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Introduction

The series of exercises contained in this book will guide you through a fusion of African and American elements. On the American side, we have shuffle and shuffle-funk. On the African side, we have the rhythms from Cameroon known as mangambe and bikutsi. Playing these exercises will strengthen your groove, provide you with an understanding of the three-against-four polyrhythm, give you an awareness of the second partial of the triplet, and introduce you to a fresh new way to hear and feel music.

Syncopation and Independence

Having a clear understanding of syncopation and independence is essential to enabling you to play the complete patterns with the correct feel. Throughout the book, we'll look at each of these elements and examine how they work together. After mastering the exercises, you will be able to hear both sides of the three-against-four polyrhythm at the same time. It'll take patience and persistence to master all of the concepts that will be presented, but the payoff will be worth the effort.

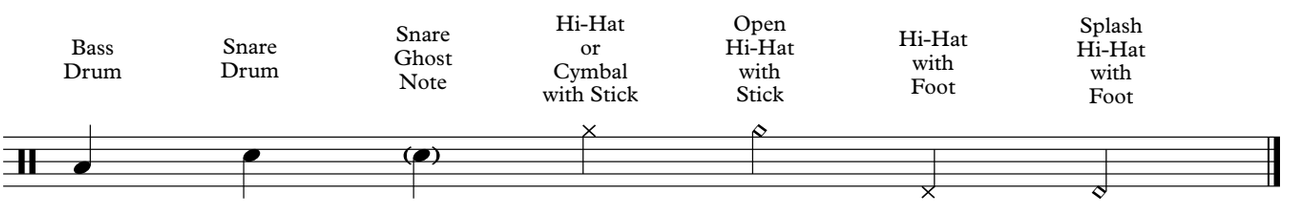
The examples begin by presenting the rhythms in their most basic forms. We will then add elements with subsequent exercises. Some of the exercises may be frustrating at first, but stay with it. Having an effective system of practice will minimize the frustration you experience while developing your independence. We recommend practicing each exercise for a maximum of twenty minutes. Once you've worked on one idea for the allotted time, move on to practice something that's not related to polyrhythms. We've found this to be the most effective way to internalize challenging material. The distraction of practicing a new, unrelated idea allows your subconscious to process the rhythm and independence of the exercises. After stepping away for about twenty minutes, try the challenging exercise again. Repeat the process until you've mastered it. Try this method as you work through the book, as well as with any new material you may be studying.

Using a Metronome

Practicing with a metronome is essential to developing a stable and consistent time feel. When using a metronome, it's important to have a positive attitude toward it. The metronome should be viewed as a friend, which makes it easier for you to play a groove with good time. The nature of the three-against-four polyrhythm is that each element of the rhythm has its own meter, so you can modulate to either one relative to the original pulse.

Having the consistent pulse of the metronome will help you strengthen your internal clock. Once you're comfortable with the independence and syncopation aspects of the exercises as they relate to the pulse of the metronome, you'll need to learn to ignore the metronome—while at the same time being aware of it—in order to achieve the proper feel. Once you can hear both vantage points of the rhythm, you will be able to change the feel of what you're playing without dropping a beat. And you will be well on your way to learning the joys of African-American funk!

Notation Key



Acknowledgments

"I would like to thank God for blessing me with the gift of the music, along with my wife, Wendy Joseph, and my mother, Jerlen Joseph, for their unending love and support. I would also like to thank my sponsors: Sakae, Sabian, Evans, Regal Tip, 2Box, and Drumasonic."

—Jonathan Joseph

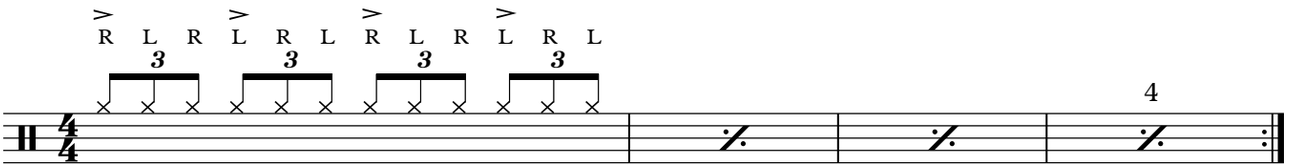
"Thanks to Claudia, Bryan, and Matt for their constant love and support. Thanks as well to Remo, Sabian, Vic Firth, Rez Drums, the Frost School at the University of Miami, and the UM Drum Nation."

