

Technical Headroom by Phillip Smith

by Rhythm Scene Staff | Feb 03, 2021 [Leave a comment](#)

The ability to effortlessly play any musical idea that comes to mind without having to worry about executing it should be the goal of all musicians. But is it possible to go so far into this concept that it becomes detrimental? “Technical headroom” is a term I created that describes the ability of musicians to always have abundant technical prowess and proficiency on their instrument to execute the most demanding musical passage with ease.

To get to the point of having enough technical headroom, most musicians are aware that years, if not a lifetime, of practice, is needed. Knowing this inevitable commitment exists, one question commonly arises: Is the incessant practice of intricate, technical exercises truly practical? Could it even have negative implications? Students are frequently encouraged by instructors to build as much technical expertise as possible. However, even the most dedicated student can find this discipline uninspiring, and many well-respected, popular players often downplay, if not criticize, this type of advanced study, which can lead to conflicts of intent and conviction.

Musical instrument practice is an inherently isolated act. Aside from the requisite physical seclusion, it takes a great deal of mental fortitude and inner work that's seldom credited by the outside world. In our increasingly technological existence, many have developed a craving for social media recognition. That style of praise is not present when developing this technique. Could this lack of external acknowledgment hinder technical growth?

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

For my musical purposes and career, I believe that having adequate technical headroom is a must. I've been playing for roughly 35 years. I've studied quite diligently and am fluent in virtually all common hand and foot techniques. I am also very well read, having worked through countless method books, including our “bibles” of drumming. To this day, I still practice everything—from the most basic rudimental exercises to advanced snare solos and drum set techniques. I've concluded that the work I endure to build technical headroom is for my satisfaction and peace of mind. Furthermore, I have decided that if I only encounter one spontaneous, unforced use of the technique that I've accrued, then it has been worth the effort.

One of the best compliments a musician can receive is that your performance is raising the music's overall level. If your musicianship is so strong that no matter what comes your way, you can elevate the music (without worrying about your technique), then consider your technical headroom adequate. This technical effortless should also simultaneously benefit the musicians with whom you are working. If I have an easy time working with (and locking in for a rhythm section setting) other musicians, it also holds true that others should feel the same about me. Having complete control to play steady, fluid, effortless time is far more fun than struggling to maintain a simple groove. The great feeling of accomplishment and knowing that you are doing something good for yourself and your fellow bandmates is an obvious plus. Not to mention the work ethic you are cultivating by consistently working on your technique will benefit you in numerous other areas of your life. Pursuing truly meaningful goals is arguably the key to finding significance and satisfaction in virtually every aspect of our lives.

CONSIDERING THE SACRIFICE

Achieving these lofty objectives amounts to a lifetime of work and sacrifice. Some people believe their time can be spent better elsewhere, and that's fine. Everyone finds different value in their chosen pursuits. As long as we have honest intentions, then the results should lead to positive conclusions. Following are a few valid reasons to lay off the heavy practice routine.

First, many musicians have limited capacity to practice for long, sometimes monotonous, lengths of time. These players are highly susceptible to burnout. Taking a more deliberate practice routine may be the only way to avoid this issue. In this case, technique can and should be practiced, but not as long.

For some, it can be problematic to skip or limit practicing musical elements that they must play for gigs in lieu of technical exercises. It is never wise to jeopardize your employment—much less the music itself—in preference of self-indulgence.

Another pitfall is overuse injuries. Granted, this damage usually occurs when improper grip or other restriction problems are present. However, repetitive exercises can take a physical toll over extended periods, so critical attention must be used to prevent injury.

CONCLUSION

Achieving a surplus of technique is a must for some, but has less significance for others. It is critical for each performer to evaluate his or her own situation and make the appropriate choices. Be honest with yourself, set a goal, and make the right decision for now and the future. We all strive to make our instrumental voice as fluid and effortless as our speaking voice. For some, that means building technical headroom; for others, it's not. The primary difference is that we individually arrive at our musical destinations at different times and in different ways.

Phil Smith is a professional drummer and educator based in Atlanta, Georgia, and a music and percussion instructor at Georgia State University and Talladega College. 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. Phil is also the host of the popular drumming podcast *Drummer's Weekly Groovecast*.



Upcoming — February 2021

by Rhythm Scene Staff | Feb 01, 2021 [Leave a comment](#)

Ableton Live for Drummers Webinar

Ableton will be hosting a free webinar on Wednesday, February 3, 2021 at 19:00 GMT hosted by Joe Clegg, drummer and Musical Director for Ellie Goulding, Clean Bandit, and Mumford & Sons. In the 90-minute session, Joe and special guest Adam Marcello (drummer and Musical Director for Katy Perry) will discuss their take on hybrid drumming and how they use Ableton Live on stage.

This webinar is ideal for beginner and intermediate drummers and percussionists interested in using Ableton Live to enhance their performances. It will cover topics including how to connect drum pads, play sampled sounds, complex automation routing, and more. As well as chatting about using Ableton Live, Joe and Adam will share real world, road-tested knowledge alongside anecdotes and behind the scene stories.

