

THE MANHATTAN TRANSFER'S STEVE HASS

On Time, Dynamics, And Double Bass

I saw you perform with the Manhattan Transfer at the Dakota in Minneapolis. I was expecting to hear some great vocal jazz. What I got was a lesson on how to play drums behind vocalists. Your musicality, time, and dynamics really amazed me. How did you develop such confident and consistent time? My time often wavers in situations where the other musicians don't lock up with my beat.

Your dynamics were impeccable. I've seen many bands play the Dakota, and usually the drums overpower the band. You played that room like no one I have ever heard. Every lyric was crystal clear. You never played over mezzo forte [moderately loud], yet the energy and content of your drumming was still driving the band. How do you work on dynamics? Do you use lighter sticks or different cymbals depending on the size of the venue?

You also played a very tasty double bass pattern during your trades with the pianist, which consisted of some odd groupings. Do you remember what that was? I would love to see it written out. Thanks for the inspiration!
Mike Steinman

Thanks for the kind words, Mike. It's nice to know there are people out in the audience really listening.

My concept behind playing time is simple: Lay down a comfy carpet for everyone to walk on. Whether they walk off the carpet, hover at the edge, or stay in the middle is a musical choice they must make. When a song has a tempo marking of 104 bpm, I play it at 104. If the chorus needs a nudge, I'll play on top. If the bridge needs to lay back, I'll play behind. But the tempo will remain at 104. Of course, I'm not a machine, but I do my best to keep that kind of consistency.

There are exceptions, though, and some gigs require looser playing. In an improvisational jazz

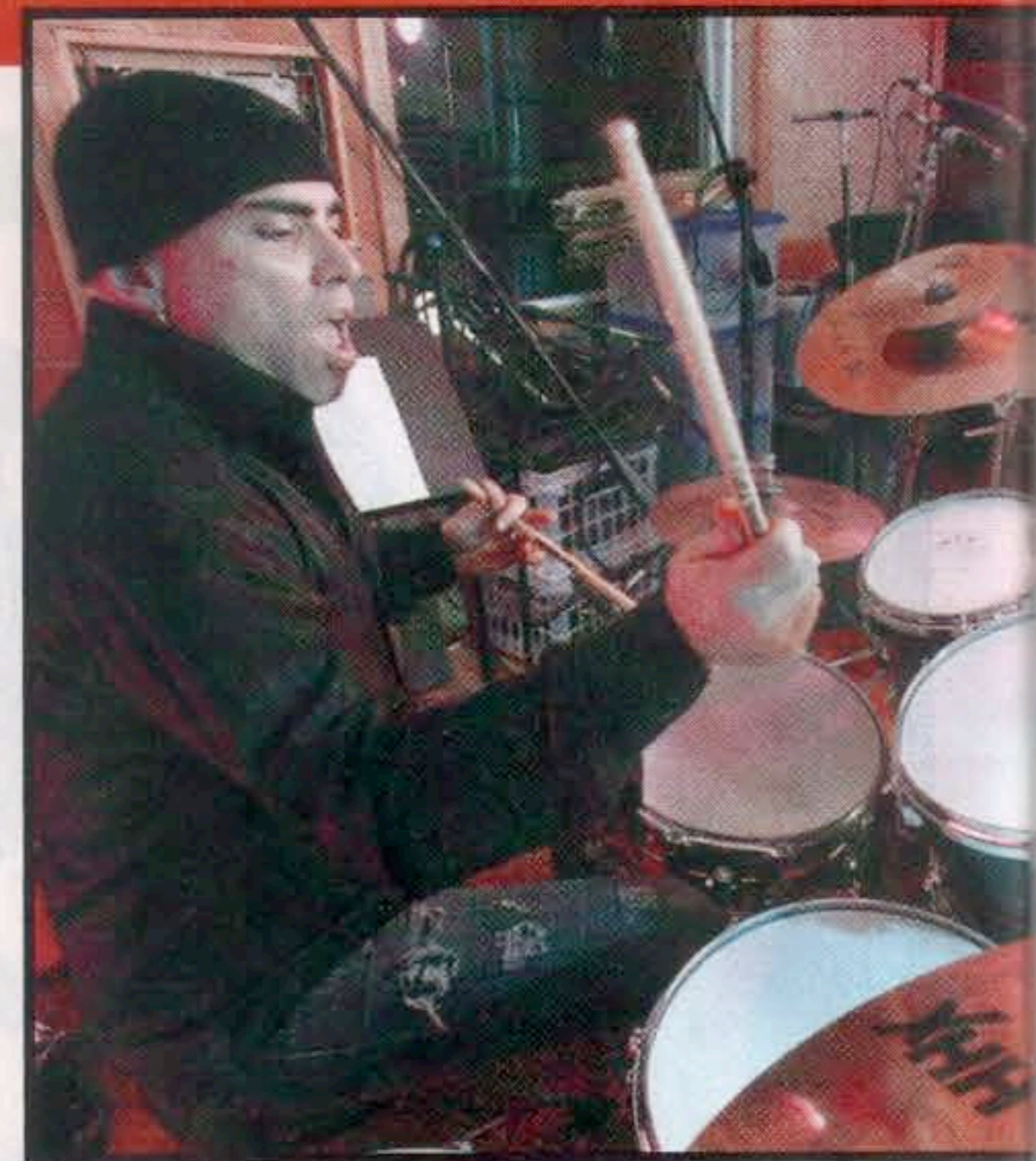
setting, there's usually no need for super-strict time playing. But situations where the musicians are not hooking up with the drums are simply beyond your control. Just lay down that carpet.