—Steve Rucker

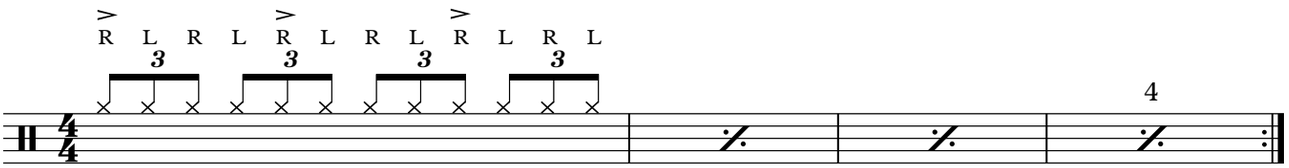
Chapter 1: Three-Against-Four Polyrhythm

The first thing we need to address is the three-against-four polyrhythm, which is crucial to many African rhythms. It's necessary for you to be able to hear and feel this rhythm in order to apply some of the concepts presented later. In the exercises, hearing the rhythm is as important as, if not more important than, actually playing the patterns.

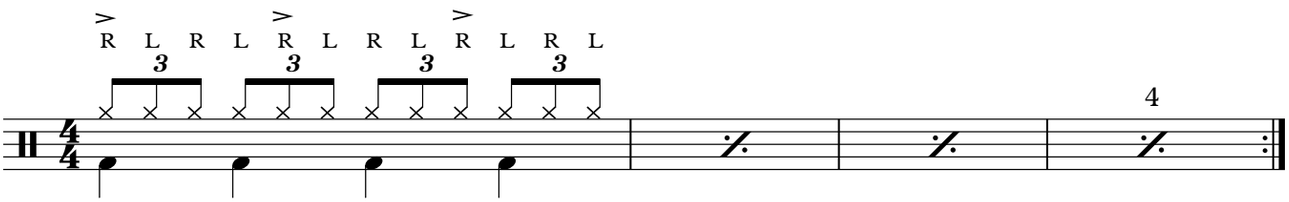
Let's learn to hear the three-against-four polyrhythm. Play the following triplet exercise on the hi-hat. Be sure to use a metronome or external sound source. Start at a tempo of 80 bpm. As you're playing this exercise, keep the tempo steady and count out loud: "One, two, three, four."



Now change the pattern so that you're accenting every fourth triplet partial. Count those accents out loud as "One, two, three." Technically, the polyrhythm is 3:4. For the purpose of this book, we will refer to this rhythm as the "long three," because of the way the pattern feels relative to the quarter-note pulse in 4/4.

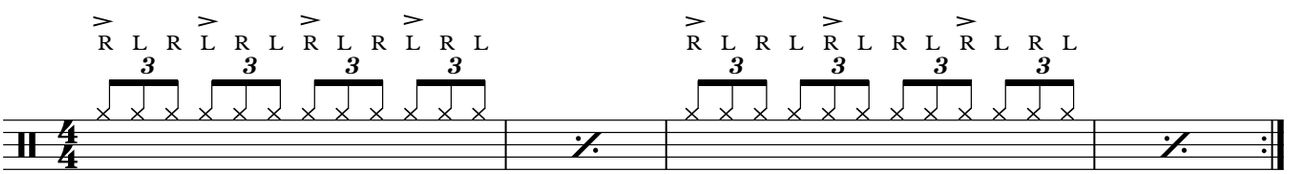


It might help to ground this rhythm with the bass drum.

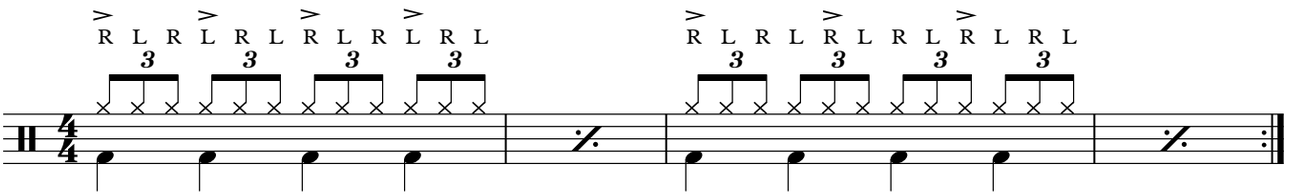


It's important to remember that this is an exercise for the mind. The space between the triplet partials never changes—the only thing that shifts is your perception of the accents against the metronome.

