

15 Disability, Drumming, and the Drum Kit

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Introduction

See the trick is only pick on those that can't do you no harm,
like the drummer from Def Leppard's only got one arm. FROM THE BLOODHOUND GANG'S
'WHY'S EVERYBODY ALWAYS PICKIN' ON ME' (1996)

What is especially significant about this ableist mid-1990s popular culture reference is that Def Leppard's Rick Allen has long been the public face of the disabled drummer. As the Bloodhound Gang's lyrics make clear, Allen has more often than not been identified primarily by his disability (e.g. 'the one-armed drummer' and so on), as opposed to by his name, or solely by his role (e.g. 'the drummer'). Like some disabled musicians that came before him such as Chick Webb, Django Reinhardt, and Ray Charles, Allen's disability is visible, and as a result, for many in the music-consuming public, his disability defines him more so than his musicianship. Such perceptions are typically tied to the tired trope of overcoming disability, which is rooted in an implicitly or explicitly held belief in a normal body,¹ and that it ought to conform to the built environment such as musical instruments, and more specifically in our case, the drum kit. In the case of music, this 'normal performance body' is above-average with regard to the musculature and dexterity needed to play an instrument.² Applying this theory to the drum kit, drummers are presumed to play their instrument with two hands and two feet.

In this chapter we examine the intersection of drumming and disability. Whilst Rick Allen is undoubtedly the most famous drummer with a disability, he is certainly not the only drummer with a disability. The World Health Organization estimates that fifteen percent of the global population have disabilities, and therefore by extension we can safely presume that many drummers do or will experience disability at some point in their lifetimes.³ By seeking to learn about the experiencers of other drummers with disabilities, the drumming community can broaden and deepen its understanding of how disabilities affect drumming, if at all. To this end, what began as a conversation initiated by Adam wanting to learn from Cornel about his experiences drumming as a person with disabilities

soon morphed into this co-authored chapter on drumming and disability. Our research process took the form of the following stages: First, we engaged in multiple semi-structured conversations to generate possible themes and topics to examine at the confluence of drumming and disability.⁴ These conversations were then transcribed to text and analysed for their most salient ideas. We mutually agreed upon how we would address or illustrate the key ideas we wish to communicate in this medium, and settled on the overarching concept of how disability, drumming, and the drum kit intersect with each other. Using narrative sections written by Cornel about his experiences as a drummer with a disability, we apply concepts from the field of disability studies to drum kit studies and consider the significance of our discussion for the drumming community at large.

We commence our chapter with a discussion of relevant concepts from the field of disability studies. We presume readers may not have engaged with disability studies literature, and therefore we provide a brief primer on core concepts from the field such as the medical and social models of disability, relevant critiques of these paradigms as they relate to drumming, and how they influence societal perspectives on drumming.

Drumming and Disability Studies

In the interest of brevity, our summary of disability studies as it relates to drumming is admittedly condensed. Our aim is to provide sufficient foundational information such that readers with little to no familiarity with the field of disability studies can grasp some of the basic concepts and terms employed throughout the chapter. As a starting point, both the terminology itself and the understandings of terms within the field of disability studies are contentious;⁵ it is like the jazz of academic fields: there is no resolve. Entering into the field of disability studies is less like wading into warm waters and more like a polar bear plunge: it is invigorating, awakening, and for some, a shock to the system. In Western societies, we tend to accept the idea that there are ‘average’ things such as bodies, but, ‘there is no such thing as average body size . . . Our modern conception of the average person is not a mathematical truth but a human invention’.⁶ Disability studies scholars point out that our conceptions of ‘average’ or ‘normal’ are unfounded yet continue to deeply influence our understanding of the construct of disability. During the nineteenth century, ‘Medical knowledge determined the boundaries between “normal” and “abnormal” individuals’ and by the end of that century, ‘the individual approach to disability located in medical knowledge was widely

accepted . . . It focused on bodily “abnormality”, disorder or deficiency and how this “causes” functional limitation or “disability”.⁷ This line of thinking that centres on the individual as disabled is what is commonly referred to as the *medical model of disability*.

