THE RISE OF THE STICKS

by Mark Shelton

A driving 6/8 tom-tom groove propelled the chorus of the opener. As the bridge of the second song builds, you crescendo a stream of thirty-second notes on the snare drum--and you are NOT sitting behind a drum set. Another musician is handling the trap set duties while you are holding down the spot often referred to as "hand percussion." These days, it is not a far-fetched notion that the entire worship set might be played without ever laying a hand on the congas or djembe. In my ministry as a percussionist with Gateway Worship, I find myself playing a fair amount of "stick percussion" along with good measures of Afro-Cuban hand drums.

Certainly hand percussionists have long employed sticks and mallets on cowbells, woodblocks, timbales, and cymbals but I perceive a bent toward greater use of stick-struck instruments in modern worship music. ("Stick" is used as a convenient reference to all percussion striking implements--sticks, brushes, mallets, etc.) One needs only look as far as Hilllsong United, Bethel Music, and Gungor to find evidence of this stick-percussion trend.

There are hundreds of stick-struck instruments available from the immense world of percussion. I have some suggestions for just a few pieces of gear that might expand your timbral palette along with ideas for musical applications.

Tom-toms: Ethno-drive

The worship leader asks for a "tribal groove" on the second verse, but still wants to keep some "backbeat rock" feel. Of course, the drum set player has a bunch of toms at the ready--but only two hands.

How about letting that rock feel continue in the set while that "ethno-groove" comes from the percussionist playing a batch of toms with sticks--equipped with Stickballs (TM)? A product of Rhythm Tech, the Stickball slides onto a drum stick and allows the player to produce a shaker/rattle sound with each stroke.

Backing the drum set groove with relentless rhythm on a single tom-tom can give more meat and drive to the overall sound. Add a layer of tambourine by attaching a Stick Jingler (TM) to each implement. Also from Rhythm Tech, the Stick Jingler provides an easy way to mount tambourine jingles to a stick, brush, or mallet.

Check out the Hillsong United video for "Oceans" to catch an example of some driving tom-tom action.

Snare drum: Much more than 2 & 4

Snares on, snares off, rim shot, stick shot, scrape with brushes, cross stick, tap the shell--and there are many more tone colors available from the snare drum. An essential element in the drum set, this multi-timbral marvel can also have a home in the hand percussionist's nest.

• Try substituting snare drum with brushes instead of a shaker.

• Play a busy rhythmic pattern on the snare drum while the drum set player lays down a simple “snare-less” linear groove.

• Thicken that cadence groove coming from the drum set by doubling the snare drum part.

Concert Bass Drum: Lower the boom

Imagine the simple beauty of a worship ballad accompanied on the opening section with only a few instruments. No low frequencies are being played--except for some well-placed whole and half notes on the concert bass drum. Tasty!

Although the concert bass drum and the kick drum both operate in the same general sonic area, each of these percussive brothers has a distinct timbre. A concert bass drum is usually tuned significantly lower and more open (resonant) than a trap set bass. The kick drum gives that punchy thump while the "gran cassa" can provide a thundering BOOM!

While an orchestral-sized instrument is the optimum choice, space and budget could dictate something smaller and less expensive. A marching bass drum (tuned low), a Brazilian surdo, or a single-headed gong bass can be a more compact, less expensive alternative that can still provide some low-end wallop. View Bethel Music utilizing a small bass drum in the video for "Forgiven."

The original release of Matt Redman's "10,000 Reasons" makes great use of the concert bass sound in the verses. Listen to those three strokes--so simple, yet so effective.

Glockenspiel: A brilliant choice

There is something about the bright, high-pitched, happy tone of the glockenspiel that mixes well with the raw-edged sounds of rock and pop music. You can hear bands playing rhythmic backing lines and poignant melodies with the “campanelli.” Give a listen to the album version of "The Earth Is Yours" from Gungor. The glockenspiel shines brightly on the opening measures!

