

Introduction

It was in the summer of 1967 that I first heard the Beatles tune “Strawberry Fields Forever.” I had only been playing drums about three or four years at the time, and didn’t know much, but when I heard Ringo’s drum fill at the beginning of the third chorus of that tune (at the 1:40 mark), I knew something special was going on. This is what it looked like:



Little did I realize that: a) this was a three-beat phrase, and a perfect example of musical phrasing on the drums; and b) in 2014 I would write a book on this subject! A few years after that, Peter Magadini, with whom I was studying at the time, turned me on to the Max Roach drum solo entitled “Blues For Big Sid” from his album entitled *Drums Unlimited*. This is the main motif of this solo:



I realized that this was a more advanced example of phrasing. A basic motif is stated and then restated with a slight rhythmic variation. It’s then restated again starting on a different beat in the bar, and with yet another rhythmic variation on the end. At the time of course, I didn’t understand the technical aspects of all this—I just knew that I liked the way it sounded!

So, what is phrasing?

The dictionary defines a phrase (in music) as a group of notes forming a distinct unit within a longer passage. As a verb, it means to divide (music) into phrases in a particular way, esp. in performance: (as noun phrasing) : *original phrasing brought out unexpected aspects of the music*.

To me, phrasing is everything!

Drummers can be particularly guilty of playing a non-stop barrage of notes without leaving any space whatsoever. This is very boring to the listener! We need to take a breath in the same way that sax players take a breath, and to make clear, meaningful statements on our instrument. To me, there are two kinds of fills. There are the ones that make you shake your head and say, “Wow, that was a lot of notes...what the heck was that?” And then there are the ones that make you smile and think, “That was very clever, I never would have thought of that!” I prefer the latter. The clever fill beats the “muscle” fill every time for me. To me it’s akin to the skill of a great artist. With a few deft strokes of the paintbrush, he or she can create a beautiful statement, while a lesser artist might waste a whole lot of paint trying to say the same thing.

There have always been drummers with incredible chops who could play a lot of notes without a whole lot of musicality, but I think that I’ve always leaned towards drummers that employ the concept of phrasing. Maybe they also happened to have great chops, but they used their chops to play musical phrases that you could really hear and feel. Jazz drummers like Max Roach, Philly Joe Jones, Elvin Jones, Lenny White, and Tony Williams were pioneers in this concept. But as evidenced by my reference to Ringo above, there have been certain rock drummers like Mitch Mitchell, John Bonham, Ian Paice, and Mike Shrieve, that employed phrasing in a very musical way. More recently drummers like Gary Husband, Paco Sery, Manu Katche, Gary Novak, Dafnis Prieto, Billy Kilson, Bill Stewart, Ari Hoenig, and Mark Guiliana, have taken it even further.

There are times that I say to my students “Just play the drums and pretend that you don’t have any chops!” Let me explain what I mean by this...

I think that in over-studying fancy licks and fills, we sometimes lose sight of the goal of saying something meaningful on our instrument.

When I was about 25, I played with a great guitarist named Domenic Troiano. There was a tune called “Rock and Roll Madness” that had some drum breaks at the end, and he complained that what I was playing was too complicated and not clear. I was young and rambunctious, and a bit hot-headed, so my remedy for this was to oversimplify to the point of playing something pretty boring. Needless to say, he wasn’t happy with this either! So I finally said, “Well, what the heck do you want me to play?” He couldn’t exactly tell me, but years later I realized he wanted me to play MUSIC on the drums! He wanted me to dig a bit deeper and not just play some memorized licks.

I had a similar experience at the age of 40 when I studied with Peter Erskine. He put on a sequence for me to play along with, but before I could jump in with guns blazing, he said, “I don’t want to hear any licks, no doubles, nothing fast. I know you have chops! I want to hear phrases and motifs. I want you to tell me a story.” Well, I felt quite handcuffed by this and was at a loss for what to play, but what he said stuck with me. After that lesson, I had a different outlook entirely and it began to show up in my playing. I owe a lot to Peter Erskine.

I still have the post-it notes he gave me to put up beside my drums in my practice room:

Always Be Musical...Dynamics...Motifs...Tension-Release...And Ask Yourself → “Would somebody want to listen to this?”

