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# MODERN DRUMMER

The World's #1 Drum Magazine

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# PETE LOCKETT

For six years, the modern world-percussion master cleared his mind and his calendar and dedicated himself to studying Indian music. **Today every drummer with a curiosity about Eastern rhythms is richer for his experience.**

by Mike Haid

**A**t the weeklong 2009 East Meets West International Percussion Camp in Groznan, Croatia, British world percussion master Pete Lockett blindsided the unsuspecting students, dismantling their rhythmic vocabularies and overloading their already swollen brains with his advanced concepts of Indian rhythms. It was merely another stop on his lifelong quest to single-handedly change the way the drumming world looks at rhythm.

During his career Lockett has collaborated with a plethora of notable drummers throughout the world, including heavyweights such as Bill Bruford and Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez. An amazing drumset player in his own right, Lockett has also mastered many world percussion instruments, including tabla, taiko, kanjira, darbuka, and ghatam. He's an expert at Konokol, the art of Indian vocal percussion. And his constant stream of session dates, world tours, clinics, festival performances, and solo projects is enough to put your average workaholic to shame.

Lockett's most recent book, *Indian Rhythms For Drumset*, is the golden key to unlocking the mysterious and highly advanced rhythmic art of Indian drumming. *MD* spoke with the jovial and witty percussionist at the East Meets West Camp during a break from the otherworldly rhythmic lessons he was laying on us.



**MD:** Talk about your initial concept of incorporating Indian rhythms into traditional Western drumset playing.

**Pete:** It's about vision, in a sense. Originally I was a drumset player. Then I started to learn the tabla, thinking it would give me some new rhythmic ideas for the drumset. But it didn't end up happening like I had expected. It was so abstract. Everything was so different. The way you play the tabla, the way the rhythm works...

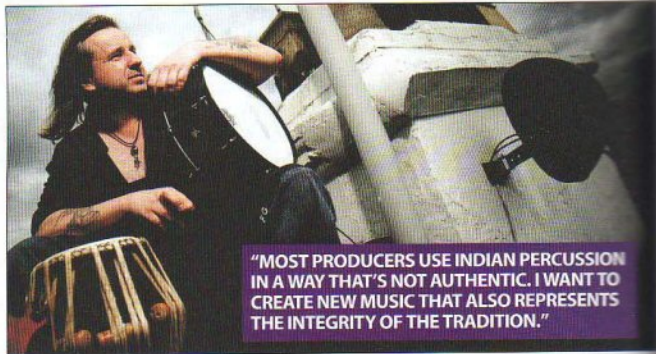
For instance, there is a predominant backbeat in most Western music. But when you go to Africa, India, Japan, or the Middle East, none of that music is backbeat driven. It's lyrical-phrase driven. For that reason, it was very hard to imagine any way I could employ Indian ideas on the drumset. So it became a separate study for many years.

For six years, that's all I did. I didn't gig. I didn't do *anything*. I just learned North and South Indian music. When I'd accumulated so much common parlance of the instruments and the rhythmic repertoire, I could slowly start to see different ways of putting it all together. I realized that what I had to do is restructure all of the material that I'd gotten from North and South India. It partly came about from my educational practices, like the workshops where I would teach people the basics of the rhythm and then develop ways to orchestrate those ideas on the drumset.

After having gone through that whole journey, at the end of the day I realized that what we're talking about are phrases and how we look at time. When I'm asked how I play in odd time signatures in Indian music, I say it's the same as playing in 4/4. The phrases may be divided into odd numbers, but it's the combination of phrases that creates the rhythm. So the important thing is learning the phrases and building grooves from them and then creating lyrical patterns.

