

With one foot in tradition and one in the future, the exceptionally diverse, super-polished pounder is at the forefront of a scene that shows little interest in what *can't* be done on the drumset.

Periphery's Matt Halpern

Matt Halpern first appeared on the cover of *Modern Drummer* at age thirteen. Well, sort of. When visitors entered the after-party of his bar mitzvah, the first thing they saw was the young drummer's face on a mocked-up cover of *MD*. "Matt Halpern: Drummer to the Stars!" read the headline, and if the guests were lucky, they might hear the young lion perform a solo on his Ludwig kit. Even then Halpern had big goals. Fifteen years later, his musical dreams have come true, and he's enjoying his first *Modern Drummer* cover story, for real.

While Halpern is often lumped in with the progressive metal trend known as djent (a term he downplays—"It's simply the sound of a certain type of palm muting on a guitar string"), the twenty-eight-year-old Baltimore native is a fan of drummers as wide-ranging as Dennis Chambers, Mike Mangini, Stewart Copeland, and Roger Taylor. And Halpern's technique is as unusual as his taste is diverse. Watching him play his stripped-down three-piece set, you might first notice his somewhat bizarre technique. Halpern changes stick grips constantly, to match the music and to implement ideas that blast from his kit like shooting stars across a midnight sky. Whether he's using a German, French, or American grip, he bastardizes each for ultimate fluidity and flexibility, as his drumming flashes through rock, metal, reggae, and jazz styles with equal smoothness and passion.

Halpern first came to many people's attention as a member of the progressive metal heat seekers

Animals as Leaders. His star began to rise in earnest when he joined Periphery in 2009, a gig that seemingly left every drummer who shared the stage with the band an instant convert to his otherworldly rhythmic ideas and unstoppable energy. Halpern appears on Periphery's self-titled 2010 album, the 2011 EP *Icarus*, and the brand-new long-player, which is also titled *Periphery*. The first two releases were recorded piecemeal, with Matt playing a V-Drums kit and replicating rhythms programmed by guitarist/composer/mastermind Misha Mansoor, one of contemporary heavy music's true visionaries. For the band's new release, however, the drummer recorded on an acoustic Mapex set.

Throughout, Halpern's playing is an attention grabber. The half-time rhythmic stomp of "JI" is matched by the tom fills on steroids of "Make Total Destroy," where Halpern's snare drum slap and hi-hat slash are as powerful as his double-pedal fury. "Mile Zero" begins with a nearly classic-rock groove, but Halpern's lockstep with bassist/producer Adam Getgood—his patterns vacuum sealed and madly electronic—are anything but old-school. Elsewhere, Matt double-fists a pummeling tom-filled attack on "Ragnarok," revs up his inner Dave Lombardo for "Scarlet," and performs a flexible, extremely inspired solo within the slippery groove of "Erised."

MD spoke with Halpern as Periphery was putting the finishing touches on the album that, years from now, will likely be viewed as *the* breakout performance of a truly monstrous drummer.

Story by Ken Micallef • Photos by Sahisnu Sadarpo





“I work out ideas in front of an audience. I’ll think about what I want to play, then I’ll go for it. If I nail it in a high-pressure situation, that proves I can do it at any time.”

MD: Periphery has a great presence on YouTube and on the Internet in general.

Matt: When Misha Mansoor began writing songs for Periphery, he’d also been playing drums. Then he began programming drums with Toontrack’s EZdrummer and Superior Drummer programs. Whenever Misha recorded a new song, he would post it on SoundClick.com. Prior to the band

getting signed, Misha had released 130 free downloadable tracks. That free music really built our foundation as an Internet band. Once the album was released and we began touring, we built on that momentum. All of us in Periphery [which also includes guitarists Mark Holcomb and Jake Bowen and singer Spencer Sotelo] are very active on the forums—we all teach lessons—and I am very active on my

site, Bandhappy.com, which is about musicians reaching out to their fans.

MD: When did you begin playing drums?

Matt: I had my first kiddie set at three; I got a Ludwig kit at six. Through a couple local teachers I learned rudiments, time signatures, rates, and dynamics. One teacher focused on jazz and Latin fundamentals, and the other opened me up to Screaming Headless Torsos and that style and feel. I practiced the twenty-six rudiments and worked out of books, and I mixed and matched different hand patterns to replicate the rudiments between the hands and feet.

