

Compositional Jazz Band Drumming

Exploring sound, rhythmic, and
melodic aspects of drumming

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Time Keeping Basics

As drummers, we play beats for the music and the musicians we accompany. The music we perform influences our approach, style, and instrument choice.

- Traditional or contemporary styles
- Projection and sound quality

The drum set is made up of a collection of sounds that together, create one composite sound. The rhythmic consistency and fluidity of each limb will directly effect how solid your beats are.

The Ride Cymbal



- The ride cymbal is the most important element for achieving a good flowing swing feel
- Accenting the quarter note pulse within your ride pattern can help “lock in” your three remaining limbs when playing time
- Knowing where the quarter note is and how it relates to the rhythms you are playing will help develop solid time, regardless of what style of music you are playing

The Bass Drum



- The bass drum is the foundation of your swing feel
- It can be used to keep time by feathering four quarter notes to the measure, or used for accenting rhythms played by the rhythm section and ensemble

The Hi Hat



- The hi hat can function as a timekeeper, or for accenting beats two and four of your ride cymbal pattern
- In addition to the standard two and four rhythm, the hi hat can be used for accenting to produce variations in your swing feel

The Snare Drum



- The snare drum can also be a time keeper, or used to accent major brass figures, especially in the trumpet section

Tip: Working with a metronome/click track as you practice can:

Teach you to accurately perform note and rest values.
Help gauge your progress.
Prepare you for playing with a click track in a recording studio.
Develop “Relative Tempo”.

A metronome will not:
Slow down when you play fast exercises, or speed up when you play slow ones.
Develop your feel or phrasing in a particular style.

Compositional Beat Examples:

A drummer's beat should enhance and support the composition. When composing, focus on the rhythms and articulations in the bass, piano, brass, and saxophone sections. Listen carefully for the dynamic, mood, and texture of each phrase. This should get you started on the path to a musical outcome that connects with the ensemble in a positive way.

Example 1 Four and One (background figure rhythmic information)

Example 2 I Love You (bass part)

Trumpet 2 and 3 melodic information in 5/4 (3 + 2)

Transition from 5/4 to 4/4

Chart Reading Fundamentals

There **is not** a standardized method that arrangers use for writing drum parts. Some composers give exact information concerning style, tempo, ensemble or section accents, and suggested beats for certain sections of a chart. I've also read arrangements that provided nothing more than the name of the composition followed by numerous measures of repeat signs. Because a drum chart does not accurately represent what you play, it is essentially a guide that drummers use to *improvise* and *compose* an individual part. This is the greatest difference between brass or reed parts and a drum part.

Another point of contention is most arrangers are not drummers and often have difficulty communicating exactly what they expect from you on the part. One suggestion would be to question what you see and listen carefully as you read. Listen for the ensembles phrasing (swung or straight), articulations (long or short), and dynamics (loud or soft) and use this information to help compose appropriate beats and figure interpretation.

Your personal interpretation of the music should reflect the amount of detail found within the arrangement itself. Listen for: The introduction, melody, solos and background figures, shout choruses, key changes, etc. Interpreting the music with this approach can help bring about a more effective accompaniment plan.

Engage the listener with ideas that have variety and contrast as you *lead* the ensemble through each musical phrase. One example of this is when a musical theme ascends from a low register to a higher one, try playing the phrase by ascending from your low drum (bass drum or floor tom), to a higher voice (possibly snare drum or hi hat). The written phrase on your drum part will not reflect any shape. Try consulting the lead trumpet part to discover the shape of any musical line.

Listening Tip:

Put on one of your favorite big band recordings and listen for the main sections of the arrangement: Introduction, melody, solos and backgrounds, shout chorus, etc. Once you know where these landmarks are in the music, think about ways of accompanying them on the drum set. Try using rhythmic information you hear within the rhythm section, and brass and reed sections to come up with beat and fill ideas. Jot this information down on a separate sheet of paper and begin practicing with the recording.

Articulation:

As drummers, we cannot play note durations with the accuracy of a horn player, but we can designate sound sources from the drum set that best complement the articulation and intensity of a note or phrase.

A note's articulation is determined by:

- a. what section of the band is playing
- b. the intensity of the phrase
- c. the instrument range (high or low) the phrase is played

The key is to let your ears point you in the right musical direction. Your approach to phrasing and articulating should always complement the ensemble, and by reading and understanding these symbols, you will bring clarity to the longer phrases you play.