**MD:** Can you go a little deeper into incorporating Indian phrases into the drumset?

**Pete:** For me it's an amalgamation of North and South Indian music, because they're as different as rock and jazz in many ways. It all starts with the phrases. That's how I've structured my book *Indian Rhythms For Drumset*. I start



**"MOST PRODUCERS USE INDIAN PERCUSSION IN A WAY THAT'S NOT AUTHENTIC. I WANT TO CREATE NEW MUSIC THAT ALSO REPRESENTS THE INTEGRITY OF THE TRADITION."**

with a five-beat phrase, then go to a seven-beat phrase, and then modulate from there. Then I put it all in 4/4 so the whole thing becomes a practical exercise. It's not foreign ground at all for drumset players. The whole modulation concept that Gavin Harrison uses is very similar. This is simply how you can approach the same concept with Indian rhythms.

**MD:** Is your concept to re-orchestrate the various percussion instruments on specific parts of the drumkit?

**Pete:** No, I look at the phrases as abstract linear entities. Then I impose

very simple stickings and orchestrations on the drumset to create the phrases. Then, instead of taking blocks of 16ths, I've stripped them into rhythmic units—for instance, taking a group of five 16th notes and dividing them between the bass drum and snare to create a pattern. It's all about building your patterns around the rhythmic units. So you start with a unit such as nine-nine-nine-five, looking at that unit as a sticking pattern. Then look at it as a paradiddle-based groove. It's not like a specific syntax, where every "na" is a snare drum. Others have tried to use that concept for



the drumset. I think, beyond using three syllables, it doesn't work.

**MD:** How would the three-syllable concept work for drumset?

**Pete:** The three syllables come from the tabla. They are "na," which is the high-pitched note on the small drum; "ghe," which is the open sound on the bass drum; and "dha," which is both sounds together. You can create any two-handed independence pattern with those three syllables. It's an easy way to learn independence. I've tested it on people, and it works so much better than seeing the two lines written and trying to read them.

**MD:** Do you feel it's important for a drummer to learn to speak the syllables before trying to apply the rhythms to the drumset?

**Pete:** It's a finite thing, because there are really only five syllables that I use in the book, which are the main units that all South Indian rhythms are built from. But once you learn the syllables, it's a really useful tool. For example, when I hear an odd phrase, I immediately find the syllables that fit the phrase, and I can quickly subdivide the

phrase based on the syllables. It's a fantastic tool.

**MD:** You're one of the first Western drumset players to really bring Indian rhythmic concepts to the forefront of Western drumming from a true Indian master's reference.

**Pete:** I'm not saying that my Indian rhythms will change the world. What I do is just a doorway. But when you look at the depth of what Zakir Hussain and the Indian masters have reached, it's completely frightening. What they are able to do is from a different planet.

**MD:** Your ability to master both the art of Indian drumming and the art of Indian vocal percussion, or Konokol, is rare, even in Indian culture.

**Pete:** Most South Indian percussionists don't master the art of Konokol. They develop a rough version but usually don't master it. In North India, tabla recitation isn't specifically an art form in its own right. Sometimes you'll hear Zakir and his father recite a composition in the middle of a tabla solo. But it's not a solo thing in the way that it is in South India, where Konokol is actually a part of the percussion group.

I really focused on it and spent a lot of time learning it.

**MD:** So mastering the art of Konokol has been beneficial in helping you dissect odd rhythms?

**Pete:** Yes, it's an amazing tool. And counting with your fingers is extremely helpful. It's good to learn the syllables with clapping cycles as well, so you're also pitching the rhythm against the quarter points of your clapping cycle and the syllables. Time cycles and phonetic recitations are very important aspects of Indian music.

**MD:** How do classical Indian percussion masters feel about having their rhythmic approach incorporated into Western drumset playing?

**Pete:** If you go to England and speak to classical Indian musicians, you'll find people with very closed minds, because they're about four generations removed from India. Their families may have come through Kenya or another African country, and they've held onto values that are way out of date. When you go to India and hang out with the young players, they're very open-minded. They want to explore. There are not many drummers who play Indian stuff that most Indians would hear anyway. Steve Smith is among the few Western drummers really doing anything with Indian rhythms.

