

# Art Blakey's Jazz Messages

**JOHN RAMSAY**

*drum transcriptions by* **JOHN RAMSAY**

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*Dedicated in loving memory to*

**ABDULLAH IBN BUHAINA**

a.k.a.

**ART BLAKEY**



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**P**HOTOGRAPHY

**FRANCIS WOLFF**

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EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

## FOREWORD

“You never see an armored car following a hearse.” So spoke the great Art Blakey when attempting to bolster the flagging confidence of young, weak, and less concerned musicians (we were always around in case this sort of verbal inspiration was proffered — it often was). So interjected Abdullah Ibn Buhaina as high priest of mythology at the most recent funeral for jazz in explaining why the meat hook of commercialism would not slice into his soul sliding him, embarrassed from the stage as jazz master to the spiritual freezer of publicly acclaimed puppet (it had snared so many of his even more-renowned colleagues). This is what Art Blakey said when convincing again his many enthralled audiences that the hot sound of a band swinging would proudly resound no matter how deteriorated the contemporary social virtues.

Mikell’s Night Spot early eighties: people packed, unabashedly exhibiting the love and respect reserved solely for the most venerated of long-standing warriors. Art Blakey at the helm of a band of young would-bes, perched on the orange throne of a drum set, head cocked heavenward, mouth open in wonder, eyes flashing in the act of creating, listening as he hammers the supremacy of swinging out into the still, smoky night air. The young not believing their good fortune — sharing the bandstand with the living embodiment of what they want to dedicate their lives to. They too thought the funeral for jazz was last week — they read it in all the magazines — but here is a priest of it, alive and willing to teach by playing with them — to give himself up to them and those listening. Why should he? “From the creator, to the artist, to you.” So spoke the great Art Blakey in explaining why he played every gig like it was his first and last.

He was the greatest man most of us will ever know. Capable of doing more of “everything” than anyone you ever heard of. Folks used to say, “On the eighth day, God created Art Blakey.” He was just made of something else, different from us (mere) mortals. It was the integrity and soul of the man; he was unshakable, with an indestructible belief in soul and intelligence melded into an inseparable one through jazz music that inspired him to stay on the road shaping excellent band after band long after most of his generation and

younger had faded and curled like bad, old and loud wall paper. He loved this music and the musicians that played it and they loved him back even under the most adverse circumstances (of which there were many).

He loved to swing and help others to swing. That’s what he did full out, all night long — daytime too ... all the time!! You thought it wasn’t hard for him to live with this heroic intensity because, well, he lived jazz music and was at all times totally himself, unique, inimitable, bred by Mrs. Blakey to too-hard work. He could even tell a lie with such integrity as to have you agreeing — even when it was on you. He was a great storyteller who loved and knew intimately all sorts of people from criminals to the judges. Yes, and they loved him because he was a magician and everyone loves magic. His was the magic of powerful rhythms. Yes, he was a magician whose sleight-of-hand tricks converted a trap set from cow skin, wood, and sheet metal to the many creaks, moans, groans, hollers, and whistles of nature of a quiet then stormy night. “Never let one hand know what the other is doing.” So spoke Bu in describing the execution of some impossible to play polyrhythm. So he spoke as Merlin in the process of casting a spell to unify contrasting rhythms into harmonious tapestry of swinging sound. He was a drummer, could control the sound of a band like you wouldn’t believe, but would give you chances to control it — if you wanted to, if you could, or if you were trying. Because he was patient; would let you learn how to play at his expense. But now, if you were bullshitting, “here comes this bass drum right up your ass to make you play something — mother. . . .!!” He was no saint, but a hero bred to battle. Possessed of an inborn fire that could not be doused. A hot, passionate combination of fury, calm, greed, generosity, intelligence, and soul, yes, that is what he was most of all — unconquerable.

You might have heard that he could do more of “everything” than anyone else (people like to talk about things like that — and maybe it was true) but did I mention that really, he loved to swing and help others to swing too? Well, that is the truth — about him anyway.

Wynton Marsalis, May 1994

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For Julia, who provided love and support and a beautiful tropical paradise to write in, and without whom this book could not have been completed.

For my children Corey, Shaka, Niko and Evan Ramsay; my sisters Joy and Bobby, and my father Percy; and for Art Blakey's children Gwendolyn, Art Jr. and Evelyn Blakey; Gamal, Sakeena, Takashi, Kenji and Akira Buhaina; Ann Arnold Blakey, Yawu Miller and the whole family.

A special thanks to all the Jazz Messengers who contributed to this book, and especially Wynton Marsalis, for his loving Foreword.

Thanks to the other spirit of the drums, Lenny Nelson — you're an inspiration for all drummers. Yeah, Universal Dexterity!

Special Thanks to Javon Jackson for hookin' me up with "the cats." And to my brother Billy Pierce.

Thanks to Paul Siegel, Bob Weiner, Kim Plainfield, Bill Brinkley, John Riley, Alan Dawson, Sandy Feldstein, Charlie Banacos, Tommy Campbell, Louis LoCicero and Don Sickler; Andy Zildjian and Steve Oksenuk at Sabian Cymbals, Vic Firth and Carol Calato; Larry Monroe, Warrick Carter, Lee Berk, Dean Anderson, and the Berklee College of Music percussion faculty.

