

Richard Wilson

Broadening The Limits

by Robyn Flans

For drummer/composer/teacher Richard Wilson, the problem with most drummers is elemental: They don't know how to play their instrument.

"When someone comes to me," Wilson says, "I ask him to play a few fundamental strokes—simple things. Within five seconds I know just where they are. What drummers usually need to know—and it sounds really strange—is just how to hold the sticks. Because if they don't, they are forcing everything out in an inefficient way. Why was Buddy Rich faster than other people? It was because he was more efficient with his motions, which enabled him to get more speed. The whole idea is: half the effort with twice the speed."

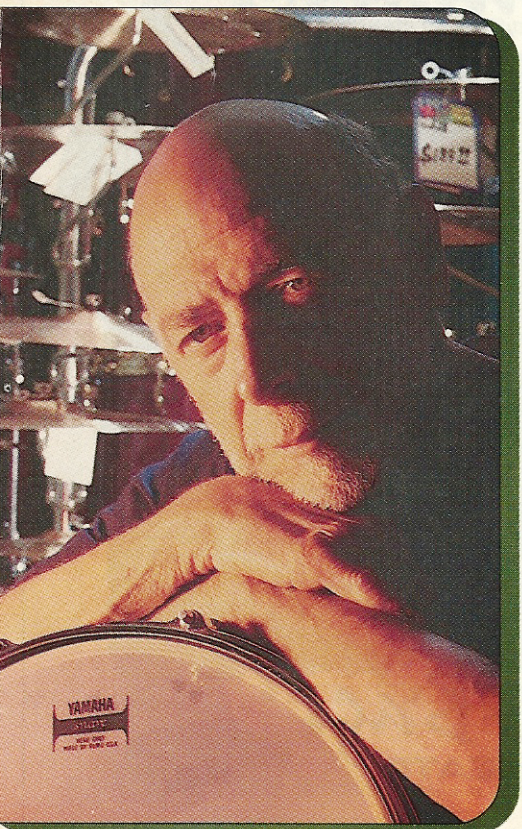
Wilson began playing drums at age two, violin at age four, and concert piano at age six. He played violin at Carnegie Hall at nine.

By age ten, Wilson had studied with two world-famous composers, Ernst Krenek and Eric Zeisl. But Harlem beckoned the young Wilson, because that's where he could watch the masters play drums, which stirred his soul. Since then, Wilson has played drums with such artists as Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughan, Zoot Sims, Hampton Hawes, Dexter Gordon, Chet Baker, Don Ellis, Gary Peacock, Victor Feldman, Dave Mackay, Clare Fischer, Rosemary Clooney, Irene Kral, Shani Wallace, Buddy DeFranco, Warne Marsh, Frank Rosolino, Richie Kamuca, and Paul Moore's big experimental band. Wilson also led his own orchestra called the National Endowment, which used the latest development of twentieth-century music—harmonically and linearly—retaining ethnic rhythmic influences. (The group was so named because the National Endowment helped Wilson get the project started with the two Composition Fellowship Grants awarded him.) Aside from putting together a retrospective of his recorded catalog, though, today Richard says he attempts to give something back through teaching.

"Before you get into tricks or things professionals need to know to excel conceptually," Wilson says, "the first basic element to cover is the essential seventy-eight rudiments, because they're the scales and arpeggios of the instrument. Some teachers know thirteen rudiments, and some know the twenty-six, as the books show.

There are small, uncomplicated strokes that I'll join together into longer, more complicated strokes as the students' hands develop and technique becomes apparent, and this happens without their even realizing it. Technically, I teach from the standpoint of floors, balances, and fulcrums, teaching dynamics, phrasing, and musical form, observing the conclusions of Archimedes, Galileo, and Isaac Newton—using the acceleration of gravity and the theory of mass."

Wilson talks in depth about specific grips: "There are four grips. Each grip will have a different fulcrum. The fulcrum is the point of support on which the lever changes direction, pivots, rocks, turns, or rotates. If we're talking about matched grip, the fulcrum is the first knuckle of the middle finger. That's the cradle over which the lever—or stick—turns. The crack of the first finger and the flat of the thumb guide the stick. If you need more leverage or volume, you'll use the fourth and fifth fingers as well. To build a grip, you establish a fulcrum and a guide, and the fulcrum leads the fourth and fifth fingers.



Alex Solca

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The Pros On Wilson

"Most everybody plays half turned over, which is slightly rotated out, which moves the fulcrum between the first and middle finger. When you go to French grip, which is thumbs up—the timpani grip—the stick rotates over the first finger, or index finger, which is the fulcrum. With traditional grip, the fulcrum is in the crotch of the thumb. The first finger lies over the stick."

Besides technique, Wilson has certain opinions about learning to improvise on one's instrument. "In North American history," the teacher explains, "drums and drumset playing was traditionally an ethnic experience created by the mother, who is instantly and outwardly emotional. To be a good improviser, it's essential to express your ideas immediately. The changing social mores of the '60s and '70s and the acceptance of indigenous musical forms, however, have allowed everyone the opportunity to relate emotionally on drums."

Wilson contends that technique should not be the premier concern. "Drums are a matter of feeling, so if you use intellect to learn first, you will not be as good an improviser. The student should learn how to intellectualize after."

"Drummers feel they don't need to know their instrument," he continues. "If they play the licks du jour—the licks of the day—and they have enough talent and good feel, they can be successful. They can be klutzy on their instrument—unlike with such instruments as the violin, oboe, piano, or trumpet, where, if you want to be on a virtuoso level or even competent enough to work in a symphony orchestra, it takes ten years to learn the fundamentals. When the periods end, only the drummers who have done something unusual with their talent are remembered."

