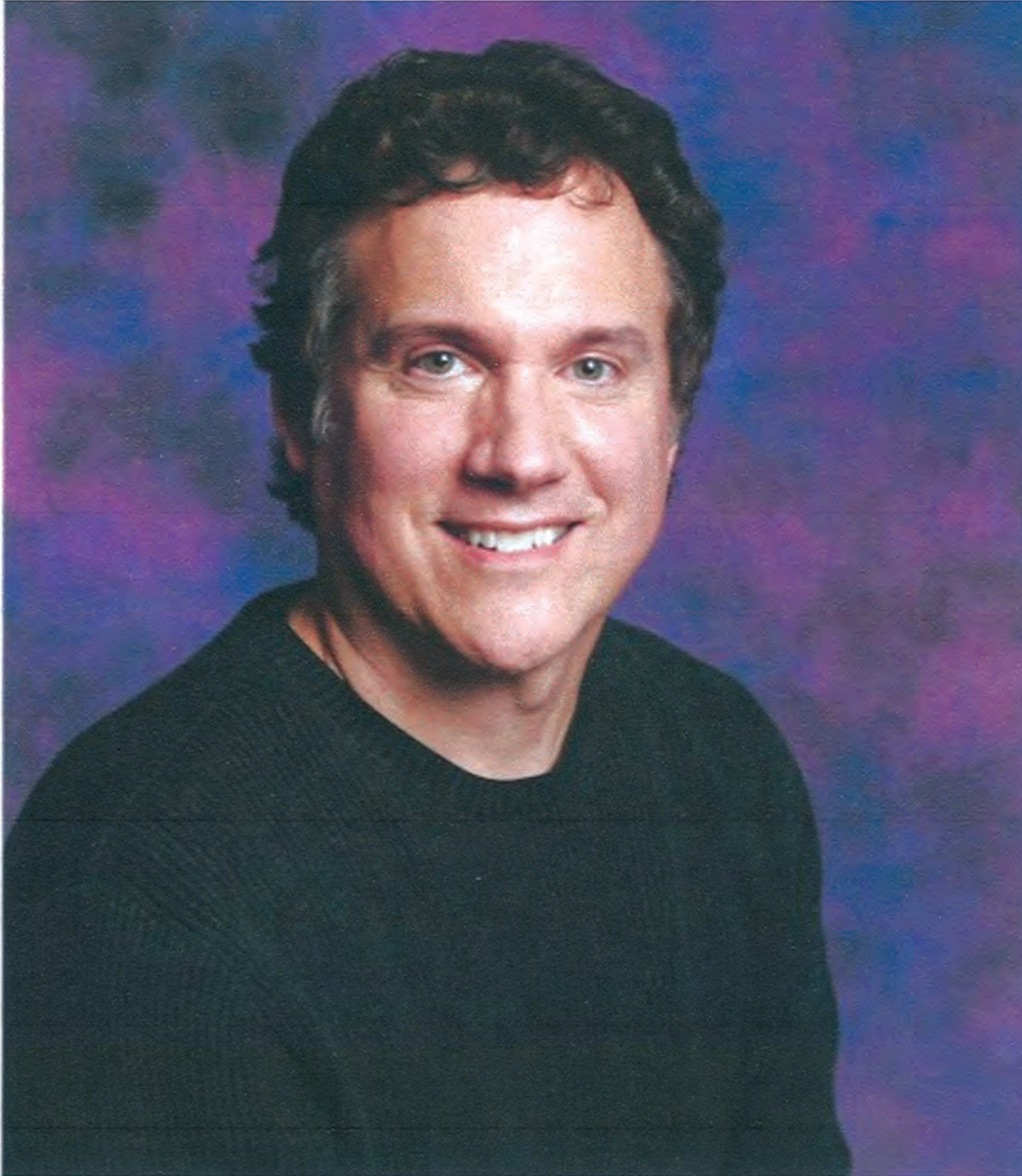


Dave Black - Exclusive OnlineDrummer.com Interview

Nate Brown

World renown drummer, composer and best-selling author, Dave Black, shares his insights into being successful in the music industry, which he explains goes far beyond simply performing. Learn from one of the best in the industry as Dave lays it out for us.



