Stick Control

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Every couple of years, I embark on an intensified regime of practicing the drums. I play for hours a day over the course of several months, determined to take my skill to the next level. Musicians call this woodshedding, an apt term for drummers since an hour or more at the drums will cover your pant legs with drumstick splinters.

As I improve, however, I also navigate anxieties about my drumming that have been with me since I started playing. After my band, Semisonic, stopped touring in 2001, I had recurring dreams in which I was about to take the stage with my band mates, whereupon they turned to tell me, "You're going to remain backstage and practice." Five months ago, in August of 2016, my band booked a show for early January 2017, our first show in years. As I prepared, I was haunted by those dreams and the anxieties that billowed through them. I sat down at my practice pad with my sticks and confronted an old truism: Rust never sleeps.

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L

This is the first exercise in *Stick Control for the Snare Drummer* by George Lawrence Stone, a book drummers refer to as *Stick Control* and sometimes "Stone," forty-six pages of sticking patterns designed to develop a drummer's hands. The exercises themselves are a series of notes, each note marked with an L or R, denoting the left and right sticks.

L R L R L R L R L R L R L R

This is the second exercise, and though it is essentially the same pattern as the first — constant alternation between hands — Stone recognized that for right-handed drummers, this second pattern was slightly harder, because it's easier to lead with the stronger hand. The *Stick Control* exercises thus promote balance and fluid evenness.

As one progresses through them, the patterns become drumming tongue twisters.

L R R L R R R L R L L R L L L R

Stone instructs drummers to practice each exercise twenty or more times in a row before proceeding to the next. It might take half an hour to get through a page of twenty-four exercises, and if you cultivate an ear for evenness, you can spend your whole drumming life revisiting any of its pages. This eighty-year-old book, which tops the drum book category on Amazon, is so universally embraced by drummers of all levels that I have posted Stone's author photo on the Facebook pages of drummer friends on their birthdays. All of them recognize it.

I have three copies of *Stick Control*, two of them fairly worn, these in addition to the half dozen that disintegrated with use. Dozens of other drum method books, some of them great, sit on my

shelf, but none compare to *Stick Control* for axiomatic simplicity. With my sticks in hand and the clicks of my computer's metronome in my ear, I follow Stone's exercises back to my beginner's mind, drawn into deeper awareness of what relaxed and evenhanded sticking feels like. My awareness of musical time magnifies, and as I notice the slight compressions and expansions of the spaces between the notes, I adjust, not merely aligning my sticks with the metronome but striving to embody the metronome, to become an organic time-keeping machine. When my muscles tighten, I soften my hands and slow my breath until I rediscover the deep form of relaxation needed to pass through the transition state to perfect synchronization with the metronome. This not only sharpens my awareness of time, it allows me to practice becoming part of something beyond myself.

Drummers have used *Stick Control* for various purposes. Most have greater speed and dexterity in mind. As a young drummer, however, I was drawn to a different agenda—perfecting my sense of time. Each exercise presented an opportunity to practice the iconic evenness found on the R&B and funk records that had captured my teenaged imagination.

Consider Andrew Smith's opening snare fill on "Midnight Train to Georgia." Anyone who has played the first exercise in Stone's book can execute it.

RLRL R L

But who could render that simple pattern as beautifully as Smith? "Bah-bah-bah-bah BAP BAP!" The drumming I loved expressed musical time with sensitivity beyond metronomic perfection. Metronomic evenness was not the destination, merely a stop along the journey to the sublime. So I developed a regimen that began with thirty to sixty minutes of *Stick Control* practiced with a metronome followed by an hour or more of playing along with favorite recordings. Could I match Benny Benjamin's jumping grooves on all of those Motown hits? The heartbreaking thud that Earl Young laid down on Philly soul classics? The ticklish funk that Clyde Stubblefield slipped under James Brown? When I started playing rock music, I studied John Bonham's swagger, Charlie Watts's drunken stumble, and Ringo's lilt. By emulating the drumming of my heroes, I found my drumming voice.

Meanwhile, my drum peers became faster and faster. By my early thirties, my drumming had diverged considerably from theirs. I took pride in how well I could lay down a groove and shape a song, but I worried about my relative lack of speed and dexterity. I comforted myself with the thought that I had chosen better priorities. While the majority of fellow musicians oohed and aahed over my speedier peers, the songwriters I knew took notice of my groove and song sense. Indeed, it was these strengths that attracted my future band mates, Dan and John. We formed a trio called Semisonic, and our songs relied on groove and concision, exactly what I had practiced.