When you can really hear the polyrhythm, alternate between two measures of 4/4 and two measures of the long three. As you're playing the exercise, keep the tempo steady and count out loud "One, two, three, four" with the accents in bars 1 and 2, and count "One, two, three" with the accents in bars 3 and 4.

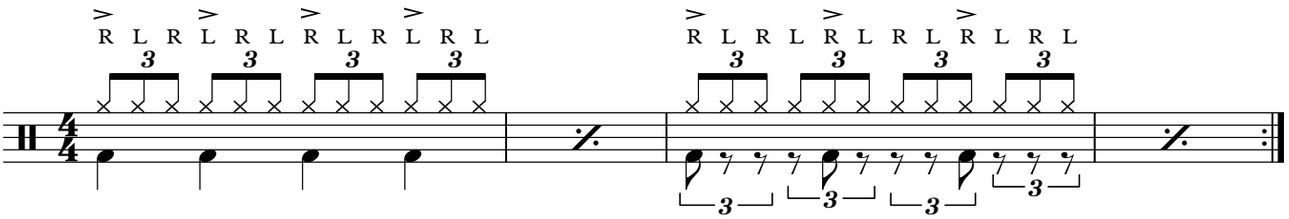


Here's the same exercise with quarter notes on the bass drum.

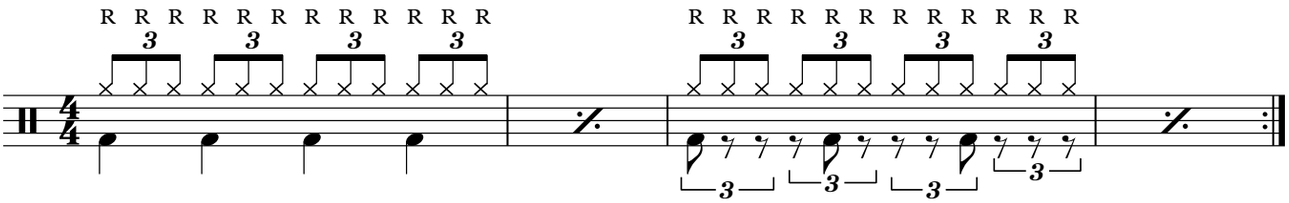


To make it more interesting and fun, play the previous exercise along with recordings that have a triplet subdivision, such as “Babylon Sisters” by Steely Dan.

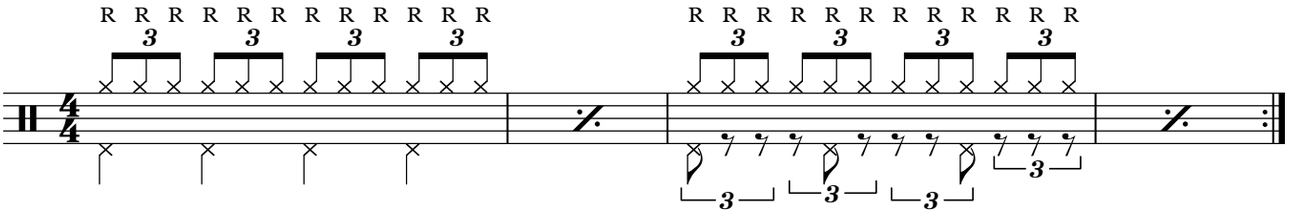
Now play the bass drum on the accented notes.



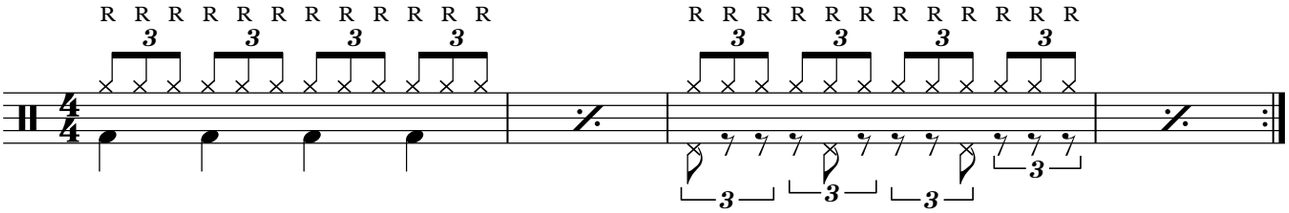
Now play the same exercise with triplets on the ride cymbal.



