

## A Slice of Time

### A. This Boy (Ringo's Theme)

There was little demand for fat, unathletic kids in West Hartford, Connecticut in 1964. Your options were basically limited to reading. I adored Norse mythology. I still remember my teacher actually *rolling her eyes* when I eagerly informed the class that the day "Friday" was named after the Norse goddess Frigg, who was basically in charge of marriage, prophecy, clairvoyance and motherhood. Will you be shocked when I tell you that neither she nor anyone else in the class gave a fuck?

The only football I could play were those tabletop games where a buzzing metal surface sent hunched plastic players on little brushes scrambling crazily around the board. Oh, and by the way? It really had almost nothing to do with real football, and everything to do with toy companies soaking parents for a very low-tech solution that seemed high tech, in that you had to plug it into the wall. If you got this for Christmas, you played it for a week and then it was exiled to the basement closet. Your mom threw it away about 5 years before its vintage value would have given you a semi-decent head start on your first car.

Baseball you say? I could barely hit a wiffleball, much less a hardball thrown (at your head, natch) by a sneering, sinewy Little Leaguer. Back in Ward Cleaver's America, boys had only one or two lanes in which to travel. Clearly, I was screwed.

That is, until February 9, 1964. I had vaguely heard about this in the weeks leading up to this night. Some English band who called themselves “The Beatles” (bugs?) were going to be on Ed Sullivan. My family all huddled around our Admiral console black and white TV with the cane-grilled speaker.

When Ed introduced “THE BEATLES”, and they burst into “All My Loving”, everything changed. It was as if the impossibly heavy door to my future silently revolved around a tiny, jeweled bearing, and opened up the previously hidden passage to my future and my identity. Who needed sports? I wanted to be like Those Guys. I wanted to be a rock and roller. And, most specifically, I wanted to be a drummer.

I wasted no time, but you have to know that my resources were extremely limited to what was on hand in the garage, basement and kitchen. I built a faux drum set out of paper plates. Some old 2x4’s were my “cymbal” stands. And, most adorably, I wrote the word “Libby” on the front of my “kick drum”<sup>1</sup>, unaware that Ringo’s set actually said “Ludwig”.<sup>2</sup> In my defense, please note that back in 1964, Libby Foods cut a pretty wide swath through any supermarket, with their syrupy fruit cocktail being especially memorable, and not in a good way.

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<sup>1</sup> *Libby's*

<sup>2</sup> *Ludwig*

My grandmother, the West Hartford Duchess of Indulgence, took me to Sears a few months later, where I bought my very first 45 single: “If I Fell” b/w “And I Love Her”. I still have it. Before we got to Sears, though, we had to stop at my Uncle Moe’s laundromat. I vividly remember a hand painted sign on the wall directing customers to remove objects from their clothes’ pockets before washing, such as coins, combs, and—I’m not making this up—bullets.<sup>3</sup>

My parents were perhaps impressed at my resourcefulness, but decidedly less than enthusiastic about any actual drumming taking place in the house. Two years of low-grade whining, and tactical use of my grandmother’s generosity, landed me an Emenee Big Bash snare drum<sup>4</sup>. It sounded like the piece of trash that it was, devoid of the *snap!* that a good snare drum needs. But: baby steps.

Denied a drum set for my bar mitzvah present from my parents,<sup>5</sup> I cleverly worked the system by using some of the money I received to buy, yes, a used **Ludwig** blue sparkle drum set. Hey Ringo, over here! It’s me, the fat kid!

## B. Tiny Pieces

Once the blue sparkle kit was mine, my parents relented and let me take lessons. The kit resided in my bedroom, and frankly traumatized my miniature schnauzer, Alfie (not to mention

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<sup>3</sup> This still kills me.



<sup>4</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “Wouldn’t you really like some skis instead?”

everyone else in the house). It got to the point where if I *touched* a cymbal, Alfie would grumbly leave the room.

I always knew I had rhythm in me. I could always hit the beat but playing to songs was something else altogether. So: lessons.

My teacher, Glen, taught me the basics, but there were a couple milestones that I had to hit before I could really begin doing anything that sounded like other than chaotic bashing. First, you may be surprised to know that about 90% of all rock songs are a basic beat in a variation of 4/4 time. That means that your right hand plays eight notes on a cymbal or hi-hat: If you count it out, it goes one-and-two-and-three-and-four-and... . Then, *on top of that*, most songs would be happy if you hit your snare on the two and four beat. I'll show you guys when I see you, but at first, it's like rubbing your tummy and patting your head. A lot of false starts and "wait...". Then, as if that weren't hard enough, go ahead and kick the kick drum pedal on the ones and threes. The concept is basically trying to achieve complete four limb independence, and the quest for that is both eternal and Sisyphean.

After a few weeks of practice, I triumphantly bounded into Glen's studio and proudly showed him that I had mastered this. At home, I realized that this basic rock beat could pretty much work for most Beatles/British Invasion/AM radio songs.

But then came a real test, and this one did not come nearly so easy. Any boob can do a single stroke roll. Although it sneakily begins on an off-beat, the drum intro that kicks off "Born to Run" like a cyclone is a single stroke roll.

Ah, but Glen said. You must learn the double stroke roll. That consists of hitting *2 beats* per stroke, bouncing the stick twice before repeating it on the other hand. It's one of those seemingly impossible things to do, but something you have to master before you can go much further. Glen suggested that I just watch TV, with my rubber practice pad, and go slowly. Then, I was to speed up slowly until the sticks are sort of floating in my hands and above the pad. "Let's see how you do in 2 weeks."

I practiced like a lunatic. At about day 12, it clicked. I walked into the studio:

Glen: Do you have it?

Peter: I HAVE IT!!

Once I had it, it was inside of me forever and I could summon it at will. For me, it was as if I found a new way to divide time, by slicing it into irregular but ever-tinier slivers, which, when heard in the context of a rock song, became a convincing narrative of the story of the song.

I still love telling those stories. When listening to music, many people first hear the singer, or the shredding guitar. Me, I hear the drummer slicing the 2:59 into gorgeous tiny pieces.