In contrast, the *social model of disability*, takes aim at the failings of society to support people with *impairments* – bodily differences – which as a result leads to experiences of disability:

This approach does not deny the significance of impairment in disabled people’s lives, but concentrates instead on the various barriers, economic, political and social, constructed on top of impairment. Thus “disability” is not a product of individual failings but is socially created.⁸

Pitted as binary opposites, applying medical- and social-model thinking to drumming and disability lead to rather limiting understandings. In practice, if a drummer and drum kit are seemingly ergonomically incompatible, we do not attempt to adjust one or the other, we do both. Drumming is but one activity in a long list that exposes the inadequacy of either/or medical- and social-model thinking. More nuanced understandings based on peoples’ lived experiences help to make sense of disability theory, and we use examples from Cornel’s life as a drummer to highlight the importance of complexity and context. In particular, Tobin Siebers’ conception of ‘complex embodiment’ as a way of understanding disability as the result of both the effects of the environment *and* the effects of the body meshes well with Cornel’s perspectives on drumming and disability.⁹

Drumming, Disability, and Social Media

We proceed with a narrative by Cornel on how he has experienced others’ perceptions of him through his online presence on various internet and social media platforms. Notably, ‘while social media is becoming an increasingly important part of our lives, its impact on people with disabilities has gone largely unscrutinized’.¹⁰ By having Cornel present his perspective in the first person we gain valuable insights into his experience as a drummer with an online presence and how others’ perceptions of his disability are expressed to him and affect him.

Cornel: As a disabled person who was determined to escape the stereotypes of disability, for years I avoided what many people believed would be an obvious path for me; that is, to engage with and study disability, particularly when considering musicianship and drumming. As I became more serious about music, and as my musical presence (particularly online) became more known, I came to realise that further study into disability did not only increasingly pique my interest, but in fact became simply unavoidable. I was

on something of a musical 'quest' to be praised and scrutinised for my music alone, disability notwithstanding.

Particularly noticeable are the online comments stemming from two standpoints. The first of these is what I like to term 'inspiration at all costs'. This standpoint includes comments that are positive to the point of being disingenuous, completely ignoring the music itself, ignoring any aspect of playing ability, and simply addressing me as 'inspirational' due to my disability. Although not abusive in their nature, these comments carry undertones of me being inferior because of my disability. It seems that the fact that I do more than sit around being cared for by other people is enough to amaze people – the proficiency of my playing does not matter. These comments are indicative of the attitudes of a large online community towards disability: disability is primary, and music is secondary. This attitude highlights the concept of 'inspiration porn'¹¹ – the portrayal of people with disabilities as inspirational solely due to their disability. My musical ability is of a proficient standard (I have had professionals confirm this for me), yet I have been called inspirational for my ordinary daily activities (in extreme cases, being able to hold an apple whilst I ate it) as well as for my music. Placing these two activities under the same banner of 'inspiration' belittles the value of the one, and unduly elevates the value of the other. These types of 'inspiration at all costs' comments create a culture of disabled people existing for the sole purpose of being saint-like inspirations for non-disabled people. This attitude fuels an 'us and them'-type culture between disabled and non-disabled people and holds disabled people as 'serving' non-disabled people through simply living their lives. I do not play music to inspire people. I play music because I enjoy it, because I am motivated to improve my playing, and because I want to be taken seriously as a musician in the possible hope of a musical career in some capacity.

The second standpoint regarding online comments are the overtly negative perspectives, primarily perpetuated by internet trolls whom spread abusive comments relating to my disability. These consist of derogatory terms, ableist assumptions about my capabilities, and threats (although these have been incredibly rare). These negative comments do not move me in any particular way, positively or negatively. I do not spend much time dwelling on these because they have a negligible impact on my music and my overall views on disability. The other type of negativity stems from non-disabled musicians suggesting ergonomic improvements to my drum kit, reinforcing the belief that disabled people could not possibly know best about their own needs, requirements, and preferences. I have been painstakingly honing and experimenting with for over 16 years! This attitude is also exemplified in online comments from non-disabled people such as 'now I have no excuse not to play', implying that simply not having a disability is enough for a person to play an instrument, and play it better than the person with a disability.