In your article "My Views of Music Education" you brought to light a very important topic: succeeding in today's music industry requires more than being able to play your instrument well. For someone that may not be able to attend music school, either because they are too young or because of other situations, do you have any advice on how to become more knowledgeable in these other important areas?

DB: Well, one of the best ways to become more knowledgeable is to try and secure a job or an apprenticeship within the music industry. Aside from the usual performance venues, there are a number of jobs in the following areas of music that can be both artistically and financially rewarding: music publishing, music engraving, sales, editorial, music manufacturing, marketing, engineering, A & R, composing/arranging, music librarian, entertainment law, performance rights organizations (BMI, ASCAP), personal assistant, management, etc. The job you start off with isn't as important as getting your foot in the door. Once you're in the door, you now have the opportunity to explore other areas of the industry that may be of greater interest to you. Most companies prefer to promote from within, so if an opportunity does

arise you feel would be a better fit, then you can express an interest/desire to move into that particular area of the company.

If you can't find a full or part time job in one of the areas above, seek out composers, arrangers, studio musicians, engineers, industry people, etc. and ask if you can tag along with them to concerts, sessions, teaching engagements, conventions, clinics, etc. This is not only a great opportunity to watch and learn from a pro, but to get to know that person as well. Not only will you be getting valuable musical experience and honing your networking chops, but it puts you in a position to be recommended for a potential job lead if the person who's mentoring you is asked for a recommendation.

Having led an online drumming community for a number of years, I've noticed that many young drummers today don't have an interest in learning to read music. What is your opinion on this mindset?

DB: Well, I think it's a well-known fact that the ability to read music is going to increase your chances of getting work by a million miles. Yes, there are those drummers who have good natural talent and ability, but that will only take them so far. Without the ability to read, you're not going to be able to do studio work, musical theater, a major symphony or orchestral gig, a talk-show house band, a cruise ship show band, etc. It will also diminish your chances of obtaining employment in other areas of music such as teaching or engraving/editing music, as all of the above-mentioned jobs require the ability to read music.

On our forums, the question about the importance of learning rudiments often shows up. What is your take on the importance of learning and practicing drum rudiments?

DB: Rudiments are to drummers what scales are to brass and woodwind players. Being able to play them is not only essential for building good technique, but for developing the skills and finesse necessary to be able to get around the drumset more musically and accurately. What many people don't realize is that all rudiments are made up of single strokes and double strokes. So, those who may not be interested in learning or practicing the rudiments are already playing them to some degree whether they realize it or not.

With the increasing number of resources for learning the drums available online, I've noticed that many of our members regard themselves as self-taught and/or overlook the advantage of having a private drum instructor. How advantageous do you feel a one-on-one, qualified private drum instructor is to the success of a drummer?

DB: The benefits of having a teacher cannot be stressed enough! The availability of online resources was never meant to take the place of a teacher, but to be used in conjunction with one. Online resources are certainly better than nothing for someone living in a rural area without access to a music store or teacher, or for someone who simply can't afford a teacher. However, the advantage of having a teacher in front of you (especially in the early stages) is crucial in order to keep a young student from developing bad habits related to grip, technique, reading, styles, coordination, etc.

You've been successful in the music industry for a long time. Looking back, were there any decisions that you made that you feel were a turning point in your career that were perhaps integral to your success?

DB: I would say that taking the job at Alfred was a major turning point in my career. I graduated with a degree in percussion performance, and was lucky enough to get several really good touring gigs for a number of years. As good as those gigs were, however, being on the road and out of town for several months at a time started to get a little old. I wanted something in music that would not only allow me to stay in town for awhile, but would allow me to continue playing, composing and writing.

I started at Alfred in the marketing department, and eventually moved up the ladder to my current position of Editor-in-Chief (School & Church Publications) and the Director of Percussion Acquisitions. This is a great example of what I talked about earlier regarding the importance of finding a job within a company and getting your foot in the door (even if it's something you don't have an interest in pursuing long term). In this particular case, I was more interested in the editorial side of the business than I was the marketing side because I enjoyed the process of reviewing, selecting, writing, proofing, and recording music and books. I worked in the marketing department for a year or so until an editorial position opened up, and then I moved that direction.

