

Drum Tracks

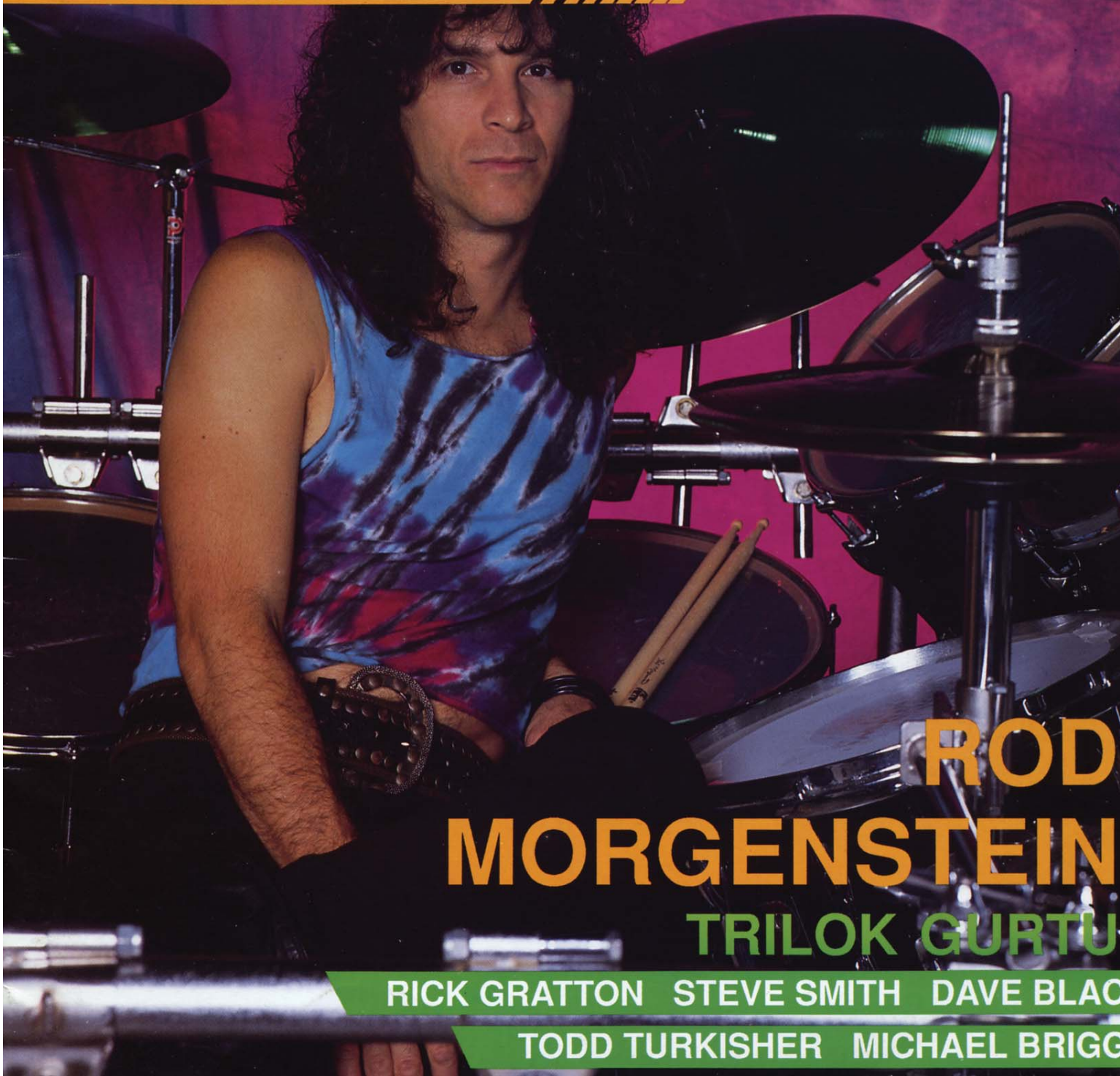
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CONCEPTS FOR THE INNOVATIVE DRUMMER



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THE DRUMMER AS A MUSICAL DIRECTOR

By Dave Black

There are many different musical situations in which a drummer can be an effective leader/Musical Director. However, the topic of this article will deal primarily with the show drummer/Musical Director in the situation when the show does not carry it's own Musical Director and you, the drummer, are asked to assume the role.