Thanks to Hannes Giese for the discography in his book *Art Blakey Sein Leben, Seine Musik, Seine Schallplatten (His Love, His Music, His Records)*, published in Germany by Oreos books.

*John P Ramsay*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Drummer, recording artist, author, educator, clinician — these are all words which describe John Ramsay.

John is featured with the Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers Big Band on a recent Blue Note Records Compact Disc entitled *The History of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers*, and the 1980 Timeless release *Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers Big Band Live in Montreux and North Sea*.

In addition to these recordings, John can be heard on the 1993 debut CD release for tenor saxophonist Les Arbuckle *No More No Les*, featuring Kenny Barron and Cecil McBee for Audioquest Records, and on Lionel Hampton saxophonist Andy McGhee's first release as a leader, *Could It Be*, with Ray Santisi and Joe Cohn.

John has been heavily involved in teaching at Berklee College of Music in Boston where he has taught for the past twelve Years. He has participated in many *Berklee on the Road* activities including jazz clinics in Italy, Poland, Japan and in the United States in Santa Fe and Los Angeles. He has also performed at Jazz Educators seminars in St. Louis, New Orleans, Miami and Boston.

Aside from his membership in the Jazz Messengers Big Band, John served as road manager and occasional drum sub in the Jazz Messengers Sextet. John's close personal relationship with Art lasted until Art's death in 1990.

Born in Northampton, Massachusetts, John grew up in the 1960's playing the popular music of the period. His musical direction was permanently altered with the advent of Jazz/Rock fusion and with the arrival of Max Roach to his alma mater, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. It was during

this period of study and with the guidance of Max Roach that John first became aware of the great American art form of jazz. This led to a five- year period of study with master drummer/educator Alan Dawson, who John credits with giving him the well-rounded skills necessary to survive in the music business. John also studied with Ed Soph and Bob Moses, and continues to study and learn by taking occasional lessons and transcribing the recordings of great drummers of our time. John says: "That's one of the wonderful things about music and drumming, it's a lifetime endeavor. One can always learn something new."

In addition to the Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers Big Band, which included Wynton and Branford Marsalis, Kevin and Robin Eubanks, James Williams and Bill Pierce, John has performed with Sonny Stitt, James Moody, Terence Blanchard, Wallace Roney, Donald Harrison, Donald Brown, Kenny Barron, Cecil McBee, Eartha Kitt, Gregory Hines, John Hicks, Walter Booker and The Clifford Jordan Big Band. John endorses Sabian Cymbals and Regal Tip/Calato drumsticks and brushes.



## VARIATIONS ON A THEME

**Ex. 3f** Play the buzz two to three inches from the edge of the drum.

23  
TRACK

**REFERENCE** "One By One" 8th bar of A section of head

album: *Oh By the Way*

Timeless Records SJP 165

**Ex. 3g** Play the left cymbal crash with the butt of the stick (matched grip).

24  
TRACK

**REFERENCE** "Along Came Betty" 16th bar of trumpet solo

album: *Moanin'*

Blue Note BN 4003

**Ex. 3h**

25  
TRACK

**REFERENCE** "Along Came Betty" 3rd and 4th bar of last A section of trumpet solo

album: *Moanin'*

Blue Note BN 4003

**Ex. 3i** Art would sometimes set up ensemble figures like this:

26  
TRACK

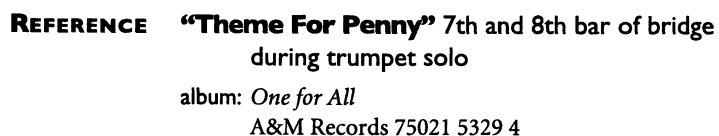
**REFERENCE** "The Egyptian" introduction

