



Pen Beats:

Tapping into a New Generation

If you have ever been sat at a desk bored, either at school or at work, the likelihood is you have found yourself idly tapping away with a pen or a pencil. But did you ever become so caught up in the rhythm that you found yourself throwing out fills like a desk-bound Dave Grohl? If the answer is yes, then you are already part of a movement that has taken the internet by storm over the last few years. Hordes of people - predominantly the student demographic - have taken to Pen Tapping Beats, a phenomenon that sees its proponents take up commonplace writing utensils and turn them into something much more.

The precise origins of this improvised art-form are difficult to trace, but it would appear to have begun in the United States, where videos started sprouting up on YouTube about 8 years ago. The earliest example of which was this video, uploaded by Brandon Hite back in October 2006:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7KY6lLaaEo>

Since then approximately 60,000 videos have been posted, with more and more appearing every day. Many upload covers of songs such as Arianna Grande's *Problem* or the assiduously ubiquitous *Gangnam Style* by Psy; whilst others prefer freestyling as a means to demonstrate their speed and dexterity. Some use markers, others prefer ball points. Make no mistake though; this is an incredibly popular pastime, showing no sign of decline. For example, if it feels slightly familiar but you can't quite figure out why, then you may have seen the latest advert for Microsoft's *Surface* tablet range. The

application of the avocation to the marketing strategy of a tech machismo such as Microsoft, shows just how relevant pen tapping has become.

It is of course likely that people have been doing this for decades, but - as with so many hobbies - the birth of digital media has provided the forum for people to share and compare their skills. The inception of YouTube and online video has brought about an age in which people are immediately able to see just how high the bar is in their chosen field. No longer do kids who learn the yoyo have just their classmates to compare themselves with, they now have the best in the world; and pen tappers too have become privy to this evolved pedagogy.

Furthermore a central hub for this digital community has arisen in the form of penbeats.com - a haven for stylo dynamos to congregate; to share their work and ideas. Started as an experiment by two marketing interns, the website is a belvedere for 'Natural beats using only an everyday pen and table top' and individuals who have the 'creative minds and the talent to turn an everyday writing utensil into a musical instrument'. Whether it is to post a video, add to the blog, watch tutorials, or simply buy one of their neat little branded ballpoints, tappers of all skill levels are welcome. (v)



It has been suggested that the answer to the genesis of pen percussion lies within the impoverished schools of America; kids that are too poor to procure musical tuition, find other ways to satisfy their rhythmical curiosities. This opinion is compounded by the writers over at the *Creativity not Control* blog who in their article: 'Pen tapping beats in the age of Austerity' write:

'Pen tapping strikes me as a form of creative resistance to austerity. The system cuts the music programs in working class/inner city schools across the country, and yet students keep making music...'

A plausible theory, after all, it wouldn't be the first time in history that hardship has inspired musical innovation - the phrase 'necessity is the mother of invention' comes to mind. (xi)

Meet the Maestros:

Perhaps the most prominent figures in the pen beat movement are Washington University classmates: Shane Bang and Kevin Ke, the former arguably the more famous of the two. Referred to by penbeats.com as 'one of the finest and truest pen beat artists', Bang posted his first video back in November 2009, and has since accumulated millions of hits and around 140,000 subscribers to his you tube channel. Whether he is banging

his biro to familiar tunes such as the Mario Brothers theme or freestyle tapping in the kitchen, this 21 year old aficionado is at the forefront of the pen beat generation. In his videos he can be seen using a variety of pens to drum on almost anything in close proximity to his hands. If you haven't heard of him already, it is likely that you have seen him, or at least part of him, in the aforementioned Microsoft *Surface* ad campaign.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-9b90KCjKA>

Yep, those are his dexterous digits making an appearance, and this isn't the only instance of his skills being used for marketing purposes; Bang has worked with the likes of Sharpie, Papermate and Expo. But it isn't just the stationery giants with an interest in bang; legendary DJ Krafty Kuts posted one of his videos on his Facebook page to show his support. Bang's slogan: Pens. Beats. Battlestar Galactica, certainly sends a message about the ambitions of this young man. I got in touch with him last week and he was gracious enough to answer some of my questions.

When did this all start for you?

I was in 6th grade when I started, so I think I was about 11 or 12 years old. I'm in college now and actually turned 21 a few weeks ago. So it's been about 10 years, which is crazy.

Why pen tapping?

Like many of my fellow students, I found school to be very boring, so I developed the habit of tapping pens on a desk during class. As I started getting better, I saw a few videos on YouTube of other kids doing it, but they weren't that inventive or impressive. It inspired me to try to take pen tapping to another level creatively.

Do you have a preference on the type of pen you use?

As long as the pen is relatively thin without any clips or buttons, I'm usually not too picky. Papermate style pens usually do the trick though.

Where do you see it going?

I honestly don't know where pen tapping is going. As the years go on, more and more kids are getting into it and posting their own videos, which is awesome. There's been a sort of cool pen tapping culture that has developed not only in the U.S, but surprisingly also in Asian countries like Vietnam and China. I love looking through videos on Instagram and YouTube, and seeing what people come up with. It keeps me motivated and inspired to continue being creative.