Cornel's experiences of being the object of others' inspiration porn or trolling on social media highlight how difficult it is for him to be regarded solely as a drummer; instead, he is compartmentalized as a 'disabled drummer':

Cornel: My large online following knows me primarily as the disabled drummer (a combination of two aspects of my character). Musicians become known and identified by their art form. I am subject to a step further in external identification, by my art form, and by my disability. My disability does not constitute 100 percent of my identity; it occupies a very small percentage of my identity, but also, (surprisingly for some) neither does drumming. Drumming and playing music are huge passions of mine. There is nothing I would rather do professionally than play music every day. This is, however, something that I do, not who I am.

Cornel Plays 'Everlong'

Given that Cornel wishes his drumming to be perceived as something that he does as opposed to something that he is, we proceed with a description of how he plays his drum kit, which requires some contextualization. We begin with Cornel describing his disability and how it affects his drumming. Following, Cornel describes his approach to playing 'Everlong' (1997) by Foo Fighters, a rite of passage for many drummers as it requires considerable experience and practice to rival the performance of the original recording by Dave Grohl or the live performances of Taylor Hawkins. To the reader we pose this question: in the act of playing 'Everlong' on his drum kit, is Cornel disabled? From an auditory-only perspective, if the same notes are being played, there would be no way of knowing about Cornel's disability. But, in our visual-centric society, watching Cornel play his drums in addition to hearing him play them is integral to the listening experience. How we see Cornel play drums changes how we hear him play drums. As Cornel explains, understanding how he plays 'Everlong' necessitates not only a description of his performance, but also his disability and his drum kit:

To fully understand how I played this song, I believe it is important to understand two things at the outset: the nature of my physical disability, and my drum kit, which is tailored for my disability in a very individualized way.

My disability: The best way to describe my disability is multi-limb deficient. The most obvious manifestation of this is that my arms do not go below the elbow on either side. I have neither a left nor right elbow joint. I do however have a digit on my left side, which allows me to grip items (with a high degree of strength, as well as allowing for variation in that strength). In relation to drumming, this is where I hold one of my two drumsticks. On my

right arm, I have no digit, and in terms of drumming, my stick on this side is held on using a leather and Velcro strap, which allows for tightening and loosening; however, most of my dynamic stick control on my right side comes from a muscle in my right arm, which I relax and contract accordingly to vary dynamic control depending on the requirement of the piece that I am playing. A less obvious aspect of my disability is that I have had my right leg amputated above the knee, due to being born with a fully formed leg and foot being twisted around completely. I therefore wear a prosthesis, which has a functioning mechanical knee joint, socket, shin, and foot.

My Drum kit: My drum kit has not required any equipment modifications; rather, it has been a case of years of ergonomic adjustment and movement of various drums, cymbals, and other percussion variants. If one assumes a 'standard' right-handed drum kit consists of a drummer sitting with a snare drum between their legs, their left foot on the hi-hat pedal, their right foot on the bass drum pedal, with toms above the bass drum and floor tom to the right of the drummer, then my drum kit does not appear vastly different. The first, and arguably most important adjustment to my drum kit is the heights of my drums and cymbals. I am 180cm tall, yet I require my drum kit to be much higher for me. This is primarily because of the angle of attack on my drums, which is most obvious when considering my snare drum. Because my arms are shorter, I have less reach low down for a good angle of attack when my drums are too low, and often end up impacting the snare head almost with the top of the tip of my stick. Raising my drums means I have to reach a shorter distance lower, meaning I can angle my stick more effectively. The most obvious adjustment to my drum kit, however, is the positioning of my feet. Due to my prosthetic foot being less able to move quickly than my 'real' foot, I play with my left (real) foot on the bass drum, and right (prosthetic) foot on the hi-hat pedal for faster bass drum strokes. This means that I play angled facing to the right of my kit, with the hi-hat moved to the right hand side over the floor tom (instead of the 'typical' position over the snare), my left foot on the bass drum pedal, with the floor tom between my legs. This is a very comfortable drumming position for me. I am able to play a right-handed drum kit (I lead sticking with my right), yet utilise my faster moving, 'real' foot for bass drum strokes. Within this setup here lies an issue: the distance between the hi-hat cymbal and the snare drum is great, meaning that, for example, playing a fast 4/4 beat with 16th notes on the hi-hat interplaying with the snare is exceedingly difficult. To circumvent this issue, I have added another, closed set of hi-hats in the 'traditional' position left of my snare drum, to use for extra accents, as well as fast hi-hat/snare interplay. This is particularly conducive to playing songs such as 'Everlong'.

