

The Evolution of Snare Drum Grips

BY JAMES A. STRAIN

The way in which one holds a drumstick can drastically affect a player's technique, the pace of development for a young player, and one's overall attitude toward sound production, or tone, on a drum. Although "rules" on how to hold a stick may seem to be steadfast, these rules have evolved through several schools of thought, and even today are still changing. An examination of written explanations and pictorial representations from the past 200 years regarding "gripping" the stick provides keen insight regarding this evolution of the snare drum grip.

EARLY INSTRUCTORS

Early nineteenth-century "instructors" (i.e., instructional books) deal entirely with military drumming and describe a grip now labeled "traditional." One of the earliest books to explain this method of holding the sticks is the 1815 British publication by Samuel Potter that was the basis for most American instructors of the same era. His description of the grip includes two analogies often echoed by others at that time: the right-hand grip is compared to holding a sword and the left-hand grip to holding a pen.

Potter says: "The right Hand stick to be grasp'd with the whole Hand about two inches and a half from the Top (or more if requir'd)—as Drum sticks are not all of the same Weight: similar to grasping a Sword or Stick when going to play Back-sword. The left to be held between the Thumb and Fore Finger of the left Hand close in the hollow, the Top towards the Wrist leaving the Top of the Stick as much out of the Hand as the other—resting it resembling a Pen when going to Write, only with this exception, between the first Joints of the Second and Third Fingers."

Note that Potter states that the "whole hand" is to grasp the right-hand stick. In contrast to this, Ashworth (1812) identifies the little finger as the primary finger gripping the right stick, and more clearly specifies where the left stick lies on the third finger: "The upper, or left hand stick...must be firmly held between the

Thumb and two middle fingers, to rest on the third finger a little above the middle joint. The lower, or right hand stick must be held fast with the little finger and be allowed to play with ease through the others, as a man may use a stick in fencing."

LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY METHODS

In 1861, Howe takes the opposite opinion regarding the role of each finger for the right hand: "The stick in the right hand should be held naturally; that is, it should pass between the thumb and fingers; the little finger should be loosely closed around it, and it should be held firmly with the thumb and fore-finger."

"The stick in the left hand should pass between the thumb and two forefingers, and over the third and fourth, the first and second closed round it to the thumb."

Bruce (1862) differs, saying that the left hand "should grasp the stick firmly, but not too tight, between the thumb and first two fingers, passing over the third, and resting a little below the middle (or large) joint; the thumb in the meantime resting on the forefinger." Note that he specifies the thumb should rest on the first finger, whereas Howe instructed the reader to close two fingers to the thumb.

For the right hand, Bruce adopts both the fencing analogy and the little finger as the primary point of contact: "The stick in the right hand should be held between the thumb and fingers lightly, with the little finger pressing it, so as to play through the hand, as a man would use a stick in fencing."

In a British publication, Elliott (1884) introduces two analogies, one similar to a sword, another to a spoon: "One drumstick should be grasped firmly in the right hand in the same manner as when one is going to strike a blow with an ordinary stick, while the other should be held in the left hand somewhat similar to the way in which we should hold a spoon, only the stick should be passed between the middle fingers and allowed to rest upon the second joint of the third finger, the thumb being used to hold the stick with. The drum-sticks should be thus

grasped about four inches from the top of each."

By "top," Elliott is referring to the butt end of the stick, as the sticks hang downward to the drum. Other writers mention the distance one should hold the stick from the butt end in various ways. For example, Sousa states: "The right hand should grasp the stick at about two inches from the end, the thumb well under; and the left hand should hold the stick lightly, between the thumb and first two fingers, passing over the third, and resting on the first joint, the thumb on the fore-finger." This "thumb on the fore-finger" for the left hand occurs in many descriptions, including Flockton's (1898), which states: "Close the thumb against the side of the first finger, and hold the stick only tight enough to handle it."

TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY METHODS

Langey (1891) provides one of the clearest early descriptions regarding the distance from the butt end and all four fingers of the left hand: "The right stick is held between the first joint of the middle finger and the inside tip of the thumb at a point about four and one-half inches from the butt end. The remaining fingers curve under the stick and control it without interfering with its free action. The left-hand stick is held between the thumb and fore finger, the butt end lying in the hollow, passed between the second and third fingers, and rests on the first joint of the third finger, the butt end projecting out about the same distance as with the right hand. The tips of the fingers are bent towards the palm of the hand."

Flockton (1898) introduces a new analogy for the right hand that recurs well into the twentieth century: "The stick in the right hand should be held very much like a hammer... The little finger should hold the stick the tightest, and each finger looser and looser in succession, the first finger leaving the stick free. The ball of the thumb should rest against the side of the first finger."

De Ville (1905) is also quite explicit regarding the point one holds the stick:

Admittedly, there are occasions when your students shouldn't use our sticks.

BY CARL ALLEN

There are times when sticks just aren't the best choice for a piece. But to use brushes correctly, you should know that brushes can be used to play soft or loud, with a wide range of dynamics and tempos.



One of the more common problems that I see is the lack of "sound." You want to get a full sound (not necessarily loud) out of the drum. To do that, first you have to look at the position of both hands on the snare drum. Try the classic "figure eight" motion in each hand independently. You want to go for a wide stroke, feel the motion. Avoid playing with your arms and try playing more with your wrists and fingers with very little forearm (to conserve energy). One of the reasons for playing with brushes is to get a larger sound out of the

drum. You accomplish that by playing the brush across the drum and drag, as opposed to tap and release as you would with stick. Sometimes drummers will not strike at all but just "swish" the brush from side to side.

Then there are times when you want more of a sound as effect instead of the sound of strict time. In these cases, it has to be felt more than heard—but heard nonetheless. Often, a drummer will play time in one hand while the other hand is just making movement. It's very important to "feel" the time in both hands. As a suggestion, try practicing with just one hand at a time to see if you can feel and hear the time. You must have control in both hands. But don't tighten the wrists. The more relaxed you are the more control you will have.

There are many different types of sounds you can produce with the brushes from short to long and soft to loud. However, you can also get a wide range in density of your sound. To experiment, adjust your grip on the brush from loose to tight, you can also adjust your wrist movement. If you want a

heavier sound you can press the brush into the head. For a lighter sound, ease off the head. You also have a wide array of brushes with various weights and thicknesses that you can use. And that includes Hot Rods, which give you a sound and feel somewhere in between a brush and a stick. I use several different brushes depending on the sound that I am trying to create. Playing brushes is a very personal thing that requires one's own creative approach. So pick out a pair, try it, then try another, until you find just the right pair for you — and the piece you're playing.



FAMOUS QUOTE

"With brushes, the more relaxed you are, the more control you'll have."

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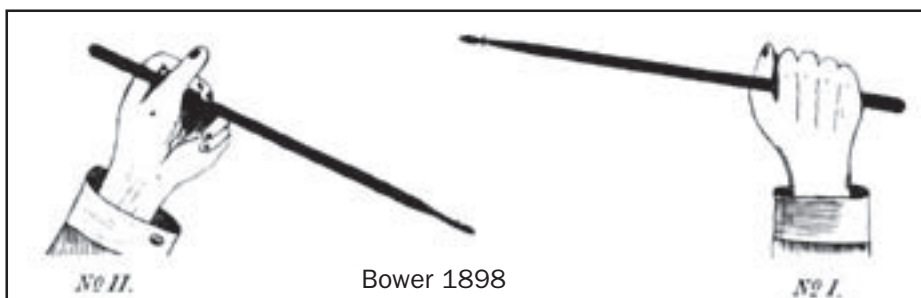
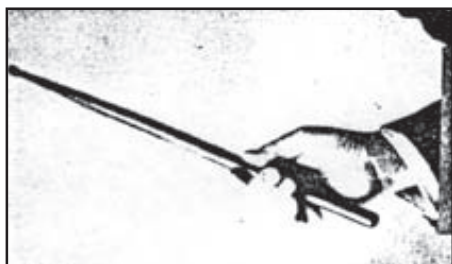
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Bower 1898



