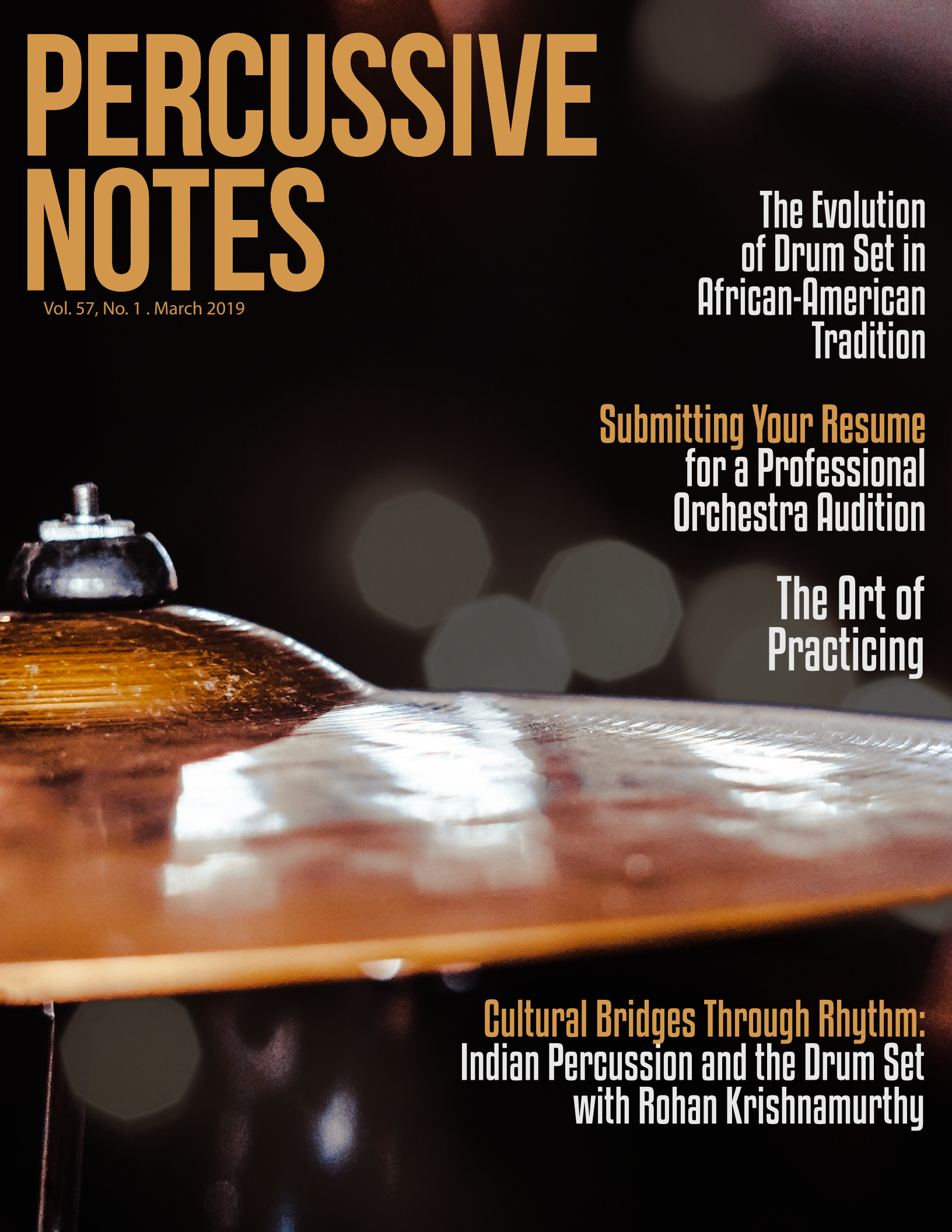


# PERCUSSIVE NOTES



Vol. 57, No. 1 . March 2019

The Evolution  
of Drum Set in  
African-American  
Tradition

Submitting Your Resume  
for a Professional  
Orchestra Audition

The Art of  
Practicing

Cultural Bridges Through Rhythm:  
Indian Percussion and the Drum Set  
with Rohan Krishnamurthy



# Cultural Bridges Through Rhythm:

## Indian Percussion and the Drumset with Rohan Krishnamurthy

By Craig Woodson

**A**claimed a “musical ambassador” and “pride of India” by the *Times of India*, Indian-American percussionist, composer, and educator Rohan Krishnamurthy imagines new musical intersections to bridge diverse cultures and communities. Rohan’s cross-genre artistry draws from his formal study of south Indian classical *Carnatic* music, at once propagating the ancient tradition and expanding it across global genres.

