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THE IMPACT OF MOTOWN DRUMMERS
IN POPULAR MUSIC

By
ESTEVAN ADRIAN BARRIENTEZ

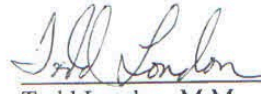
A RECITAL PAPER

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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in the School of Music
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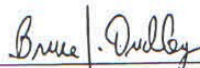
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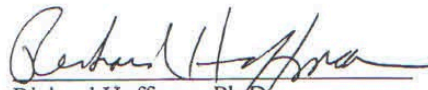
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“My Girl” (1965) – Robinson, White

“Please Mr. Postman” (1961) – Dobbins, Garrett, Gorman, Holland, Bateman

“It Won’t Be Long” (1963) – McCartney, Lennon

“I Can’t Help Myself” (1965) – Holland, Dozier, Holland

“You Know I’m No Good” (2006) – Winehouse

“Heat Wave” (1963) – Holland, Dozier, Holland

“Just the Two of Us” (1980) – Withers, MacDonald, Salter

Stevie Wonder Medley (1972-1976) – Wonder (arr. Thompson, Barrientez)

Michael Jackson Medley (1969-1979) – Jackson (arr. Thompson, Barrientez)

“Still Feel Like Your Man” (2017) – Mayer

“Make It Better” (2019) – .Paak, Robinson

“Fragments of Time” (2013) – Edwards, Bangalter, Homem-Christo

“Leave the Door Open” (2021) – Mars, .Paak, Emile, Brown

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Introduction

The story of Motown cannot be told apart from the story of the people who created it. Detroit, Michigan had become a booming city in the early twentieth century as a direct result of The Great Migration, in which thousands of people—predominantly African-Americans—left the South in hopes of work and better life opportunities. Detroit was one of the cities with a large influx of population due to the work in the automotive industry that was available to African Americans. While jobs were more available, Detroit still experienced the same racism, segregation, and socioeconomic inequality that occurred in the South throughout the centuries of American history leading up to the Civil Rights Era. Despite this, several places like Paradise Valley became centers of life for the African-American communities of Detroit in the 1940s and 1950s. It was within communities like this that Berry Gordy grew up and later founded Motown Records.

It was in Detroit, often called “Hitsville U.S.A.,” where Motown would churn out over 100 Billboard top ten hits between 1961 to 1971. One of the key contributing factors was song structure. The tunes consisted of “a simply structured song with sophisticated melodies and chord changes, a relentless four-beat drum pattern, a gospel use of background voices, and use of both horns and strings” (Landau 1971). This simple formula was perfected by the Holland-Dozier-Holland (Lamont Dozier, Brian Holland, and Eddie Holland) songwriting team that paved the way for Motown during its early years. In addition to the songwriting team, a relatively unknown group of backing musicians later known as the Funk Brothers brought the songs to life with their

musicality. The heartbeat of this group was provided by a trio of drummers. This trio of drummers from the Funk Brothers and their creations will be the focus of this paper.

The purpose of this paper is to display the creation of drum styles during the Motown Era and show how these styles influenced popular music drumming in the post-Detroit Motown music era. To do this, I will begin by introducing and exploring the original drummers of the Funk Brothers in Detroit, Michigan that paved the way into a new era of popular music: Benny “Papa Zita” Benjamin, Richard “Pistol” Allen, and Uriel Jones. These three drummers were specifically chosen because they are largely credited as being the originators of the Detroit Motown drum grooves. According to Richard “Pistol” Allen in an interview with drummer Zoro, these drummers were heavily influenced by several different styles including jazz, blues, and gospel (Allen 1999). They were the solid foundation of the rhythm section that is credited with creating the “Motown Sound.”

To introduce the Motown Sound, I will start by breaking down and transcribing Motown drum parts from notable Motown songs. The selected songs, which are included in my recital program list accompanying this paper, showcase the distinct style of drumming. These transcriptions are from songs featured in my recital which were selected using two major criteria. The first criterion is that the song must have been released by Motown Records during its Detroit Era (1959-1972) and the second criterion is that the song must have hit number one on a Billboard Top 100 chart. As no official credits were given to individual drummers, the songs selected from the Motown Era, apart from “Please Mr. Postman” by the Marvelettes, were determined to be played by either Benny “Papa Zita” Benjamin, Richard “Pistol” Allen, Uriel Jones, or a

combination of the three according to several sources of information. In the *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* documentary, several Funk Brothers members including Ed Willis, Joe Messina, and Eddie Brown mention which drummers played on certain tracks (Justman 2002). The second source was through personal interviews that occurred between drummer Zoro and Richard “Pistol” Allen (Allen 1999) as well as another interview between Allen Slutsky and Uriel Jones (Jones 1992). Finally, with the limited knowledge of which drummers played certain songs, intense listening and comparing playing styles on songs helped the author of the paper determine who played on the songs that were lacking drummer performance credits. The songs were also selected to showcase a larger pattern among the drummers. This pattern can be used to categorize the different playing styles on Detroit Motown hit songs.

