

Don't Upset The Rhythm

Words: Sam Pert Images: Eckie

Toby Couling has an infectious cheerfulness that artists, bands and musicians are drawn towards. Luckily for us, it just so happens he's an exceptional drummer too

As a young session drummer on London's competitive music scene, where scores of other young drummers who want exactly the same jobs as you are champing at the bit, frothing at the mouth and snapping at your heels, you could forgive anyone for letting the pressure get the better of them. But for Toby Couling there is one simple solution: stay positive. And this he does very well. So much so that his skills have been enlisted by such high-profile artists as Mercury Music Prize winner Speech Debelle and, more recently, chart toppers the Noisettes.

Before a Noisettes show at London's HMV Forum, the polite and hospitable 25-year-old invited Drummer to listen to his story so far, including his view on how the magic of music is governed by a strong rapport between the musicians involved, and how he likes to take it upon himself to ensure that that bond is made. But our first question, that of influence, is met with a typically considered response from Toby.

"A lot of what I class as influence is outside of music. I'm so bad at this; that question is so hard for me. Even bands that I know and love, I forget their names. I come from quite a musical family: my mum's a pianist and a music lover – she got me into dubstep. We're all so open to all music and all things in life. You can't close something down before you know about it. I try to give time to things that I don't understand, so that if I listen to something enough I will invariably appreciate it. I remember my mum playing classical piano in the evenings as I went to bed. My dad loves his blues and boogie-woogie stuff, which made me think a lot about the shuffle early on. Steely Dan, Aja, is one of my favourite albums, for the shuffles. Dance music too, from a drumming point of view, is great. You can learn a lot from programmed beats; it's really fun to emulate those things. And drum 'n' bass is great for improving technique."

And so were laid the strong foundations of an eclectic love of drums and music. But surely it takes more than interest to become a great player? You need knowledge, versatility, technique...don't you?

"Sometimes you can think about technique too much. I learnt about Moeller when I had a summer of lessons at Drumtech. Mark Roberts really got me thinking about that stuff. I respect it hugely but I try not to overthink about it. But I can't deny that it helps the speed and dynamics of rudiments and grooves. It makes things easier: you can achieve the same sound by playing half as much sometimes, conserving energy. Placing accents on rudiments is made easier too. It's about learning how your body works around your sticks and making the most of every movement." Toby clearly made the most of the London scene and the educational opportunities that it presents, spending time with tutors at both Drumtech and ACM. "I was only 16, so

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I had to get the bus from my hometown in Guildford, which was two bus rides away, two and a half hours each way. So I spent a lot of time on the bus alone, practising on my knees."

GOING POP

In a relatively short space of time, those days have evolved and the hard work has paid off, with an exciting popular-music career and a shared hand in a recording studio in South East London with brother Ollie Couling and friend Gareth Cobb. "The Fold Studios," says Toby, "is where I practise and do a lot of recording; it has a great drum room and is a great place to feel inspired." No wonder the man's positive! No doubt it was just as much his optimism as it was his chops that won Toby the gig with the Noisettes. "The band and the previous drummer went their separate ways and I got recommended by a few people, which was really nice," he says.





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“We’ve been in a really cool studio in Brighton, Brighton Electric, writing together.” That’s Toby, with the enigmatic Shingai Shoniwa on vocals and guitarist Dan Smith. “It’s been really nice to be involved in that process. I think we all have a very similar musical mindset, in terms of rhythm and groove especially. I’m really into how you can manipulate things: for example, if you’re playing to a metronome, just placing the notes behind or in front of the click. Dan and Shingai are both really up on that as well. Having that balance in the studio and trying to get things to sit nicely is a beautiful thing. I love it and I think it’s so important; it’s something I really work on. Also, the difference between straight and shuffled is a really important thing to know about. I’m exploring this a lot at the moment. For instance, I will take a paradiddle groove and work from completely straight to absolutely shuffled, feeling all the differences in between. Shingai’s a great bassist; she sits really nicely just behind the beat, which I really like. We jam a lot in a live situation too. I have come to realise that pop music is not what I thought it was; it all comes down to good songwriting. I think Noisettes do that really well, and a lot of people can really relate to it.”

THE POWER OF SPEECH

Rewind a year or so and Toby would have been busy with a different act altogether. Speech Debelle’s 2009 album, *Speech Therapy*,

is a stripped-down, wholly British hip hop album of honest lyrics and honest production. Although Toby did not feature on the album, he was chosen as the live drummer for his ability to adapt and let the music breathe.

