

PLAYING WITH A BASS PLAYER IN THE JAZZ IDIOM

Where the Beat Is Placed



by Ed Soph

The foundation of a good jazz rhythm section, be it in small group or big band, is the rapport between the drummer and bassist. Of course, the magic interplay of such drummers and bassists as Jimmy Cobb and Paul Chambers, Jo Jones and Walter Page, or Danny Richmond and Charles Mingus cannot be reduced to mere words of analysis. But there are some guidelines that might lead to the genesis of such a musical relationship. As in any other musical experience, both the eyes and the ears are of the greatest importance.

Unity of Time Phrasing

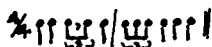
There are as many interpretations of the basic jazz ride pattern as there are drummers. Unfortunately, many of those drummers can play only one. And if they happen to play with a bassist who plays another there is no common ground on which to build the time phrasing of the group and its soloists.

Here are the most common (but not the only) variations of the ride pattern and, subsequently, fragmented patterns of those common variations.

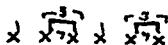
1. dotted-eighth, sixteenth "feel"
2. triplet "feel"
3. straight eighth "feel"

The jazz drummer should at least have these three at his immediate disposal. He should practice them to the point that when he hears a bassist phrasing in one of them the drummer can complement the bass line with the same phrasing without even thinking. What the ears hear must be played instantaneously by the hands and feet. The ride pattern should reinforce the bass line, not destroy it.

For example, if a bassist were playing a line like this:



the drummer would play:



or a variation thereof, and not a dotted 8th-16th or straight 8th pattern. An obvious point, for sure, but how often it is disregarded, especially by younger drummers who have cut their jazz chops on the duple-note patterns of rock.

A word about ballad playing might be appropriate here. Very often we will hear an inexperienced drummer phrase his ride pattern like this



when playing a slow ballad. This is fine if the bassist is phrasing in a similar fashion, or if a double-time transition is being implied. But in most cases, a ballad bass line is composed of either straight-8th patterns or triplet patterns. Naturally, the feel of the above example does not fit with either straight-8th or triplet, and the overall mood or feel of the ballad, its legato feel, is destroyed. It's like a beautiful woman with a distracting nerve tick! Again, it's a matter of using one's ears, and being comfortable with all that space between notes. The space is in time, too.

We've all, hopefully, heard the Basie band play a ballad. The time seems to float because it is so "laid-back." Yet, it never "drags." Woody Herman's band has been characterized by an "on top of it" rhythm section. Yet, it never "rushes." The time neither drags nor rushes because it is placed either behind or ahead of the center of the beat in a consistent fashion. And it is the solidarity and empathy of the bass and drums which provide the foundation of the band's phrasing. We can diagram it like this:

On Top

Middle

Behind



As in our example of time phrasing, the ears are of the utmost importance. But, the eyes can help, too. The drummer can watch the bassist's fingers to see when he plucks the strings. And he can watch the drummer, either his ride hand or his hi-hat, to see where the drummer is putting the beat. In both cases, the sooner the drummer, and bass player, get their heads out of the charts the sooner communication is apt to happen.

Some Closing Ideas

The jazz bass line is usually characterized by a legato line. The notes flow together. They don't thump along independently. Rock bass lines are predominantly staccato in attack. The jazz drummer should match this overall sound in his playing, too. Basically, this means tuning his drums so that they have an open sound and not the deadened thud of drums muffled for rock.

Dynamics and contrast are essential to good music be it jazz, rock, or classical. Don't drown-out the bass. His rhythmic role is just as important as the drummer's. Plus, he provides the harmonic foundation of the group. If a style of jazz is played where the bass drum is played on every beat of the measure it should be played so as to support the bass, not obliterate it. When played in this manner the bass drum should be felt, not heard.

In summary, we can say that the drummer must be flexible to phrase and play his time in a way which compliments the musicality of the group. This flexibility is not learned in books or articles like this, but through playing the "feeling." The drummer must use both his eyes and ears to help achieve a rapport with his fellows in the rhythm section. And if these fail, talk it out. How many times has it happened that the bass player wasn't dragging after all, but that the drummer was rushing.

