

# Session Sensei

## HOW NOT TO USE A METRONOME

by Scott Healy, keyboardist for *The Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien*

**It's hard to evaluate your own time while** you're actually playing. In a performance situation, "being in the moment" is, in fact, being slightly *ahead* of the moment: You have to plan chord changes, voicings, and rhythms, and construct on-the-spot reactions to others' musical ideas. This is why it's hard to evaluate your own *time*. By the time you realize you're not in the groove, it's already too late. You need to work these issues out in the practice room, not on the bandstand or in the studio.

The tried-and-true method is playing to a metronome. Intuitively, it makes sense, but most of us misuse the metronome, inadvertently "practicing in" bad habits. *Click, click, click* – maybe you're not totally focused, maybe you're overcome with exuberance, but suddenly you're ahead of the

beat. Most keyboardists rush (and most drummers and bassists drag). You realign with the pulse, then move ahead, hopefully now in better sync. You've actually slowed down for an instant to get back on track, then sped up to the proper tempo. That's a bad habit, and you've just practiced it.

If you bring this habit to a live gig, your playing will sound edgy and nervous. You'll always feel like you're ahead of the beat (because you are) and constantly be adjusting back. The drummer and bassist can adapt to some degree, but they've got their own challenges, and your lack of metric center will quickly wear thin. On a recording session, there's not even this much wiggle room, and you'll be pegged in five seconds as the player who can't play to a click.



Unless you learn to line up your internal clock with the external clicker, you'll never improve your time. So don't just flip on the metronome and blast ahead. Any "adjustments" need to be made *before* you begin to play, so that you nail the time as soon as you start. Take a minute to just listen. If quarter notes are the main pulse, subdivide eighths in your head: *one-and-two-and-one-and-two-and*. Now try triplets: *one-two-three, two-two-three*. To really discover the inner sense of the beat, slow down the metronome, as it's more challenging the slower the pulse gets. Try to think ahead and predict when the next click will fall, as opposed to just listening to your own playing. If you lose the groove, start over from the top – this will help break the habit of adjusting on the fly. ☒