Drumming 'Everlong': I have chosen 'Everlong' by Foo Fighters to demonstrate the similarities (and indeed, differences) of how I play. The intro and verses of this song are played in 4/4, with fast 16th note hi-hats carrying the right-hand rhythm, with the snare played on 2 and 4 in the verses. The intro to this song, 16th notes on the hi-hats with a gradually

opening crescendo into the verses I play on my primary pair of hi-hats, controlled by my right foot on the pedal, to the right of my floor tom. It was learning to play this song on drums that encouraged me to devise a solution to the issue of reach between my hi-hat cymbals on the right, and my snare on the left. The solution was a secondary pair of hi-hats, closed with a clutch, on the left-hand side of the snare in the 'traditional' place. This allowed me to play the fast 16th note rhythm on the hats, whilst also managing not only the main snare beat on 2 and 4, but also to play fills, which interplayed these two parts of the drum kit. This is how I am able to play this beat effectively in the verses. As the song progresses, I experience fatigue in my left arm whilst playing the 16th notes, which usually sets in towards the end of the second verse. This is due to the unnatural position of my body whilst playing the secondary hi-hats, as I am twisting my whole body to reach and play this effectively. This fatigue is also especially prevalent in my upper arms and shoulders. Whereas most drummers would play fast single and roll strokes using wrist control, I am using the entirety of my arms and shoulders. I overcome this through regular practice and lifting weights. I notice that if I practice these motions even for a couple of hours one day, the next day I feel noticeably less fatigued when playing, especially concerning the fast 16th notes.

In the verses, my bass drum pattern is different from the original recording. Played with my left foot, I elaborate a little on the almost '4 on the floor' type bass drum rhythm that Dave Grohl plays on the original track. This is a stylistic variation to the song and does not concern my disability. My ability to play 4 on the floor or more complex bass drum patterns is not impacted simply because I play the bass drum with my left, 'real' foot, rather than my right, 'prosthetic foot'.

In the build-up crescendo from the verse to the pre-chorus, Grohl opens up his hi-hat foot pedal to create a louder, trashier-sounding build up to the verse. The hi-hats that I am using to play the main 16th notes rhythm are closed shut with a clutch; therefore, I compensate for this by striking the side of the closed cymbals (causing them to create some openness) with the thicker sides of my sticks, whilst increasing how hard I hit the cymbals, thus increasing volume.

The pre chorus I play very close to how Grohl played in the original recording, with the snare and crash-led fill leading into a 4/4 beat at the end of each subsection, played with bass drum, snare, and on my primary hi-hats situated to the right of the floor tom, playing 8th notes instead of 16ths. The same is true in the build to the chorus and the chorus itself. In the chorus, I switch to leading with 8th notes on the ride cymbal, interplaying with fills using the snare, bass, and crash. In these fills and in the main beat in the chorus, I noticeably use ghost notes and accents. I am able to do so using the digit on my left arm, controlling how strongly I hold the stick, allowing for a hard hit, light hit, single stroke, or multiple-stroke role. I achieve this with

the stick strapped to my right arm using the muscle in my arm which is in direct contact with the stick, contracting the muscle for harder, single stroke hits, and relaxing the muscle for ghost notes and multiple-stroke roles. This abruptly changes for the last couple of bars of the chorus, where I play an 8th note floor tom-led beat, before going straight back across my drum kit to the hi-hats to play the fast 16th notes into the second verse.