In one word: LISTEN. Listen not only to what you are doing. Listen to the masters who make it seem all so easy.

THE AUTHOR

ED SOPH has been playing professionally for 18 of his 32 years. He attended North Texas State University where he played with the "1:00 Lab Band." While in school he worked in the Dallas jingle studios and was part of a house rhythm section which backed numerous top visiting artists. During summer vacation, Ed toured with Stan Kenton and the Glenn Miller Band under the direction of Ray McKinley.

Ed graduated from North Texas in 1968 and, through the recommendation of Cannonball Adderley, joined Woody Herman. He remained with Woody until 1971, having recorded four albums and toured extensively both here and abroad.

Ed taught drum set at North Texas upon leaving Woody. Then, in 1972, he moved to New York to pursue a free-lance career. Equally in demand as a teacher and clinician, Ed Soph has been associated with the National Stage Band and Combo Camps since 1971. He often does clinics as a current member of Clark Terry's Quintet and Big Band. He is clinician for Premier Drums and Avedis Zildjian Cymbals, conducting clinics under the auspices of these companies at numerous schools as well as at the Percussive Arts Society's International Convention '77 and the National Association of Jazz Educators' 1978 Convention. In addition to his numerous performances with Clark Terry, Ed is on the faculty at the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut. He also teaches privately and has had many students from all parts of the country study with him under grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The Musical Big Band Drummer

BY ED SOPH

Have you ever heard a passive/aggressive big band drummer? You probably have. This is the drummer who plays loudly and assuredly when there are figures to be read, but timidly and repetitively when there is nothing to read other than “Play 12 bars time behind trumpet solo.” Often, one sees this drummer counting while playing those twelve bars. When written figures reappear on the chart, the drummer comes back to life with an exuberance expressed with over-played accents and cymbal crashes, and fills with no relationship to the band figures that those fills are supposed to connect.

“Passive/aggressive” drummers play only with their eyes. They are literal, unimaginative, and unmusical. But they are good readers and counters.

Unfortunately, this type of player is becoming more the rule than the exception, and it is not difficult to understand why. All kinds of materials are used to educate young jazz drummers except the music they are learning to play. Instruction is visual, not aural, especially in the hands of teachers who are products of such a curriculum.

The reality of the situation is that everyone can read but not everyone can hear. Aurally based curricula would produce fewer but better teachers. Those teachers would have the aural perceptions of a player as well as the visual tools of an educator.

Musical big band drummers learn to play the music by listening to it. This is not an argument against books, but a book is not a musical end in itself, and any book is only as good as the experience and the musicality of the individual teaching from it. That is where the problem lies. The ability to read a book on big band drumming should not give one license to *teach* big band drumming.

Visually oriented teaching does not encourage musical insight, musical imagination and individuality, or musical playing. Reading is the least impor-

tant of the three general areas of expertise required for playing musically in a big band, yet it is often given the most importance, usually by those who have not progressed beyond that level of learning. The other two areas, interpretation and improvisation, are based upon aural skills. The ability to listen distinguishes a *musical* reader, interpreter, and improviser.

Below are some qualities that make a big band drummer musical. Listen for them in the playing of artists ranging

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from Chick Webb, Davey Tough, Don Lamond, Buddy Rich, Sonny Payne, and Jo Jones to Jeff Hamilton, Butch Miles, John Riley, Jon von Ohlen, Jim Rupp, and Mel Lewis. You won’t “hear” these concepts in a book.

1. Drummers must have consistency of time and dynamics within the drumset before they can play musically within the rhythm section and the ensemble. Why? A musical rhythm section plays in time and is dynamically balanced. All components of the section—piano, bass, guitar, vibes, etc.—play in time and are equally heard. Likewise, the components of the drumset must mirror the other instruments of the rhythm section.