Whilst Shane Bang is by far the most famous, there are other salient ballpoint beaters on the radar. One such talent is a man known only as The Beat Master, who can be seen

demonstrating his virtuosity in the following video uploaded by redman2027, titled 'So good it's Scary':

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_oovZbh-Ew

As you can see the tapper wears a mask in the video, which has led to much speculation about his real identity. His phenomenal hand speed has actually caused some to suspect that the video has been sped up. However, one only has to look at the movement of the other people in the video to tell that it hasn't. It would also appear – after hours of trawling the internet – that this hand speed is quite unique to him and him alone.

In perhaps the most revelatory evolution of the art form, a man who goes by the moniker Lyrical God has gone so far as to fuse his capacity for rap and his knack for tapping. In his self-sustained song 'Let the beat ride', he demonstrates his independent mastery of the two skills, seamlessly blended together so effectively that if one was to only hear it and not see it, it is likely one would assume that it is the work of not one but two men. 'This dude right here can just about slay anyone with his powerful beat making and sick lyrical guidelines'. (v)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_mr7mTEKbE

The young talent from south Philadelphia, who was just 17 years old in the video, claims to have a 'crazy vision', and says that, lyrically, he is 'the truth', the former may indeed be true as he has since posted a video of himself tapping and rapping with an even more adventurous twist; he is now blind folded (viii).

How to get started: (Tutorials and code layout)

If you have been reading this and found your eyes flitting towards that fountain pen on your desk, or you have already bolted for your biro eager to give this a go, now is your time to shine. There are many sources offering step by step tutorials on how to get started. YouTube channel YourHowToDo offers many helpful videos and Wikihow has a fairly succinct set of guidelines which have been read an impressive 18k times. But just in case the browse is too laborious for you, here is one from me.

Much like a guitar tab pen tapping can be laid out on the page in numerical form. Each number correlates to a certain hand movement.



1 - Bass: With the pen held firmly between your fingers, use the part of your hand where your palm meets the wrist to hit the table to create a low frequency bass sound.

2 - Hi Hat: With the pen held between your thumb and your fingers tap the point of the pen onto the table to simulate the ticking of a hi-hat



3 - Snare: With your thumb and index finger gripping the pen, and the pen parallel to the table, slam the pen down to create a sharp percussive snare sound

A simple beat piece of beat tab would like this: **1-2-3-2**

If you want to get started, grab your nearest writing utensil, and give this beat a go. Once you have mastered it you can move onto more complex patterns - there are a multitude of examples to be found on the internet, or you could always make up your own, of course. Experiment with different surfaces and the type of pen you are using.

The possibilities are endless. Be adventurous- who knows, you may be the next pencil case ace.

Where is it going?

As with so many other pleasurable pastimes that reach the realms of cyberspace - which is pretty much all of them these days - pen tapping has evolved. It is no longer confined to the chrysalis of the U.S (it may never have been), it has traversed the globe on digital waves and found a wealth of new ink-instrumentalists. Websites exhibiting videos and providing tap tab for all are sprouting from a plethora of countries: Russia, England, France, and India are all tapped in. But it is, as Bang mentioned, Eastern Asia where things are really starting to escalate. In countries such as Vietnam there seem to be an increased focus on collaborations between school children, as this YouTube video from ficcayr's channel demonstrates:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ps8FembATw>

But whilst collaboration is indeed important for progression, the past has proved that, in the realms of the arts at least, competition is a prolific catalyst for improvement. Rap, DJ, and b-boy battles have been entertaining spectators for decades, and forcing competitors to up their game in order to appease the fans.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujahVn-w0kw>

At a little under 5 million views, the above video has one of the highest hit counts of any on the subject; a testament to the popularity of combative art forms. The rise of the tap battle could see desk drumming reach new levels of complexity. Suppose a scenario of two desks lit up on a stage, face-to-face, waiting for the best in the game to take their seats and settle a live stationery skirmish, it could happen.

In order to assess the future of any vocation it is sensible to observe the youth. In this case one of the youngest and most outstanding tappers is YouTuber Kevin31601. At just 12 years old he is already incredibly adept, with thrilling hand speed and awesome technical ability. He is so confident in fact, that he has already started to upload tutorial videos of a more complex variety than the average seen. The existence of this young pen prodigy indicates that pen tapping is still evolving, and showing no signs of slowing up.

But whether it has serious longevity is hard to tell. The traffic on Penbeats.com certainly hasn't increased much since its inception, and perhaps, whilst it is brilliant in its own right, pen tapping is just too limited and cannot compare with a kit and sticks. On the other hand there are new Vines and YouTube videos being created every day, and stranger hobbies have lasted - just look at freestyle wheelbarrowing, who would have thought that would last? - only time will tell. But the next time you are scrolling aimlessly through that Facebook news feed, why not pick up the pen and see what you can do?

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