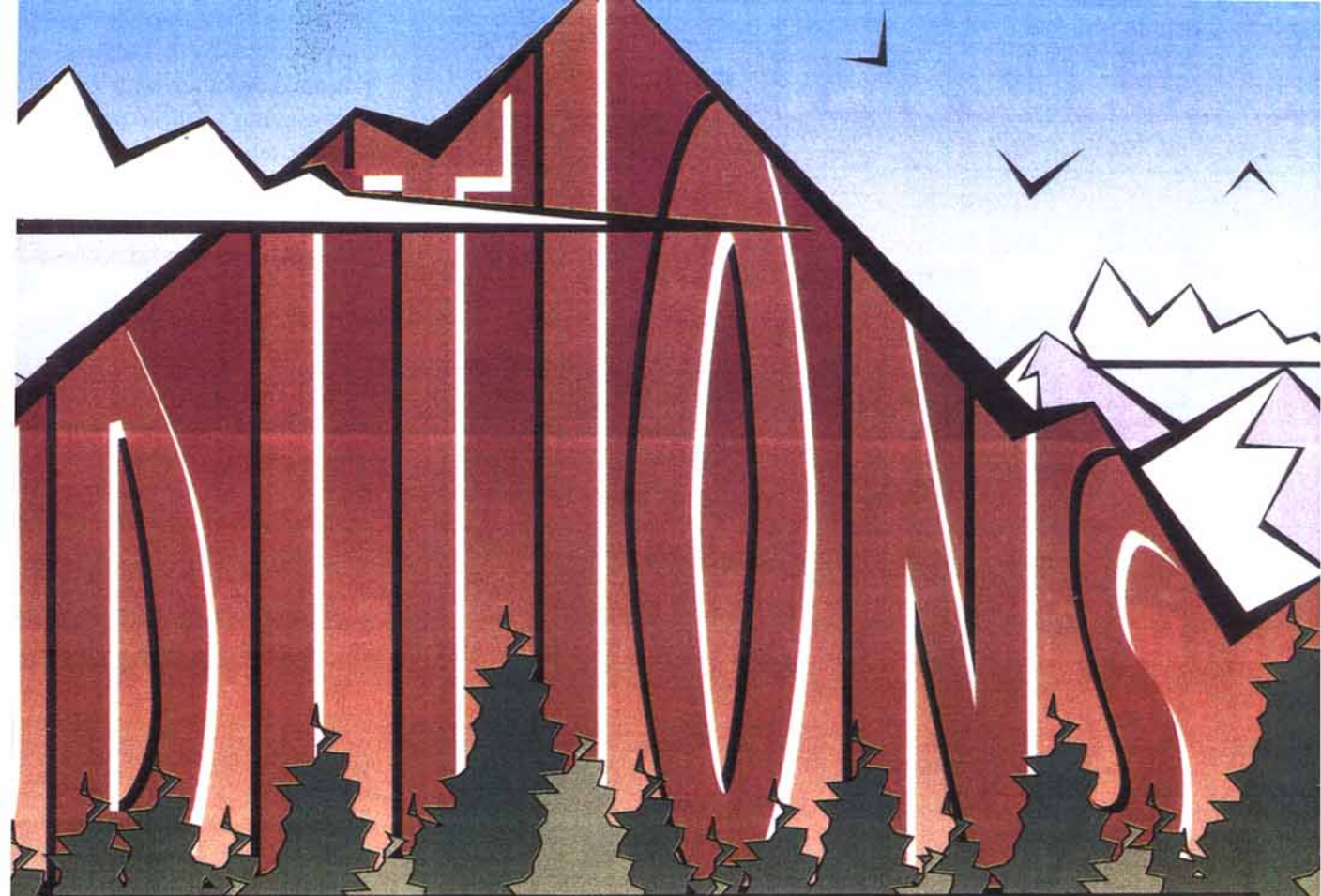


SURVIVING

DRUM AUDITIONS



Illustration by Joe Weissenburger



by Robin Tolleson

Some drummers break into a sweat at the mere thought of the big "A" word; many feel awed or just plain odd at the audition. They could think of a million things they'd rather be doing than going through the tension and disrespect that is frequently part of the audition experience. Other drummers view the cattle call as a learning tool, a valuable gauge of their musical growth. They love the challenge and will leave one great gig to try to bag another. Either way, like it or not, the truth is that auditioning is a part of what we do.

Through the experiences of some very worthy drummers—Tim "Herb" Alexander, Tommy Igoe, David Rokeach, Doane Perry, Ndugu Chancler, Danny Gottlieb, and Rod Morgenstein—we'll share some tips to, first of all, help you get the audition, second, get through the process, and third, feel better about yourself after it's over. Remember, even the big names blow 'em sometimes.

Tim "Herb" Alexander got his first break in music by going on an audition. Among other things, his story proves that it's better to audition than do nothing at all. "At seventeen I had worked differ-

ent jobs around Phoenix and was *not* having a good time," Tim recalls. "My mom suggested I look in the *Yellow Pages* for recording studios to see if anybody needed a drummer. I was thinking, 'Yeah, sure.' But then I said, 'Okay.' The second studio I called gave me an audition. The only thing I could play was this song by Rush with lots of odd meters. It didn't show any kind of studio versatility, and they were like, 'Well...we don't know what we can do with that, but thanks for coming.' I didn't have any auditioning experience, and obviously they weren't too thrilled, but a guy in the next room there knew a club band called Major Lingo that was looking for a drummer."

Alexander made it to the Major Lingo audition the best he could. "I packed my drums in pillowcases and a couple of cardboard boxes, threw them on a Greyhound bus, and took the bus up to Flagstaff, three hours away. My girlfriend's dad picked me up in his pickup truck and drove me to Jerome, a ghost town in Arizona where the band lived. I showed up dragging these pillowcases and cardboard boxes, looking like I was living off the street. I set up and played, and they loved it. They auditioned other people later that week, but they wanted me."