"It's a good idea to learn your instrument, not so you can imitate other people, but to express yourself easily and see if your natural talent and originality emerge. Since the quill pen, writing hasn't gotten any better; it's probably gotten worse. Now that videotapes are available and drummers can watch their favorite star play their favorite licks—and get the recordings, too—it creates more copying and less individuality."

"Of all the names out there, who was the most influential drummer as far as playing his instrument? Buddy Rich. There's no new Buddy Rich coming along. Who out there can play the snare drum, the core of the whole discussion? Of course there's Louie Bellson, but I'm talking about young people coming up. Who will be the next person to play the instrument? I'm not talking about a particular playing style, because twenty years from now that style is going to be passé. If you can play your instrument, though, you can transcend styles, as Buddy did, through all the periods."

"It's important for students to know the difference between a

Ten years before Murray Spivak died, the famed drum teacher took Richard Wilson aside and said, "I am going to die soon—you are the only one left with the knowledge. Don't let it die." Wilson undertook the responsibility, passing down the knowledge to his students, many of whom were top professionals eager for his wisdom. But what have these pros learned from Richard Wilson?

Carlos Vega: "Do you have a week? I feel very fortunate and honored to study with Richard. He is not only a master of the drums, but he is also a composer."

"There was a student before me recently, asking whether or not he should be practicing groove playing as opposed to some really hard stuff for your hands. I was telling him it all relates. You have your stroke, your wrist turn, and your rebound, and it's a combination of those three things. If you're practicing one thing, it's only going to help the other. I find that my groove stuff feels more relaxed and snappier. The hi-hat will be nice and relaxed if I'm doing something like 16ths. My backbeat can be nice and tight because I've been practicing my rolls and getting that accent, like if I do a five-stroke roll, making sure that the four strokes before the accent are nice and even."

"He's a real knowledgeable cat about a lot of stuff. You can talk to him for an hour and a half about food. He's a very unique man."

Vinnie Colaiuta: "What I got out of it was a combination of things—he understood the mechanics of body motion and efficiency on a physical level. It was a whole-handed kind of a thing—the body mechanics of how the fingers, wrists, and arms interact and how the strokes gradually blend into one another, depending on the velocity and volume you play. He also understands composition, so on a musical level, some of the exercises he wrote to utilize the techniques of body mechanics were pretty brilliant. Dick is coming from the perspective of someone who can write. It's a whole other world."

David Garibaldi: "I only studied with Richard for a very short time, within the first couple of years of my living in Los Angeles. Richard was really great in that he kept asking me, 'What is it that you want to do? Why are you here?' which I thought was really important. It's something I now ask my students. He was very good at getting me to think about exactly what it was that I needed to focus on."

Michael Barsimanto: "Richard is an experience unlike various other ways of receiving knowledge. None have such a deep-rooted effect as plugging into the source. Richard's understanding of balance, fulcrum, economy of movement (half the effort, twice the speed) is astonishing. Most of his lessons are compositions that include such totality as far as drumming goes that you can't help but be positively influenced."

motion up and an upstroke, or one or more strokes made on the motion up," Wilson says, "because then you're making strokes on the up as well as the down, resulting in half the effort with twice the speed. That's important if you're going to play one-handed series of singles, whether you pull your fingers or bounce the wrist on the upstroke. The final result of studying technique, besides one-handed playing, becomes crescendo strokes. Once the student has learned to play rolls, then he learns to play crescendo rolls and singles, raising approximately ten inches above the surface with no wrist, only arms and shoulders, with a flat stroke for ultimate power and speed. What I've described is the end of the fundamentals. The student has ultimate power, speed, endurance, and finesse to play whatever he or she wants."

A Wilson Exercise

To give you an idea of some of the types of things Richard Wilson writes for his students, *MD* asked him to compose a few exercises. The examples that follow give a good indication of the creativity of this talented educator.

1. Here is a warm-up exercise that applies rebounds. The slurs notated under the sticking indicate which notes are to be played as rebounds. (Tap your feet with the pulse of the metronome.)

♩ = 54. . 60. . 72. . . 80. . . 88

{ LR R R RL L L R }
{ RL L L LR R R L }

2. The following is a paradiddle exercise that utilizes accents to outline an ersatz clavé.

♩. = 48. . .72. . 96. . 104. . . 112

{ R L R R L L R R L L R L R L R L R R }
{ L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L }

3. Next is another good technical exercise. Note that the two 2/16 measures are in the speed of 16th-note triplets, in five motions. (Be sure to observe the following "a tempo.")

♩. = 48. 108

R LLR L R R { L RRL R L L R LLR R L R R LLR R L L R }
L RRL R L L R LLR L R R L R RRL R L L R }
L RRL R L L R LLR L R R L R RRL R L L R }

4. Finally, this exercise presents a poly-metric setting, utilizing throws and rebounds. The notes written on the "a" space in bass clef represent the part to be played by the feet (to be tapped in unison with a metronome). The term "up" written in this example refers to upstrokes. (An upstroke is a means of going from a low position to a high position while in the process of making a tap or rebound.)

♩. ♩ = 44. ?

R R L R L L L R L R R R L L R L R L L R L L R L R R L R R }
L L R L R R R L R L L L R R L R L R R L R R L R L L R L L }

