

[TITLE SLIDE] This paper explores the relationship between a number of concepts that are hard to reconcile in the worlds and discourses of popular culture - and represent some initial thinking.

Between the concepts of American and British, between jazz and rock, between the primitive and the virtuosic. It does so in the context of some other slippery concepts; namely Greatness and heritage. The last two are - out there - in the public imagination, whereas the first three are, in particular, explored via the discourse of drumming. Specifically the drumming of three British drummers of the 1960s and 1970s - who I'll come to shortly.

Or, more succinctly, this paper explores British Popular Music heritage through looking at three Great, Great British Drummers.

It comes from a nagging curiosity I get when I see and read articles in what, for the purposes of this paper, I'll call the 'Drumosphere' [SLIDE], the online and offline spaces of discussions of drums and drumming. In particular it is the curiosity that forms whenever I read the lists of the great drummers published in blogs and magazines - Rolling Stone, Drumeo, Drummer magazine and others, and ponder the included and excluded, or perhaps the acts of, and rationale for, inclusion and exclusion.

I've explored this recently for a chapter in a book about Deep Purple [SLIDE] and was asked - as a drummer - to write about their drummer Ian Paice and I started to pay a little more attention to the placing of drummers in these lists and why they might be placed in particular positions. As this conference started to develop I also started to think about the national identities of these drummers and what that might say about both their drumming and our - that is the public - imagining of them as GREAT and how this might contribute to the canons of drumming and popular music. I also thought about Cozy Powell and the artwork for his album and single 'Over The Top' that seemed somehow to represent a particular era of British drummers and drumming.

So

To do this I'll talk a little about the following...[SLIDE]

The development of the drum kit and drumming

Some information on the top three great drummers.

The idea of virtuosity and greatness in relation to these drummers.

The public discourse of drumming virtuosity and greatness

There will be no drummer jokes. [SLIDE]

So to start, lets have a look at the history of the drumming in relation to the drum kit.

The drum kit is, unbelievably, a labour saving device, more akin to a one man band than an instrument. Before the early 1800s snare drums, bass drums, cymbals and so on were played by individual percussionists in a variety of musical contexts and the idea of the drum 'kit' did not exist.. The invention of the bass drum pedal - in the 1800s by British 'Rock' band leader Joseph Richardson [SLIDE] and patented later by William F Ludwig, as popular music performance entered the industrial period, made playing several drums at the same time a possibility and lead to the twentieth century phenomena of the drummer and of the drum kit.

The first Half of the century was filled with competitive drum production leading towards the standardisation of what we consider to be a drum set. This happened largely in North America, between Leedy, Ludwig and Slingerland. Some of the U.S. companies had some of their production in Europe, notably Germany and the British company Premier, was largely copying American developments and design for a U.K. market.

The world wars isolated drum production to individual companies with few American kits coming in to the U.K. and Slingerland moving their production to their own factories in the U.S.

With a standardised idea of what a drum kit was, the idea of what a drummer or percussionist might do with it also begins to become standardised. The early to middle part of the century sees the development of drumming and drumming style, largely through jazz and then the emergence of rock and roll and the development of rock and roll drumming alongside that.

In the late nineteen fifties Earl Palmer was credited with developing the first rock back beat style drumming in 1957 on Little Richard's 'Lucille'. There are several stylistic developments between jazz and rock drumming, and live and recorded drumming, each privileging different elements of the kit and where beats might sit within individual bars. This is intertwined with other developments such as amplification. So whilst jazz drummers would play rhythmically on the cymbals; in competition with amplified guitars, rock drummers would shift to louder punctuating sounds on individual drums.

Of course there are other contributing narratives here that I don't have time to explore, the relationship between folk music and rock music, the rise of skiffle in the U.K. and so on and, of course, the roll of the blues in the development of rock music in general.

I mention these drumming developments because, whilst from our contemporary positions, rock drumming is a culturally and musically established norm, at the time of the emergence of our British drummers, Rock drumming was a new phenomenon. Less than ten years had elapsed between Earl Palmer's innovative playing on Lucille and the first records by the musicians being discussed today.