Rohan has shared the stage with the leading artists of Indian classical music and spearheaded collaborations with orchestras, jazz ensembles, and Grammy Award-winning musicians.

An acclaimed educator, Rohan earned a Ph.D. in musicology from the Eastman School of Music. He has presented and taught at renowned institutions, including the Eastman, Harvard, Munich Conservatory, Kyoto University, and A.R. Rehman’s K.M. Conservatory of Music in Chennai. He teaches in the Music Department at Ohlone College in the San Francisco Bay Area and directs the award-winning RohanRhythm Percussion Studio. An innovator, Rohan patented a new drumhead tuning system, which was outlined in *Percussive Notes* in 2006. His design was supported by Eastman’s Institute for Music Leadership and is now available worldwide.

I have had the privilege of knowing Dr. Krishnamurthy for well over a decade and discussing his innovations at every stage. His latest development is the hybrid kit, an ambitious undertaking uniting jazz and funk drumset with Carnatic percussion, and integrating stick and hand drumming more broadly. I spoke to him about this new, trendsetting percussion paradigm.

**Craig Woodson:** What inspired you to bridge the distinct worlds of Carnatic percussion and drumset?

**Rohan Krishnamurthy:** Even though I grew up in the small town of Kalamazoo, Michigan, my first musical language was Indian classical. I spent

much of my childhood immersed in the vast repertoire, culture, and tradition of Carnatic music, including many years of study with India-based maestro Sri. Guruvayur Dorai. During this time, I found myself not only experimenting with ideas on the mridangam, but also with other cross-genre rhythms. Coming from a musical family and living in an American context, I was exposed to many styles of music through live concerts and recordings. Still, I always had an interest in finding connections between even the most seemingly unrelated genres.

While I studied Indian percussion, I was also always fascinated by the drumset—its range of timbres and dynamics, its role as the foundation of so many styles of music, and its immediate power to move people. I spent countless hours exchanging ideas with my friend, Ryan Andrews, a fantastic

drumset player and composer. We performed across the Midwest and recorded a global percussion album. During this time, I was also exposed to the pioneering work of Trilok Gurtu, who creatively bridged the North Indian Hindustani tabla with drums. I thought that something like this could be done with Carnatic percussion, too.

My college percussion professor, Mark Guthrie, formally introduced me to the drums, sticking techniques, and Western classical percussion. By this time, my performance career as an Indian classical musician was taking me across the country and India, solidifying the foundations of my cross-genre outlook. I moved to San Francisco after completing my doctorate at Eastman and reached out to Alan Hall, an amazing Bay Area drummer teaching at the California Jazz Conservatory. He graciously accepted me as his student



PHOTO BY JULE SPARENBURG

and has been pivotal in shaping my drumset skills and hybrid kit setup. It was a new path for both of us, and we were charting our own course. A dual focus on traditional drumset techniques and new experiments for hybrid kit kept things exciting.

I was also fortunate to receive inspiration from pioneering Tower of Power drummer David Garibaldi, who's based in the Bay. He opened my eyes to the manifold approaches of translating Indian percussion to the drums. As I developed these techniques, I realized that one general approach is to start with a hi-hat/snare/bass drum core, and add each level of detail layer-by-layer. Another more literal approach is to map each specific sound of the mridangam, for example, to a part of the drumset. The translation process is complex and involves so much more than the basic rhythm.