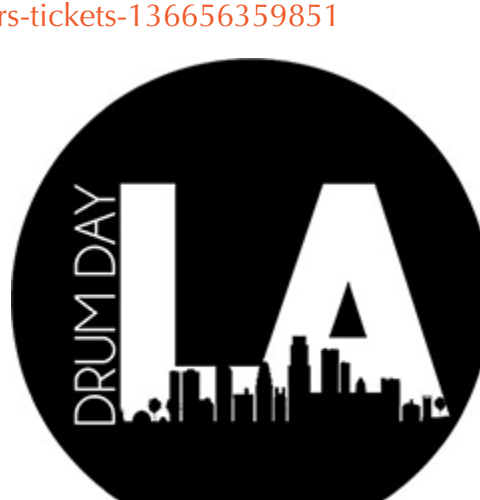
This will be a fully-interactive webinar, live-streamed from Joe's studio in the UK. He'll demonstrate the software using his hybrid acoustic kit with additional electronic pads, with Adam joining remotely from Dublin, Ireland using his Roland V-Drums setup. The two drummers will reveal different ways to get the best from Ableton Live by sharing their screens as they perform and work within the program. The applications of the software demonstrated by Joe and Adam will include playing complex programmed drum parts live on drum pads and triggers, switching between sounds, using automation lanes, and harnessing the power of Instrument Racks, Drum Racks, and Chain Selectors. After the comprehensive tips and insight from two of the leading names in hybrid drumming, the webinar will conclude with a Q&A session.

Attendees of the live stream can also take advantage of two great offers. Ableton Live 10, which can be used with all brands of electronic drums, is available with a 90-day free trial at ableton.com/en/live. Joe's drum sample company, Drum Palace, is also offering a free sample of KIK/SNR, which he will be using as a template to illustrate how he approaches sampled sounds in his live performances.

To attend, sign up at eventbrite.co.uk/e/ableton-live-for-drummers-tickets-136656359851

Drum Workshop 2021 Products Presentation YouTube Event

Drum Workshop Inc. (DW) has announced Drum Day LA, a free livestream event celebrating the newest products and more from DW, PDP, Gretsch, and Latin Percussion. The broadcast can be viewed exclusively on the DW YouTube Channel on Friday, Feb. 5, 2021, at 12:00 noon PST. Segments will also be viewable after the event on each brand's social media channels. Drum Day LA will feature new product launches presented in a tradeshow booth-like setting, a behind-the-scenes DW Custom Shop factory tour with John Good, and a who's who of celebrity drummer guest hosts and performers.



In addition, viewers will be able to speak with product experts in real time via YouTube chat. Wood Whisperer, John Good, accompanied by session great Russ Kunkel, will take drum enthusiasts behind the scenes at the California factory, showing off the latest, state-of-the-art drum making advancements and manufacturing techniques.

Artist performances to include Keith Carlock, Gergo Borlai, Stanton Moore, Thomas Lang, Tony Royster Jr., and many more. Drum Day LA will be a unique celebration of drummers and percussionists worldwide.

Five-Question Friday: Phil Smith

by Rhythm Scene Staff | Jan 29, 2021 [Leave a comment](#)

Phil Smith is an educator and performer based in Atlanta, Georgia. He teaches Applied Percussion and Percussion Methods at Talladega College as well as Applied Percussion, Jazz History, and Music, Society, and Culture at Georgia State University. Phil is also an active performing, recording, and touring musician as well as an active publisher. He has had numerous pedagogical articles and papers published in several different magazines and journals. He is also the host of the popular podcast, *Drummer's Weekly Groovecast*.



Rhythm! Scene: *If you weren't a percussionist and educator, what career could you see yourself having pursued?*

Phil Smith: I would most likely pursue pharmacology. I believe there's a great blend of objectivity and creativity when compounding different types of medicines.

RIS: *As a freelance artist, what's one of the weirdest gigs you've taken or oddest jobs you've had outside the industry?*

PS: When I was in graduate school, I took a gig playing for a rodeo. It was absolutely the strangest job I've had! The most prolonged period of time you'd play was eight seconds—the time of a full bull ride. Plus, your eyes had to be glued to the conductor as well as the cowboy in case the ride ended abruptly.

RIS: *What's one thing most people don't know about you?*

PS: Most people don't know that I'm a cinephile. In particular, I like art movies. I have an affinity for Russian films by Tarkovsky.

RIS: *What is your favorite percussion instrument and why?*

PS: I love the drum set. It's the first percussion instrument I learned, and I continually find infinite fascination and enjoyment in all of its aspects. However, the vibraphone is a close second!

RIS: *Where did you grow up, and what's one interesting thing about your childhood (musically or otherwise)?*

PS: I grew up in Athens, Tennessee, in the foothills of Appalachia. I had a very typical, if uneventful, childhood that did not include music; no one in my family was interested in music. However, I was a great student, especially in Language Arts, and I won several spelling bees.

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