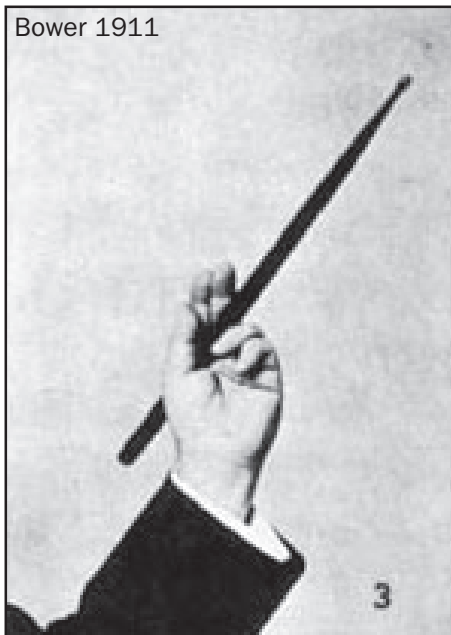
Bower (1898) in his *Imperial Method* includes an illustration as the primary means of explaining the grip with the following comments: "The right stick should be grasped about two inches from the end with the whole hand being about parallel with the knuckles. The back of the hand should be inward as in cut No. 1. Grasp the left stick the same distance from the end between the thumb and first two fingers of the left hand, with the palm of the hand inward, as in cut No. 2." Note the directions in which the palm and back of the hand should face.

By 1911, however, Bower uses a picture to illustrate the grip, including instructions for the right hand that state: "The stick being held loosely, principally by the Thumb and first two Fingers, also the other Fingers must touch the Stick (more or less) while drumming." For the left, along with the picture he states: "Note the Thumb resting on the first Finger, also the little Finger and one next to

it inclined somewhat towards the center of the hand." One notes that within one decade Bower has changed his right-hand grip from the "whole hand" grip to just using the thumb and first two fingers.

Rollinson (1906) provides quite extensive directions for the grip. For the left hand, he states: "Turn the palm of the hand up. Open the first two fingers, turn

Bower 1911



Bower 1911



the third and fourth down, until they nearly touch the palm. Lay the stick in the hollow between the thumb and first finger; let it cross the third finger between the second and third joints. Then close the first and second fingers around the stick, the thumb also closing around it and resting on the side of the first finger. The stick should balance on the hand in such a way, that when the thumb and first two fingers are raised, the small end (tip) of the stick will drop over the third finger. The thumb and first finger should have the firmest grip."

For the right hand, he says: "Turn the palm of the hand down. Close the fingers around the stick, which should be held nearly parallel with the knuckles. The thumb should close as in the left hand. Balance the stick so that if the fingers were opened, the small end would drop over the thumb. The little finger should close around the stick, more firmly than the others, and each consecutive finger with a consecutively weaker grip. This will give much more power than if the stick is held by the first finger alone." Note that he continues with the little finger as the primary finger for the grip in the right hand, and that the stick is parallel with the knuckles, similar to Bower's early description. He also mentions that the palm should be down—one of the first to clearly state this.

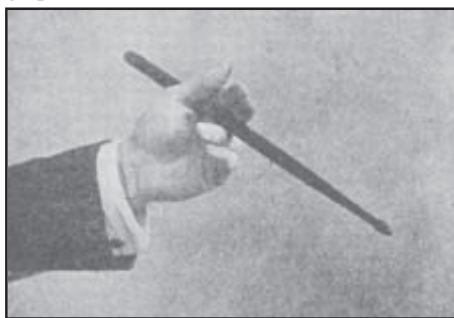
EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY METHODS

Dodge (1917) uses numerous pictures and frames from moving pictures to illustrate the grip and strokes. Using the "hammer" analogy, he states: "The right stick is held by the thumb and first two fingers. The other two fingers touch the stick lightly but do not grip the stick, and the butt (thick end) of the stick rests against the heel of the hand. About the way you would hold a light tack hammer."