**CW:** *Combining instruments and styles can lead to exciting new sounds, but the path is uncharted, as you say, and the process can be complicated. Can you describe some of the most exciting and challenging aspects in developing the hybrid kit?*

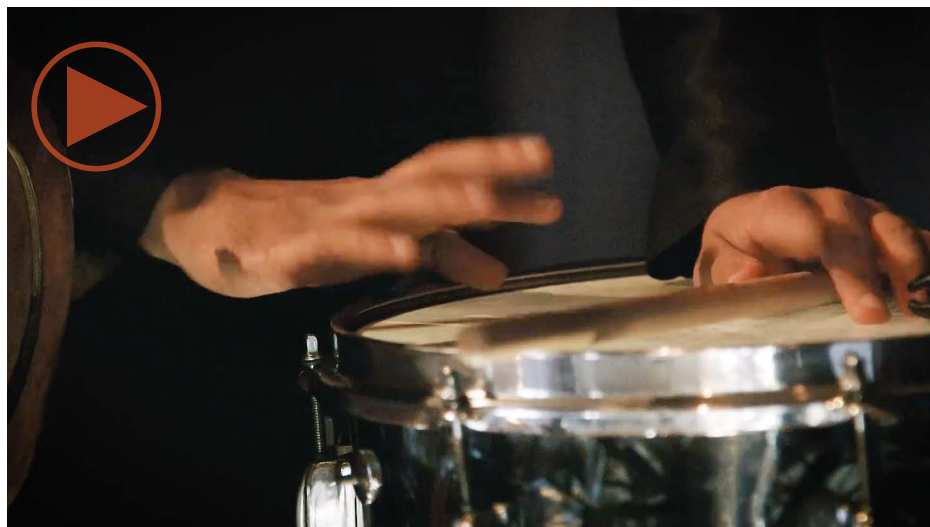
**RK:** Coordination! I have experimented with several hybrid kit setups for different musical contexts. Certain setups allow for more back-and-forth between drums and percussion, while others enable an integrated hybrid flow. I often keep the mridangam in the middle where the snare would traditionally be. Mounting the mridangam on a snare stand allows me to maintain eye contact with artists who are sitting on chairs or standing. With the mridangam mounted in the middle, the snare drum can be to the left, and I still have full access to it. I might have a floor tom to my right or another Indian percussion instrument such as a *ghatam* clay drum mounted on a snare stand. With this configuration, I have a smooth flow through the entire set and I can explore new textures, such as one hand/one stick and feet, two hands and feet, and two sticks and feet. A *khanjira* frame drum and *konnakol* vocal percussion can also be easily incorporated into the setup without additional mounting. Again, the hybrid setup can be customized and optimized to the demands of the musical context.

In a broader sense, the hybrid kit experience is like being multilingual. When you're proficient in multiple languages, you can find natural and seamless connections to code-switch and create hybrid linguistic styles, often subconsciously. If you feel a rhythm or idea, you can use whatever tools you have to express it—hands, sticks, feet, etc. The more techniques you have at your fingertips, the closer you can come to expressing it. As David would tell me, "Keep reaching for what you're hearing."

**CW:** *I'm sure many drummers and percussionists will want to experiment with their own hybrid kits. What advice do you have for them to adapt your approach?*

**RK:** The best way to explore hybrid possibilities in a nuanced and aesthetic way is to learn multiple

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Cycles. Video by Max Savage



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traditions. Deciding what timbres to combine and when to combine them requires careful thought. But there are many levels of hybridization. For example, I've experimented with playing Indian split finger techniques and rhythmic repertoire on the snare drum with my hands while also having the freedom to use my feet on the bass drum and hi-hat. This hand-on-snare technique creates a bright and full sound that blends naturally with traditional drumset and jazz instrumentation. For hand drummers, playing a drum with both hands and experimenting with the feet can be an eye-opening, polyrhythmic experience.

A relatively easy way to start is regularly marking beats with the hi-hat. You can also explore playing with both hands on a drum over a simple foot ostinato, or naturally accenting a low tone on a drum with the bass drum. Finally, there is the approach of playing Indian rhythms—grooves, phrases, embellishments, and compositions—with the traditional kit that doesn't require any additional instruments. Many students have shown an interest in learning these hybrid approaches and are already brainstorming creative ways to customize it to their musical world.

At its core, the hybrid approach comes down to cultural humility and responsiveness. Every system of music has its own immense repertoire, techniques, and culture that can be unfamiliar and complex. It takes courage to be a beginner when you're already proficient in something else; the master becomes the apprentice all over again. But with the right mindset and community of supporters, learning something new with an open mind can be one of the most rewarding experiences.