For example, the comping of the piano or guitar is analogous to the rhythmic comping on the snare/bass; the bass line is analogous to the rhythms of the ride cymbal and, depending on style, the soft “four on the floor” played on the bass drum. The sections of the ensemble play in time together and are dynamically balanced, as is the rhythm section.

2. The drummer must produce a good sound. The horns and the other instruments of the rhythm section play with

clear articulation, inflection, and intonation. So must the drummer. This can mean playing the ride or hi-hat in the proper area with the appropriate part of the stick to get the clearest definition; playing the snare drum consistently just off the center of the head to get a clear, articulate attack; and making sure that the “chick” of the hi-hats is heard on the other side of the band.

3. Drum figures and the improvised figures created to set them up or connect them (fills) can sound like the horn figures and phrases they relate to and complement. Many big band drummers use the rhythmic vocabulary of the chart itself—the horn figures—as material for their interpretation and improvisation. Even a drummer’s improvised figures can sound like part of the written arrangement when they

musically reflect the rhythmic and dynamic nature of the ensemble’s figures.

4. Musical big band drummers may delineate the form of the tune by changing the orchestration of their time playing and by playing rhythmic

turn-arounds to accompany the harmonic turn-arounds of the music.

5. Through the use of accents, rimshots, buzzes, flams, and ghost notes, as well as shoulder accents on the cymbals, the drummer can shape and phrase rhythmic figures to sound like legato or staccato horn articulations and phrases, not simply linear drum rhythms.

6. A musical drummer voices ensemble figures on the set according to attack (long or short), according to which section or sections of the ensemble are playing the figures and in what register (high, mid, low) they are playing, and according to dynamic level. A musical drummer hears that a saxophone section *forte* is not the same as a trumpet section *forte*, and plays with the dynamic sensitivity that comes with that understanding.

7. A musical drummer knows that the drum part also shows what the ensemble

is *not* playing. A “reader” plays only what is written, does not know how to accompany soloists when the big band becomes a combo, and plays stock patterns and licks that have no rhythmic or dynamic relevance to the ensemble’s figures. This is the sort of formulaic playing that is the result of rule-based, visual teaching.

8. A musical drummer is both a big band drummer and a combo drummer.

9. Musical drummers are good listeners who let the music tell them what to play and how to play it.

10. Musical drummers listen to what they are reading.

The next time you listen to a musical drummer, ask yourself why that drummer sounds so good. You’ll hear the drummer observing some of the points given above, but more importantly, you will form your own conclusions and begin to educate yourself aurally. That is the first step in becoming a musical player and a musical teacher.

Ed Soph is an Associate Professor of Music in the percussion department at the University of North Texas. In addition to his duties at UNT, he is in much demand as a performer, adjudicator, and clinician. Soph’s big band experience includes the North Texas One O’Clock Lab Band and the bands of Stan Kenton, Woody Herman, Bill Watrous, and Clark Terry.

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The Young Big Band Drummer

BY JIM RUPP

Every year I'm fortunate to hear a great many talented young drummers at jazz festivals, workshops and concerts. Many of them have a very good grasp of the jazz idiom, a concept of styles, and are working on technical aspects to further develop their playing. However, most need direction in certain areas—quite often the same areas. The following are some observations and recommendations that will help young drummers develop their jazz ensemble skills.

LISTEN TO THE STYLE

Just as one would never try to speak a foreign language without hearing it spoken, so jazz must be heard in order to develop the concepts necessary to play in a musically valid way. There is a wealth of excellent new method books on the market with accompanying CDs. Two of my favorites are John Riley's *The Art of BeBop Drumming* and Steve Houghton's *Essential Styles*. Listening to recordings and hearing live performances has to occupy as much time as practicing the instrument; otherwise, practicing is without a musical direction or concept.

LISTEN TO THE BAND

Make sure the drummer is in a position to hear the ensemble as well as the rest of the rhythm section. The rhythm section should be set up as a trio, able to hear and see each other, and function as a group. The bass player's amp should be behind the drums. The section should also be close to the rest of the band. In a big band I like to sit right next to the trombone section so I can hear the brass section clearly; in a small group, I want to be close to the soloist. The job of the big band drummer is to make the other musicians feel good.

