

# The Spivack/Wilson Approach to Technique

## Part 1: Levers and Wrist Turns

by Richard Martinez and Kevin Crabb

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There has been a recent resurgence of interest in the teachings of the legendary Los Angeles drum instructors Murray Spivack and Richard Wilson. Although both gurus have passed away, their ideas live on in such noted students as Chad Wackerman, Vinnie Colaiuta, David Garibaldi, Walfredo Reyes Sr., and Jimmy Paxson, among others. In this series of articles we will explain the educational concepts that Spivack and Wilson used.

### Brief Bios

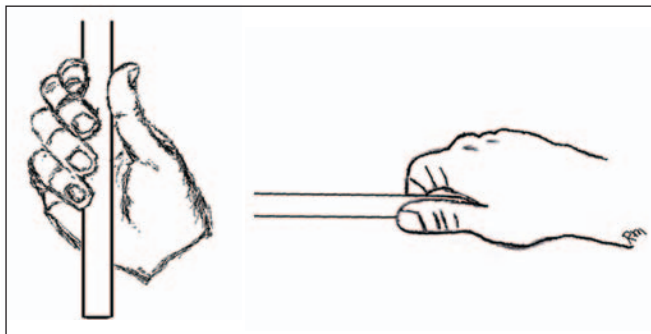
Murray Spivack (1903–1994) studied with timpanist Karl Glassman, snare drummer David Gusikoff, and mallet player George Hamilton Green, and he was an in-demand drummer and teacher in his own right in New York City. After moving to Los Angeles, Spivack took up a career in film as a sound designer and eventually won an Academy Award for his work on the soundtrack to *Hello, Dolly!* Wanting to keep a hand in drumming, Spivack continued accepting students. His teaching reputation soon attracted top percussionists like Walt Goodman, William Kraft, Louie Bellson, Remo Belli, and Richard Wilson.

Richard Wilson (1929–2003) was a child prodigy who had his Carnegie Hall debut at nine years old as a violinist performing the Brahms Violin Concerto. But it was the drums that drew most of Wilson's attention. The artists that Wilson would go on to play drums with include Sarah Vaughan, Duke Ellington, Gary Peacock, Chet Baker, Zoot Sims, and Don Ellis.

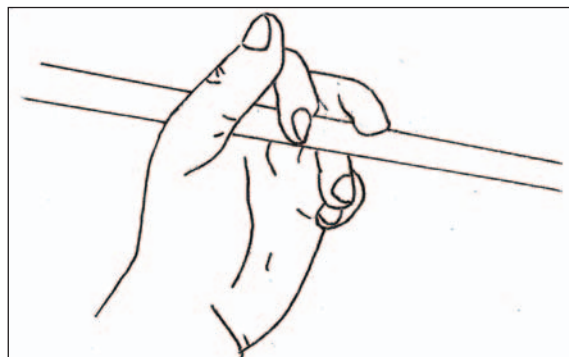
### How to Hold the Sticks

According to Spivack's approach, matched grip can be seen as a simple three-finger grasp between the thumb, index finger, and middle finger. The other two fingers—the ring finger and pinkie—don't really have anything to do with it, so they can just relax. The idea behind the three-finger grip is to create a very narrow fulcrum. (More on fulcrums in a bit.)

For matched grip, hold your hands in a playing position, with your upper arms hanging by your sides, your forearms parallel to the floor, and your palms pointed down. Now make a cradle with the first joint of the middle finger, and place the stick in it so that the butt end rests against your palm. Now bring the thumb and the first knuckle of the index finger toward the stick, and hold the stick between the ball of the thumb and the side of the first joint of the index finger. Don't hold on too tightly.



If you play traditional grip, hold your left wrist in the playing position, with your upper arm hanging by your side, your forearm parallel to the floor, and your palm pointed toward you. Now place the stick between the thumb (which remains straight), index finger, and middle finger, allowing it to rest on top of the ring finger, between the first and second joint. The middle finger doesn't really have anything to do with the grip, so just let it relax.



### The Fulcrum/Lever System

A fulcrum is part of a lever system, whose parts consist of:

**Resistance**, or the weight of the object being moved (the drumstick, your arm, wrist, etc.).

**Force**, or the energy used to move the resistance. The force can be muscles, gravity, or even the rebound energy from a struck drumhead or cymbal.