If you play a paradiddle between your hands and feet, you can turn it into a beat. I really focused on the

INFLUENCES

Queensrÿche Operation: Mindcrime (Scott Rockenfield) /// **Screaming Headless Torsos** Screaming Headless Torsos (Jojo Mayer) /// **Dave Matthews Band** Under the Table and Dreaming (Carter Beauford) /// **Queen** Greatest Hits (Roger Taylor) /// **Dream Theater** Images and Words (Mike Portnoy) /// **Deftones** Around the Fur (Abe Cunningham) /// **Rush** Moving Pictures (Neil Peart) /// **Metallica** Master of Puppets (Lars Ulrich) /// **The Police** Greatest Hits (Stewart Copeland) /// **James Brown** Greatest Hits (Jabo Starks, Clyde Stubblefield, others)

paradiddle; I would note if a pattern sounded like a paradiddle groove or a double accent. I also learned albums by Queensrÿche, Led Zeppelin, the Police, the Beatles, James Brown....

I was in a serious band on the weekends; we played Foo Fighters kind of stuff. Before that I played in Dream Theater— and Rush-style cover bands. Learning the music of those bands is why I've connected with the progressive side of Periphery. I learned how to dissect rhythms and songs at a young age. I was recording instrumental music when I was seventeen.

MD: What did you woodshed while in high school?

Matt: I'd learn an entire album—Dave Matthews Band, Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains—and practice soloing. I'd watch videos by Dennis Chambers, Mike Mangini, Steve Smith, and Walfredo Reyes Jr. I tried to learn Dennis's singles technique, that sweep around the drums between his right hand and right foot. From Reyes I learned how to subdivide the left hand

on the cowbell while playing a groove with the right side of my body. And I was never afraid to solo and perform.

MD: Why the simple setup of just bass drum, snare, and floor tom?

Matt: That began when I played in local bars and needed to get offstage fast. I enjoyed how easy it was—and how my performance improved. The smaller set gave me more room to move around. When you're touring, less is more. Because I had played in clubs on a small kit, I was comfortable with fewer toms and cymbals. I can perform all my music on this kit. In a live setting, if you don't have a roadie, it's hard. The smaller set allows people to see my emotions and my movements better as well.

MD: There are fills on mounted toms on the new album.

Matt: I used one mounted tom and two floors on the recording. And I had a bunch of cymbals. We wanted to get the tones and the vibes. For the upcoming shows, I may incorporate more into the set.

A Happy Band Makes a Happy Drummer



"Bandhappy came to be out of necessity," Matt Halpern says of the website he founded, which acts as an online market-

place for musicians who want to teach or take live lessons. "I needed to support myself financially as a touring musician, so I began teaching on tour as a way to supplement my income. On tour with Periphery, I teach students in every city we play, all over the world.

"When I started, I noticed a few things. Fans and students previously had no other way to sit down for thirty or sixty minutes and have a personal interaction with their favorite artist. In a music lesson, fans can ask questions, learn directly from the source, and build a deeper relationship with their favorite players, all rooted in education. It strengthens the bond between fans and musicians substantially, and that's great for both bands and fans."

When Halpern came off the road and continued his lessons with international students, including many touring musicians, via video chat, he found that the various platforms necessary to make his teaching business work—PayPal, email, Facebook, Skype—made the process time-consuming and cumbersome. The drummer's solution was to start Bandhappy.

"Whether the individual is an aspiring drummer wanting to learn from their favorite drummer, an up-and-coming business mind who wants to start a record label and wants guidance from a reputable manager, a school music teacher who wants to expand their after-school lesson roster or bring international artists into their classroom, or a touring musician who wants to connect on a deeper level with fans and supplement their income through teaching, Bandhappy offers those opportunities. We provide all of the scheduling, communication, payment, promotion, and lesson tools for students and teachers to connect live and in person, either via our custom live video-chat lesson platform or face to face when bands are on tour."

Currently Bandhappy has attracted more than 350 teachers and 10,000 students and has lessons taking place online and in person in more than a hundred countries.

MATT'S SETUP



Drums: Mapex

- A.** 6 1/2 x 14 Black Panther Sledgehammer snare
- B.** 16 x 16 Saturn birch/walnut floor tom
- C.** 18 x 22 Saturn birch/walnut bass drum

Heads: Evans Black Onyx snare batter (not shown) and clear 300 bottom, G2 tom batter and G1 bottom, and EMAD bass drum batter

Cymbals: Meinl

- 1.** 14" Byzance Sand Hats
- 2.** 19" Byzance Medium Thin crash
- 3.** 18" Byzance Dark China/
16" Byzance Thin crash stack
- 4.** 22" Byzance Extra Dry ride
- 5.** 18" Byzance Medium crash
- 6.** 22" Byzance China

Hardware: Mapex, including Falcon double pedal

Sticks: Pro-Mark 5B

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MD: On the “Improvised Grooves” video at Bandhappy.com, you play quick semi-rimclick patterns and use a fast glancing motion between the snare and floor tom.