My feeling is that they love it. Everything I've done has been very well received in India. I'm releasing CDs on Indian labels that also feature classical Indian music. And they're releasing CDs with me collaborating with Indian musicians. I want to create new music that also represents the integrity of the tradition. Most producers use Indian percussion in a way that's not authentic. There's no true integration of musical styles. I put a lot of effort into putting an authentic angle on the music while also including electronics and sound design.

**MD:** At what point in your career did you feel ready to establish yourself as a serious Indian percussionist?

**Pete:** I got an offer from the British Council to tour the world. The idea was to go out with a couple of local musicians from England, spend a couple of weeks in each country rehearsing with local traditional musicians, and then

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perform with them. When I came to India, I had already learned some of the local music of the region. It's very intense music, similar to learning authentic Cuban music. So when I got there I decided to seek out the top percussionists of the region to find out if I was really ready to hang with the heavyweights.

I decided to really push the boundaries and do some shows with V. Selvaganesh, who's the leading frame drum player of his generation. You can't sit on stage with players of that caliber

if you don't have it together, because they will eat you alive. Luckily it was very well received. Bickram Ghosh, who is Ravi Shankar's tabla player, said to me that I had entered at a very high level and was immediately accepted. That tour was seven or eight years ago. I made a conscious effort about three years ago, after getting my foot in the door, to target India and see what happens. It's worked out well. I've done numerous tours and solo gigs and have recorded eight albums.

**MD:** You seem to be everywhere in the

international drumming community as well, with multiple collaborations under your belt.

**Pete:** Yes, I recently recorded an album with Airtio in Calcutta. I also did a track with Mark Schulman for his new DVD. I've collaborated with Nicko McBrain from Iron Maiden. I performed with Steve Smith at the Montreal Drum Festival. And I'll be working with Russ Miller in Holland. I also enjoyed my duet with Benny Greb on his [*Language Of Drumming*] DVD.

I also just improvised with Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez for the first time, and it was fantastic! Instead of discussing ideas of playing Indian rhythms or Afro-Cuban rhythms, I wanted to just improvise to see what we could create, to just sit in the middle and see what happens. It was a special moment, like breaking bread with a new friend. We are now collaborating on a piece that El Negro is sending to Giovanni Hidalgo to record with us.

**MD:** What have you found to be the major technical advantages of incorporating the Indian rhythmic system into drumset playing?

**Pete:** I think not just in terms of incorporating it into drumset playing, but into the whole of the percussion world. It allows me to incorporate new techniques on different instruments. Like with the darbuka, I use ghatam technique. Or I'll use ghatam or tabla technique on darbuka. Sometimes I'll use tabla technique on bongos.

So for me it's all about the whole cross-fertilization thing, of not just the rhythmic system but also the technique. The intricate finger techniques for a percussion player are immense. I was vocalizing some rhythms to El Negro, and he asked how you could ever play them with sticks. I explained to him that it was very possible with the proper stickings. Obviously with single strokes it wouldn't sound very interesting, but with the correct single- and double-stroke combinations it wouldn't be complicated at all to interpret many of the Indian rhythms—certainly less complicated than several of the major rudiments.

**MD:** How did you approach the conversion of Indian rhythmic patterns into your drumset examples for *Indian Rhythms For Drumset*?

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**Pete:** I wanted to make sure the examples I played were very simple. I didn't want it to be a showcase of drum technique. I wanted to play the simplest possible variants of rhythm as examples so it would allow people the freedom to create their own ideas within those building blocks. I wanted my drumset orchestrations to be simple examples of the basic units.

**MD:** When producers call you for soundtrack, film score, and jingle work, do most of them hire you because of your knowledge of Indian rhythms?

**Pete:** Absolutely not. I wear many dif-

ferent hats in the studio. Most producers want sounds. Even in my own music, I'm most interested in making new sounds. I make a lot of my own sound samples. I've chopped a ride cymbal up and tied all the bits together. What an amazing, fantastic sound! It's a matter of putting those sounds and frequencies together in the same way that you'd think about the drumset, between the bass drum, hi-hat, snare.... I work with the frequencies to try and make the music sound interesting. Although people don't book me because of my knowledge of Indian rhythms, my

rhythmic repertoire has increased immensely because of it.

