

GETTING BEYOND THE DRUM SET

By Barry Elmes

There are drummers, and there are musicians who play the drums. For most of my adult life I have pursued becoming the latter. In my view, both the role and the responsibilities of the jazz drummer have required this approach for considerable time, at least since the advent of 'be-bop' in the early 1940's (when such melody-conscious drummers as Max Roach were showing us the way) and arguably before that time. Yet, in spite of this, few drum teachers today seem to embrace the notion of teaching the drums within a musical framework, preferring instead to restrict their students to isolated traditional drum methodology (where rudiments and rhythms are taught for years and melodic forms and concepts are saved for later 'advanced study').

When I first began to study jazz music and jazz drumming seriously, I received some great advice from one of my teachers: I was told to start composing melodies right away as part of my drum studies. It was explained that this would broaden both my concept of jazz drumming and my understanding of the role of jazz drumming within improvised ensemble playing. My relationship with my teachers was, by my own choice, one of 'master and disciple'. I desperately wanted both information and to improve as quickly as possible. I was keen; I did what I was told. My first few attempts at composition travelled directly from my desk to the waste-paper basket. However, I eventually composed some blues heads and then some simple-form tunes that actually worked. As I look back on my career as a jazz artist, I believe this was the single most important thing that shaped the way I play drums. The act of composition made me think melodically with my drum set and pushed me past the simple (or perhaps not so simple) kinetic exercise of playing the drums. Composition enabled me to turn rhythms into musical phrases.

I'm making the concept of melodic drumming sound simple. The concept *is* simple. So is making the decision to follow this path of study. But, finding a teacher who is equipped and willing to help you follow this path can be more difficult. Furthermore, not every drum student can get past his/her love of 'drums' to step into the promised land of 'music'.

I realize that for some drum students, writing melodies might be a big step. Let me try and explain how this early exercise in composition impacted my playing and eventually permeated my total musical being. Initially, the act of trying to write tunes was a little frustrating, but it helped me think melodically. Eventually, it helped me get past the fascination of playing the drums and to see the bigger picture – the music. The desire to be engaged in playing music, to be an equal partner in the band, empowered with the same knowledge that the other instrumentalists have, plus mastery of rhythm, became the driving force in my studies.

This desire led to the exploration of repertoire, musical context, and eventually the sound and tonality of my drums. Again, this can be a big step for drummers because most people think that if you play great time and groove and have a concept of dynamics, that is enough. With the incredible sophistication of improvised jazz performance today, it is certainly not enough. Having steady ‘time’ and a great ‘time feel’ are certainly both mandatory, but they are not the end of the quest, they are the starting point. Great musicians understand there is much more. Learning jazz repertoire aids composition because it reveals song structure, call-and-response, melodic phrasing, and more. The ability to hear melody while playing the drums (as opposed to just playing rhythmic devices) opens the door to a new world where drum rhythms are improvised in a context that relates to the composition being played and to what everyone else in the band is playing.

To learn about phrasing, I listened to horn players, including: Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, Dexter Gordon, and many others. To practice phrasing musically (and also work on soloing melodically) I practiced playing jazz compositions by Thelonious Monk: medium tempo songs that were full of rhythmic phrases and lots of space between them. “Blue Monk”, “Monk’s Dream” and “Played Twice” are just three examples.

Great drummers understand their sound and how it fits the ensemble. The compositional exercise I started out with eventually led me to discovering the timbral qualities of my drums and cymbals and the way in which my musical voice interacted and supported the rest of the ensemble. New levels of listening ensued as different ensemble instrumentations arose. I also became more aware of both note weight and note duration. I never stopped loving the drums; I

loved them even more because their capability and versatility seemed to grow along with my own.

Somewhere in the process I realized that learning repertoire informed me of the importance of understanding the original intent of the composer. Each composition conveys emotion, a certain mood. The more melodies I learned, the better I became at expressing mood on the drums. This gave depth to my interpretive skill and my performance.

The more melodies I learned, the better I became at hearing and retaining melodic ideas. My drumming improved dramatically. I engaged in closer listening to songs I thought I already knew, and discovered more detail and subtlety. I continued my quest of learning more repertoire and the pursuit of even more depth in a performance. Eventually, the entire process resulted in my drumming becoming more about trying to ‘tell a story’, to ‘say something’...surely the main reason anyone would want to play a musical instrument in the first place.

When *soloing*, I hear the melody (in my head) as a framework for my own statements on the drums. Additionally, I hear a bass line (also in my head) walking along as a second internal voice, underpinning my drum solo. In other words, I hear the bass line as the foundation or ‘rhythm section’ upon which my solo is built, and at the same time I hear the melody as the framework for improvised solo construction. I strive to solo melodically at all times. For example, I’ve been told that when I trade ‘fours’ with Ed Bickert in my quintet, it sounds like a seamless melodic conversation. I guess I’m ‘melodically grounded’ because I can’t seem to play anything relevant on the drums if there is no melody to relate to. Without melody, I’m either forced to regress to ‘drumnastics’, or create my own internal melody on the spot to interact with on the drums.

When *accompanying* a soloist, I try to engage in a dialogue with the soloist (if such comping seems appropriate), using the melody as the framework for each chorus.

Quite early on, my composing efforts improved to the point where I was no longer writing because it was a means to improve my drumming. My

compositions were now being recorded. Thirty years later I'm still writing songs and hopefully still improving. I usually write melody first. I leave the spelling of the harmonic content fairly simple, including upper partials only when necessary. I do this to allow the musicians some room to move in my songs. Rarely do I spell out specific voicings. The players I work with will inevitably choose a much nicer voicing than the one I might indicate. I believe that this approach allows my compositions to breathe musically and reach logical points of collective tension and release.

As a teacher, I teach jazz drumming melodically through jazz repertoire. I believe that it is vital for a beginning student of jazz to be hearing and learning repertoire in tandem with drum technique because each one serves the other. For example, at the first lesson, the student and I will look at from one to three songs. The student is asked to come back in a week and be able to sing or outline the melody of the song(s) on his/her instrument. For this exercise, I am not concerned at all with drum technique. I'm trying to teach music and I don't want the drum set to get in the way. For me, drum technique is not a thing unto itself – it has to serve the music. For this reason, I think all drum set teaching should be done through repertoire because repertoire teaches context, integrates musicianship, and brings a melodic sense to the music.

I am convinced that the most inexperienced listener can differentiate between a 'musician who plays the drums' and a drummer who thinks only about rhythm. Similarly, one can tell the difference between a drummer who is listening to, and playing with, the other musicians in the band from a drummer who is thinking only about playing the drums. This is because jazz is a language, involving melody, rhythm and harmony. To say anything with meaning and emotion in jazz you have to at least be able to 'speak the language'.