album: *Indestructible*

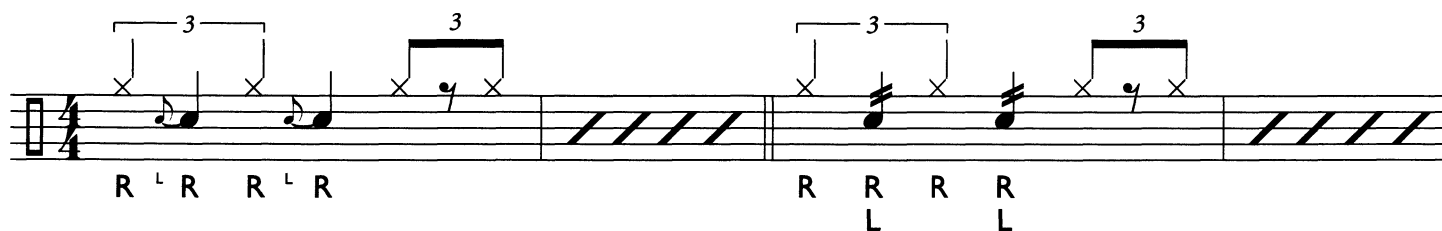
Blue Note 84193 or

CD: *The History of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers*

Blue Note CDP 7 97190 2



**3m** (buzz unison hands)

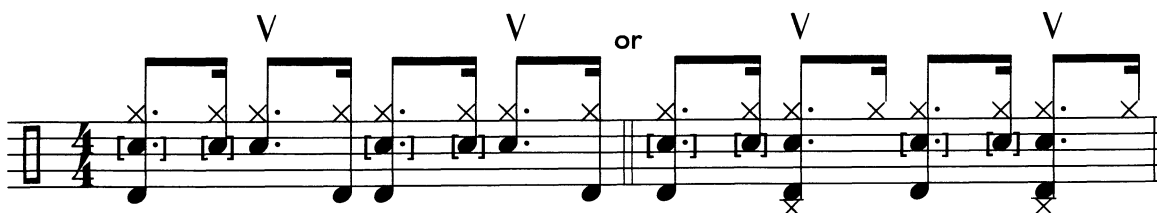


**Ex. 4a** Shuffle #1



$V$  = deadstroke center of drum

**(Firmly dig the stick into the drumhead — don't allow the stick to rebound or buzz.)**



Blue Note BST 84003

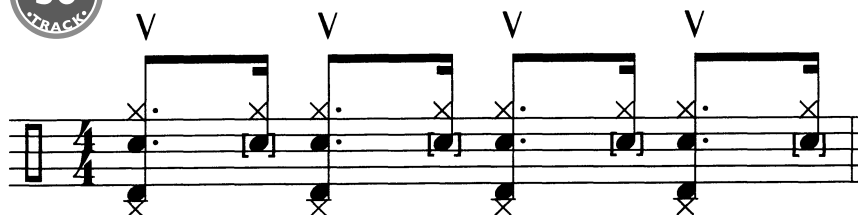
album: *The Big Beat*

Blue Note BST 84029 also

**CD: *The History of Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers***  
Blue Note CDP 7 97190 2

**Ex. 4b** Shuffle #2

30  
TRACK

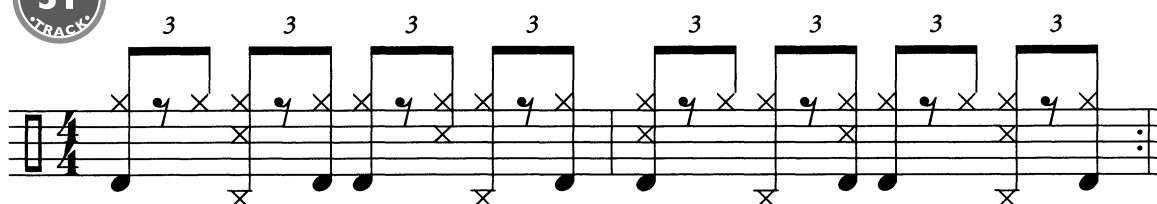


**REFERENCE** “Blues March”

album: *Moanin’*  
Blue Note BST 84003

**Ex. 4c** Shuffle bossa

31  
TRACK



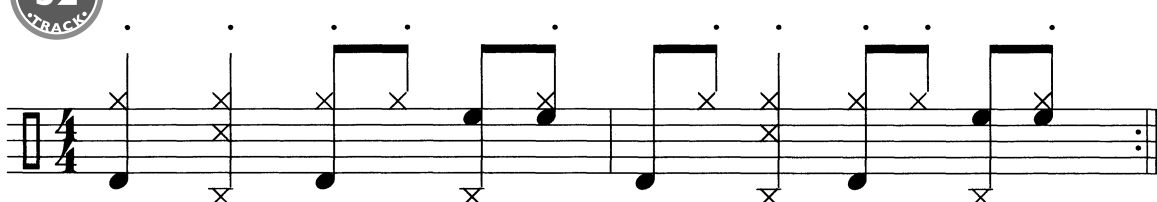
**REFERENCE** “Pensativa”

album: *Free for All*  
Blue Note BN 84170

**“BLAKEY MAMBOS”**

**Ex. 5a** Jazz mambo — even eighths

32  
TRACK



## Art’s Jazz Messages

The great drummer Kenny Clarke would often come to see the band when we played in Europe (he lived in Paris). One time the Big Band played in Torino, Italy, in the middle of a big soccer stadium. Kenny was playing in the festival the next night, so Art asked him if he wanted to play with the band during our show. I was stunned to find myself playing in a Big Band with three drummers — myself, Art Blakey and Kenny Clarke! I was even more stunned when I noticed Max Roach and the members of his percussion group M-Boom walking across the field toward the stage. Incidentally, Roy Haynes was there too, having just played the night before.

Another time when I was road manager for the Jazz Messengers I was backstage with Kenny Clarke at the New Morning Club in Paris. I had been road managing for sometime and I told Kenny I was frustrated because I hadn’t been playing. Kenny said, “Yeah, you need to play with other people because that’s where you get your ideas from.”

That same evening Art gave me one of his two snare drums and told me to ask Kenny to tune it for him.

— **John Ramsay**