



tricks of the trade

drumming instructors roundtable

What happens when you put four of the San Francisco Bay Area's premier drum teachers together in a small room? If you ply them with enough Starbucks and bagels, you'd be surprised at what they reveal, especially when it's a diverse group of pedagogues like noted percussion author John Xepoleas, ex-Four Non-Blondes skins woman Dawn Richardson, DRUM! Magazine music editor at large Wally Schnalle, and world-renowned vintage snare collector Mike Curotto. Not only did they share their hard-earned wisdom, they did so without throwing a single punch. BY ANDREW LENTZ PHOTOS BY DAVE CONSTANTIN

▶ DRUMMING INSTRUCTORS ROUNDTABLE

DRUM! How do you inspire your students to practice?

SCHNALLE There's what we do to inspire them and what *they* do that inspires them. And when they have successes, then they start moving faster.

CUROTTO Or when you play it for them and they see that they can play it. If you do it in the non-ego way ... I always like to start something slow, like, 'Look, I'm doing this slow. I'm going to dazzle you with it in about two minutes.' Then I play it at the full speed, so hopefully it registers. That's one way – maybe they see the teacher being able to play it, but explain it in a way that gets to them also.

XEPOLEAS If they're going to practice something, if it's something they feel they need that's going to get them to the next step, you know, you shouldn't have to force them to make sure you're on the ticket. This is what this student needs; this is what he's looking

for; this is why he's here; and that's why he's going to practice it.

SCHNALLE But what I've also had experience with is if you show the kids a paradiddle or a nine-stroke roll or something, I've actually had kids go, 'Pffff! Yeah, what am I going to do with that?' Then you set up the drum set and go, 'Here's a couple of things,' and then all of a sudden they go, 'Ohhhh, hey, that's a cool thing.'

RICHARDSON It's sometimes hard to always show them the application of why this is good for you. You know, it's like eating broccoli.

DRUM! What's the best way to generate business?

XEPOLEAS I've had articles in magazines and books and things – all that kind of stuff helps, but the word of mouth is like ...

RICHARDSON Yeah, and [*pointing to Schnalle*] we taught at the same store together ...

SCHNALLE And I think those are both of our experiences.

RICHARDSON Yes.

SCHNALLE But now I think it's word of mouth, and being at home and, you know, I took out an ad in the Yellow Pages and whatever else I do that keeps my name out there. But, you know, just recommendations, and now people finding everything on the Internet.

CUROTTO There are five ways that I generate business: Being at a store, some kind of advertisement, word of mouth, return business, and then the fifth way is if they see you play. I [met] one of my drum teachers [when] my parents were at a wedding – he was playing drums.

DRUM! How good of a living can an instructor expect to make?

CUROTTO My viewpoint is: This is not a hobby. I already have a hobby: I collect vintage snare drums. So I'm going to run this like a business. Personally, I get 48 hours notice to cancel and I'm not going to bear the brunt of the soccer coach calling in a last-minute practice. You give me 48 hours notice, you get the privilege of making the lesson up. Because they don't understand that now I'm giving you two hours of my time: The hour that you bailed, and the hour that I have to open up to make up. Also I tell them that it's going to take a while because I already teach 50 hours a week.

SCHNALLE It's like, where do you put that extra hour?

CUROTTO It's kind of hardcore, but it's business.

XEPOLEAS I think you have to run it like a business, but I think you teach about twice as much as I do [to Curotto]. I think you can make a great living at it just depending on how much you're willing to teach, but I think the ticket for all of us is to teach – for me, I manage, I perform, I record, I write books and ...

RICHARDSON Doing a lot of things ...

XEPOLEAS To be able to do a lot of different things, to put it all in the pot, it makes it more exciting. I actually limit my teaching to 20 hours a week because I wouldn't be able to do the other things that just make me happy as a person. I used to teach more and, for me, personally, it was too much – I lost the passion for teaching.

SCHNALLE I can remember saying this, "If I could just pay my bills playing music, I'd be a happy man." And on that level I just have to take stock and say, 'Dude, you did it.' I'm certainly not rich but I'm happy doing what I'm doing and paying my bills.

"It's just having a positive experience for them when they're there and kind of just being focused"

–Dawn Richardson



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DRUM! Do students seek you out because you're known for a specific drumming style?

SCHNALLE I'd say it's like 50/50. Some of the adults are like, "I shouldn't have given it up when I was in high school," and they come and they want to go back to it. But the older students will come to me because they've developed it to a certain level and have heard me play or whatever. Then there are junior high or younger kids that – even though I give them a CD – have no clue what I do or how I play outside that room where I spend that half hour with them.

RICHARDSON I think it's about 50/50 for me, too. Some people might come because they know the reputation or they want to play rock music mostly. And then there is the other half that it's just geography. It's like you're the person in the area that gets recommended a lot and, you know, little kids don't care. Anybody can be teaching them a paradiddle. I think it's just having a positive experience for them when they're there and kind of just being focused, right?