The entire song allows me to demonstrate a variety of drumming techniques, such as switching from 8th to 16th back to 8th notes, as well as fast single strokes, ghost notes, dynamic variation, and tightness of playing. Through minor ergonomic adjustments to my drum kit (higher drums and cymbals, as well as moving my primary hi-hat to the right hand side and adding a closed, secondary hi-hat on the left), I am able to play this, and other songs, perfectly capably, whilst adding improvised embellishments to various sections of the song.

Enacting Evolution on the Drum Kit

Considering Cornel's explication of his approach to drumming 'Everlong', it is clear that he engaged in a thoughtful and complex process to determine the optimal approach for himself to play this particular song. While Cornel's drum kit setup for 'Everlong' deviates from the supposed 'standard' drum kit configuration, the changes he makes to the standard configuration are less than those required by a left-handed drummer because the standard configuration presumes right-handedness. Despite this fact, in Cornel's experience, observers of his drumming tend to pay more attention to his body than his drum kit. Such a perspective exemplifies medical model thinking as the focus is on the individual as opposed to the environment (the drum kit in this case). Following, Cornel details how he is often compared to Rick Allen of Def Leppard, and explains why this comparison is problematic when we compare their respective approaches to playing the drum kit:

I am frequently compared to the drummer from Def Leppard, Rick Allen. On the surface, these comparisons appear obvious – we are both drummers with limbs missing. One does not have to dig too much deeper, however, to understand the flaws in this comparison, particularly when considering the ergonomics of a drum kit, as well as the vastly differing methods that Allen and myself have for playing drums. First and foremost, our circumstances are entirely different. I was born with no lower arms, and my right leg was amputated in my infancy (nearly a decade before I started playing drums). This means that all I have known is my disability. I have been aware of my capabilities and limitations for as long as I can remember and have adapted this to my drumming. I have never known what it was like to be a drummer playing the 'standard' way, with all four limbs fully formed and fully working.

The case of Rick Allen is vastly different. He was a drummer in an established rock band for many years before he acquired his disability and had to adapt his drumming after his arm was amputated. The second thing to consider is the vastly different natures of our disabilities. I have arms to my elbows, but no joints and no fully formed hands. I also only have one fully working leg, with my right leg being an above-knee amputation, on which I wear a prosthesis. Allen has one fully working arm and hand, but on the other side, has an amputation up to his shoulder joint, with no part of a working arm whatsoever. What Allen does have, however, is two fully-formed, fully working legs and feet, which appears to be the key to his drumming. With two working feet, Allen has adapted his drumming using an adjusted drum kit, which involves pedals not only for the bass drum and hi-hat cymbals, but for multiple drums too. This shows a distinct variation from the majority of other drum kits, which only have the two pedals (or maybe three if a double bass player or with multiple hi-hats and effects), therein lies an entirely unique ergonomic drum kit setup for Allen, but also, a completely individual way of playing. Allen's feet will be doing a lot of the work that a non-disabled drummer's hands would be doing, and so, a complete rethink of rhythm and playing would have been required as a complementary exercise to the ergonomic adjustments to Allen's drum kit. My drum kit setup is vastly different to Allen's in that its setup is remarkably similar to a 'typical' non-disabled drummer's setup. I use no uniquely crafted equipment to play. What is individual to my kit setup is the placement of the drums and cymbals. Last, but certainly not least, one should not assume that all ergonomic changes to drum kit setups made by disabled people are due to disability, as many I am sure will be stylistic.