Matt: The hand movement is left to right, right to left, left to right, right to left. That's Dennis Chambers' Baltimore sweep. He leads with his right hand: snare, floor, kick, kick; floor, snare, kick, kick. Then with his left hand: snare, floor, kick, kick; floor, snare, kick, kick. As you do it up to speed, the wrist movements become shorter between the two drums, creating a swaying motion, allowing you to go back and forth. It looks as if I'm lightly sweeping each drum, but I'm kind of bending my wrist both ways to hit the drums. Then filling in with your foot makes the motion more fluid.

Dennis did it as top, top, bottom, bottom. But you can also try top, bottom, top, bottom, or top, top, top, bottom. The trick is dynamics. If you're just playing drum fills, the dynamics don't matter because there isn't necessarily a backbeat to follow. But in “Improvised Grooves” I'm playing with a backbeat in mind. The

fills mesh well with the bass drum because I'm hitting the floor tom at a lower volume to match the volume of the bass drum. And I'm playing ghost notes on the snare, so they can be more layered to match the bass drum. I'm not putting a lot of force into it. It's also the tone, or the ring, of the bass drum and snare mixing together that helps me move between the drums more easily and at a higher rate of speed.

MD: Your technique is so fluid, and your grip seems to change constantly. What does that give you?

Matt: It's all out of necessity, though it happened almost by accident. Playing so many styles of music—metal, where you have to be precise but you also have to hit very hard; rock, where you're beating the crap out of the drums; jazz, where you have to use a softer feel—it's about being comfortable with different dynamic ranges. So I don't try to play with one grip all the time; all the variables make my style unique.

My focus is to use a large spectrum of dynamics. If I let the stick fall from a high place and I want it to have a free range, I hold it very loosely.

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When I'm closer to the drum, I may hold the stick differently from the way I would when I'm farther away from the drum. When I'm playing a loud rimshot, I use more of a whipping motion, almost like a Moeller whip, and when I hit the snare drum I clench up and use an American grip. But when I'm playing ghost notes, it's more of a French grip, because I use fingers and a looser wrist bounce. When I'm playing the right hand on my hi-hat and accenting an 8th-note downbeat, I may use my shoulder to push it and have my hand in a French grip—it depends on the velocity [at which] I'm pushing the stick into the hi-hat.

MD: Do you use a click live?

Matt: Yes. I use a 16th-note click, because that way, whether I'm playing in four or five, it's very easy to count and feel the different changes and feels. Playing ghost notes is also a great way to feel the spaces between the larger quarter or 8th notes.

MD: You've explained before that you learned polyrhythms by singing them to yourself first. Did you approach other drumming principles by internalizing them?

Matt: Often I can't sleep because I have rhythms in my head or I'm grinding my teeth to create grooves with my mouth. I don't count them out first; it's a feel thing. Often I'll have an idea and tap it out with my hands. If I can tap out a full song on my steering wheel, then I can apply it to the drumset. With one hand on a table I can copy a bass drum and a snare drum and put it all together and make a groove. If you ask me to play a groove on a book, I can do that. Sometimes it's easier to learn something on a small scale.

MD: When recording, does Periphery grid everything? Do you do any live takes? And are you replicating Misha Mansoor's programmed drum parts?

Matt: On the new album we tracked everything separately with real drums and real amps. We wanted to do a full live album, not in terms of us recording live in a room together, but separately the performances are live.

Whoever writes the song usually has an idea for the drum part. Misha uses

Toontrack's Superior Drummer to program a basic drumbeat. So he'll give me a full demo with a drum part and fills and groove ideas and sectional ideas that I then make my own. There are songs where I completely composed the drum ideas, and on other songs I embellished the other songwriter's ideas and made it my own feel. The final takes are me doing three or four passes and getting comfortable and then compiling a drum part from the best takes.

MD: So you assembled your drum parts.

Matt: I'd punch in and redo a section, or I'd redo the entire take to get a better feel. We didn't cut and paste drum parts in Pro Tools. "Mile Zero" was one take, start to finish. I hadn't played it before we recorded it. We did quantize the drums after that, lining them up on the grid. That's a big part of Periphery's sound, being very tight rhythmically.