So, in the first chapter, before we get into any advanced technical ideas, I would just like to examine some of my favourite musical phrases as played by some of my favourite drummers. A lot of these examples are in the funk/fusion/rock vein, because that is where my main musical passion lies. Someone whose passion is mainly straight-ahead jazz would have a whole different set of examples. One of the major realizations I had a while back when I started analyzing all this was that the reason I loved some of these ideas so much was the fact that I could sing these phrases, and they also conjured up visual ideas in my head. I could “see” the shape of the phrase. There’s an Allan Holdsworth tune called “Tullio” on the *Hard Hat Area* recording, and at one point during the guitar solo the drummer, Gary Husband, and Allan Holdsworth both pause at the same point and then “re-attack”, and for me it conjures up the vision of someone walking away from a doorway, and then changing their mind, and turning around and re-entering the same doorway. That sounds pretty cosmic I know, but I am very serious, and this happens a lot to me when I listen to music!

Well, maybe you can’t quite get your mind around that one yet, but that’s okay...let’s get back to the idea of singing phrases.

There’s an old saying: “can’t sing, can’t play.” I think this is absolutely true. One of the ways I practice when I’m away from the drums is to sing rhythms in my head and then visualize how I could orchestrate them on the drums.

When you have a clear vision of what you want to play, and you can verbalize it, then you have a good chance of pulling it off, but if you just let your hands play themselves you’re just skimming the surface of really making a musical statement of any kind. You’re not going to impress anybody but other drummers when you play from that headspace. And the more chops you acquire, the harder it is not to use them in a non-musical way. Sometimes it’s almost a curse! That’s why I urge students (and myself sometimes) to forget what they know and just play the drums! I will even venture to say that if you can’t sing what you’re playing, then it’s not worth playing!

So let’s get into some examples of what I’m talking about.

Most of these will consist of drum fills in varying lengths, or intros to tunes. Some of them are very simple, but all are very musical. You can listen to my recorded version of most of these examples, but I would highly recommend that you check out the original sources, either by purchasing them on iTunes, or by looking on youtube.

Also, because these are some of my personal favourites, some of them are fairly obscure, by drummers that perhaps you don’t know. I think every musician has “lightbulb” moments during their learning years (well, we’re always learning), when a certain performance or recording unlocks a new door and reveals a whole new area of study. Well, these are some of my moments. Some are fairly recent, while others date back to when I first started playing. One thing I’ve found over the years is that inspiration is always just around the corner!

I’ve written in possible sticking choices where I thought it necessary, and some are just an approximation on my part, so feel free to use your own.

Chapter One – Examples of Musical Phrasing

TONY WILLIAMS

Tony Williams was a master of phrasing, and he never played a note that he didn't mean. That's why his playing was so clear and musical. You always knew what he was trying to say.

So, here are three examples from Tony Williams's incredible album from 1976 called *Believe It*. I think I went through about two vinyl copies and a couple of cassette tapes of this one, and I know that Vinnie Colaiuta, and a lot of other drummers of his stature, swear by it too. It is a veritable bible of fusion drumming.

The first example is the intro for the tune "Fred." Well, it doesn't get any simpler than this, but I think it's a beautiful and clear statement. The sound of the cymbals, and the fact that he changes to the open hi-hat for the last hit in bar four, well, I think it's magical. He could have played something really busy, but chose to play this simple motif, and it sets up the tune perfectly.

audio track 3

♩ = 140

ETC.



The last examples from *Believe It* are from the tune “Proto-Cosmos.” The first set of fills occurs right at the beginning of the tune.

To me, each one of these fills is pure magic, so clear, so rhythmic and syncopated.

FIRST SET OF FILLS

♩ = 122

audio track 5

Another thing that I noticed while recording these examples is the “surprise factor” of Tony’s playing. He might start a fill in a seemingly normal way, but then take a left turn and end it with something most drummers wouldn’t think of. When you try to play these examples from “Proto-Cosmos,” I think you’ll understand what I’m talking about. There was only one Tony Williams!