Soon after we began playing shows, record executives began to court us. Over the course of two years, we were wined, dined, signed, and after the release of our first album, touring the country. We shared stages with other bands and walked through backstage hallways crammed with other musicians and label suits. Inevitably, the conversations made their way to drumming. Who had the fastest sticks? The fastest feet? Who played the most complex polyrhythms? None of this mattered to me, except that it did. From offstage, I saw other drummers blaze around their kits, wowing the fans as well as the musicians and suits who stood around me. When a drummer whipped off some incredible flourish, I'd feel a tap on my shoulder. "Did you see that, Jake? Did you see it?!" Yes, yes I did.

In an unconscious surrender, I asked some dynamo drummers for exercises that might increase my speed. I practiced and discovered that what one practices, one plays. After two weeks of these new chop-building exercises, my hands and feet, though barely faster, could not restrain themselves from filling every musical nook and cranny. Where I had once played understated fills that preserved musical space, I now filled that space with grabs for attention. It worked. The fist-pumping guys in the front rows pointed at me and whooped, seizing the mood of the room from the quieter listeners a few rows back, with their thoughtful smiles and gently swiveling hips. After the shows, I strutted through the backstage corridors with arms bowed, as if to advertise the newfound muscularity of my drumming. The suits nodded their rising approval. But as I lay down in my tour-bus bunk and we rolled on to the next city, my musical conscience whispered to me. "You're becoming an asshole on the drums."

I gradually returned to my groove-keeping ways. My dalliance with speed, however, had emerged from the sense I had more to say on the drums. What was it, and how would I learn to say it?

I started by thinking about drum fills, those moments when a drummer leaves the beat and plays a flourish, often around the entire drum set. I went through my record collection and compiled recordings of my favorite fills, most of them a few seconds in length — Mick Waller's opening snare hits in Rod Stewart's "Maggie May," Andy Newmark's arresting strikes during the pauses in "Anticipation," Russ Kunkel's tom-tom delirium in the choruses of "Fire and Rain," 125 fills in all. I burned these onto CDs and listened.

During this same period, I was writing road diaries about Semisonic's adventures and posting them on the band's website, an endeavor that inspired me to revisit some classic writing texts. One day, as I flipped through *The Elements of Style,* I thought to myself, "Wow. This might be the best book ever written about drumming." More drummers needed to "avoid the elaborate, the pretentious, the coy, and the cute."

Suddenly, I began to hear drummers as artists who made rhetorical moves—creating enjambments (Russ Kunkel in the outro of "Fire and Rain"), stretching out ellipses (Andy Newmark in the chorus pauses of "Anticipation"), and inserting line breaks (Ringo in the second verse of "A Day in the Life"). These were all instances of speaking clearly to others, not babbling to oneself.

Fills, I discovered, could embody wit. A simple, well-placed "Wham!" on the floor tom could crack up my band mates. So could an unexpected interruption—the right one—a drum fill that plowed through the middle of a phrase, turning things momentarily upside down. Or perhaps a giant hole, where I delayed a drum entrance by a couple of beats in order to create a temporary sense of the bottom having fallen out. Dan and John looked back at me during shows in approving laughter, enjoying the sense of me wisecracking from the drums.

In 2001, after sales for our third album faltered, Semisonic began a hiatus. As the empty days unfolded before me, I brushed the drumstick shards from my pants and sat down to write a memoir about my journey through the show business machinery.

Where the writer in me wondered how to proceed, the drummer leaned in to guide. "Chop that opening. Remember the impatience of radio listeners." Each day, a new observation. "Write a single, not an eight-minute album track." As I typed, the subtleties of grooves, syncopation, and fills and how they created musical meaning came back to me as I felt the pulse of each sentence roll off the keys, the iambs and trochees and dactyls at play, the gathering logic of rhythm at work. I could accent this point, suspend that one, and use all manner of punctuation to stretch . . . things . . . out . . . or—as if abandoning a steady beat for a fill on the tom toms—interrupt, turn, and crash.

Further insights followed. As the chapters accumulated, a familiar pattern revealed itself: verse-chorus-verse-chorus-verse-chorus. The verse chapters captured private interactions—the band's formation, our dinners with record executives, our explorations in the recording studio. The chorus chapters depicted the public moments—the release of our albums, the shows, the media coverage. My musical instincts spoke up. "Shorten the later verses and make the choruses longer and louder." I tweaked the end of the second verse, quieting it into a momentary pause out of which the second chorus, describing the band's sudden rise to fame, might explode.

The more I wrote, the more obvious it became that any number of writing problems could be framed in musical terms. Scenes that reprised earlier ones wanted elaborations, much as one adds a tambourine and background vocals to a later song verse. Where I introduced a new character or theme, my arranger's instincts told me to simplify the moment of entrance and allow the elaboration to follow. During one of my later drafts, I realized the book needed a bridge, a change of key, a shift in tonality, something that might call the verses and choruses into question. The book had relied on the narrator's self-deprecating humor, but in order to tell the whole story it needed to capture the brief moment when my quest for superstardom did not look ridiculous but felt prac-

tically assured. So I placed a bridge before the final chorus, again relying on musical instincts to compensate for my writing inexperience.