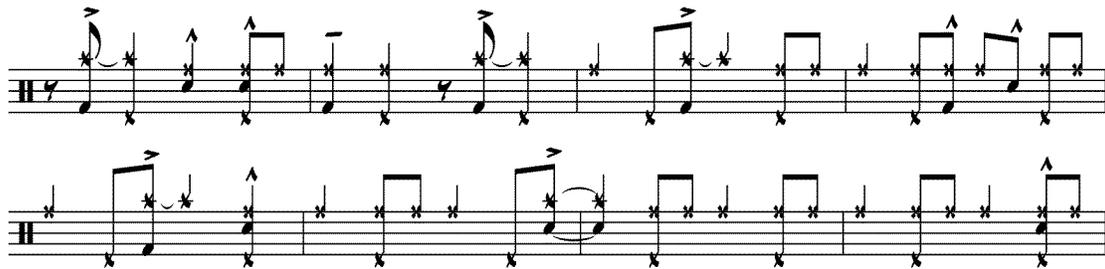
Below is a trumpet 1 phrase with articulation marks.



If we expose the rhythms with articulations, we have a phrase that illustrates the *emphasized* horn rhythms. These are destination points in a musical line that create a second tier of accent texture. With just the articulated rhythm, the phrase looks like this:



Below is one common drum set articulation for this phrase.



By reading and emphasizing the articulated rhythm, you naturally attain the notes a horn player would give significance to. *Now* you are phrasing and articulating with the band!!

Dynamic Expression and Shape

Music of all styles or genres has shape. As a piece of music develops, phrases ascend or descend with intensity creating different musical textures and moods. Drum parts from big band arrangements have a multitude of single “flat line” rhythms that do not indicate shape. It is up to the individual performer to interpret these rhythms around the drum set.

Flat line drum set section figure example:

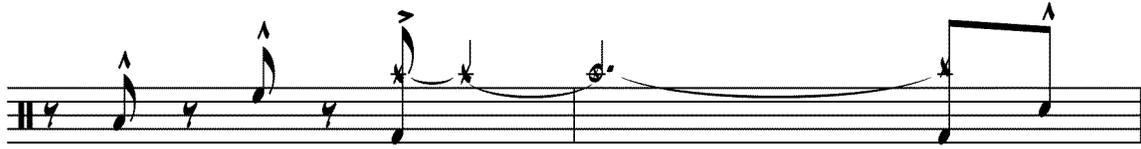


Below are the same two measures from the trumpet one part:



The line drawing below approximates the shape of the above multiple note trumpet figure. You can apply this shape on the drums and cymbals.





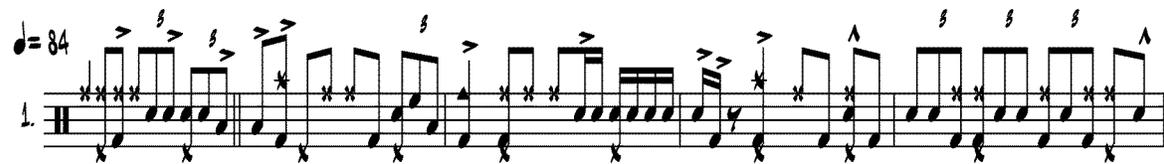
Set Up the Band!

A “set up” is an improvised fill that helps prepare a section or ensemble entrance enhancing the flow and excitement of the arrangement. Set ups are determined in part by the tempo and style of the piece and can complement or contrast its parent band figure rhythmically or dynamically.

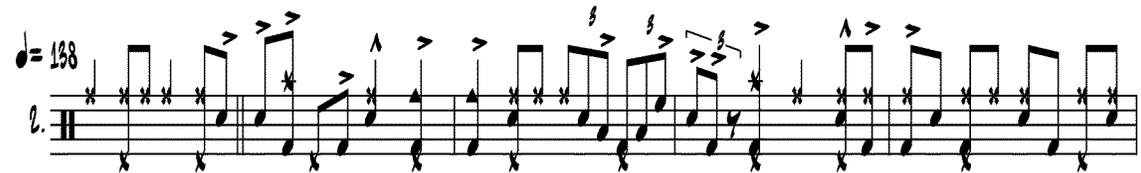
Below is a 4 measure phrase followed by various set up approaches at different tempos:



At a slow tempo, smaller subdivisions such as eighth note triplets or sixteenth notes can be used as set up material.



A faster tempo requires less rhythmic fill activity.



Now let's look at each phrase side by side for analysis purposes.

The image displays three musical staves, each representing a different tempo. The first staff is marked with a tempo of 84 bpm and contains four measures of music with annotations a, b, c, and d. The second staff is marked with a tempo of 138 bpm and contains four measures with annotations e, f, g, and h. The third staff is marked with a tempo of 260 bpm and contains four measures with annotations i, j, and k. The notation includes various rhythmic figures such as triplets, eighth notes, and quarter notes, along with dynamic markings like accents and slurs.