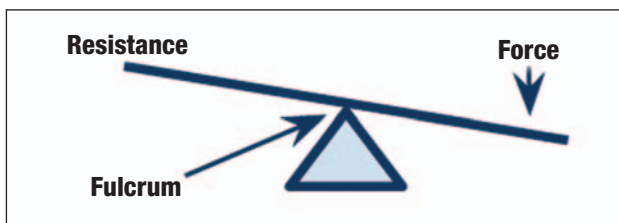
**Lever arm**, such as the sticks, your arms, or your wrists. A lever arm can be divided into two parts: a resistance arm and a force arm. The resistance arm is the distance from the fulcrum to the object being moved (resistance). The force arm is the distance from the fulcrum to where the force is generated.

**Fulcrum**, or point of support (axis) over which the lever

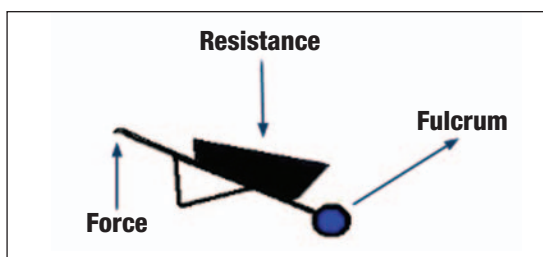
changes direction, pivots, rocks, or turns.

There are three classes of levers:

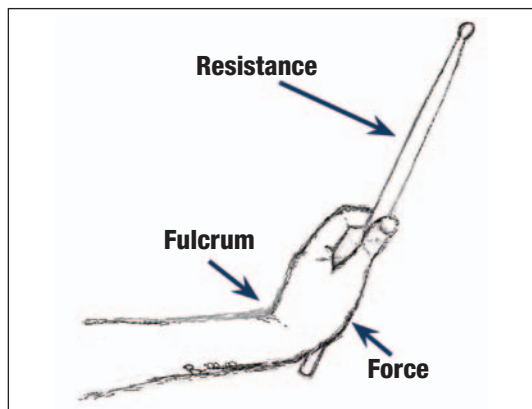
**First-class lever.** Here the fulcrum is located between the force and the resistance. A good example is a seesaw.



**Second-class lever.** Here the resistance is located between the fulcrum and the force, as with a wheelbarrow.



**Third-class lever.** The force is applied between the fulcrum and the resistance. The wrist turn used in drumming is an example.



The body's limbs and joints are all lever systems. It's important to understand that no matter which technique you employ, be it, say, Moeller, drum corps style, or symphonic, you are ultimately applying force to resistance over a fulcrum, i.e., a lever system.

### The Wrist Turn

The wrist has a turning radius that will extend as far as the wrist can move either up or down. When drumming, you're able to turn up as high as your wrist extends, but when the wrist turns down, the range of motion is impeded by the drumhead. Thus, the starting position, which Wilson referred to as the "floor," is 1/2" to 1" off the head, with the bead and butt ends of the stick parallel to the playing surface. Although there are multiple ways to turn the wrist, Spivack and Wilson taught strokes that start at the floor position. You then turn the wrist up toward the ceiling and down to strike the surface, before returning to the starting position. It's important to maintain a

smooth, relaxed wrist in order to assure the path of least resistance over the fulcrum (your wrist).

### Technique and Tempo

Spivack and Wilson were very specific about metronome markings, and they believed that top speed could not be achieved without proper technique. If you discover that you are unable to execute exercises at faster tempos, here are some things to keep in mind.

1. The exercises are about turning your wrist. Therefore it's essential that the muscular force applied comes from the wrist and not the forearms (elbow), upper arms (shoulders), or fingers. Notice that the muscles that control the wrist are located just in front of the elbow.

2. As you turn your wrists, pay careful attention that they are following the path of least resistance.

3. Stay relaxed. Do not hold the sticks tightly, and allow your arms to hang freely.

### Single-Stroke Wrist Turns

Example 1 is a Spivack exercise in 4/4, played with the metronome representing a quarter note.

♩ = 40-152

1

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L  
or L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R

Wilson would write exercises with a more modern rhythmic concept. Be sure to tap your feet along with the pulse of the metronome.

♩ = 58-116

2

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L  
L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R

In this exercise, the arrows pointed downward represent where the metronome lands. Tap both of your feet along with the metronome.

♩ = 58-116

3

R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L  
L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R L R

### Double Strokes

The next example is a typical Spivack wrist-turn doubles exercise in 4/4.

♩ = 40-152

4

R R L L R R L L R R L L R R L L  
or L L R R L L R R L L R R L L R R





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