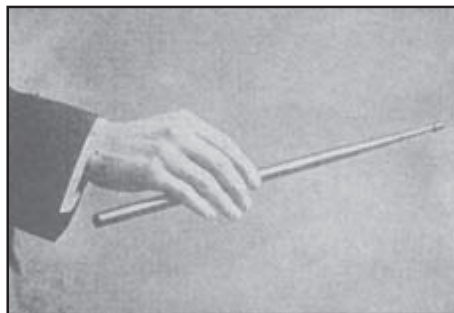
For the left stick, he says: "Curve the thumb around the stick, gripping it very lightly. The stick rests on the first joint of the fourth finger and the little finger supports the fourth finger, but does not touch the stick. The index and middle fingers do not touch the stick except occasionally to keep it from falling out of the thumb hold. Be sure not to cramp the fourth finger." Note that he is clearly stating that the thumb holds the left stick, not the thumb and the first and/or second fingers.



Gardner (1919), writing a method for concert—not military—drumming states: "The left stick is held in the crotch of the thumb and forefinger. The first and second fingers rest above the stick while the third and fourth fingers rest beneath the stick. Great care should be taken to avoid a protruding finger. All the fingers should be wholly relaxed, but with sufficient elasticity to return to position when displaced by stick action. The right stick is held between the inside tip of the thumb and the first joint of the middle finger. The three remaining fingers rest upon the stick in the same relaxed manner as the fingers in the left hand." Clear pictures are given for several angles of the grip.



Inside View of Left Hand

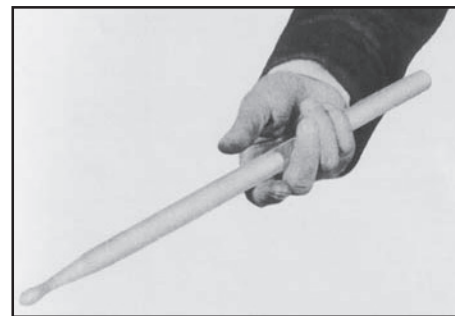


Outside View of Right Hand

Of importance for Gardner is a note, clearly acknowledging the military style of holding the stick. "A right-hand position common among military drums in this country consists of holding the stick like a hammer, grasping it between little finger and palm. This position has the obvious disadvantage of control on but one side of the fulcrum and is not to be recommended. Many drummers playing in this manner, however, have excellent technic."

By acknowledging this second technique, Gardner makes one aware of two parallel methods of performing, based on style of drumming. Bower has hinted at this, and as the twentieth century progresses, it becomes clear that different grips are used for different musical styles of drumming.

Among those players with excellent technique, as mentioned by Gardner, was Sanford A. Moeller, who, in his 1925 method takes exactly the opposite point of view on the right hand by stating: "The illustrations are so clear that words are unnecessary, but the attention might be drawn to the fact that the right stick is held almost entirely with the little finger as in Plate No. 7. When the stick is placed on the drum the other fingers are closed around the stick, but very lightly, if touching it at all. The left stick is grasped between the thumb and first finger. The pressure on the drum head is made with the first finger, the second finger acts more as a guide. The third finger is the one under the stick and is used to pick it up."



He goes on to defend the right hand "little finger" grip by referring to seven previous methods (including Flockton, Potter, and Langey) that suggest this grip. Note that he also uses the first finger of the left hand as a primary means of striking the stick to the drumhead, in contrast to using the thumb, as stated by Dodge.

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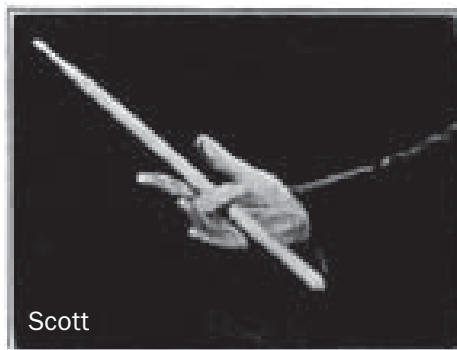
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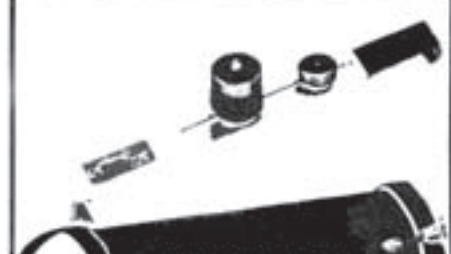
Scott (1930) includes clear photographs with the following directions for the left hand: "Place drum stick between thumb and forefinger, allowing it to rest between the first and second joint of the third finger. Close the first and second fingers over drum stick but add no pressure."

