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# **introduction**

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The knowledge put forth in this book is basically an oral tradition. To be honest, it was difficult to translate to the page, although I think we did an excellent job, and I think the ideas are very clear. Still, a lot of this material is easier to communicate on a person-to-person basis. One thing to realize is that we're dealing with musical ideas and concepts. We can explain these concepts to a certain degree in writing, but oftentimes aural examples prove helpful. For this reason, my address is available for those who would like to contact me in person to ask any questions or to study privately. I'm also available for clinics. You can reach me in care of Modern Drummer Publications.

I believe you will find the concepts in this book to be practical, valuable and immediately applicable to the everyday job of playing music. Unlike most books I've read, it presents an overall concept rather than detailing technical minutia or lots of side issues, such as bass drum technique or left-hand finger stroke. It deals with the larger category of playing music, and does so in such a way that it simplifies it and translates the concepts into some very simple, obvious methodologies.

In a sense, this book takes the mystery out of playing. When you hear a great drummer play, you may wonder, "How could I ever do that?" Basically, this book will give you a very simple explanation of what actually happens in the act of making music. (In fact, it does so in such a way that the book is valuable not just to drummers, but to anybody who is interested in making music.) It also deals with basic concepts of communication. All art is an attempt to communicate and there are certain rules about getting your ideas across that really pertain to all artistic expression.

The concepts set forth in this book are open enough that they won't necessarily lead you to sound like me; they will help you to sound like yourself. That's one reason I did not include a lot of exercises in the book. It's not even important that you play the few examples there are. When I, myself, try to read the Non-Independent exercises in this book, it actually slows me down. I generated the examples by playing extemporaneously. Whereas I can play that stuff easily off the top of my head, trying to read it back is difficult. The examples are included to show you the *type* of thing you can do; they are not intended to be exercises per se. In a way, this book is like a coloring book: It outlines a broad basic concept which each individual can fill in his or her own style, whether that be rock, funk, Latin, jazz, swing, reggae or whatever.

I recommend that you start by reading the whole book from beginning to end, so you get an idea of the overall concept. Then you can go back and work on it chapter by chapter, concept by concept. You can jump ahead to chapters that particularly interest you or you can jump back and forth, but only after you've read the whole thing from beginning to end.

# attitude

The first step in my concept is always having a musical idea behind what I play, and getting this idea across to my listeners. I always play from something; I never play from nothing. Sometimes when I hear people playing, it's difficult to know what idea they are playing off of, because the musicians are not making enough use of the specific elements of the song they are playing. Melodic musicians should use the original melody as the idea behind their melodic improvisations. Even the drummer should be able to relate a drum solo to the original tune in such a way that a listener will be able to recognize that tune in the solo.

This involves a certain amount of predetermination. Before you play, you have to decide what idea you are going to play off of. Until you make this decision, you will not be free to put your full energy into your playing. Instead, you will be concentrating on figuring out what you are going to play. Once you've decided, you can really jump on it, and play it with all the force, sensuality and sensitivity that you can muster.

The next important point is to take one idea and expand it, instead of playing a lot of ideas. The greatest musicians are those who can take one idea and make the most of it. Too often I hear drummers who flit from one idea to another. They might start with an 8th-note feel, and then suddenly go into a triplet feel. Next, they might throw in a quick 16th-note thing, and then go back to the triplet feel. Meanwhile, they are switching from one cymbal to another cymbal. My feeling is that any one of those single ideas could be expanded and used for five to ten minutes.

Look at the reason for change in music: When I play, I make musical changes because I've gotten all the juice out of a particular idea; I've milked it. I've reached a point where I feel that anything more I could say on that idea would be redundant and unnecessary. So at that point I change the idea, and I change it forcefully. I avoid wishy-washy transitions where the listener is wondering whether I am still playing the same idea or whether I have switched to something else.

Another reason that we want to have an idea to play off of is because our goal is to groove. As far as I'm concerned, that's the only goal. Creativity is not a goal; creativity *is*. Everybody is creative, but not everybody grooves.

Let's look at the word "groove." Inherent in the word "groove" is "repetition." That's not all groove is, but there has to be some element of repetition or else the music is not going to groove. There are some grooves that I call "static" grooves, which are 100% repetition, or close to it — the same thing over and over. Certain funk and disco grooves are like that, and they can feel great. What's nice about jazz playing is that there's room for change within the groove; it's not 100% repetition. There might be just one little element of repetition, but that in itself gives the music the cohesion it needs. Your element of repetition may be minimal, as it often is in jazz, or maximal, as in disco, funk, Latin or African music. The point is to maintain that single idea rather than to constantly change your internal focus.