LISTEN TO THE SOLOIST

Most of the drummer's time is spent accompanying a soloist, so interaction is the key. Ideally, the soloist should stand in front of the rhythm section or as close as possible. Following are some thoughts that should be going through the drummer's mind:

- Am I playing in a style that supports the soloist both dynamically and texturally?
- Am I interacting with the soloist to create a back-and-forth "conversation"?
- Am I doing everything possible to make the soloist feel comfortable?

None of the above would be possible without focusing on the soloist and listening to what he or she is doing.

LISTEN TO THE SOUND OF THE DRUMSET

The tuning and setup that makes a great rock kit is not necessarily good for a jazz drumset. A full, resonant, legato sound is best. The ride cymbal should have definition, along with enough "wash" to add length to the sound. Putting a large center hole in the front bass drum head and a pillow inside the bass drum works well for some settings, but usually provides

too much slap and not enough sustain for a big band. Some of the new bass drum heads (e.g., Remo PowerStroke, Evans EQ1) have built-in muffling to take away excess boominess. The toms and snare should sing, and drums that are taped up with too much muffling tend to sound dead out front. Drums are rarely miked in a big band, so they need to sound fat and full, complementing the sound of the band. The drummer, upon occasion, should have someone else play the kit and go out front to hear what the kit sounds like. Recordings will also give clues for what type of tunings are typically used.

USING DYNAMICS

Because they can play louder or softer than anyone else, drummers can control the dynamics of the band. That power can help the shout choruses "shout" and the subtle sections "whisper." Contrast between dynamics is incredibly powerful and adds immeasurably to the impact of the performance. The great drummers on the Count Basie Orchestra, like Sonny Payne or Harold Jones, have given us wonderful examples of how to support the band at the loud moments, and come under the band when things quiet down. Too often, drummers get caught in the *mezzo-forte* or *forte* dynamic range and sit there all evening. The power at hand should be used with discretion.

"FEATHER" THE BASS DRUM

There are many times when it is very appropriate to play the bass drum on all four beats; but there is nothing worse than hearing all four beats played too loudly on a funk-sounding drum in a big band. The first key is to "feather" the drum so it is felt rather than heard. If the director out front can hear it, it's too loud. The second key is to tune the bass drum to give a round legato sound; as mentioned in the tuning section, a staccato "slap" funk sound is not desirable. If the band is playing a classic Basie blues, then playing on all four beats would be the right style. If the tune has a looser, more flowing feel, then *not* playing on all four beats would be more appropriate. Once again, studying recordings will give a feel for when to play "four on the floor."

PHRASING WITH THE ENSEMBLE AND SOLOISTS

This is a very important skill to be learned—how to phrase musically. For example, not changing ride cymbals in the middle of a phrase, but waiting till the end of a section, or a new soloist, or the top of a chorus to change the texture of your cymbal sound. Playing figures or "comping" to outline the form of a song is another way to accompany or phrase with a soloist. If they know the form of a song or chart and have done their listening homework, most drummers will naturally do the things that are needed to play in a more musical manner.

I hope that the thoughts expressed above have given some direction and ideas to aid young big band drummers. Sitting in the driver's seat when things are really cookin' is one very special feeling!

Jim Rupp is a graduate of Ohio State University and has played with the big bands of Maynard Ferguson and Glenn Miller, and is the drummer on the Woody Herman CD *The Fiftieth Anniversary Tour*. He has also performed with Ray Charles, Buddy DeFranco, Clark Terry, Joe Williams and Natalie Cole. Rupp is the president of Columbus Pro Percussion in Columbus, Ohio, and does freelance touring and recording with such artists as Hank Marr, Diane Schuur and Tony Bennett. Rupp is chairman of the PAS Drumset Committee and will host PASIC '99 in Columbus. PN



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