**MD:** As you said earlier, so far Steve Smith is one of the few Western drummers to really explore Indian rhythms on the drumset.

**Pete:** Praxis and poiesis is one of my main guiding philosophies in music. Poiesis is an action that contains a goal outside of itself. For example, you're playing music to become famous. You're playing music to make loads of money. Praxis is an action that contains its own goal. You're playing drums because you love playing drums. You've got to have business sense to earn a living, but your main reason for playing is because you love the instrument and you love to play. Steve Smith is a classic example of that. He loves learning new things for the drumset. It inspires him, he's excited by it, and he's moved to action by it. He's possessed with learning new stuff and bettering his skills. He's taken the awareness of Indian rhythms and is moving it forward, as are Benny Greb and Russ Miller.

**MD:** Do you see music as a language?

**Pete:** I consider music a language in as much as I want to be able to improvise with it. As we speak now, I'm improvising with my limited knowledge of the English language. To me, music's the same. You learn as much of the syntax and formalities of the music and the technique as you can, and then you use that to improvise. That's why I don't do any specifically classical Indian music anymore. That was simply part of the learning process for me. These are all tools to develop my rhythmic voice. That's also why I don't play Western classical music. I have no interest in playing specific things off the written page in a classical idiom. I just don't see the art in that.

**MD:** You're a great drumset player. Why do you choose not to add drumset playing to your repertoire?

**Pete:** I do have a Trilok Gurtu-type kit that I use quite often, which I prefer to the traditional drumset. The "hand kick" is like a sub-808 type of thing, very closely miked. I like that approach in the sense that you're limited to using your hands. I feel closer to the hands-only kit than the traditional kit. I like the small, compact jungle snare. If you listen to the recorded examples from the book, none



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of them are recorded with sticks. I use Pro-Mark Lightning Rods.

I don't like the sound of sticks on drums. It's too aggressive for me. With sticks and traditional drums, it seems to be either jazz-led in technique and style, or it's driven by the backbeat. With my hands-only kit I get different phrasings, so I can do more tabla-like things between the hands, like Trilok does. It's a very different sound. If you apply Indian drum techniques to the hands-only kit, you get different-sounding ideas. I use the hands-only kit a lot in India. It's really good musically because you're forced to play much simpler parts than you'd play at the full drumset.

**MD:** What makes up the kit?

**Pete:** It's a 14" bass drum, 12" snare, and 10" and 12" toms, all very shallow in depth. The low drums are from left to right. It's the same tonal position as the tabla, so I can use those types of patterns in my playing. I also like using the Zildjian cymbals that you can play by hand, like the Azuka models and various gongs.

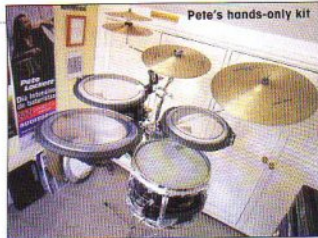
**MD:** What are your thoughts on the tonal quality and feel of traditional

handmade percussion as opposed to modern-day percussion that the major companies are putting out?

**Pete:** Certain instruments, such as tabla, you can never replicate. I don't think any company could make a tabla that could compete with the original. One of the most impractical things about many of the traditional instruments is that the skins are very susceptible to the effects of the weather. And many of them have bizarre and awkward tuning systems, especially African drums, things like fish-skin darbuka, and most notably the kanjira, which is made with very thin lizard skin. When you play it, you have to put water inside the drum to control the pitch. The company making the greatest strides in quality replication of the original instruments is Remo. They make a kanjira that sounds stunning; it's tunable, and the skin looks authentic. The new Remo darbuka is amazing as well. The fish skin looks real, and it sounds and feels like a professional drum.