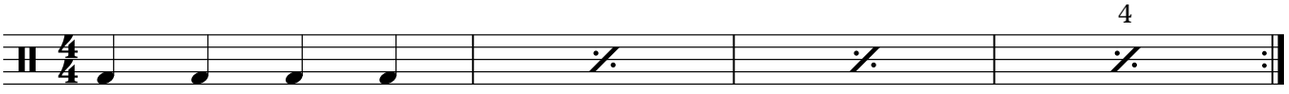
Now play the bass drum rhythm from the last exercise with the hi-hat foot.



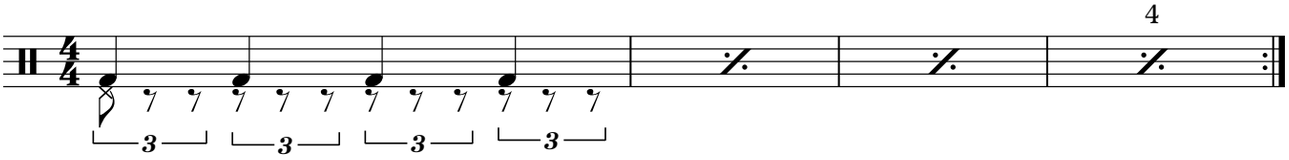
In this next exercise, play quarter notes on the bass drum for two measures, then play the long three with the hi-hat foot for two measures.



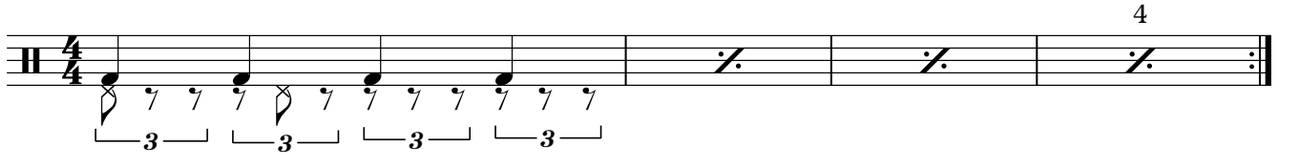
The next step is to play quarter notes and the long three at the same time. Start by playing quarter notes on the bass drum.



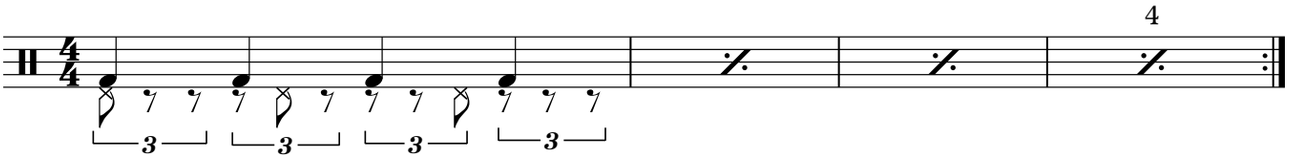
Then add the hi-hat foot on beat 1 while singing the 8th-note triplets out loud.



Next, add a hi-hat note on the second partial of the triplet on beat 2. First sing the rhythm, and then play it.

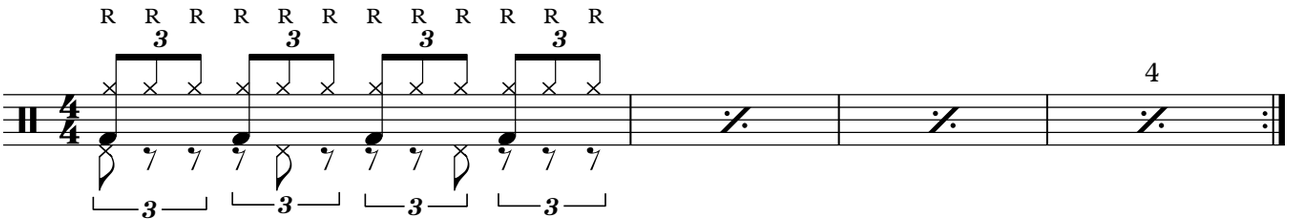


When that feels comfortable, add a third hi-hat note on the third triplet partial on beat 3. Now our polyrhythm is complete!