Before developing these points further, I want to say one more thing: There should be a musical idea behind everything you practice, just as there should be a musical idea behind everything you play. I'm against any kind of mechanical, non-musical, "drumistic" kind of practicing, such as doing paradiddles for an hour while watching TV. It's a bad habit to separate the drums from music. Every time I pick up the sticks to play, I have music running through my head. I am playing music, not just drums. I think it's also a bad habit to practice just to exercise your "chops" per se. There will always be something *musical* that will exercise your "chops." If you know only drums, you don't necessarily know music, but if you know music, then you know drums. Music includes melody, harmony and rhythm. Having just the drumistic things without having the rest of music is certainly incomplete.

# ***internal hearing***

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Once you have accepted the concept that you should always play off of something, the next important point is this: There is a distinction between what you play and what you play off of. In other words, there is often a difference between what you are hearing in your head and what you — or the band — are actually playing. This brings us to the concept of internal hearing. Let's call what you are actually playing the external. That's what everyone can hear. However, what you are playing off of is sometimes an internal thing. Only you hear it in your head. So there is a separation between what you think about and what you play.

What are the types of things I hear internally in my mind? What I think about — the internal hearing — is always the simplest possible idea. Let's compare it to building a house. The first step is to have a strong, basic framework. The second step is to add all the detail and decorative work. So the house has two elements: the structural, which is very simple, basic and strong, and the detailed, ornamental work. In terms of music, the decorative work is generally the province of the soloist or lead instrument. The drummer and the bass player provide the strong, basic structure. This is not to say that the drummer can never play decoratively, but the sense of structure must not be lost. It's certainly not desirable for a lead instrument to lose the structure, but it's not disastrous either, because that player can find the structure again by listening to the rhythm section. However, if the drummer or bass player loses that focus, it *is* disastrous, because they *are* the structure. That is why it's so important to hear a strong, focal idea in your mind, and why, in many cases, you cannot afford to listen to what is actually being played as much as you listen to something internal. If there is any danger that what someone plays, or what you yourself play, will pull you off the basic structure, then you cannot afford the luxury of listening to it. You have to actually *ignore* the external because your first responsibility is to be one with the structure.

Internal hearing is like a muscle that I use to hold onto something that may slip away from me. The commonsense rule about internal hearing is: When the external is very simple and conforms to the basic idea, then you don't have to flex that internal hearing muscle very strongly, because the music itself is giving you the structure; the internal and external are the same, or very similar. As the music moves away from the basic structure and gets more abstract, polyrhythmic, over the bar or less melodic, it will tend to pull you away from the basic idea. That is the time when you have to flex the internal hearing muscle more strongly, because that is when you are in the greatest danger of being distracted from the basic idea. This often means that you will actually not be listening to the "external" music.

What, then, are some of the specific things that one can play off of? Although it is theoretically possible to play off of an infinite variety of ideas, in my playing there are three musical sources I employ more than others: playing off of a melody, playing off of a vamp or playing off of a resolution point. Many years ago I realized that utilizing these sources gave my playing grace, strength, and a consistent feeling of swing and groove.

When playing off of a melody, I make that my primary thought. I don't concentrate on what I'm playing. Some people have trouble singing a melody while they're playing drums, because the melody is interfering with their drum patterns. That's backwards. I make the drums follow the melody — become subservient to the melody. After all, if I wasn't playing *that tune*, I could just be playing free. Also, when I choose to play a specific song, then that is the material on which I base my improvisation.

While the band is playing the melody, my internal and external hearing are the same. However, when it gets to the second chorus and one of the lead instruments starts playing an improvised solo, I am still internally hearing the original melody and almost ignoring what the soloist is playing. Many times a drummer will try to duplicate the ideas, abstractions or extensions of the soloist, but that is not your job. Your job is to be aligned with the structure and provide a cushion for the soloist to work off. This is not to say that you can never listen to what the soloist is doing, but you can only do so after your internal hearing is so strong that you could not possibly be in doubt about or lose the basic structure — the melody from which that solo comes.

Trying to play *with* the soloist is like two people trying to get into the same end of a canoe — it's going to tip over. Therefore, you must continue to play off of the basic melody even after the soloists have abandoned it and have started improvising. That way, the soloists can balance their ideas against the basic structure.

Some tunes are based on vamps. Generally speaking, when a tune has static harmony, it tends to have a rhythmic/harmonic vamp. In many of these types of tunes, such as John Coltrane's "Equinox," the vamp is in the bass line.



In this situation, align yourself with the vamp and continue to play off of that, no matter what the soloists are playing. This gives them a consistent structure to work off.