**MD:** What do you hope to accomplish with your *Indian Rhythms* book?

**Pete:** I want to open the door and completely demystify the concept behind



Indian rhythms. You're not going to read the book and become Zakir Hussain. But you will learn how the rhythm system works, and what you can do with it. It's like a book of new rhythmic grammar. It's intended to offer rhythmic cells for any instrument, including guitars, keyboards, and horns. You can also orchestrate, and then interpret, these rhythms on any instrument. That's the ultimate goal, to orchestrate and interpret. In fifty years' time, every drumset player will incorporate Indian rhythm as a common part of his or her study. I give the Pete Lockett guarantee on that one!

Go to [modern drummer.com](http://modern drummer.com) to check out what Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez and Bill Bruford have to say about Pete Lockett's groundbreaking work.



### Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez on Pete Lockett

Coming from an Afro-Cuban background, I'm always very eager to play with other percussionists. Pete Lockett is not just a master Indian percussionist. He also has a Western music background that is very together. I would call Pete a world percussion master, with a vast knowledge of rhythm in general.

It's always exciting to have the surprise element of playing with somebody for the first time without any kind of rehearsal. It was very inspiring to play Afro-Cuban rhythms along with the sound of the tabla. And Pete knew how to swim in our waters. He gave the rhythm a brand-new sound. And it gave me a brand-new way of hearing percussion inside my own music. It's a very different way of phrasing, and it's a totally different sound that we've never had in our music.

Pete and I are now going to collaborate and work out some new rhythms, because you can see that there is a very vast rhythmic palette to work from, not just from the sound of the instruments, but because of Pete's rhythmic knowledge. It's a great demonstration that time is universal. No matter where you come from, the pulse of the music is always the same.

### Bill Bruford on Pete Lockett

You're never going to meet anyone quite like Pete Lockett, with that kind of ability and energy. He's a force of nature. He's been taken to the bosom of some of the highest-caliber classical Indian percussionists, who want to share their art form with him.

Pete is persistent. He deserves all the success he has. His career has really rocketed since 1998, when he and I recorded [the One album by] the percussion quintet Network Of Sparks. I believe Pete and I are kindred spirits in that we both stem from the idea that modern pop rhythms in the West are rather dull with 2-4, up-down. Everything attached to that is cosmetic, but any way you skin it, it remains 2-4. Pete knows that life can be so much more interesting for us drummers in the West. Once you see the musical light from the point of view of someone like Pete, who has a very advanced sense

of Indian rhythm, there are all kinds of interesting things you can bring to Western pop music.

Pete does big movie scores. When you see James Bond running through a Vietnamese marketplace, knocking all the vegetable stands over, you're hearing Pete in the background. He knows the origin of the instruments and finds the music of other cultures much more interesting than ours. And I have to agree. If I tried to do anything at all in my drumming career, it was to try to bring other things into dull pop. Pete and I come at it from different angles, but we are both aware that there are some wonderful rhythms out there.

What I also love about Pete is that he is the ultimate world traveling, one-man percussion lesson/concert. In other words, for readers who don't know of Pete's talents, he can do a two-hour solo show, no problem, with lights, unbelievable electronics, and audio backdrops. He could easily do a two-hour lecture on Indian vocal rhythms and clapping. He could do a two-hour lecture on tabla. He can thrill anybody in any town square pretty much anywhere in the world with kanjira, which is a small instrument. He has the whole frame-drum thing down. He has the tabla thing down. He plays rock drums like crazy. He's released books on rock drumming and now has released the amazing Indian Rhythms For Drumset educational package. He's a really valuable character, doing really valuable work.

I think in twenty-five years' time, kids will be learning Indian classical rhythms and learning to vocalize them and clap in the Indian tradition as much as they'll be doing Western drum rhythms for their basic drum instruction. I think the world will be a whole lot better place as a result of that. And I think everybody will say, "Oh, I remember Pete Lockett started all this."