers often refer to their art as

composing on the spot, or spontaneous composition. So if you're at a loss for how to start composing, take a few minutes to improvise on your drums—or better yet, on another instrument, like piano or guitar.

Keep in mind that developing a unique voice on any instrument requires serious discipline and dedication. And it's not always an easy endeavor. There are countless stories about how visionary and uncompromising artists like Eric Dolphy, Elvin Jones, John Coltrane, Thelonious

Monk, and Ornette Coleman had to overcome many obstacles along the way. But the ultimate reward is the feeling you get when you're engaged creatively with whatever you choose to do, every day of your life.

**Marko Djordjevic**, who was born in Belgrade, Serbia, has performed with Aaron Goldberg, Matt Garrison, Eric Lewis, Jonah Smith, and many others. He is the bandleader of Sveti and is on the faculty at the Collective in New York City. Djordjevic's DVD, *Where I Come From*, is available through Alfred Publishing. For more info, visit [myspace.com/svetimarko](http://myspace.com/svetimarko).



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