Cornel has to adjust his drum kit to his body, but also adjust his body to his drum kit in order to play. Is this statement not true for any drummer? We forward that drumming inherently requires 'complex embodiment', a blend of medical and social model thinking about being in our environment (i.e. playing the drum kit). In comparison, many other musical instruments are much less modifiable and therefore either exclude a potential player due to bodily difference or demand the player adapt to it. And, while other musical instruments may be adapted or modified, they are often singled out for being just that, such as the one-handed bass guitar.¹² The drum kit requires no qualifying terms – there is no one-handed drum kit even though there are one-handed drummers.

The construct of a drum kit is in flux – it can take on many different configurations and be made of many different materials and yet be recognized and referred to simply as a drum kit. Why this might be is beyond the scope of this chapter, but we suspect that the drum kit's relative newness compared to other musical instruments that have arrived at fairly fixed designs over time helps to explain this phenomenon. At the

beginning of the twentieth century, all of the elements that comprise a drum kit as we now know it existed, but they were not played together by one person.¹³ The drum kit has a history of being amorphous and modular – components can be added or subtracted yet it will still be acknowledged by both drummers and non-drummers as a drum kit. Some of the technological advances of the drum kit have afforded evolved and new techniques,¹⁴ but for drummers with disabilities, it is often the necessity to deviate from the norm – not artistic aims nor the recognition of the possibilities afforded by new technologies – that drive innovation. While the modularity of the drum kit is an important factor in making it accessible to people with disabilities, how disabled drummers are able to adapt techniques, often in personalized ways, is also an important factor to consider.¹⁵ Not only does adapting tried-and-trusted techniques make playing the drum kit more accessible, it also challenges established ideas about technique and opens up previously undiscovered possibilities of the instrument. In this way, all drummers are engaged in a critical role of evolving the very conceptualization of the instrument itself because our instruments are extensions of ourselves.¹⁶

Final Fill: Conclusions

Am I a drummer? Am I a musician? Am I a disabled musician? Am I a combination of all of these things? Part of the problem that exists here is the disparity between other people's perceptions of my identity, and my own. CORNEL

Perhaps it is not possible to completely bridge the disparity of which Cornel speaks, but drummers can and will play a pivotal role in how the intersection of disability and drumming is perceived; it is imperative and inevitable. Given that 1 billion of the people on this planet will experience disability at some point in their lifetime, Cornel's case is not an anomaly. The specifics of Cornel's disability and how it affects his drumming may be unique, but the broader idea that drummers will experience disability playing the drum kit is not. Cornel's case exemplifies that, 'Having a disability is something that makes you different, but not something that by itself makes you worse off because of that difference. Being disabled is simply something that makes you a minority – it is a way of having a *minority body*'.¹⁷

Cornel's approach to playing 'Everlong' is different than that of Foo Fighters' Dave Grohl and Taylor Hawkins, but does this difference constitute 'disabled drumming'? Who decides? Whom does it affect? Why does it matter? These are questions that drummers need to contemplate both for themselves and for those they mentor. Kat Holmes observes, 'As we age,

we all gain and lose abilities. Our abilities change through illness and injury. Eventually, we all are excluded by designs that don't fit our ever-changing bodies'.¹⁸ As we have detailed, the infrastructure of the drum kit can potentially be changed to accommodate our ever-changing bodies. How far from the standard configuration of a drum kit can we deviate before we cross the undefined threshold of dis/ability? If we cannot adapt our drum kits to our changing bodies, can we adapt our drumming techniques? Aspiring to be a lifelong drummer demands an acceptance of the reality that our bodies change over time.

Beyond the physical, disability not only dictates how a drummer plays, but how a drummer is perceived. The drummer's identity hangs in the balance of public perception, be it on social media or elsewhere. A disability identity may be chosen by an individual, assigned by a government agency, or presumed by others – in all cases, disability identity, whether a drummer chooses it or not, affects how they are perceived as a drummer. Considering how disability affects drummers physically and socially, if we are not already, we drummers ought to be ever-conscious of our own complex embodiment, and continually contemplate how to navigate the intersection of disability, drumming, and the drum kit.

Notes

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