Example 1 Analysis/84 beats per minute

- a. This is an example of *parallel motion*. The triplet fill leads the ensemble to their entrance. The figure is then played in unison with the horns. The drums and horns move *parallel* to one another.
- b. Example B creates *counter point*. By accenting beat one of measure two, the drum fill produces a **new** rhythmic figure. The ensemble rhythm on beat two is not played in unison. The ensemble enters on beat two.
- c. This is another example of parallel motion with sixteenth note set up fills.
- d. Because the tempo is slow, example D illustrates figures with eighth note triplet *connector material*.

Example 2 Analysis/138 beats per minute

- e. parallel motion figure treatment with eighth notes
- f. counter point example with quarter notes creating new accents on: (beat four, measure two), and (beat one, measure three)
- g. parallel motion with triplet fills
- h. eighth notes played as connector material

Example 3 Analysis/260 beats per minute

- i. eighth note connector material
- j. parallel motion with a quarter note fill set up
- k. eighth notes played as connector material

To reiterate, the three basic ways of interpreting figures with set ups are:

1. *Parallel motion*- An improvised fill that leads the ensemble to their figure where a unison rhythm is created with the band. The drums and ensemble move parallel to one another rhythmically.
2. *Counter point*- This set up approach creates a new accent rhythm “in the holes” of a phrase where the band is resting and breathing.
3. *Connector material*- Using various rhythmic subdivisions between band figures bringing a sense of connection and cohesion to the horn figures.

Musical Issue: If your band is having difficulty with a rhythmic passage that is being set up by the drummer, should he or she play the phrase in unison with the ensemble?

Solution: Playing figures with a band that is having problems playing together can cause more rhythmic inaccuracy. In this instance, a simple counter point fill set up, coupled with good flowing time, can create a reference point for the band and help the ensemble lock into the groove.

Building a fill vocabulary for band figures

Building a fill vocabulary takes practice and patience. At one time or another, you’ve probably wondered how a drummer could sight read a big band arrangement on the spot and sound like they’ve played it for years. How do they do that?? Well, through years of playing experience, they’ve become so familiar with “common figures” in arrangements that they react automatically to them, eliminating the process of reading each note and deciding on a tonal and rhythmic conclusion. These players have developed a “hearing eye” so to speak; the ability to look at a drum part and determine from sight alone how a phrase is articulated, swung, and will ultimately sound. An individual interpretation to that phrase is then played. For starters, since drum fills are combinations of quarters, eighth notes, triplets, and sixteenth notes, we can experiment with these subdivisions for connecting figures.

Ensemble Figure

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff, labeled '1.', is a treble clef staff with a 7/8 time signature. It contains a sequence of notes: a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and an eighth note. An arrow points from the text 'Ensemble Figure' to the first two notes. The bottom staff, labeled 'A.', is a bass clef staff with a 7/8 time signature. It contains a sequence of notes: a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and an eighth note. An arrow points from the bottom of the page to the first two notes of this staff.

Example A uses eighth notes as the connecting rhythm.

Below are examples that illustrate figure connection ideas for example 1 with:

- B. swung eighths
- C. triplets
- D. sixteenth notes

The next tier of discovery is to experiment practicing the connector rhythms with single and double stroke sticking combinations:

- (1) RLRLRLRL (2) LRLRLRLR (3) RRLLRLLL
- (4) LLRLLLR (5) RLRLRLRL (6) LRLRLRLR

Example B with sticking 1:

Example B with sticking 3 (RRL):

Sticking interpretation 1 and 3 produce a different feeling to the same rhythm. Sticking 3 has a rounder more legato feel, sticking 1 is more staccato.

Below are more examples connecting ensemble figure example 1 with triplets and sixteenth notes.

Example C with sticking 5 (paradiddle)



Example D combines sticking #4 (LLRR), 2 (LRLR), and 6 (LRLR)



As you can tell from the above examples, utilizing different stickings as you connect band rhythms can change the feel of a musical phrase. Horn players achieve this by using alternate fingerings for the same note. The point is to produce a continuous flow of dynamics, accents, and tempo through consistent motion as you voice a sticking and connecting rhythm around the instrument.

Compositional Phrase Examples

What Influences Our Approach to Band Phrases?

1. Intensity and shape of the phrase
2. Style and concept of the composition
3. Number of musicians being supported
4. Phrasing, articulation, and dynamics employed by the lead players

Four and One Parallel Motion Motifs





I Love You counter point examples



I hope this material serves as a guide to help develop jazz band drumming reading and interpretation skills for you and your students. If you have any questions concerning this presentation, please email me directly at stevefid@comcast.net

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