CUROTTO That's an excellent point. I tell older students, "Look, you're the CEO of whatever company you're at, I know this is your 'golf,' so you're not trying to get in a band by next week. Do what you can, we'll have fun."

RICHARDSON Right.

SCHNALLE At first I expected students to have the same passion I had. Then I realized everybody comes at it with a different level. I had a cat, years ago, after like six lessons we're trying to play eighth-notes in time with the metronome and it was not even close, and I eventually had to say, "This may not be for you." We were really trying hard and it wasn't happening. But I bit my tongue and then months later he would come in so gleeful, and so happy like, *[imitating a student who is totally stoked]* "I got through this Stones tune this week ..."

[Appreciative laughter from all]

CUROTTO The fact that he's trying ...

XEPOLEAS I have students who come to me in junior high and high school who are coming to me specifically to be in one of those bands, so they need to know how to read charts and they need to know how to play all the styles. I don't particularly take students who just want to come in and learn songs. It's not fun for me. I don't think they're really benefiting from it. Along the way, if it comes up, I'll help them.

RICHARDSON Right.

XEPOLEAS But my reputation is kind of, "Okay, he's going to give you a real solid foundation," and I tell them when they all walk in the door that if you want to become a professional musician – great. That isn't



W "I tell the student I can get you ready to play a drum set in two to four weeks" –Mike Curotto

our priority but my goal is to get you to sound like one. My expectations – I don't care if you're 12 – but if you do things right and you approach this right and you hit the drums right and you know how to phrase, you can sound like a pro drummer. And it's not going to happen overnight, but that's my goal for you. And I think people see that and go, "That's a little different approach from Andy down the street or Fred over there," you know what I mean?

CUROTTO What you brought up, about how you don't take anyone younger than 12? I

used to not want to take six- and seven-year-olds, but this year I just had a little revelation. My daughter is 18 and she's a dance major in New York and doing very well, and when she was three my mom started her in tap and ballet, and that just hit. So consequently, I've taken a couple of six-year-olds. I even have a four-and-a-half-year-old – and you're not going to believe this – this guy is playing eighth-notes to a metronome at 100 [bpm], and tapping his foot on the floor, and counting.

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DRUM! Do you all have strict policies about students learning the rudiments on pads before you'll let them get on a kit?

XEPOLEAS Oh, no – *old-school*.

RICHARDSON No, no.

CUROTTO Nah.

SCHNALLE [Not getting to play on a drum set right away] was my experience, too. And I will still do that if they're willing. If they don't have a drum set yet, I'm like, "Let's work on the pads for a little while until the drum set's right," but a lot of times it's like, "I got a drum set for Christmas."

RICHARDSON Yeah, they already have one.

XEPOLEAS At the first lesson I'll explain it to them: "We're going to work on the drum set, I know that's what you're here for, but there's other parts of it. There's the part on the practice pad to get your hands going, and there's this reading part. If you work on all three parts you're going to have success," but I'm not going to be like an old-school teacher – "Maybe if you work on these rudiments and spend years" – because they're not going to hang in there.

CUROTTO I tell the student I can get you ready to play a drum set in two to four

weeks. And my goal there is to get them to read eighth-notes so that we start on *Funky Primer* [by Charles Dowd]. *Funky Primer* starts with eighth-notes, so at least [it takes] a gradient approach. And I tell the parents, so they don't get shell shocked, that doesn't mean I'm going to force you to buy a drum set.

on, like, the first day because they're sitting there anyway.

XEPOLEAS "A couple of months" seems like the magic number. I say, "I'm going to give you this page of beats. Make a drum set."

"Don't we always want to be evolving as a teacher?"

—John Xepoleas

RICHARDSON I try to do both things, too, because when they get on the kit, then they're worried about the coordination of doing all the things with their body. So if you can get them to think like, "This is the time when you're just going to work on your hands," because you know when they get on the kit everything goes out the window. You can't think about everything at the same time, so usually I get everybody

When I was a kid, put two books on the edge of a bed. Here's your hi-hat, here's your snare, hit the floor [*stomps foot on carpet to mimic bass drum*] get this coordination and when you come here I'll let you play drums for a few minutes and get the feel for it. And if you stick with it, and you show your parents that you're doing it, your parents are going to want to come in and hear you play the groove – they're going to be more inspired to get you that set.



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CUROTTO The first lesson, at the end, we just jam. If the kid is totally raw, [I'll say] "Just hit the drums." I tell them, "Play as loud, as soft, as little, or much, or as fast as you want to, just do something," and then they get an idea of what it's going to be like to be on a real drum set, and maybe that plants the seeds of, "This is going to be fun," or maybe not.

SCHNALLE So how often do you have to change heads?

[Group laughter]

CUROTTO Yeah, tell me about it.

DRUM! What is your setup in the studio?

One kit? Two kits side by side?