The old cliché that you are less of a musician because you are "only" a drummer is slowly changing. History has produced some very fine drummer/band leaders such as Louie Bellson, Buddy Rich, and Gene Krupa. Today's ranks are no less shining, what with the likes of Billy Cobham, Carl Palmer, and Harvey Mason, all of whom are not only considered fine drummers, but established band leader/Musical Director's as well.

The drummer may be asked to assume the role of Musical Director for a number of reasons, and since one of the primary functions of the drummer is tempos and continuity, he is a logical choice to assume the role. This is particularly true in a show were there are a variety of styles and tempo changes, or the show is rhythm/percussion oriented.

RESPONSIBILITY

Regardless of whether you are the drummer or another instrumentalist who has been given the position of Musical Director, the responsibility should obviously never be taken lightly. When you are given the position of Musical Director, it must be made clear to those under your direction that the responsibility you have been given is one that should be respected. They may disagree with you, but they must ultimately go along with your decisions. On the other side of the coin, one very important thing that the Musical Director must remember is that working in this kind of a situation is a team effort. The Musical Director must be courteous and fair to his fellow musicians, not take on the role as a dictator. That is not only unprofessional, but will cause fellow musicians to lose respect in you.

NECESSARY SKILLS

If you are the drummer/Musical Director, it is best that you have some knowledge in theory, conducting and on a variety of brass and woodwind instruments, plus vocal techniques. In addition to having a good background in theory and conducting, the drum-

mer/Musical Director must be an exceptional sight-reader. Not only does he have to worry about his own part, but must keep his eyes and ears open for problems that come up. If the Musical Director is confident and relaxed, the other performers and musicians will sense this and the show will go much more smoothly.

As Musical Director, make sure you're well prepared. It's your responsibility to know all the cues and tempos for starting numbers, as well as all segues. Timing is often crucial. If you start a number too early, or leave the artist standing there waiting for a "count in," it can be very embarrassing.

WHAT TO EXPECT

One of the most common problems that you'll find after doing a show for a while, is that tempos may fluctuate. This can be caused by a number of factors, the most common of which is an excessive flow of adrenaline, often caused by the fact that the artist may be dancing or moving around the stage while he/she is singing. Another reason may be simply that the artist has become more comfortable with his/her act. You have the final decision of course, but the artists observations should be recognized. Plus, there are many times after you've been playing a show for a while that you as Musical Director, the producer, or the entertainer feel that it would be in the best interest of the show to take a section of the music slower or faster. Always be open to suggestions.

POSITIONING

As a drummer/Musical Director, it is important that you position yourself so that everyone involved has good eye contact with one another. When counting a number off, make sure that you're clearly heard. Sometimes clicking your drumsticks while counting aloud will help. When counting off a tempo keep in mind the mood of the piece. If it's a ballad you don't want to click your sticks, or to count in a manner which is loud and aggressive. If it is your intention to segue without pause into the next number, make sure everyone understands what you're going to do in the rehearsal phases of the show.

CONDUCTING WHILE PLAYING

There may be times during a show when

you will have to conduct certain passages while playing to execute cut offs, accelerandos and ritards. The more familiar the musicians and the artists are with these sections, the smoother the transitions will be. If additional direction is needed, head and arm movements will work well, especially for cut offs. If you do have a free hand, using a stick to aid in cut offs and tempo changes can be easily seen. Similarly, in the case of dynamics, visual signals may also be helpful. Smaller motions will indicate a decrease in volume and/or tempo, while larger movements will indicate an increase in volume and/or tempo.

CONDUCTING WHILE NOT PLAYING

If it is necessary for the drummer/Musical Director to conduct passages of music in which he/she is not playing, he/she should be familiar with all the basic beat patterns. Luckily in most shows, the sections in which the drummer is not playing often have only one instrument, usually a pianist, accompanying a vocalist. In this situation it is usually best to let the vocalist and the pianist play off of each other. However, more than one instrument playing will likely need a point of reference, and as musical director your conducting must be clear and easy to follow. In sections where the tempo is extremely slow, subdividing the beats in a bar might be necessary.

In an article of this nature, it is impossible to cover all the points one should know in order to become a competent Musical Director. The experience of doing many shows will enable you to deal with most situations in a calm and professional manner.



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