For the right hand, along with photographs, it states: "Close middle finger, not tightly, but merely enough to keep the stick from falling from the hand. Close remaining fingers, but remember that the right stick is controlled mainly by the middle finger." Note that Scott's right full-hand grip, clearly illustrated by a photograph, is identical to Heney's (1933), both of whom are writing primarily for a military style of drumming.

In contrast to the military style, Little (ca. 1930), writing specifically for a "swing" style drummer, states: "Left-hand stick: this rests in the hollow between the thumb and first finger and is held between the second and third fingers, palm upwards. Right-hand stick: this is grasped with the palm downwards and lightly held between the first finger and the thumb: the three other fingers merely assist in controlling the position of the stick, without in any way gripping it." His illustration shows the stick positioned in the second knuckle of the right hand, not the first. Of interest is that Little discusses the various styles of drumming (concert, military, and dance), but makes no distinction regarding the grip for these styles.



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The 1937 *Sears Home Study Course Drum Method* (containing the exact, duplicated material regarding the grip as the Haskell Harr method, though not credited to him) includes complete pictures and makes a clear distinction between a rudimental right-hand grip and a grip for "light playing." For the rudimental right-hand grip it states: "Grip the stick firmly with the second finger as shown in figure 1. The other fingers and the thumb close loosely around the stick, permitting it to hinge on the second finger. Turn the hand over and you will have the closed hand position for playing as shown in figure 2."

Figure 1

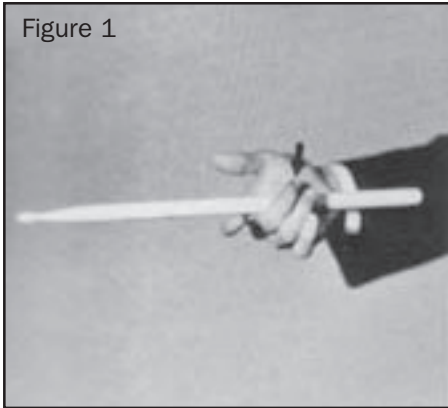


Figure 2

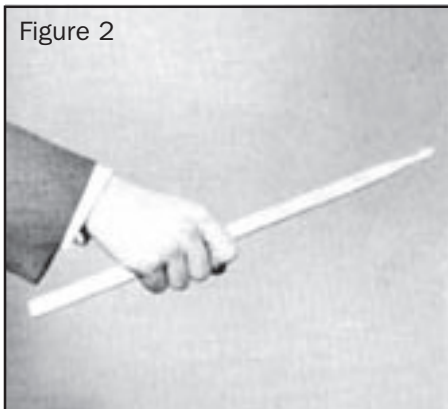
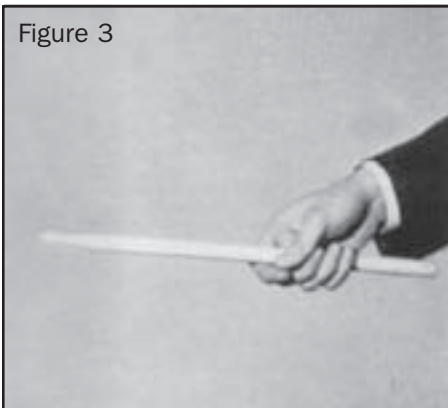


Figure 3



For light playing, one is directed to Figure 3 and to "hold the hand in the same position as figure 1, placing the stick so that it will rest across the second joint of the first finger, then place the thumb on the stick opposite the second joint of the first finger, close the second finger as before, and turn the hand over for playing. The stick will pivot between the thumb and first finger. Retain a slight grip with the second finger."