Remember to use those sparkling tones tastefully. The quality that gives the instrument its appeal can become grating if overused.

Doubling a hook or interlude melody with the orchestra bells can be an effective arranging device. Listen for this effect on "When I'm With You" from Gateway Worship's *Great Great God* (That’s me on the glock!).

Find the videos for Belarive's cover of "Your Love Never Fails" and "You Are My Vision" from Rend Collective Experiment to pick up some glockenspiel inspiration.

Electronics: Sticks on the samples

Along with using implements on acoustic instruments, there are plenty of compact electronic percussion devices designed to be activated by sticks. The addition of one of these instruments can increase your timbral possibilities with a multitude of digital samples at your fingertips (or in this case--stick tips!)

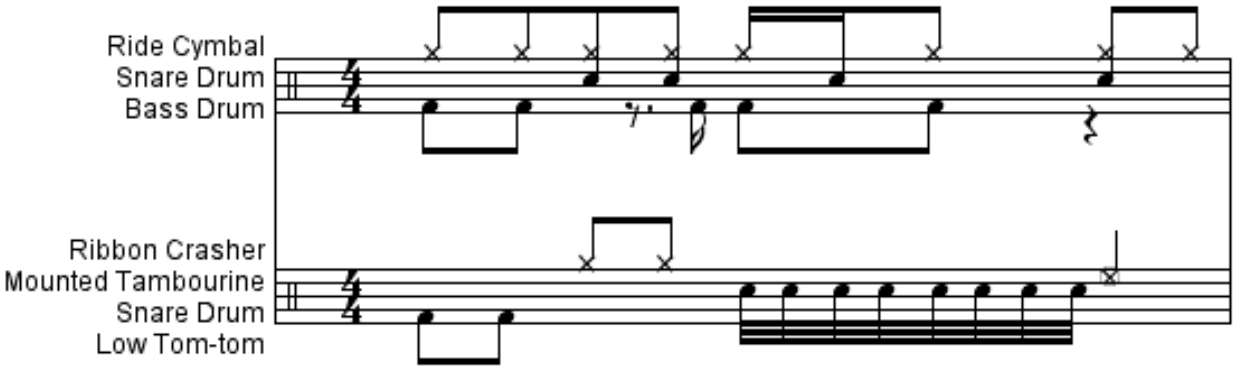
Both the Octapad SPD-30 (TM) from Roland and Yamaha's DTX-Multi 12 (TM) feature multiple playing surfaces and hundreds of pre-set sounds. Some of these compact units include sampling capabilities along with on-board factory sounds. Roland's SPD-SX (TM) and the Alesis SamplePad (TM) give you the option to record and play custom samples.

A great feature of the Korg Wave Drum (TM) is its ability to recognize what is striking the playing surface and respond accordingly. You can actually hear a difference between striking the head with a stick or brush.

Secondary Drum Set: Decompose and recompose

In preparation to play David Eric Moore's "Found in You" it became apparent that there was a great deal of percussion on the recording. After consulting with my colleague, Josiah Funderburk, I learned that he had recorded multiple drum set parts. After all the tracking, production, and mixing, it was a very dense percussion groove. Working with Josiah, I was able to construct a linear groove that would mimic some of the percussion parts that would not be covered in the "live" drum set pattern. My multi-percussion part uses a low tom-tom, snare drum, mounted tambourine, and Ribbon Crasher (tm). The notation below demonstrates how I orchestrated a "secondary drum set" part that could be played from the percussionist's set up--using drum sticks.

Download "Found In You" from the Gateway album, *Love Expressed* to hear the original recording and compare it with the notated version below:



As we participate in this trend toward greater use of stick percussion in modern worship, remember that the plethora of basic instrument tones can be enlarged by merely switching implements. Keep the gig bag stocked with a wide assortment of sticks, mallets, bundled rods, and brushes to bolster your stick-percussion creativity.

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