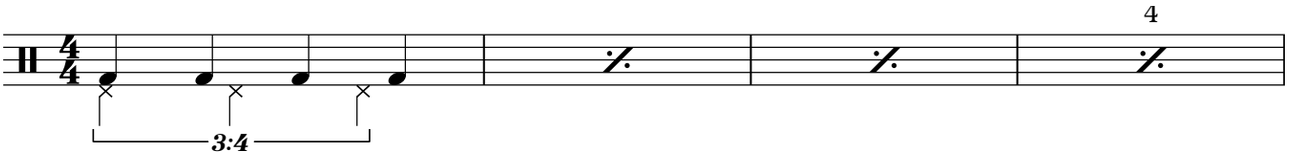


The musicality of this exercise should be apparent by the time you get to the complete polyrhythm. You may be tempted to alter the sonic placement of the long three, such as by playing it with your left hand on the snare. While that is a valid way of expressing the polyrhythm, it's important to realize that this is an independence exercise designed to give you the skills you'll need to combine the African and American elements found later in the book. We encourage you to develop the exercises as they are presented, in order to master these very important concepts.

Next, add triplets on the ride cymbal to the previous exercise.

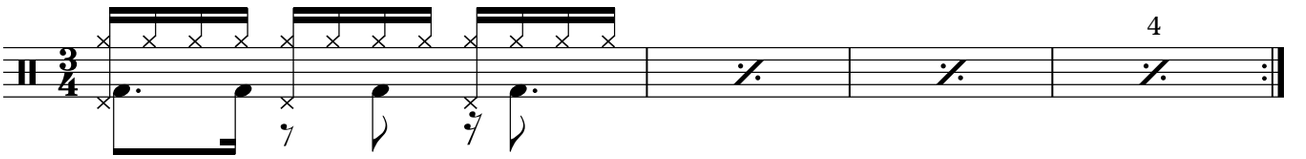


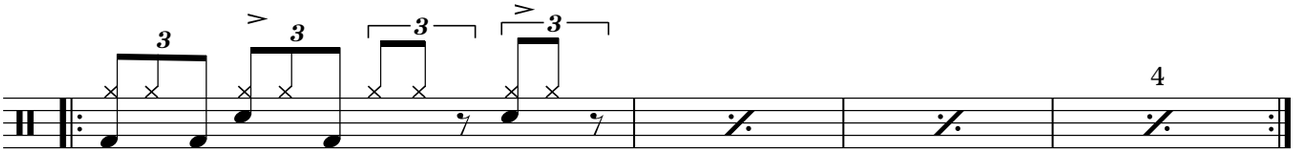
Here's the pattern with the feet written a different way.

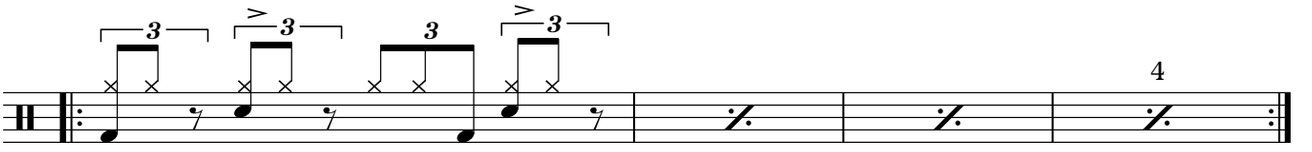


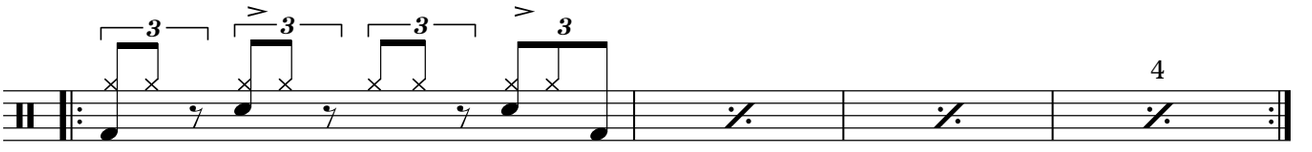
Using this notation, you can clearly see the 4/4 and 3/4 meters stacked on top of one another.