In the U.K. rock music and English rock music as opposed the American rock music specifically emerges in the early 1960s with the New York Times reporting on, a visit to Liverpool, where the

'Loud, long-haired, guitar-plucking, twisting and jumping young extroverts with a strong beat and amplifiers.' And 'The drummers hammer[ing] away relentlessly, eyes closed' (Brennan, 2020, p.223) were a peculiarly

British phenomenon, because, “Before 1964, if English records became popular in America, the fact that they were English did not lend them any distinctiveness.” (Belz p.121)

Post 1964 an internationalism and competition in Rock music emerges and the successes of The Beatles or The Rolling Stones in America play a large part. To address the drummers in those groups, who do regularly feature in the ‘Greatest Drummers’ lists they fall in to a category that I call ‘The right drummer for the band’ category - that is, whilst their inclusion in lists based on some of the elements that we’ll come to discuss shortly - namely virtuosity, isn’t necessarily the case, their ability to know and play within their contextual bands is notable. So, no Ringo or Charlie Watts today. Charlie Watts, in fact, claimed ‘there are too many drummers trying for the tricky stuff. Just lay down the beat and realise what you’re there for.’ (In Brennan, p. 225). This very realistic thinking about playing drums does not get you to the top spot in ‘great drummer’ lists.

“Rock drumming was now heavily dominated by straight eighth grooves, and as opposed to the lighter, cymbal oriented shuffles which had characterized early rock, mid-sixties drummers relied more and more on heavy kick and snare combinations to drive the band.” (Glass, D, in Brennan, M. 2020, p.223)

This was in part due to the development of the ‘gig’ as well as music in this period, amplification and PA systems were making guitarists louder and louder and drummers were having to work hard to keep up. this in and of itself is a major contribution to rock drumming with Ginger Baker claiming in his autobiography that “That was where all that smash, bash drumming came about. I was hitting my drums that hard because I was trying to hear what I was playing.” (Baker, G. P.118)

This quote unveils our first drummer of the top three - Ginger Baker of Cream, Blind Faith, Airforce and Baker Gurvitz Army, with numbers two and Three being Keith Moon of the Who and John Bonham Of Led Zeppelin : they appear as numbers 3, 2 and 1 in Rolling Stones ‘Greatest Drummers’ list.

So let’s start with a little about the drummers.

Peter ‘Ginger Baker’ - 1939 - 2019, is most often discussed as the drummer from British Rock Power Trio The Cream alongside Eric Clapton and Jack Bruce. The trio were active between 1966 and 1968, releasing Four albums before tensions between Baker and the rest of the band lead to their breaking up.

As well as being the first ‘Power Trio’, Cream were also the first band to have a platinum selling double album and Ginger Baker is credited with bringing in the drum solo in to rock culture from his Jazz background.

“Baker’s fusion of light-fingered jazz technique with a heavier rock approach can clearly be heard on the band’s debut album Fresh Cream (released in 1966). Another noteworthy innovation is the final track on the album - a drum feature called ‘Toad’ with Baker credited as the sole composer. The studio version of ‘Toad’ runs for five minutes, but Baker was known to lengthen his solo to over fifteen minutes in the band’s live performance - arguably the earliest incarnation of the epic rock drum solo that would gradually become a common part of the arena rock band concerts.” (Brennan, M. 2020 p. 224)

However, In the Rolling Stone list Baker is described as an“immense talent [...] with double-kick virtuosity and extended solos“ as well as being “cursed with a temper [...] clashing constantly with Cream bandmates” (Rolling Stone) his ‘character’ being as much a reason for his inclusion as his playing.

“Another drummer who was first entranced by jazz was the Who’s Keith Moon. Along with Baker, however, Moon both embraced and embodied the role of the drummer as rock star. This entailed performances full of showmanship that demanded he was seen as well as heard, and playing the drum kit as a lead rather than accompaniment instrument.” (Brennan, M. 2020 p. 224)

Keith Moon 1946 - 1978 was the drummer in The Who recording ten albums with them from 1965 to 1978 as well as solo work. He is celebrated for his flamboyant style and on and offstage antics.

Moon’s behaviour is more publicised and less dark to some extent from Bakers with his drum kit, stage, and hotel room trashing antics being widely celebrated. However, his drug use meant that on the opening date of The Who’s American tour in 1973 he passed out several times and a member of the audience played the remainder of the show.

“he was more performance artist than mere rock "sticksman.”” (Rolling Stone)

Moon “was flamboyant, he [was] an extrovert [...] he worked really hard at being a showman.” (Brennan, M. 2020 p. 224).

‘He was more interested in looking good’ (Townsend in Brennan, p. 227),

‘Neither was moon an all-round virtuoso’ (Brennan, p.226)

“Moon is is a very flash geezer [he] likes to play on a kit that is just about twice the size of anyone else’s [...] he tells me to find the biggest fucking drum kit in the world - bigger, even, than his usual array.” (Butler, D. 1981,P.122)

Moon and Baker used double bass drum kits emulating their jazz influences (from Jazz Sam Woodyard and Louis Bellson)

Although our final drummer - John Bonham was enamoured with the double bass drum kits, he was ‘not allowed’ to have it as a regular part of his playing with Led Zeppelin.

