You'll Need Some Tape

by Mark Shelton

Can you imagine life without adhesive tape?

Back in the nineteenth century, it is doubtful that the folks involved in the development of pressure-sensitive adhesives imagined the myriad uses for a sticky strip of fabric or paper. I'm certain that no one back then imagined a prom dress made of duct tape.

Living in the present-day drumming world, you learn that adhesive tape can be a friend in many situations. Besides making temporary repairs to your gear, there are several ways that a roll of tape can assist a percussionist. A look around my trap table during a rehearsal set me to thinking about how I use the sticky stuff in my music making.

Soften a stick

When you find yourself in a musical passage that includes both the sharp attack of a drum stick bead AND the rounded tone of a soft mallet, but with no time for an implement change, a few inches of tape can help you deliver the two sounds.

Take any drumstick and wrap some "cushion tape" (Examples: 3M Nexcare (R) Absolute Waterproof Tape or Dr. Scholl's (R) Moleskin) around the lower shoulder area. That's it! Give this treatment to a couple of sticks and you can easily play that suspended cymbal roll and move quickly to using the bead on the snare drum or the butt end on the cowbell. A decent cymbal roll is even possible with only one modified stick.

Your Fingers Will Thank You

Pounding away on the djembe and congas can take a toll on the hands. Without some protection, I am prone to getting tiny splits in my fingers and palms while hand drumming. My favorite means of split-prevention is a good dose of tape before I begin to play. Nexcare (R) Absolute Waterproof Tape provides a bit of cushioning without interfering with my tone or technique.

Tone down the jingles

It only takes a little tape to manipulate the sound of a tambourine. If you want to darken the tone of jingles, apply a tiny bit of tape to several of the discs. This little trick will mute some of the higher frequencies. To reduce the overall volume of the instrument, tape some of the jingle sets to the shell so that those discs remain stationary (and silent). The photo shows this technique applied to a Jingle Stick from Latin Percussion (R).

Where did I put that?

Sticks and mallets are fairly easy to locate on a trap table even in dim lighting, but smaller implements such as triangle beater can be elusive. Your eyes will have an easier time spotting the beater if you wrap a strip of bright yellow tape (or glow tape) around the handle.

Shaker combinations
Finding the proper shaker sound to fit the musical moment is part of the art of playing percussion. Combining a couple of shakers might be the right formula. Playing multiple shakers simultaneously can be used to bump up the volume. Holding two or more in one hand while you play a bongo part with your other claw might be a precarious juggling act. Just wrap some tape around the bunch and proceed to shake with confidence.

Find the right pair
The difference in appearance between a general timpani mallet and a staccato stick can be very slight and it can also be a challenge to quickly locate a matched set of drum sticks in a stick bag if they are stored with the “beads down.” (Of course, “beads down” makes it easier to grab a stick in the right position.) Find the right pair of implements in a hurry by color-coding with different colors of tape on the shafts.

Don’t miss a page turn
Have you ever shown up to a rehearsal and been given sheet music that was unbound? Trying to navigate a seven-page chart while moving between congas, tambourine, and claves can be challenging enough without trying to flip through a bunch of loose paper to find the repeat sign. Several strips of tape can eliminate an element of stress and improve your performance. Anticipate that situation, toss a roll of transparent tape in your mallet case, and tame the pile of paper before the rehearsal starts.

See all your pitches
Perhaps you have been adjusting the gauges on a set of timpani only to discover that a couple of pitch markers are missing. Maybe there is not enough space between the F and G markers to squeeze in the F# marker. It's tape to the rescue! I routinely have a few precut strips in my mallet case to fit those tight spots on the gauge or substitute for a missing marker.

It had to be a lot tougher to be a percussionist a couple of centuries ago. Not only were there no automobiles to haul your gear to a gig, but no one had gotten around to inventing pressure-sensitive adhesives. Take advantage of playing in modern times and stock up on several rolls of tape.

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