“I had a really good ride with Speech Debelle. I really enjoyed the music and learnt a lot from it – about knowing where to fit around the vocalist, especially with someone like Speech, where it is all about the lyrics. I really worked off the vocals, picking things out and learning that hip hop rhythms are often more about taking things away rather than adding more stuff in. You can often say a lot more by not playing something than you can by playing something. It’s like in a drum ‘n’ bass groove where you have that kick drum build-up, but if you take that kick drum out, it has so much more impact when it comes back in. I sometimes played to a click with Speech, but then sometimes it was nicer to naturally flow with the other musicians. If they wanted to pull me in any direction it would be behind, because they were all so into that behind-the-beat style. Some songs they hadn’t been playing to a click before I joined, but I felt that they really needed to be, because the lyrics were so important



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that I wanted to make sure the rhythms were consistent throughout, in order to let the vocals shine at that particular tempo. Also, hip hop is produced - it is programmed - so people expect that consistency. In the tour bus I would listen to nothing but hip hop. My memory for names is terrible but I completely absorbed the music, as I do with everything I listen to. It's wicked!"

Toby was with the band when the album won the coveted, and often controversial, Mercury Music Prize in 2009. "When she won I was quite new with Speech, but as a band we had reached a point through playing live where I felt very comfortable. It was such a good day anyway, playing with all those people, but to finish the day with Speech winning the prize for her album was amazing. Just to be involved was a blessing. I can still remember how good it felt to play on that stage, especially with the new 22" K Ride that Zildjian had sent me!"

CHANCE TO SHINE

Let's face it, it's not often you read about a successful drummer, or successful anyone for that matter, who doesn't have a passion for what they do. Everyone has had a taste of passion without the success, however. So how do you strike the balance and make it work? Toby believes it's about putting yourself out there - the old 'right place at the right time' chestnut. For Toby, there's no question as to where that right place is. "London is an amazing place to be. I could try to do what I'm doing elsewhere, but I'd be spending a lot of money travelling to London! The whole industry is so centred on London. That doesn't undermine all of the things that are going on elsewhere in the UK and around the world, but if you're in a band and you want to get signed, London's where the network is. From a player's point of view, a lot of people strive to move here for the jams and the people you can meet. It's a big community."

Another word of advice is to be yourself: "To have your own style is important. Keeping true to what you want to do and making it your own. There is so much to learn, but if you can lean towards something that you love, there will be more of a connection for you, and people will recognise it. Then again, I do try to be equally good at an even spread of genres. To be a session drummer you need to have so much ammunition under your belt, so that when you are asked to play something you can do it. If you can adapt to different music and different people, but then have your stamp, that's perfect."



Maybe it would be an image thing - you could look different from the others. It's difficult to know what bands and artists look for. I try to have my own sound and stick to it. For a while I played small hi-hats and a popcorn snare. I quite like the punchy 20 x 18" kick sound too, so it's not always just about what rhythms you're playing. I now play the Ludwig 400 Black Beauty, limited edition, which is a perfectly versatile snare for all the different things I'm doing at the moment. But I like to have it tight so it cracks."

RATE YOURSELF

With a few minutes to spare before Toby Couling has to soundcheck, Drummer goes for the jugular and asks how he rates himself among his peers. As a relative newcomer to the scene his experiences are fresh, and his measured response is indicative of an amiable character and a highly employable drummer with more up his sleeve than he might lead you to believe.

"There are so many personalities in music and drumming. You can't really mark a human, so how can you mark a drummer? I do my thing; I bring what I bring. It's about who you are as a person and how you get on with people. Drummers need to be giving, in a way. It's almost like the scrum half in rugby: I feel we need to keep people together. I don't know about chops - everyone has their chops and there are so many amazing drummers out there and there's so much to learn. I like to be happy and I am happy - I love what I do. There are two different Tobys in a drumming sense: there's studio Toby and there's live Toby. I approach the situations differently because obviously you're performing in a different way. I love the challenge of



GEAR BOX (NOISETTES)

Drums: Premier Series Maple (Red flame lacquer finish)

20 x 18" Kick drum

14 x 14" Floor tom

10 x 9" Rack tom

14 x 5.5" Ludwig Limited Edition Black Beauty

Cymbals: Zildjian

14" K Session hi-hats

19" A Custom crash

20" A crash/ride

Sticks: Vic Firth

5A American Classics

Pedals: DW 9000

Hardware: Premier 6000 Series

Heads: Remo

Pinstripes on toms (batter)

Powerstroke 3 on kick drum (batter)

Coated Ambassador on snare (batter)

Electronics:

Roland TD-12

ddrum triggers

Percussion:

Cowbell

Tambourine

Hat Trick jingles x 2

Miscellaneous:

Ultimate Ears

new projects and learning new things before playing them onstage in front of people. When I play I give so much of myself to the beats and the grooves; I try to bring everything and everyone together, whether it's a jam or my own band or Noisettes. I love the feeling of bringing this network of players together. A lot of it is emotional, and people really pick up on enthusiasm. But also, simply looking at people, egging each other on, getting each other involved, making it a team effort. When you're performing live it's like watching a group of people painting the same beautiful picture at the same time. Anything can happen when it's live, but if you're one consistent, tight unit, it's such a good feeling. That's what people love: that vibe that no one can really describe - that beautiful element of everyone playing together."

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