Latin music utilizes the concept of the clave, which is similar to a vamp. It's a rhythmic motif that repeats over and over. The basic Latin clave is:



All the variations that Latin musicians play come off the clave or a similar vamp. This particular pattern is an integral part of most Latin music, but there are variations on this clave:



Vamps occur in all types of music. Funk music is very much based on vamps. In jazz, vamps gained a prominent place around the early '60s with the advent of modal music — music which is basically written over one chord. At that time, it became prevalent to play off of bass figures. A vamp can also be thought of as a motif, a recurring rhythm or a clave. They all mean the same thing.

It's also very valuable to use vamps when you play by yourself — to hear a bass line in your head, either one that you know from a song or one that you make up. This is a four-bar bass line that has become very much a part of me:



I don't even remember now if it's something I heard or something I made up, but I use it a lot when playing in 4/4 time. I can use it in many different styles and in situations where I need to find a focal point.

The third category is playing off of a resolution point, which will be discussed later in this book. For now, suffice it to say that this is similar to playing off of a vamp.

These are probably the three most common things to play off of, but there *are* other things, such as an image, a poetic thought or a color. An example would be to play off of the color gray. That's a very abstract idea, but if you did, in fact, play only things that reminded you of that color, you could make a cohesive statement. If you really stick with one idea, whatever your idea is, it will get across. But usually the idea will be based on a melody, a vamp or a resolution point. There is also another category I use called "the flow," which I will discuss later. "The flow" is something you can't take full advantage of until you've spent a lot of time with resolution points.

# groove canon

The concept of a canon, or “round,” is very old. Much of Bach’s music used fugue or canon, which is one melody or rhythm started in different places. Many people have sung “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” in elementary school as a round. Although it is an old concept, I have not heard it used before in the way I use it — applied to groove-oriented music.

The musical reason I came up with this was to solve an ambivalence I feel. I love vamps and repetitive figures because they’re very danceable. They tend to put the listener in a trance, and they really feel good. But no matter how hip a vamp or repetitive figure is, after a certain point it is possible to get tired of it. Even though the best musicians make it feel good for a long time, once you’ve psyched out the groove (or clave) of the vamp, it tends to lose a little of the mystery. So I came up with a strategy which, in my opinion, increases the danceability and grooveability of the vamp and, at the same time, adds the element of mystery: I start the vamp in several different places.

I use this concept on two of my albums. There are two examples on the record *When Elephants Dream Of Music* (Gramavision GR8203). The first is on a piece called “The River.” There are two figures in nine that go against each other, and these two figures each start in three different places.

The image displays three examples of a groove canon in 9/4 time. Each example consists of two staves: a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with a rhythmic line. The first example shows the two lines starting at the same time. The second example shows the melodic line starting two measures before the rhythmic line. The third example shows the melodic line starting four measures before the rhythmic line. Vertical dashed lines connect the start of each line across the three examples to illustrate the staggered entry points.

The other example on that record, “For Miles,” is not strictly a canon. In this composition, the rhythm is made up of two bars of 4/4, and one bar of 7/8. There are two rhythm sections. Rhythm section A plays the rhythm as written: two bars of 4/4, followed by one bar of 7/8. Rhythm section B starts at the same time, but begins with the 7/8 bar followed by the two bars of 4/4. I visualize this as one rhythm going forward and backward simultaneously.





Because these rhythms are mine, I can usually play my own part and still listen to the other musicians without being pulled off my own part. But on “For Miles,” even I had to ignore the others. It was really a test of everyone’s internal hearing.

Another example is from my album, *Visit With The Great Spirit* (Gramavision GR8307), on a piece called “Suite Bahia.” There is a rhythm in seven which is used in three different places, and in three different styles — first with voice, handclaps and talking drums; then on drumset, bass and guitars; and finally on log drums.



This piece has incredible groove, and yet the mystery is there for the listener because it’s impossible to discern where 1 is; there are several valid 1’s. But there is unity, because the musicians are all playing the same figure.

The reason I’m introducing this concept here is because it provides a good test of your ability to hear things internally. For instance, although I recommend that you use internal hearing on even the simplest of music, such as “Stella By Starlight,” it is possible to get through a tune like that without internally hearing the melody throughout. But with the groove canon concept, you really have to use internal hearing, because when you start to listen to the same rhythm coming in at different places, the tendency is to end up in unison with the other musicians. At first, you really have to ignore what other people are doing and hold your own part internally. The more you do this and the better you learn your part, the easier it will be for you to listen to the total effect later on.

I encourage others to try this concept with their own music. It’s a great thing to practice with other musicians who want to work on their own internal hearing, no matter what instrument they play. It’s instructive to tape yourselves, so that you can concentrate on your own part while you are playing, and then experience listening to the tape to hear how the different parts are working together. I think you will be surprised at how good it sounds, and what a good method it is for developing your internal hearing.