

Do Drummers Matter? By Chad Jackson

In this day and age, it seems as though drummers and the art of drumming have taken a bit of a back seat. A back seat to drum machines like the amazing Roland 808 and 909. A back seat to great-sounding software programs like Ableton and Easy Drummer. A back seat to pre-recorded backing tracks being played off hard drives for some of the biggest live acts instead of a real live drummer. So, the question today is...do drummers matter?

I often liken the role of a drummer to a cross-country truck driver. The truck driver needs to have knowledge of the roadmap to get the cargo to its destination expediently and safely. A drummer must have an intimate knowledge of whatever song or piece they're playing – including song structure, dynamics, starts and stops. It's the trucker's responsibility to keep the truck driving between the lines and to arrive on time. A drummer's main responsibility is helping the band feel the musical pulse collectively and cohesively which creates that elusive "groove".

While drum machines, software programs, and backing tracks may SOUND good, do they FEEL good? Do they convey mood or emotion? Do they "groove"? Proficient drummers can adjust dynamics or the placement of the beat on the fly to add tension and excitement to any piece of music. They can interact with the other musicians of an ensemble to punctuate and reinforce musical ideas resulting in a fresh and exciting take on a song or piece. Drummers can make the music breathe and move in a truly human way that machines, software, and pre-recorded tracks can not.

Elvin Jones, the transcendent drummer for jazz titan John Coltrane, once said, "The greatest contribution jazz has made in music has been to replace the role of the conductor with a member of the ensemble who, instead of waving his arms to keep time and convey mood, is an active member of the music statement. That person is the drummer." Human, dynamic, and interactive – drummers do matter.