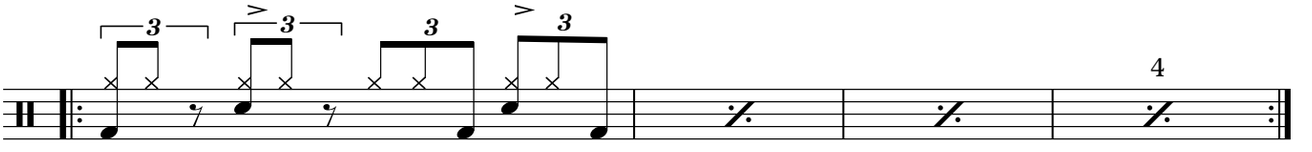
For the next exercise, use your muscle memory to keep the rhythm steady, and focus on hearing the hi-hat pattern as quarter notes in 3/4 and the bass drum as a counter-rhythm in 4/4. When you're hearing the rhythm in 3/4, the bass drum will sound like the following.

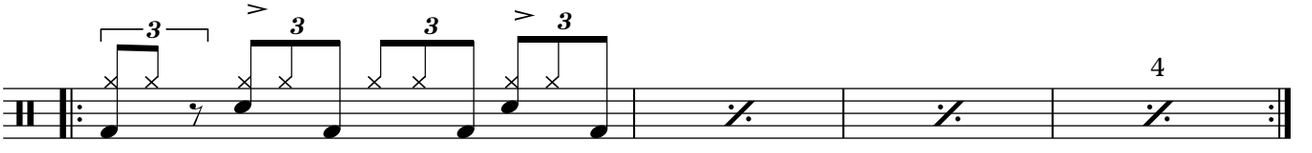


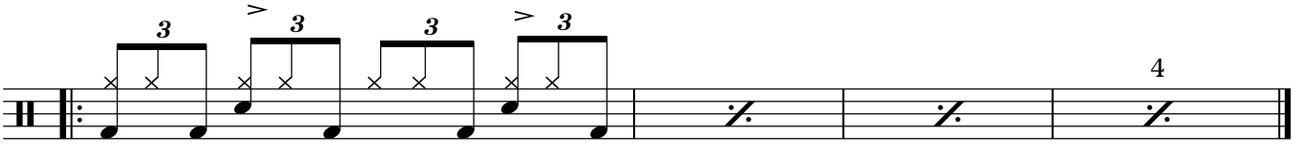




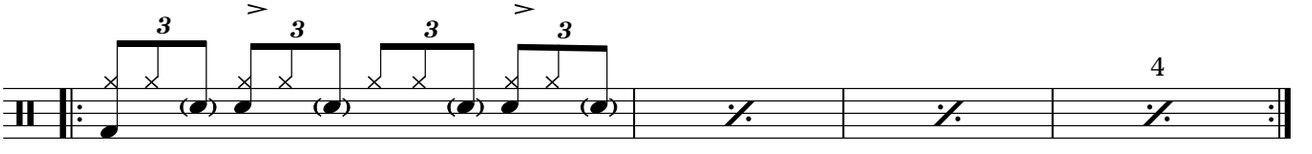


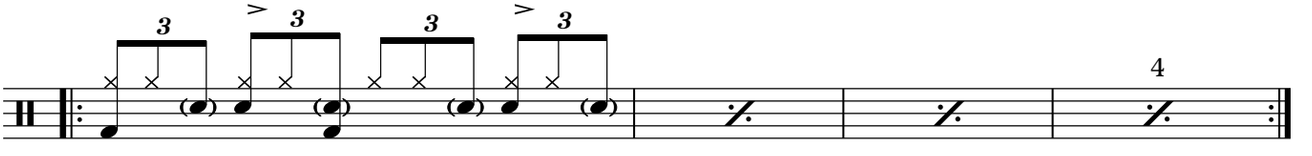


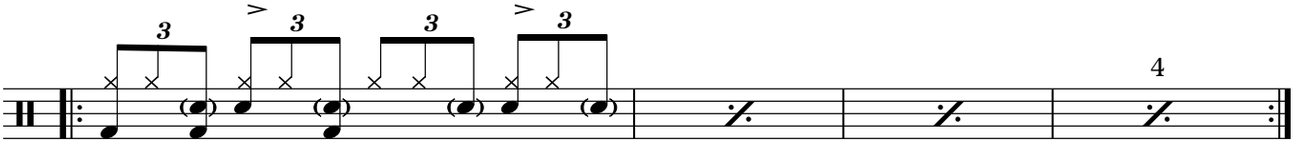


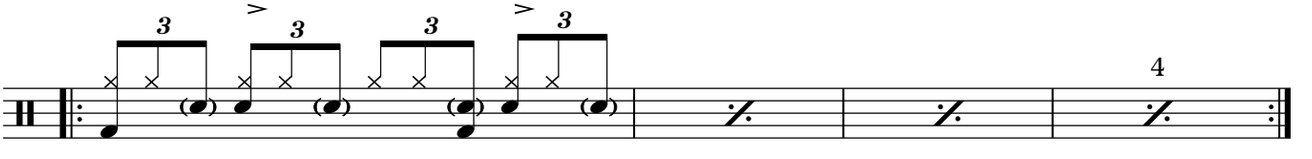


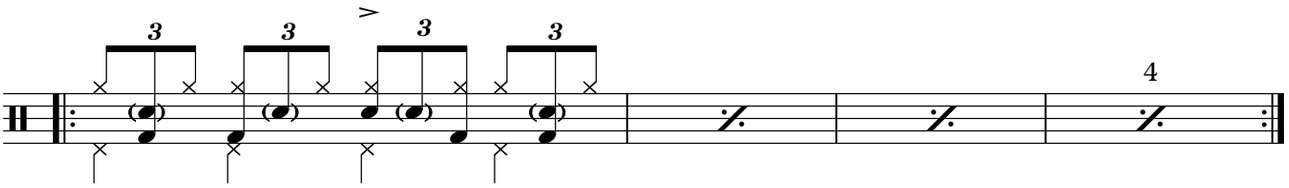
Here are the same exercises with ghost notes added on the snare.

