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MUSIC NOTATION KEY

high tom high-mid tom mid-low tom floor tom 1 floor tom 2 bass drum snare buzzed stroke ghost stroke cross stick stick on stick

closed hi-hat sloshy open hi-hat tight open hi-hat ride ride bell cowbell crash 1 crash 2 splash china

hi-hat foot hi-hat foot splash

In covering some of the fills and solos of my favourite drummers, I have endeavoured to capture their sound (as much as possible) from the original recordings. So, for John Bonham and Ian Paice, I used 13" and 16" toms tuned low, and a 24" bass drum, whereas for Antonio Sanchez and Philly Joe Jones I used an 18" bass drum with two heads, and 12" and 14" toms, all tuned fairly tight. My general default kit was 10" and 12" rack toms, and 14" and 16" floor toms with a 22" bass drum, but for the Manu Katché examples I used 10", 12" and 13" rack toms and a 16" floor tom. For Tony Williams and Gary Husband, I used 12" and 13" rack toms, and 14" and 16" floor toms, with black dot heads tuned tight. I like to be authentic!

Also note that although I recorded all the tracks with a click, generally I've only included the countoff to each example. I find that the sound of the click playing through the examples can be distracting, and many times I'm playing hi-hat quarters anyway. I've included metronome markings in almost all the examples, and of course I believe that practicing with a click is absolutely essential.



photo by Neal Burstyn

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

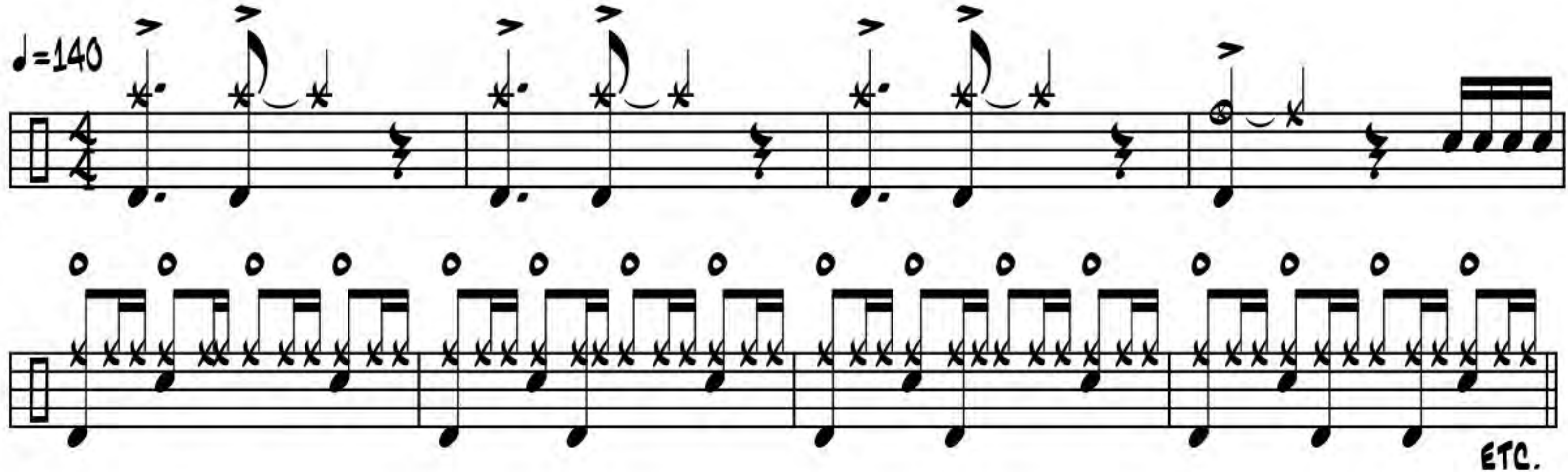
TONY WILLIAMS

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



ETC.