Of interest regarding the right-hand military style grip is the contrasting grip that Moore (1937) uses when he states: "The right-hand stick must be held against the first finger with the thumb allowing freedom at heel of stick for control. See Fig. B."



This is a clear shift from the little or middle finger as primary point of control from previous military methods, including the Harr, written in the same year. Also note that the thumb is not parallel to the stick, instead using the side of the thumb to press against the stick.

In contrast to Moore's "first finger" right-hand grip, Berryman (1940) uses the "tip" of the thumb and the second finger. For the right hand, he states: "The stick is held between the tip of the thumb and the first joint of the second finger. In playing, the other fingers rest lightly upon the stick." He further points out, "While drum instructors may disagree slightly on minor points regarding the correct manner of holding the sticks, the method here described is most successful for concert band or orchestras. For drum corps or dance orchestra some other methods may be advantageous."

One such method, written in 1942 with the dance orchestra drummer in mind, is by Buddy Rich and Henry Adler. For the right-hand grip, Rich and Adler state, "Grasp the stick with the thumb and first finger of the right hand, at about two-thirds of the distance from the knob (tip) of the stick (the center of balance). The

second, third and fourth fingers act in an auxiliary capacity as they aid in controlling the various movements of the stick. The palm of the hand is turned downward, upon striking the drum.

"The left hand stick is held at about two-thirds of the distance from the knob (tip) of the stick (the center of balance) in the crotch formed by the thumb and first finger. The second finger, acting as a guide, is placed on top of the stick. The third and fourth fingers, placed under the stick, act in an auxiliary capacity, while controlling the 'Swing' of the stick. The palm of the hand is turned toward the body, upon striking the drum." Note that they shift some guidance of the left-hand stick to the middle finger, and that they clearly discuss the direction both palms face as one strikes the drum.

Of major importance in the Rich-Adler method is the inclusion of the comment, "After all of the rudiments and exercises in this book have been thoroughly learned, the student may then practice them by holding the sticks timpani fashion as shown." This is one of the first methods to advocate what is to become the "matched grip" for general use in performing. It should be noted that it was a standard enough practice for drummers to use this "timpani" style by the time the method was written, that they included two pictures of the style in the book.



LATER TWENTIETH-CENTURY METHODS

One other method is necessary to illustrate the wide variety of exact positioning possible for the traditional grip, as well as an additional analogy. Mott

(1956) states: “The right stick is held between the thumb and the second joint of the middle finger, palm down with the remaining fingers curled over the stick lightly but securely. Hold it as you would hold a knife to cut a cake. The left stick is held palm up, in the hollow between the thumb and forefinger, the first two fingers curling over the stick. The last two fingers are under the stick, close together with the tips almost straight out, and in position to lift the stick. If these two fingers touch the palm it will cramp your muscles. The stick rests on the third finger which acts as a shelf.” Note that Mott specifically says the second joint of the middle finger for the right hand, and that the left hand’s “last two” fingers should be almost straight out (i.e., not curved toward the palm).

By 1964, Leach identifies three grips recognized by percussionists. The first is the “most common field and concert grip.” He states, “The thumb and forefinger form the fulcrum in both the left and right hands. In the right hand, the second finger is used for additional fine control, but the third and fourth fingers should not touch the stick at any time.”

The second grip is one “which has achieved more popularity in the jazz and dance field but has also become accepted in the classical field because this type of execution allows for a finer, more delicate touch and a greater sensitivity of sound. The thumb and forefingers are the only grips on either stick, thus allowing the other fingers to be used in motivating and controlling the sticks. This is known as ‘finger technique’.”

The third grip illustrated by Leach is the “timpani style” or “like-hand method.” He clearly advocates this style for use on drumset when playing additional Latin instruments or a solo on the floor tom, and mentions that many performers use this grip as a supplement to their traditional method of holding the sticks.

Educationally, this third grip mentioned by Leach is renamed the “matched grip” and assumes a position of importance by the early 1970s. Schinstine and Hoey include it as secondary method of holding the sticks in 1972, and by 1976 advocate it as follows in their *Snare Drum Primer*: “In the opinion of the authors, the Matched Grip should be recommended for the beginning percussionist.” Supporting this move toward the use of

matched grip, Faulmann (1976) includes complete directions for matched as well as traditional, even justifying matched grip as compatible for marching due to the invention of the “High Stepper” carrier.

