

# Playing Moods

Thoughts on Drumming From the Soul

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by Jeremy Hummel

Within the last five to ten years, there has been major growth in drumming media. These days drummers can find books or DVDs on nearly any subject. One concept that's often overlooked, though, is the art of practicing moods. In this article I will explain not only why this subject is important but also how it could land you more work as a drummer.

Beats and rhythms are funny things. They're the foundation that a tune is built on, yet they can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways. Line up ten drummers and ask them to play the same basic rock groove at the same tempo, and there will be some variable that makes each player different. One person might play on top of the beat, while another tends to sit back on the groove. The next player may have a certain swagger on the backbeat.

Let's go a step further. Take those same ten drummers and put them in an environment with other musicians. The tempo is now varied, based on the mood or feel of the other players. How do the drummers respond? Do they play in a way that is complementary to the music? Or do they just focus on playing the beat the best they can?

Many of us educators use Tommy Igoe's *Groove Essentials* materials in our teaching facilities. I enjoy getting to the art of playing moods right away. Groove 3 from *Groove Essentials 1.0* is a basic rock track. When a student and I listen to the music on the play-along CD, the following exchange often occurs.

Me: "What does the music remind you of?"

Student: "What do you mean?"

Me: "Does it give you any kind of feeling? Happy? Sad? Ready to take on the world?"

Student: "I don't know."

Me: "Let's listen some more. I want you to tell me a place this music

reminds you of."

I turn on the music again and wait until the student responds.

Answers I've gotten include church, a summer breeze, the beach, and a spring meadow—and they're all correct. When prompted, each student realizes that the music has a relaxed, laid-back vibe. If someone were to simply look at the

times given adjectives to describe how to play. Ask yourself how you would play *affettuoso* (with feeling, tenderly), *con amore* (with love), and *scherzando* (playfully). How about *misterioso* (mysteriously)? Beyond the notes on a page, a spectrum of emotions and moods is required to play a piece appropriately.

Let's apply this to a more common

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**But can you *vibe*?**

notes on the page rather than listen to the music, though, Lars Ulrich pounding out a Metallica tune could come to mind. Depending on the musical context, this track could be played a number of ways.

## Using Your Instrument to Embellish

We can use the different colors of the drumset to embellish the mood of the music. For example, playing toms can be a great way to complement a song's feel. In my clinics I cite two examples of this. When I recorded the song "So Cold" with Breaking Benjamin, I knew immediately that the usual kick/snare/hat beat was going to sound too happy. I went with big, open floor toms and a piccolo with the snares turned off for the verses. My second example is U2's "With or Without You." Simply by moving his left hand from the hi-hat to the floor tom, Larry Mullen Jr. creates a haunting, intimate vibe that wouldn't be so prominent if it were played differently.

## Can You Bring It?

Most of us have been in groups where the musical feel varies throughout a performance (up-tempo, ballads, etc.). In classical music, musicians are some-



situation, like a jazz or rock gig. We are rarely given descriptions like those found on classical scores. Instead, we are expected to intuit and adapt. Let's face it—some nights we just aren't feeling a certain vibe. Maybe we had an argument with our other half, and it's tough to get into a longing ballad. Musicians are a lot like actors. I'm not implying that our intent is insincere, but we need to be able to draw from emotional resources and use them when they are needed most. Just as an actor has something that compels him or her to cry, musicians need a "go to" place as well. Music is nothing without conviction.

## CONCEPTS

If you don't yet have any ways to call up various emotions, here are a few moods and corresponding recordings that can help get you into the right headspace.

**Excited:** "Walking on Sunshine"

by Katrina & the Waves

**Melancholy:** "Cause We've Ended as Lovers" by Jeff Beck

**Happy/playful:** "I Wish" by Stevie Wonder

**Mysterious:** "The Crystal Ship" by the Doors

### In the Studio

I once showed up for a recording session at 9 A.M. wired on coffee and ready to rock. The tune I was given first was a sparse acoustic ballad called "Ghost Town." I immediately had to shift gears.

When you're working with a variety of artists in the recording studio, being able to play moods is paramount. While you might be hearing a tune for the first time, the artist you're working

for has labored over it for days, months, or maybe even years. He or she has formed an emotional attachment to the piece. You should too.

### Auditions

When you audition for a band, you could be asked to jam on freshly written material. Even if you ace the material you prepared, you might also have to display your creativity and how well you *vibe*.

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The next time you're practicing, try taking the same groove and applying it not just to different tempos but also to different moods. Then take it a step further. Write down a random list of moods and emotions on a piece of paper, and discover how you would play them.

I believe that a musician's greatness is determined by how well he or she gets to the heart and mood of the music, as opposed to achieving technical acrobatics on the drumkit.

In closing, I'd like to share a passage from one of my favorite books, *The Mastery of Music: Ten Pathways to True Artistry*, by Barry Green. Musician Eddie Daniels offers this sentiment:

"In my view, it all comes back to the idea that playing music on the stage is a very godly thing; it comes from God, it is the most communicative, nonverbal, direct line to the heart. So, you can deal with learning all the notes and technique, but if you haven't learned the direct line to your heart yet, most probably you won't manage to do it tomorrow onstage. My idea of the true artist is someone who has all the technique at his disposal, but who also has a depth of being that comes through when he plays."

**Jeremy Hummel** was an original member of Breaking Benjamin. He helped that group achieve platinum status with its second release, *We Are Not Alone*. He has since turned his efforts to session work and drum instruction in Pennsylvania. Jeremy can be reached at his website, [jeremyhummel.com](http://jeremyhummel.com).



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