SECOND SET OF FILLS

1:37



Sheet music for the second set of fills, consisting of four staves. The first staff includes a time signature change from 2/4 to 3/4. The music features various rhythmic patterns with accents and slurs. Above the notes, there are letters 'R' and 'L' indicating right and left hand strokes, and numbers '3' indicating triplets. The second and third staves continue the rhythmic patterns with similar notation. The fourth staff concludes the set with more complex rhythmic figures and triplet markings.

LAST SET OF FILLS

3:22



Sheet music for the last set of fills, consisting of two staves. The first staff includes a time signature change from 2/4 to 3/4. The music features various rhythmic patterns with accents and slurs. Above the notes, there are letters 'R' and 'L' indicating right and left hand strokes, and numbers '3' indicating triplets. The second staff continues the rhythmic patterns with similar notation, including triplet markings.

Chapter Three – Practical Phrasing Applications

Part One - Combining Phrases

So far, we've been dealing with three-, five-, and seven-beat phrases, with endless possibilities in each category. There's a whole other range of possibilities when we start combining these three types of phrases.

There's one thing I want to make very clear. I think when you start to get too mathematical with this stuff, you spoil the chance of being spontaneous with it. For example, if we want to fill up two bars with sixteenths, we could plan to play $7+7+5+3+5+5=32$, but that's too much thinking for me. The way I prefer to approach it is to become so familiar with how these phrases fit in the 4/4 grid that there's no thought involved. Then you're free to improvise without getting lost. But you must do the necessary studies first to free yourself up enough to forget about the numbers.

So let's start with a bit of math first. Here are two bars of sixteenths, divided up using groupings of seven, five, and three. I'm not putting brackets on these examples, because I want you to identify the groupings without the math, and learn to feel them in relation to the pulse. Because I feel that it's important to be able to play quarters on the hi-hat foot while playing the phrasing combinations, I've written them in here. At first you may have to count the usual $1e+a$, $2e+a$, etc., but eventually you'll just feel it. That's the level you want to get to.

audio track 117

The notation for audio track 117 shows a 4/4 time signature with a tempo of 120. The melody consists of sixteenth notes. Above the staff, there are rhythmic patterns: $e\bar{L} R L R L$, $e\bar{L} R L R L$, $e\bar{L} R$, L , $e\bar{L} R L$, $e\bar{L} R L$, and $e\bar{L} R L$. Below the staff, there are 'x' marks indicating hi-hat patterns: x , x , x , x , x , x , x , and x .

You could also practice the same combination in a fast 4/4 jazz tempo with upbeats on the hi-hat foot. This gets a bit more difficult, but if you want to play these ideas in that type of setting, then it's a useful skill to develop. You don't want to have to stop the hi-hat every time you play a fill, unless that is your intention.

audio track 118

The notation for audio track 118 shows a 4/4 time signature with a tempo of 120. The melody consists of sixteenth notes. Above the staff, there are rhythmic patterns: $e\bar{L} R$, $L R$, L , $e\bar{L}$, $R L R L$, and $e\bar{L} R$. Below the staff, there are 'x' marks indicating hi-hat patterns: x , x , x , x , and x .

Here I've taken the triplet versions of the John Blackwell fill from the previous five and seven sections, and combined them randomly. Note that I ended with some regular triplets to resolve the fill more naturally.

audio track 119

The image shows two staves of musical notation for audio track 119. The tempo is marked as ♩=120. The first staff contains a sequence of eighth notes with triplet markings (a '3' over a bracket) and asterisks (*) placed below certain notes. The second staff continues the sequence with similar triplet markings and asterisks. The music is written in 4/4 time.

We can make some great fills by combining random combinations of the blushda sticking using seven-, three-, and five-beat phrasings:

audio track 120

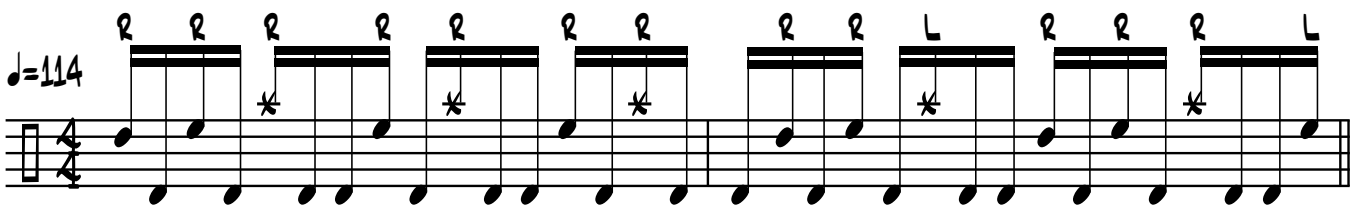
The image shows a single staff of musical notation for audio track 120. The tempo is marked as ♩=92. The notation consists of eighth notes with rhythmic stickings written above them: eL RRL, eL RRL, eL RRL, eL RRL, eL RRL, L eL RRL, eL RRL, eL RRL, eL RRL, RL. Asterisks (*) are placed below the notes. The music is written in 4/4 time.

Here's a triplet blushda combination:

audio track 121

The image shows two staves of musical notation for audio track 121. The tempo is marked as ♩=116. The first staff contains eighth notes with rhythmic stickings and triplet markings (a '3' over a bracket) above them. The stickings are: eL RRL, eL RRL, eL RRL, eL, RRL, eL RRL, L R, eL RRL. Asterisks (*) are placed below the notes. The second staff continues the sequence with similar triplet markings and stickings: eL RRL, eL RRL, L eL RRL, L, RRL, eL RRL, L R, eL RRL. The music is written in 4/4 time.

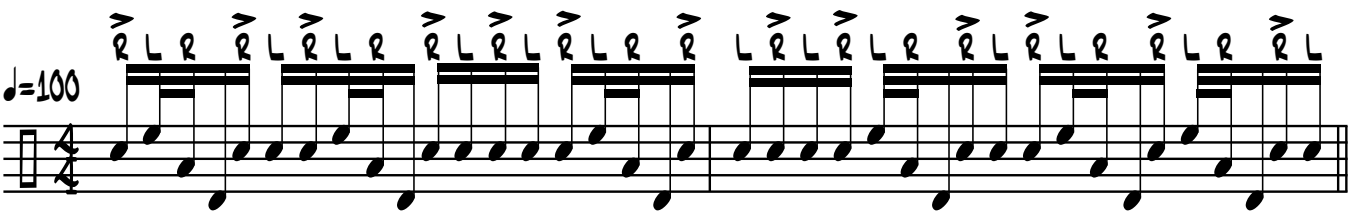
Another great possibility is the Dafnis Prieto choked-cymbal combination of fives and sevens:



audio track 122

Musical notation for track 122, featuring a 4/4 time signature and a tempo of 114. The notation shows a sequence of rhythmic patterns on a single staff, with notes grouped in pairs and some marked with an asterisk (*). Above the notes are rhythmic flags and letters: R, R, R, R, R, R, R, R, L, R, R, R, L.

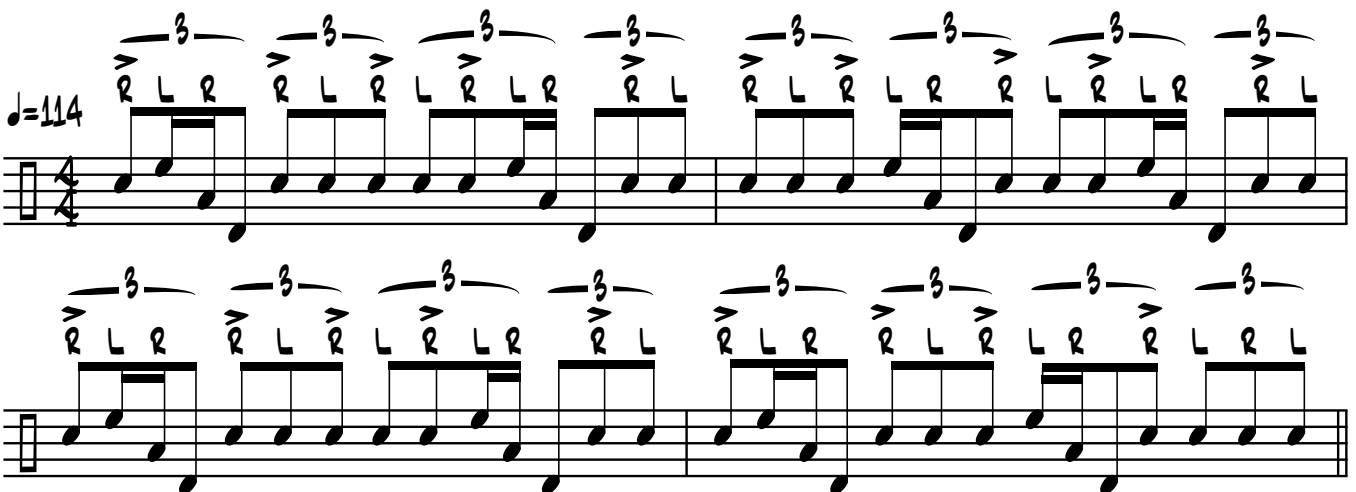
Here's the Steve Gadd phrase from page 59 played as both fives and sevens. Note that the last phrase on beat four of bar two is something I came up with to resolve the whole thing.