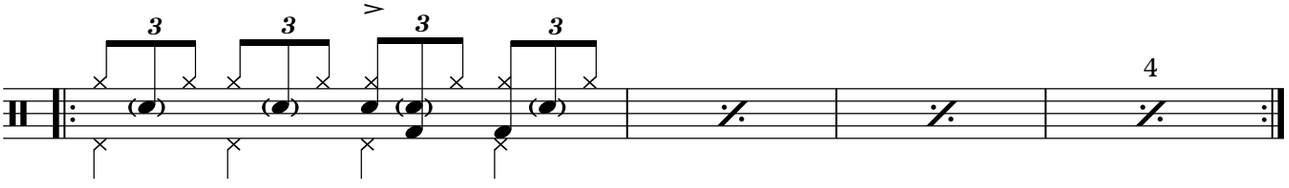
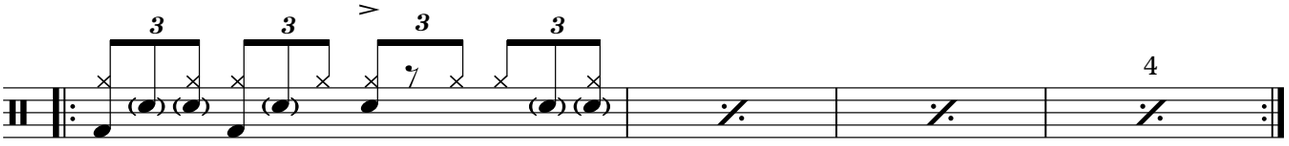
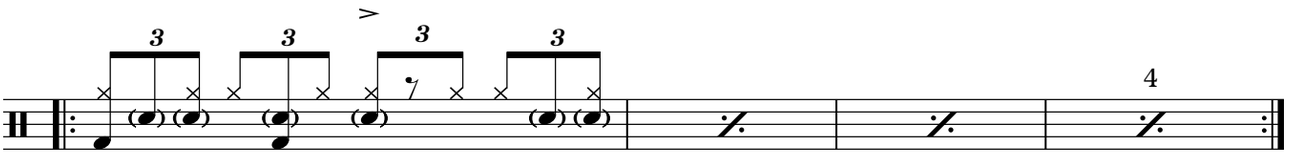
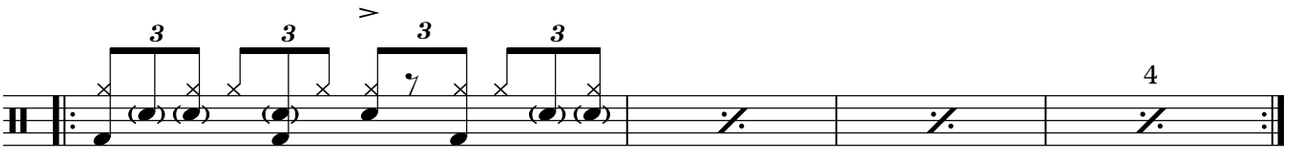
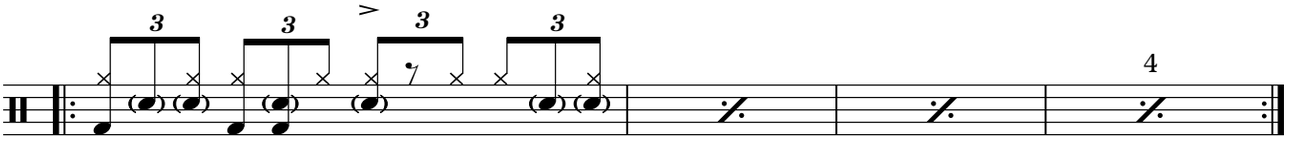