CUROTTO I just have two drum sets and this little station next to it. I use that Roland electronic thing through a speaker for the pad, and I have a pad on a stand I can put up next to them. So we do a little padding and just sit right over two drum sets, the stereo and the DVD and the TV if we need it for DVDs. You've got to be able to show them, inspire them.

RICHARDSON That's what I do, too, so when we're doing pad work they can put the pad on their drum set and I also have a snare drum where I can stand in front of them so they can see me, my hands.

CUROTTO But I think you've really got to have two drum sets.

XEPOLEAS Absolutely. I have more of a rock set, bigger sizes, that's all miked up and it can be recorded. And next to it I have a little bebop set.

CUROTTO There you go.

XEPOLEAS And so for the jazz students who really want to play jazz, I make them



playing, and later on you go, "Oh, was it me misinterpreting that teacher in the beginning or was it just them being wrong and absolute." So I always try to make sure there is

He would write down what he gives a student, and that's what I do. I have every student's name and all the information – I write down what I give them.

XEPOLEAS You write it down separately or in their book?

CUROTTO Separately.

XEPOLEAS Really?

CUROTTO Yeah, first of all it works well when they forget their books, either on purpose or they forgot. I say, "Oh, no problem, I got copies of the book and here's what we did last week."

XEPOLEAS You're insane.

SCHNALLE He's writing out everything twice for the student, and for yourself, and the monetary things as well.

CUROTTO That's only at the beginning of the month.

SCHNALLE You need a secretary, man.

XEPOLEAS He's got 50-plus minutes he has to fill up.

[Group laughter]

DRUM! Have any of your former students gone on to major gigs?

XEPOLEAS One of my students, well, I only had him for a brief time but he played in

"I think I've modeled myself after everyone I've taken lessons from" – Wally Schnalle

play on that so they know what it's like to play on a 18" bass drum with two heads on, and the beater coming back off. It's going to sound different.

DRUM! Did you all learn the ropes on the job or did you style yourselves against instructors you once had?

SCHNALLE I think I've modeled myself after everyone I've taken lessons from. One of the things I still think about is some teacher going, "Always do this, and never do that." And that voice is in your head when you're

a strong understanding and that I'm not speaking in absolutes.

XEPOLEAS Don't we always want to be evolving as a teacher? You may bring in the influences from teachers that you had, like you said, what you do want to teach, what you don't want to teach, and things that come along the way – and *learn* from students.

CUROTTO My original teacher that helped me to become a pro, Mike DeLucca – I kind of formed my teaching like he [did], but I studied with another guy, George Marsh – great drummer. I copied a thing that he did.

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Counting Crows. He came to a lesson one day and he was totally frustrated, like, "I've been in this business for so long and I don't know what I'm doing, blah-blah-blah." I get a letter from him like six months later – "I'm living in a mansion in L.A. and I'm in this band and we're recording our first record – keep an eye out for it." The next thing you know I hear this tune, "Mr. Jones," on the radio.

hadn't taken lessons from me in two years but I was on the list to get the phone call. And then he came back before they did their second record – "I want to take some lessons – tighten it up for the next record." He came to the lesson in a tour van and stuff, and I went out: "Let me see the tour van," and it's this white, beat-up old '70s van. I go, "Do you get tour support?" And

with Paul Bostaph who went on to Slayer [see pg. 131]. But please don't misprint this because I tell students this if they ever ask: Paul is a great drummer and already knew how to play. He just wanted some extra things to learn when he was just finishing one band before he joined Slayer.

RICHARDSON Let's see, [*nodding at Schnalle*] we both taught Jen [Carlson of Angry Amputees]. She's toured. I haven't had any big rock stars yet, but they're coming.

"This is not a hobby. I already have a hobby: I collect vintage snare drums. So I'm going to run this like a business." –Mike Curotto

RICHARDSON Who? [Steve] Bowman?

XEPOLEAS Yeah.

RICHARDSON [laughs]

SCHNALLE I once got a phone call, it was a message machine that was like, "Hey Wally, I'm in the offices in New York at Wind Up Records." It's this kid [Adrian Robison] that plays with Strata now. He

he looks at me all excited, "Yeah, \$20 a day." He was way into it.

RICHARDSON Sweet!

SCHNALLE But I had another kid that's in Stomp! now.

CUROTTO Oh yeah, I had a kid in Stomp!

SCHNALLE And one of my ex-students played with Lauryn Hill for a while.

CUROTTO I did a couple of months' lessons

DRUM! In ten words or less, what's the best piece of advice you would give to anyone contemplating becoming an instructor?

CUROTTO I got the perfect answer: You've got to be doing what we're doing or better.

SCHNALLE You have to have a sense of responsibility toward the students – be responsible for what you teach.

XEPOLEAS If you're passionate about it and have an overwhelming desire to do it, just be responsible, be the best player you can be, be a good person, and you'll be successful.

RICHARDSON I think all of us are doing this because we love the drums. If you don't love it I don't think you can survive. ■