How to Rock (Percussion)

by Mark Shelton

A slushy high hat and a heavy snare backbeat explode from the drum set. The thumpin' bass line is locked in with the kick drum and the guitarist is cranking out some distorted power chords. As the keyboardist bears down on his grittiest organ patch, you reach into your arsenal of percussion and choose...what?

With a world of percussion from which to pick, what do you play when the worship band is really pumping out some driving straight-eighth ROCK? It might seem like great fun to jump in on the congas or djembe and move your hands in a flurry, but is that the best choice? My opinion is: USUALLY NOT.

When the music is clearly "straight-ahead rock," consider instruments (other than hand drums) that can cut through the dense mix of overdriven everything--AND make a major stylistic contribution to the overall musical texture.

Tambourine

Whether played by a skilled studio musician or an unschooled lead singer, the tambourine rates as one of the most-heard percussion sounds in the annals of rock (probably a close second to the drum set). Those small metal discs (jingles) produce the high frequency "clack and shing" that can ride atop a thick mix of instruments and vocals.

• While doubling the snare drum back beat with single strikes on the tambourine is common, consider playing on either beat 2 or beat 4 rather than both.

• Knuckles on the headed tambourine will give more punch than striking a headless instrument.

• Striking a headless tambourine with a stick produces more attack that a bare hand.

• A steady stream of shaken eighths or sixteenths is a time-honored paragon of rock tambourine playing.

• Playing the stationary tambourine in eighths or sixteenths with your hands or sticks will deliver a different intensity that shaking.

Maracas

The sight of Davy Jones shaking a fist full of maracas as he sang with The Monkees made an impression on me. I have logged a fair amount of time playing "worship maracas." My general preference for a rock setting is an instrument having a combination of a plastic bulb with large beads that delivers a rather coarse/gritty tone.

Try rockin' the maracas with the stream of sixteenths (or playing maracas in unison with the tambourine a la Davy Jones).

Sleigh Bells

Not just for Christmas, the sleigh bells can rock year round. You might raise a few eyebrows when this instrument makes an appearance in July, but the bright timbre can bring a ringing “ethno-rock” vibe to the mix. Striking quarter or eighth notes works great as well as shaking sixteenths. Check out a couple of techniques for sleigh bells at www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCOoK2wepHc

Besides being a timekeeper, the sleigh bells can be used as a coloristic element. Jesus Culture’s cover of “Oh Lord, You’re Beautiful” provides an effective “shimmering” illustration.

Cymbal Crashes

“Play crashes on all the downbeats.” A worship leader gave me that command on more than one occasion. I answered the request with loud quarter notes on various cymbals. It certainly helped to kick things up a notch.

When things are rockin’ and the worship leader wants to bring in an extra layer of intensity, some “third hand crashes” might be the ticket. (Third hand crashes is my term for cymbal crashes that the drum set player might add--if he had a third hand!) These extra crashes do not have to be only on the downbeats. You might double a few backbeats or toss in a couple of splashes on upbeats.

With a bit of practice, you can add a few third hand crashes while playing shake tambourine or maracas.

Cowbell

There’s something about on-the-beat cowbell that feels oh-so-good when played at that just-right musical moment. In contrast to some Latin styles in which a ringing/open tone is preferred, the rock cowbell sound is generally dry/closed. The classic four-to-the-bar rock cowbell can be valuable as a driving element in a groove or it can give the listener a sense of pulse while the most of the band plays syncopated “hits.”



A favorite technique of mine is to hold the cowbell and strike it with the tambourine while shaking eighths or sixteenths.

Within the broad range of rock, both secular and sacred, a diversity of percussion instruments can be used. Although not usually my first choice when playing rock percussion, there are times when hand drums really fit. (The congas playing on Rare Earth's "I Just Want To Celebrate" is a prime example.)

As you make your percussion choices, consider using conventional instrumentation according to the musical style (the tried and true), but also give yourself license to experiment outside the lines a bit.

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