audio track 123

Musical notation for track 123, featuring a 4/4 time signature and a tempo of 100. The notation shows a sequence of rhythmic patterns on a single staff, with notes grouped in pairs and some marked with an asterisk (*). Above the notes are rhythmic flags and letters: R L R, R L R L R, R L R L R L R, R L R R, L R L R L R, R L R L R, R L R R L.

And here's a triplet combination of the same Gadd idea:



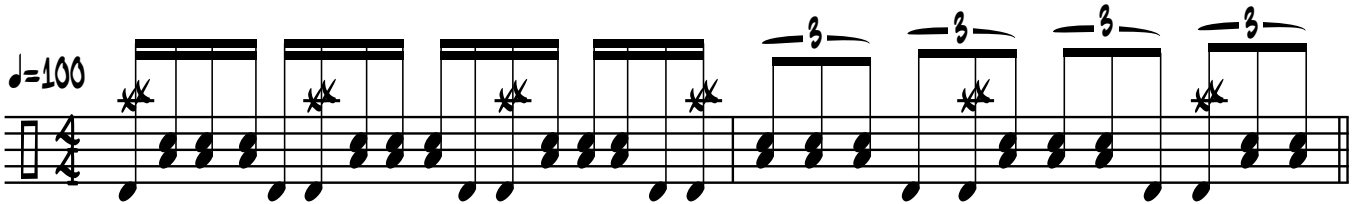
audio track 124

Musical notation for track 124, featuring a 4/4 time signature and a tempo of 114. The notation shows two staves of rhythmic patterns, with notes grouped in pairs and some marked with an asterisk (*). Above the notes are rhythmic flags and letters: R L R, R L R, L R L R, R L, R L R, L R R, L R L R, R L. Brackets above the notes indicate triplet groupings.

Part Two – Modulations

Another variation is to pick a phrase and try “modulating” it between two different subdivisions. Going from sixteenths to triplets gives the effect of slowing down, while the pulse actually stays the same. Here’s my five-beat double-stop fill played first as sixteenths and then as triplets:

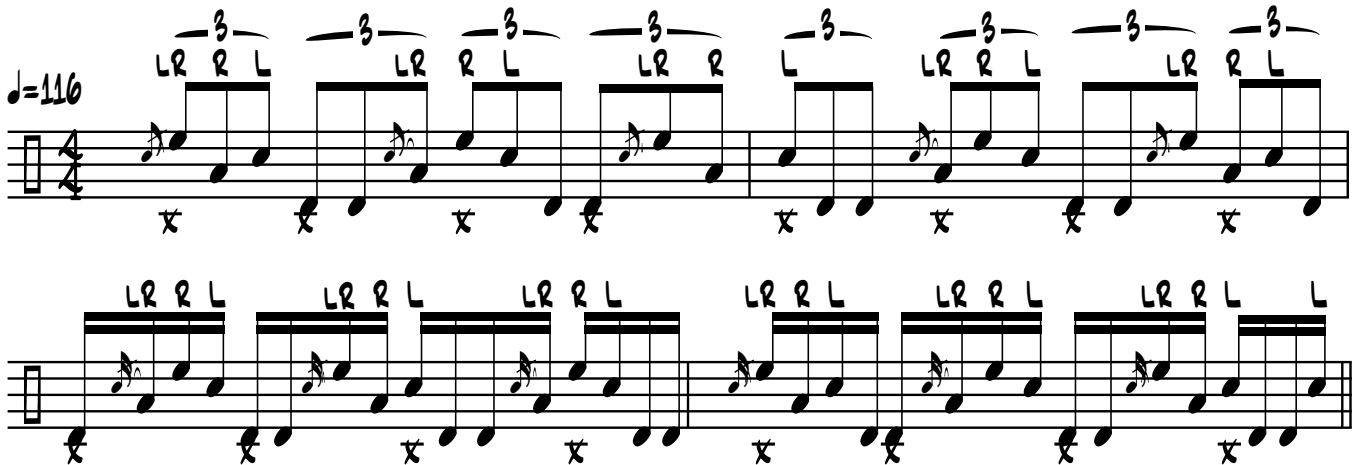
 audio
track 126



Musical notation for track 126, showing a five-beat double-stop fill. The tempo is marked as ♩=100. The notation consists of two staves. The first staff shows the fill played as sixteenth notes, with asterisks (*) above each beat. The second staff shows the same fill played as triplets, with a '3' above each triplet group.

Conversely, you could move from triplets to sixteenths, which gives the illusion of speeding up. Here’s the Tony Williams five-beat Swiss triplet hand-to-foot phrase, modulating from triplets to sixteenths:

 audio
track 127



Musical notation for track 127, showing a five-beat Swiss triplet hand-to-foot phrase. The tempo is marked as ♩=116. The notation consists of two staves. The first staff shows the phrase played as triplets, with 'LR R L' above each triplet group and asterisks (*) below each beat. The second staff shows the phrase played as sixteenth notes, with 'LR R L' above each group of four notes and asterisks (*) below each beat.

This is the blushda seven, modulating from triplets to sixteenths:

 audio
track 128



Musical notation for track 128, showing the blushda seven modulating from triplets to sixteenths. The tempo is marked as ♩=100. The notation consists of two staves. The first staff shows the phrase played as triplets, with 'RL R RL' above each triplet group and asterisks (*) below each beat. The second staff shows the phrase played as sixteenth notes, with 'RL R RL' above each group of four notes and asterisks (*) below each beat.

Another point I wanted to make is that these modulations sound best when they don't always start on beat one. To illustrate what I'm talking about, here's the seven-sixteenth flam phrase from page 74, modulating on the last beat of bar two. I also decided to play the last beat of bar four as a triplet, just because I think it sounds good. Don't forget to also try adding the bass drum to every accented flam.

audio track 129

The notation for audio track 129 consists of two staves. The top staff is a single treble clef staff with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 104$. It contains two measures of music. The first measure has four eighth notes with hand patterns LR, RL, LR, RL and accents above them. The second measure has four eighth notes with hand patterns RL, LR, RL, LR and accents above them. The bottom staff is a single bass clef staff with a hi-hat symbol at the beginning. It contains two measures of music, each with four eighth notes marked with an 'x' below them, corresponding to the accents in the top staff.

If you're feeling adventurous, you could try modulating between three different subdivisions! In the next example I've taken the Tony Williams five-beat idea we looked at, and moved it through eighth-note triplets, sixteenths, sixteenth-note triplets, and back to sixteenths to finish off. Note that with something like this, there is only a small range of tempos where all three subdivisions will sound good. I've written in a tempo that works for me on this modulated phrase. Obviously you must be able to relate all the subdivisions back to the 4/4 pulse, so I've also written in the quarter notes on the hi-hat foot just to make it clear. Practice with a click, count the quarter notes, and/or play the hi-hat foot. Whatever it takes, just make sure you always know where you are in relation to the beat.

audio track 130

The notation for audio track 130 consists of two staves. The top staff is a single treble clef staff with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 100$. It contains two measures of music. The first measure has four eighth-note triplets with accents above them. The second measure has four sixteenth notes with accents above them. The bottom staff is a single bass clef staff with a hi-hat symbol at the beginning. It contains two measures of music, each with four quarter notes marked with an 'x' below them, corresponding to the accents in the top staff.