Counting to Infinity

"Playing music is like trying to count to infinity. It doesn't matter how far you count, you don't get any closer to the end. But you do get further from the beginning."

- Victor Wooten

In my last essay, I mentioned how often I hear people say they don't have an ear. Another common statement I hear is, "I have a decent sense of rhythm." Where the first statement is unnecessarily doubtful of oneself, the second is perhaps a bit overconfident. In conversation with a student about this phenomenon they proposed an insightful hypothesis. When we are snapping our fingers, clapping, tapping our foot or dancing while listening to music we are feeling the rhythm with our body, perhaps leading us to think, "Hey, I've got pretty decent rhythm." However, the rhythmic work is being done for us, we're just enjoying the benefits. It becomes quite different when we are the ones responsible for delivering the rhythmic foundation. If you think you have a good sense of time, turn on a metronome and find out. Whenever I do, I usually find I have some work to do.

There are a few areas I notice people struggle with when trying to keep time: rushing, speeding up and revising. Rushing is when we are supposed to hold a note for 4 beats but only hold it for two and a half and then move on to the next note ahead of schedule. We're not playing the space. We can all use more patience when playing. Why are we rushing off to the next note? Playing the space is just as important as playing the notes. It makes the song what it is and it adds an element of relaxation and continuity that is vital for the listener's enjoyment. When you play with the metronome, it keeps you accountable to playing the space and playing it true.

Speeding up is when we start out at one tempo and end up at a much faster one 30 seconds later, an even faster one a minute later and so on until the song we're playing has taken on a frantic nature. Speeding up can also take a more micro form where we speed up briefly over a particularly busy series of notes (sometimes slowing down though I find this less common), periodically pushing and pulling the tempo like a musical tug o' war. When you play with the metronome, it will tell you when you are

speeding up and you can begin working on your consistency in staying with it. It's the best drummer you'll ever play with and it is *never* wrong.

Revising is when we play the wrong note or are displeased with how we've played something, back up and start again in an attempt to correct what we've played before moving on. This can become extremely problematic when playing with others. The song is moving on without you and suddenly you're in the past while everyone else in the present. Also, this is just ineffective practice. There is a difference between random accidents and mistakes. Random accidents happen once and then the next time and the time after they don't happen again. If it's a random accident, do your best to smooth it over and stay with the song. This is a skill to be practiced unto itself. If it is a mistake, meaning that it occurs repeatedly in the same place every time through the song, you'll be better served by noting it and addressing it as its own piece. If you go back, correct a mistake and move on you've actually practiced the mistake as much as what you're trying to play. That means there's probably a 50% chance it goes the same way the next time. If you isolate that section, work it out and play it correctly 10 times in a row, you'll almost definitely get it with confidence the next time rather than just hoping it goes better. When you play with the metronome it can help you stay in the moment you're actually in during a song, smoothing over those random accidents. This is great practice for playing with others or performing. Additionally, it will point out to you where your repetitive mistakes occur and where you really need to put your focus if you want to improve.

Beyond all this, using a metronome is an exercise in listening. It teaches us to listen to an external source rather than our own inner-dialogue. This can greatly reduce our anxiety, self-criticism and over-thinking while playing. It can help us practice listening to those we play with and help us broaden our listening to other aspects of our own individual playing.

Like all things in practice, start with a simple, achievable goal. If you haven't spent much time using a metronome, start by using it for 5 minutes every practice session. You may want to try just strumming a chord or playing a simple series of notes to the click. Start at 60 Beats Per Minute, then try 80 BPM or 100 BPM. Practicing at different tempos is ideal. Once you start getting in synch with the click, try to imagine

the click is coming from your fingers making contact with the strings instead of from the metronome itself, that you're so in sync with it that it's originating from you or disappearing completely. Next, try playing a song you're confident in with the metronome. Seek the same level of union with the click. There is so much more you can do but that is a great start. Ask me for other suggestions on how to achieve this or where else you can take it in the future.

If you don't have a physical metronome, get one. Don't use apps. Get the screens out of your practice. I recommend Wittner Taktell metronomes. I have their Piccolo model and recently purchased their Super Mini (the smallest metronome in the world!) so that I can easily fit it in my case and bring it to lessons. They are well made. The Piccolo model belonged to my sisters when they were learning piano and has been in my family since the 1980s, still going strong and keeping excellent time. They also have a pleasing click: loud enough to sit in the mix with your instrument without being abrasive.

Rhythm is the foundation of everything in music. You can play all the right notes but if the time isn't right, nothing is. I'd rather hear the wrong note at the right time, then the right note at the wrong time. The metronome is a challenge for most people when they start using it. However, I guarantee if you stick with it consistently, you'll learn to love it and will be amazed by the improvement it will bring to your playing. Practice with your metronome and let it help you count just a bit closer to infinity.