Alexander got another break when a friend in the San Francisco Bay area tipped him that Primus was looking for a new drummer. "I had never heard of

very direct."

Bluesman Charlie Musselwhite invited Dave Rokeach out on tour before ever playing with him. "That's the way he auditions, 'cause he hardly ever rehearses," says Rokeach. "What is important for him is not just your playing, but how you get along with everybody in the van. You had to put the adrenaline thing aside and just go do the gig. A lot of auditions are about the moment, getting up for it right then. This wasn't about that."

So how can you be "in the loop" and hear about the auditions and learn about the openings when they appear? Getting inside may take a lot of work, but start by getting your name in all the local musicians' referral services you can find. "A manager could call a service like Radio Registry in New York and ask for different drummers' names to line up auditions," says Gottlieb. "But chances are that someone in the band will recommend somebody they know by reputation and want to try out. If you're in a small town and haven't found the band that you want to play with, you've got to move on if it's in your heart to do it. Go to a bigger talent pool, whether it's at a college, in a city, or wherever. The more people you know, the more possibilities that someone's going to recommend you for something."

"A lot of it is being in a place where those things happen," agrees Ndugu. "Let's get real. There aren't going to be that many auditions coming through Boise, Idaho, so you may hear about things late. I know guys who walk in and out of the rehearsal studios periodically just to get a feel for what's going on. A lot of things go on that no one knows about except those that are right there, and they keep it kind of secretive and clique-ish."

"The music business is a horror for people who want to be on the inside," laughs Morgenstein. "How do you get on the inside? Well, you gotta be on the inside. For most people, it's just getting a lucky break and being prepared for the moment when it happens. Most often you never know where things are going to lead, so you do five or ten things that seem like they're wasting your time. But if you didn't do all of those things the lucky break wouldn't happen."

Morgenstein has some practical advice for audition hunters. "Befriend people who are on the inside," he says. "Hang out in the clubs where musicians do jam sessions. Circulate. Put together a videotape of yourself playing a song or two and soloing for a few seconds, and send it to every management company in the country. Most often no one's looking for a drummer, but obviously at some point *everyone's* looking for a drummer. Your package might end up on the desk at some management company right around the time that some drummer died, is having drug problems, quit, or was fired. It's a one-in-a-million chance, but if you don't do it, now you have a zero-in-a-million chance. These creative things can help, and also make you feel better about yourself. You have to be a self-promoter. Maybe there's a way of getting your name out there using the Internet. I don't know if having your own Web site would help, but surfing around onto different Web sites could lead you somewhere."

Igoe suggests you seriously check out whatever arts-oriented paper there is in your community for ads put in by management companies or aspiring bands. "After you start reading the ads you can weed out the bad ones by the language they use," he says.

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felt like playing rock. I auditioned, and was careful sometimes to play just a real hard, simple, in-the-groove backbeat. Then I asked if they wanted me to do some crazier kind of stuff, and they said 'Yeah, go for it.' I think part of the reason that they invited me to join the band was to separate themselves from the tons of metal bands around that time, and they thought one way to do it was to have the drums step out and do stuff that is not the norm in that genre."

Preparation is still the key, agrees LA session drummer Ndugu Chanler. "Familiarize yourself with who you're auditioning for, the style of music, and the drummers who have played and recorded with that artist before you," says Ndugu. "Live with the material before going in. That helps you deal with the personalities and makes you comfortable and confident. If you don't think 100% that you're the one for the job, don't go. Don't use an audition as a gauge just to see where you are as a player. Use an audition to get the gig. Let them say 'no' because you don't look the part, but never based on playing. First cover the bases that have already been covered. When people call you, sometimes they'll tell you what they're looking for.

They liked the guy they had, but... Those 'buts' are the voids you need to fill before you do your own thing. You must do your homework before you go to an audition—that's the bottom line."

One way of learning about what an artist likes is to ask current or past bandmembers. "Jeff Ballard was the drummer with Ray Charles before me, and he said to check out Count Basie and Sonny Payne. That was real helpful," recalls Dave Rokeach. "When I initially thought about the gig, I would listen to all Ray's vocal tunes, but he auditions you on the big band instrumentals that the band plays. I only played his vocal tunes *after* I got the gig. Ray is famous for really slow tempos, but we didn't audition any slow tempos. He'll audition to see if you've got the chops to play fast, and playing slow is something he feels he can teach you.

"If you can read and swing, then he throws the street stuff at you. He'll say, 'Okay, the first time that "& of two" accent happens, play that with your snare drum, and the second time I want to hear it with the bass drum.' After all the reading stuff, he might sing a rhythm and have you pick it up. He'll do that on the gig sometimes, start playing something and turn around and expect you to get it with no chart or previous warning—just pick stuff up by ear."

There will certainly be surprises like that during auditions, as well as times when you won't have a chance to consult bandmembers or sit down with some tapes. So Tommy Igoe takes a different approach to preparation. "My goal is to keep my skills up all the time, and just go and play," he says. "Very rarely do you get a chance to know the music beforehand."

Many artists would rather keep auditions limited to drummers they hear about from a bandmember or friend than take out ads, sift through five hundred cassettes, and listen to fifty drummers play. And some artists prefer to offer gigs to well-regarded drummers as a sort of paid audition. Manhattan Transfer auditioned Danny Gottlieb by flying him to Las Vegas for a week of gigs. "They weren't committing to other dates until after I did the week in Vegas. That's a considerate way to try you out, to give you a week and see how it works, see if it blends. And they were considerate people. If there was anything that they wanted from the drums, instead of freaking out or being cryptic, they were

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