Of interest during the last quarter of the twentieth century is a move toward a more restricted grip in the right hand, whereby all fingers and thumb grasp the stick. For the right hand, Whaley (1980) states: “The stick is held between the fleshy part of the thumb and the first joint of the index finger. The butt of the stick fits naturally in the main crease of the palm and the remaining three fingers wrap firmly around the stick. Notice that the stick is equally supported by the thumb and index finger and, the last three fingers.”

He then reiterates, with illustrations and captions, that “The stick is held between the fleshy part of the thumb and the first joint of the index finger. This provides 50% of the grip...The last three fingers wrap firmly around the stick. This provides 50% of the grip.”

For the left hand, in addition to the accepted normal directions, Whaley includes the statement “Note that the wrist is cocked in toward the body.” This is one of the few occurrences where a method advocates something other than a straight-wrist approach to the grip.

Wessels (1992) includes almost identical directions as Whaley, echoing the position of the right hand stick as “in the main crease of the palm with the remaining three fingers wrapping firmly around the stick.” However, later on the same page he includes the admonition that “you must be very careful to not squeeze the stick with the back fingers.”

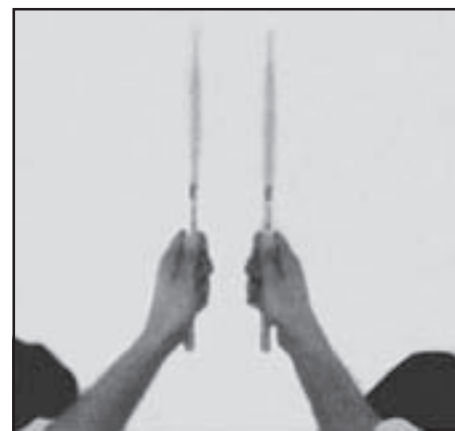
By the end of the twentieth century, the most common method for describing the right-hand grip might be one similar to that used by Breithaupt (1991), who states: “Place the stick between the first joint of the first finger and the flat, or fleshy part of the thumb, one-third the distance from the butt-end of the stick. This is the fulcrum point of the snare drum stick. Position the stick so the palm faces the floor.” He continues with “bring the fingers around the stick. The fingers will not be controlling the stick to a great extent at this point, but should stay in contact with the stick during all parts of the stroke.”

It should be noted that many books

have no directions whatsoever, and that methods written for drumset players have only in recent years begun to illustrate the various positions the hand might assume (i.e., thumbs up) when performing on the ride cymbal, as opposed to the snare drum. The single picture in *Alfred’s Beginning Drumset Method* (1990) clearly illustrates a “palm down” position for the ride cymbal. Peter Erskine’s *Drum Concepts and Techniques* (1987) and *Drumset Essentials* (2002) have photos of the right-hand grip in the palm-down position, but also show the right hand in thumb-up position, which he advocates for ride-cymbal playing.



Also of interest in one publication is an example of a common practice among drumset players when using matched grip, that is, the use of a “thumbs up” position as the primary position for both sticks. In Pearl’s *An Introduction to the Basics of Drumming* (1998), a booklet that accompanies new drumsets, the single picture for matched grip shows the sticks parallel to each other, with the thumbs on the top of both sticks.



Although there are generally just two “grips” for holding the sticks—matched and traditional—a survey of known methods identifies numerous variations in the exact way the sticks may be held, not for matched and traditional, but for the left and the right hand. The grips, both left hand and right hand, continue

to evolve even today. A quick search on the Internet might enlighten one to general discussion of where the stick lies when using a traditional left-hand grip, not in regards to the thumb and first two fingers, but on which knuckle, or even the cuticle of the ring finger, the stick should lie! As an ever-evolving process, the "grip" for the right and left hands continues to warrant examination and explanation for any true student or teacher of percussion, based on the uses and styles required for each musical performance.

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