**CW:** *In what musical contexts do you envision the hybrid kit?*

**RK:** The possibilities are endless! Last year, I had the opportunity to tour across India as part of the Park Festival Tour with my friend and Carnatic singer Roopa Mahadevan. I created a hybrid kit consisting of a cajon with a bass drum pedal, along with mridangam, snare, hi-hat, and cymbals. This setup worked perfectly for the Carnatic and cross-genre repertoire that we performed, blending jazz, R&B, and soul.

I am also leading a new endeavor called The Alaya Project, in which I play hybrid kit along with my good friends Prasant Radhakrishnan on saxophone and Colin Hogan on keyboard and accordion. The Alaya Project is a rhythm lab for interdisciplinary experimentation with amazing friends who I've been performing with for over 20 years. I composed original tunes for The Alaya Project to highlight how diverse hybrid kit textures can be used in the space between contemporary jazz, funk, and Carnatic. I'm excited to share these new ideas and sounds, and I am equally eager to see what other artists come up with on their hybrid setups. This is just the beginning!

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Changing 5s. Video by Max Savage

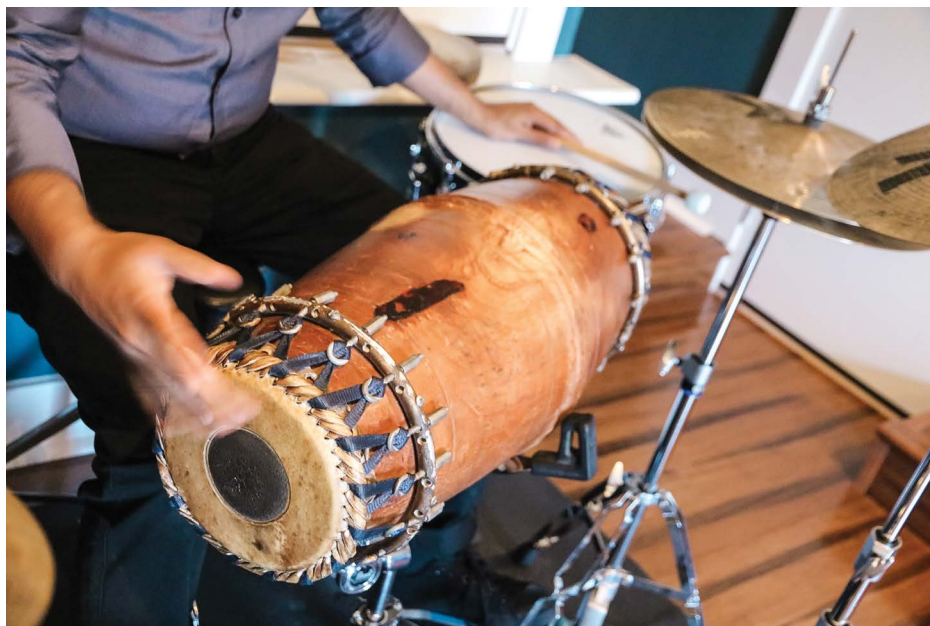


PHOTO BY JULIE SPARENBERG

**Craig Woodson** is an Applied Ethnomusicologist/percussionist with a Ph.D. from UCLA. His company [www.ethnomusicinc.com](http://www.ethnomusicinc.com) (1976–present) is a world music consultancy specializing in the development and presentation of educational programs that feature making simple musical instruments with young people. A professional drumset player and teacher since 1960, he has performed in jazz, rock, and world music bands (Greek, Israeli, African), on T.V., and in movies. His M.A. thesis is on the solo jazz techniques of Tony Williams (UCLA, 1973). In 2004 he wrote a curriculum, [www.rootsofrhythm.net](http://www.rootsofrhythm.net), that includes a chapter on drumset playing for teachers. He currently directs and teaches a program called “Drum Set in the Classroom” for the Percussion Marketing Council, [www.playdrums.com](http://www.playdrums.com), which is supported by grants from the NAMM Foundation. He has been a consultant to the Remo Company for over 20 years. **PN**