My advice to anyone who's working on developing consistent time is to practice with a metronome and to record yourself. Make mental notes of what you're playing when you're rushing or dragging, and then take appropriate measures in your practice routine to fix the problem. For example, I've noticed that when some of my students bounce 8th notes on the hi-hat with the foot, they rush. Once this problem is identified, it can be repaired.

The first time I played with pianist Danilo Perez, his advice to me was invaluable. He said, "Man, what you're playing is beautiful. But if you can play with that same intensity at half the volume, your phone will never stop ringing." He was right. I believe you have to mix yourself accordingly and play to the room. Regardless of genre, I play each room differently. In small clubs and sensitive theaters, I'll never reach a volume of forte [loud] while the ensemble is playing. In bigger theaters and arenas, I'll play with more volume and power. I adjust my dynamic range as if I'm the front-of-house engineer.

As far as drumsticks, I use the Regal Tip 8A hickory. For low-volume gigs, I use the 8A maple. The size of the stick is the same, but the weight is slightly lighter. In volume-sensitive situations I play my backbeat lighter and in the center of the snare drum without hitting a rimshot. (I typically play backbeats as rimshots.) At the Dakota, I also used a Yamaha plastic muffling ring to help control the sound.

My cymbal choice has nothing to do with volume. I believe you should be able to control your cymbals and drums in order to play in the desired dynamic range. The Dakota is a very sensitive room. That evening, people paid good money to see and hear the Manhattan Transfer sing. I had to



make sure to keep up the intensity and groove without getting in the way of the vocals. In venues like the Dakota, I begin soundcheck without a monitor. I try to keep a dynamic range that allows me to hear all the instruments acoustically. The night you saw me, I had only a drum loop and my Roland sampler coming through my monitor. When people approached me after the show saying it sounded like a recording, I felt I had done my job.

Do I practice my dynamics? Actually, no. That's something that has been learned on the job. Playing louder when the music becomes intense is normal—it's human. My suggestion is to try to control your dynamic range so you have more headroom when the music becomes intense.

Regarding the trading, I don't usually remember anything specific that I play in solos or trades. But you said the key words: double bass. I'm new to double bass, and I have limited capabilities with the double pedal. So that narrows it down for me. I'm not sure exactly what I played, but it was something like the following example. The tempo is 128 bpm. (And be sure to make note of the dynamics.) For this pattern I lead with my left hand and left foot and play single strokes. But you can do whatever feels good. I also improvise the orchestration in my hands. I usually divide the hands between the toms and snare. It's written on just snare drum, leaving the orchestration up to you. Have fun!