The number one greatest drummer is John Henry Bonham 1948 - 1980

Drummer in British rock band Led Zeppelin, Bonham is celebrated for his power and speed and his quick right foot on the bass drum pedal.

Like the other two drummers, Bonham's early influences came from jazz.

'A showman and not just a backing musician' (Mick Bonham, p. 228)

'Influence on the conventions of rock drumming' (playing hard - Brennan, 2020 p.228)

"artful clobbering [...] At his most brutally paleolithic he never bludgeoned dully" (Rolling Stone)

"If you play technically you sound like everyone else - it's originality that counts" (Bonham, J in Welch, C & Nichols, J. P.25)

"He was a bull in a china shop, without any shadow of a doubt. He had no subtlety but he was highly innovative" (Poole, M. In Welch, C. & Nichols, J. P. 29)

"You're going to have to keep it a bit more simple than that - Page.

Do you like your job in the band? - Grant

Well yeah. - Bonham

Well do as this man says.

Behave yourself Bonham, or you'll disappear. - Grant"

"People like Bonzo and Keith Moon made that era such an exciting time. [...] he was a brilliant drummer. But it was a strain, I admit, putting up with his antics." (Bill Harry - Led Zeppelin's P.R. In Welch... p. 110)

When talking about the notion of virtuosity - in relation to the drums - Dr. Mandy Smith of the Rock and Roll hall of Fame is the foremost academic, with drummer, drum historian and academic Matt Brennan are the two writers who have pushed for definitions and exploration.

"A term of Italian origin, applied, more abroad than in England, to a player who excels in the technical part of his [sic] art." (Grove, G. 1889 A dictionary of Music and Musicians. Macmilan pg 313 in (Cvejic, Z2016 P.1)

Brennan breaks drumming down in to four constituent parts - Primal, Powerful, Virtuositic and Exhibitionist.

Smith explores within the virtuosic, suggesting it is made up of

'technical rigor and mastery',

'Complexity' of rhythm, meter, timbre, form and relative pitch. (Black page)

and the 'visual component of virtuosity'

For me, the two models are very similar, with a shifting focus of importance on the word, or concept, virtuoso, whether it is all encompassing or part of the qualities of drumming.

Discussing the Troggs' Wild Thing Brennan states 'Such role playing in rock drumming blurred the lines between the musical and the theatrical, even if it was not always deliberate on the part of the drummer.' (Brennan 232)

Marco Lehmann and Reinhard Kopiez (2013: 478) note the importance of 'show performance' in the development of music, and live music in particular. They suggest (via Sandner 1977) that 'the history of rock performance [documents] an emancipation of the visual domain from the music' in that the visual domain 'becomes an aesthetic object in its own right', by enhancing 'what might be played in the studio with visual augmentations and musical gestures in live performance': that is, in front of an audience.

what is notable about the top three great drummers - Baker, Moon and Bonham, is that this live, gestural, visual and exhibitionist element of their playing is what elevates them over other drummers to make them the greatest. There are other visual elements that contribute to our understanding of virtuosity or greatness - in particular the number of drums in a drum kit, with some of those in the list, perhaps more known for their technical mastery, making visual representation of this through up to eight kick drums or thirty chromatically tuned toms. We, that is the non drumming public, are not musicologically equipped to understand the intricacies of drumming, what is difficult and so on, but we do understand visually, the flamboyant complexity demonstrated, developed and portrayed by these three great drummers.

I just want to return to Deep Purple's Ian Paice at the end of this paper. Whilst the top three 'Great Drummers' Moon and Bonham died through their excessive behaviours at exceptionally young ages, and Baker could not hold down a drumming job for long due to his violent, drug fuelled behaviour, Ian Paice remains on the drum stool for Deep Purple. He is the only original member of the band and he has played EVERY Deep Purple show ever and performed on EVERY Deep Purple album. He is, undoubtedly, a great drummer by both Smith and Brennan's model Displaying technical mastery, and complexity in his drumming. His on and off stage stability, humility and good nature have made him a drummer that people want to work with but he does not fit in to the exhibitionist element of drumming and, as such lacks a visual representation of what he does.

But the same dependable qualities that lead to longevity, do not, it would appear lead to the kind of reputation that leads one to being considered 'Great'.

Belz, Carl (1972) *The Story of Rock*. Harper Colophon Books. London.

Brennan, Matt (2020) *Kick It: A Social History of the Drum Kit*. OUP

Butler, Dougal (1981) *Moon The Loon: The Amazing Rock and Roll Life of Keith Moon*. Star. London.