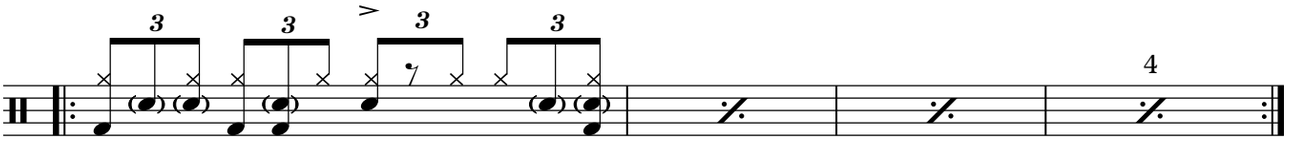
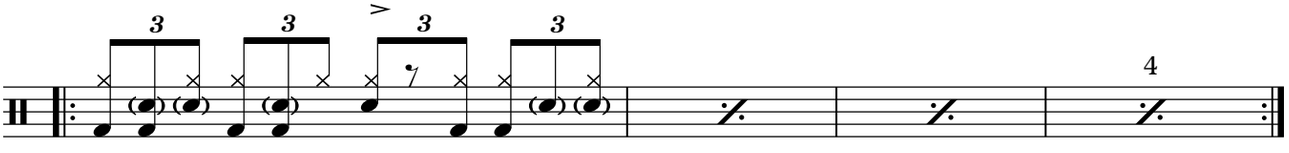
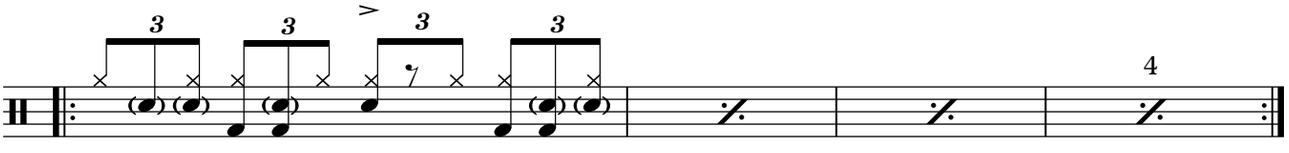
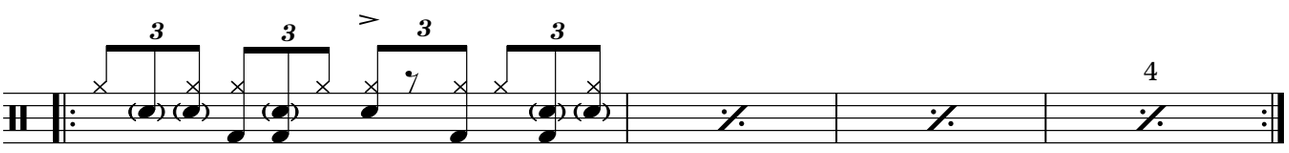












Ghost Note Pattern 3