Finally, when it came time to stop tweaking and declare the book finished, I recalled the sensation of handing over albums. As much as we musicians want to capture perfection, the flaws in our performances, the notes slightly out of tune or rushed, often reveal our soul. Indeed, my favorite recordings captured wonderful messes, the loose slop of Mick Waller's drumming on "Maggie May" for instance, which had more to say than all the tidy drumming in the world. So it might be, I conceded, with writing. The passages in my book that felt the most revealing were messy, and yet when I attempted to neaten them, the writing flattened. Handing over my manuscript meant accepting that I had replaced my fantasy of the book—rich and flawless—with something imperfect but real. I comforted myself by recalling how a band walks out of the studio, with a flawed album that speaks for them far more than the airbrushed perfection of their fantasies ever could.

Insights from writing aside, I nevertheless found myself seized by a recurring desire to become an unquestioned monster drummer. Sometimes, I'd go wide with my woodshedding. After a few days of *Stick Control*, a surge of ambition and impatience would inspire me add Stone's second book, *Accents and Rebounds*, and Jim Chapin's *Advanced Techniques for the Modern Drummer.* Soon I'd order other books: *Master Studies* by Joe Morello, *Bass Drum Control* by Colin Bailey, *4-Way Coordination* by Dahlgren and Fine, *Progressive Steps to Syncopation* by Ted Reed, *The Art of Bop Drumming* by John Riley, *African Rhythms and Independence for Drumset* by Mokhtar Samba. I'd practice the first pages of each, imagining myself radically transformed across all dimensions of my drumming. My practice regime would expand to five or more hours a day until, somewhere around day ten, I'd collapse and shove my practice pad back into its dusty corner.

Eventually, I'd tell myself, "The important thing is to drum."

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L

Practice is the art of removing effort. Practice teaches us to relax into focus, and it requires only that we show up. Avoiding my practice pad or writing desk because "I don't feel inspired" gets things exactly backwards, for only by showing up at my desk or practice pad can I learn to relax into the focus that uncovers inspiration.

As I began to prepare for Semisonic's January reunion shows I recognized that the short window of time demanded a narrow practice agenda. I settled on increasing my speed, the aspect of my

drumming that, for right or wrong, nagged at me. Seated at my practice pad, I spent the first week refreshing my understanding of stick mechanics, how gravity and the stick's rebound can do a significant amount of the work. With my thumb and forefinger, I created a fulcrum in which the stick balanced to facilitate the easiest rebound possible. My right hand was much more proficient at this than my left, and I compared my left and right grips to remove any discrepancies. As I played, I scanned for unnecessary motion and tension. My pinkies kept fluttering out. My forearms tensed, prompting me to recall Stone's instructions to practice "at all times with relaxed muscles, stopping at the slightest feeling of tension." I adjusted and traced the tension upstream, through my forearms up to my shoulders, even down my thighs and feet, slowing and adjusting to relax muscles far removed from the sticks. I found tension in my jaw, and most of all in my brain. And behold, as I isolated and relaxed these various points of tension, my sticks sped up.

All of this work took place on a practice pad. I delayed practicing at a full drum set for a couple of months, perhaps hoping that when I finally did, my faster sticks would unveil a brand new me. And indeed when I sat down at drum set, my sticks danced with newfound speed and confidence. A little too much confidence, actually—they thrust themselves into every musical space, crowding the ends of phrases. I recalled how years earlier I had failed to police this tendency, so now when my fills overran, I re-performed simpler versions that protected the silence. Though faster, my hands still could not blaze around my kit. Still, I saw signs of improved clarity and decisiveness—a brief flash around the kit, a more clearly audible diddle at the start of a fill, a surer dig into the floor tom as it dueled with my snare.

And I recalled that this is what always happens. I never transform into a butterfly, only a nimbler version of the caterpillar I was. I hear myself as someone who drums in his reading glasses and cardigan. Likewise, years of writing have not transformed me into the literary alchemist I long to be. My sentences never transmute into Proustian gold; I simply shape the same old lead with greater skill and learn to appreciate the subtle nature of its luster. This is how practice says to an artist, "Here you are. What do you think?"

Through practice, we learn to get out of our own way, but only in these past few months did I realize that the most obstructive effort is not physical or mental but spiritual—the desire to become some other drummer, some other writer, some other person. I will always recognize my drumming as mine. To accept rather than flinch at this obvious truth requires practice.