In an interview with Drum Scene Magazine in 2000, you mentioned that when you were young, you felt you knew that you would eventually have to move to New York or Los Angeles if you were to have a chance at making it in music. Do you still feel that being in these prime areas was integral to your success in music? And, do you think that the best opportunities in music still reside in these areas?

DB: Yes!!! Although there are many areas of the country that have excellent music programs, teachers, local theater /entertainment venues, bands and orchestras, etc., the main pool of talent, job opportunities, TV/recording studios, major orchestras, publishers, etc. are still located within some of the bigger cities. However, that has started to change over the last few years as more and more of the entertainment industry has started relocating to other cities/countries where the cost of doing business is cheaper.

You have authored quite a large catalog of books. How did you get into publishing? Was this something that you were always interested in and eventually pursued, or was it more seizing a good opportunity?

DB: I always had an interest in writing, but it wasn't until I started working at Alfred that I became aware of other opportunities that existed within the publishing industry. I realized that writing books/compositions for publication not only gave me the opportunity to teach/influence a lot of people, but could also be lucrative from a financial standpoint as well. My job at Alfred has given me the best of worlds, the security and peace of mind of a steady paycheck, and the ability to use my creative skills to write books and music.



As a drum teacher, I have used your drum method books for a number of years. They provide excellent resources to build essential skills, but more than that, they present them in a way that's interesting and entertaining for the learner. You have a very effective style. Do you have a specific pedagogy or technique that you use when organizing and writing your method books in order to achieve this level of effectiveness? If so, could you give us a few key points?

DB: Thanks for your very kind words. I certainly can't take all the credit since my style and pedagogy has evolved as a result of talking and listening to the many great teachers who are out in the trenches each day. It is through their experience in finding out what works for them and their students that has helped shape the books that are written and published.

You co-wrote the best-selling books "Alfred's Drum Method," "Alfred's Beginning Drumset Method" and "Alfred's MAX" with the late, great Sandy Feldstein. The number of sales alone speaks of the books' quality. How do you regard this amazing experience of co-writing with Sandy in regards to the development of your pedagogy and teaching style?

DB: Sandy was a great mentor, and so I learned a lot from him during the writing of those books. I would have to say that a lot of my pedagogy and style came from working with him. Remember, he didn't need me to co-write those books. He was already a highly-respected author, perfectly capable of writing those books on his own. He wanted to give me that opportunity, and though I was considerably younger, he always treated me with great respect and as an equal partner.

Of all the books you have authored, which do regard as your proudest work?

DB: Probably Alfred's Drum Method, Book 1. That book is not only my biggest-selling publication, but I'm very honored and proud of the fact that it has helped teach more than half a million beginning drum students since its publication 22 years ago.

Aside from authoring and drumming, you are a very successful composer. For drummers that are solely focused on drumming, in your experience, how important do you feel it is to become at least proficient with other instruments? How much focus should be put on it?

DB: I think it's very important for drummers to be well rounded in other areas of music. As I've said before, not only does it give you a wider range of skills and employment opportunities to fall back on, but it also makes you a better musician. There have been a number of very well-known drummers who went on to become accomplished composers and authors. Louie Bellson is one of those who immediately come to mind. He was very influential in my own career.

Of all the compositions you've composed, which do your regard as your proudest composition?

DB: There are a couple. In the jazz idiom, I would say "In Roy's Corner" for a number of reasons. 1) It was co-written with both Louie Bellson and Sammy Nestico, two major idols of mine. 2) It was commercially recorded by Louie and his big band and 3) the album was nominated for a Grammy.

In the concert band area I would say both "The Emerald Isle" (my biggest-selling band piece), and "A Bayside Trilogy," a three-movement commission that allowed me to compose in three very distinct and visual styles. With that piece, I was really able to stretch out and showcase my writing chops.

From all the experiences you've had in the industry and everything that you have learned along the way, if you could only pass along one piece of advice to the next generation of drummers, what would that piece of advice be?

DB: Well, I think the advice is similar for any profession one would choose. If you want to succeed, you have to know what you want, you have to be passionate about it, and you have to study and work hard. There's no easy path you can take to achieve any worthwhile goal. I would also say that as the music business/industry continues to change and evolve, it is going to be imperative that the next generation keep their eyes, ears and options open. Those who are well rounded and have other skill sets to fall back on are going to have a much better chance of succeeding than those who don't.

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