MD: You're very precise, but your recordings sound like an actual drummer. Some progressive metal drummers sound too mechanical, too calculated. You sound natural.

Matt: That's a great compliment. Thank you. I hope that comes across. I recorded the first Periphery album on a V-Drums kit, then we edited the takes in Superior Drummer. So it's my feel, but with sounds from Superior Drummer. It was important this time to get all live drum tones. We wanted it to sound as natural as possible.

MD: Do you lock in your bass drum patterns with the bass guitar in a traditional sense?

Matt: The bass is all played, not programmed, and we lock. And we have three guitar players. Two play a rhythmic part, then the other will play a more melodic harmony or layer. On "Erised," I'm following the bass part in the first verse, but in the second verse I'm accenting the vocal lines. In other songs it's about being truly tight with the guitars and bass. That's a staple of our music.

MD: Are there multiple meters in "Make Total Destroy"?

Matt: It's all in four. If you listen to the downbeat of the cymbal, you'll hear that it's 8th notes all the time. But we

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play around with different rhythms to make it sound like we're playing with the feel.

MD: Periphery plays a lot of odd time signatures.

Matt: Watching Dream Theater rehearse on this latest tour we did with them, we'd see them messing around with twenty-six and eleven and nineteen. We like to incorporate those ideas into our music too, and we want it to be digestible so that the audience is always bobbing their heads. It's putting odd meters into a certain master rhythm.

MD: "Erised" has shades of Allan Holdsworth, as well as killer 32nd-note fills and a drum solo.

Matt: The solo was one pass. Nothing was planned; it was improvised. I like the randomness of it.

MD: What do you practice now?

Matt: I'm always working on creating new grooves. Mike Mangini can play with his left hand in one meter while his right hand and right foot are in another. Then he subdivides more meters between each limb. That's inspiring to me, so I'm working on that. I have an upcoming Meinl clinic that will include Benny Greb, Mike Johnston, and Hannes Grossmann, so I have to pull something out to hold my own. I'm conceptualizing a performance—there will be a start, a middle, excitement, peaks and valleys, and a finish. It's more event focused than technique focused.

MD: What do you do to maintain your technique?

Matt: For speed I'll play on pillows or work on wrist exercises. To practice subdividing hands and feet I work on different patterns where I don't need a drumset. I take a basic rudiment or pattern and apply it to each limb, then combine all that. I work on playing linear grooves with one hand. On airplanes I place my feet in front of me at a 90-degree angle, so they're flat. Then I pitch my heels as high as they'll go, so I'm flexing my calves. Then I simultaneously drop down the heels on both feet. I do that as fast as possible, for five minutes. After five minutes I move my feet back one inch and repeat. Doing that for forty min-

utes, you'll find that for every inch you go back, the harder the exercise becomes. That really builds power and agility. I always work on the feet together, because you never know when you'll need that.

MD: Some of your recent YouTube videos, such as "Improvvised Grooves," are as informative as the Periphery records. One thing is obvious: You don't always rely on double pedal.

Matt: During high school I was in a band playing reggae, acoustic rock, and dance music, all of it on a simple kick, snare, hi-hat setup. I really worked on my single-kick technique to play a dynamic range. I practiced in live situations playing bass drum patterns alternately with my left and right foot. I never enjoyed practicing monotonous things like RRRRRR, LLLLLL. I'd do it live in front of an audience. That forces you to get it right. You have to figure it out, and you can't screw up.

MD: You didn't drill *Stick Control* with a metronome?

Matt: No. I'd always play songs or albums or work on freeform soloing, as opposed to reading a chart or working with a metronome. I work out ideas in front of an audience. I'll think about what I want to play, then I'll go for it. If I nail it in a high-pressure situation, that proves I can do it at any time. Then I go back and work on it. By improvising I come up with things that I can use in songs.

MD: That's risk taking.

Matt: I was talking to Mike Mangini about this. He spends a lot of time practicing, but he really implements it in front of an audience. Now, I wouldn't try to play a really crazy Horacio Hernandez left-foot-clave solo in front of an audience. I don't go off on a tangent and throw people off. It has to pertain to what I'm doing. But if you have a way to accent a brand-new rhythm that incorporates some of the things you've worked on but isn't run of the mill, then go for it. If it steps on the band or confuses the audience, don't do it. I improvise where it's appropriate. But the best drummers are risk takers; you have to take the risks to get the rewards.