Thus, in the final week before the show, when I noticed myself wondering, "How good am I now?," when I noticed myself pining after the flashy moves of other drummers, I paused and noticed how my posture had invariably slumped in defeat. I sat up, pulled my shoulders back and down, relaxed my face, and played into the sense of being myself on the drums.

On New Year's Day, I did my laundry and packed my bags. The next day, as I sat in my aisle seat high above Lakes Erie, Huron, and Michigan, I gave a final listen to the songs we'd perform. I

stepped off the plane in Minneapolis, which had been covered by a thin glaze of freezing rain, determined to enjoy myself.

At our rehearsal space, my band mates greeted me with hugs, and after a few minutes, I took my place behind the drum set. The drums we had rented for the week were slightly larger than what I was used to, so the first half hour of jamming together involved a bit of repositioning the tom-toms and lowering the cymbal stands. Soon, I felt at home. My hands did not blaze, but I held the band together. Over the course of those first two hours, I dished out a couple of fills and moves that caught smiles. The week, I knew, would only improve our ensemble playing and ease my comfort. The adrenaline of being on stage would add a final boost to my performance. I had prepared well.

After we adjourned for the night, our soundman, Brad, drove me to a restaurant close to the apartment I had rented for the week. "Sounds like you've been putting in some metronome hours," he told me. I smiled.

"Yeah, I've been practicing a lot." It sounded neither boastful nor apologetic, only clear and true. "Don't laugh at me if I slip and fall on my ass," I joked as I closed the door and waddled across the icy road and into the restaurant.

The bartender took my takeout order, and I called my wife, Suzanne, to report on the day, a report aimed at my ears more than hers. Things had 'gone well,' the drumming 'felt fine,' we 'were finding our way.' The bartender produced my to-go bag, Suzanne and I said our goodbyes, I paid and stepped out into the night.

And my foot kept going. In a timeless moment I still revisit, my body hung in the air as my eyes looked up into the moonless night. I hit the ice hard and pain shot through both hands. I doubled over. After a minute, I caught my breath and grimaced as I looked at my gloved hands and tried to hold a pair of imaginary drumsticks. Neither hand could. Neither could close or fully open. I made it to my feet, and my hands hung painfully limp from my arms.

A friend drove me to a hospital, and the doctors told me I had broken my left wrist and sprained my right. I nodded, as if my listening might eventually wake me from this terrible dream.

The next day, after a flurry of calls and the cancelling of the shows, I met with Dan and John. All of us were stunned. "I practiced so much," I said as I looked down at my swollen hands.

Dan, however, assured me. "You'll hang on to those gains." I wanted to believe him, but how could it be true? Rust never sleeps. Surely my hands will be slower in late February than they were up until the split second I hung midair above the icy sidewalk.

Back in Brooklyn, my left forearm and wrist wrapped in a cast, I sat on the couch, eyeing my lonely drum pad. What could I do for my drumming during the six-week healing period? Gather more drum fills? Do a lot of walking and listening to music?

I picked up a small book, Thich Nhat Hanh's *How to Sit*, a book about mindfulness meditation.

> Many of us spend a lot of time sitting—too much time. We sit at our jobs, we sit at our computers . . . To sit, in this book, means to sit in such a way that you enjoy sitting, to sit in a relaxed way, with your mind awake, calm, and clear. This is what we call sitting, and it takes some training and practice.

I was struck by the obvious relevance to drumming.

> Sit in such a way that you feel completely at ease. Relax every muscle in your body, including the muscles in your face. The best way to relax the muscles in your face is to smile gently as you breathe in and out. Don't make a great effort, or struggle, or fight as you sit. Let go of everything.

How well this aligned with what I've learned about practice. *Stick Control* invites surrender. In order to gain control of the sticks, one must let go. *How to Sit* points to the next step, to escape the distraction of judgment and find rest in being.

"We don't need to control our mind, body, and breath. We can just be there for them."

And thus, without picking up my sticks, I have begun to practice for the shows that are now rescheduled for June. I sit, spinal column straight, as Hanh advises, muscles relaxed, and then I reach out and press 'start' on my meditation timer and my attention is absorbed by the sound of a bell. I bring the gentle smile Hanh speaks of to my face and breathe in.

Breathe out.

I fill and empty my lungs—my diaphragm, the metronome—and soon I am thinking about what I didn't get done today. Then I notice my posture has collapsed. I sit up straight again, and find that gentle smile.

Breathe in. Out. In. Out.

"I am new at this," I think. "I will learn to focus. I need to learn this new way of relaxing. Imagine how good I might be at this when . . ." Evaluation. Again, my posture has begun to cave. Again, I sit up straight. And start again.

In.
Out.
In.
Out.

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L