After the establishment of the categories of Motown drum styles, there will be an analysis of drum fills. The fills, also known as licks, can be broken down into two key skeleton rhythms which appear frequently in several Motown records. The study and integration of these fills is prevalent throughout popular music following Motown, well into the popular music of today. Drummers like Ringo Starr, Steve Gadd, Steve Jordan, and Anderson .Paak all have songs that feature a variation of these particular licks (Beatles 1963, Withers 1980, Mayer 2017, .Paak 2021).

Once the Motown drum style discussed in the paper has been established, the following chapter explores the ideas about the transmission of the Motown drumming style into popular music. The songs selected for the recital program fit two main criteria. The first criterion is that the artist or drummer playing on the record must be considered a famous popular music artist. The second criterion is that the song must display main

elements of either one of the categories of groove established from Detroit Motown or a variation of a signature fill from Detroit Motown drummers. These musical choices from post-Detroit Motown music clearly display influences from Motown drummers, including some note-for-note copies of grooves and fills. Thus, the transcriptions of the post-Detroit Motown popular music included will display how Motown drum ideas were transmitted into popular music.

Chapter 1: The Drummers of Motown

There are very few musicians that can lay claim to having had a lasting impact on modern popular music since the start of the Billboard Hot 100 list in 1958. Names like the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Wonder, and Michael Jackson appear at the forefront of musicians that have cemented their legacy as popular music legends. There are, however, some relatively unknown musicians who have impacted the genre of pop music so powerfully that their innovations and styles are still used today. The curtain hiding some of these musicians was lifted when the documentary *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* was released. The Funk Brothers, the group revealed in the documentary, recorded dozens of hit songs and changed the landscape of popular music. Of this phenomenal group, there were three musicians who provided the backbeat to over fifty number one songs on various Billboard charts including the Hot 100: Benny “Papa Zita” Benjamin, Richard “Pistol” Allen, and Uriel Jones. These names might be relatively unknown outside of the music world, but they helped shape the way drums are played in popular music.

One of the original members of The Funk Brothers, drummer Benny “Papa Zita” Benjamin, was born in Mobile, Alabama on July 15, 1925. Benjamin moved from Mississippi to Detroit sometime during the 1940s and was playing a variety of musical styles, including big band swing, before catching Berry Gordy’s attention. As Benjamin often played with a number of big band groups around Detroit, guitarist Ed Willis said that Benjamin “brought a lot of musical tools already with him when he came to

Motown” (Slutsky and Zoro 1999, 74). In addition to extensively playing big band swing, Benjamin was also well versed in the blues. According to blues vocalist Joe Weaver in *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, Benjamin not only played with jazz greats Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker in Detroit, but he also played with blues artists “Ray Charles, Lowell Fulson, Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, and Chuck Berry” (Justman 2002, 0:32:45 to 0:32:58). While both blues and jazz have elements of swing, the differences in these two styles helped create the foundation of Benjamin’s playing. This unique combination of styles reflected Detroit as a city itself. Clubs like Baker’s Keyboard Lounge, The 20 Grand, and the Latin Quarter displayed a variety of styles and Benjamin was a frequent player at many of these Detroit venues. It was at one of these venues that Berry Gordy first experienced Benny Benjamin (Justman 2002, 0:32:36 to 0:33:14).

In late 1958, Gordy put together his first rehearsal with the group that would later become known as the Funk Brothers. According to keyboardist Joe Hunter in the *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* documentary, “Gordy called the first rehearsal at Claudette’s [Smokey Robinson’s wife] house in late 1958” (Justman 2002, 0:14:46 to 0:14:51). As Hunter recounts “The drummer for that first rehearsal was Benny ‘Papa Zita’ Benjamin” (Justman 2002, 0:14:55 to 0:15:00). It was there Benjamin would begin his career of being Detroit Motown’s heartbeat.

Benjamin began as the main drummer for Motown Records in the 1960s. He played on major hit songs such as “Please Mr. Postman” by The Marvelettes, “My Guy” by Mary Wells, “My Girl” by The Temptations, “You Can’t Hurry Love” by The Supremes, and several other hit records. His foundation of drumming led Uriel Jones and Richard “Pistol” Allen to credit him as the originator of some of Motown’s signature

drum licks and grooves. Benjamin is even credited for coming up with the name Funk Brothers because, as he was leaving rehearsal one day, he turned to his fellow musicians and stated, “You all are the Funk Brothers” (Justman 2002, 0:35:10 to 0:35:20).

Unfortunately, Benjamin suffered from alcoholism and a heroin addiction. The nickname “Papa Zita” actually originated from one of Benjamin’s many alcohol-related incidents. As Joe Hunter recounts in *Standing in the Shadow of Motown*,

Benny was up on stage. He was doing a tune called “Hitchhike” by Marvin Gaye. They kicked off the tune and Benny was noddin’ and dropped his sticks. So, the A&R man went up there and smelled his breath. He said, “Benny! I see you been drinkin’. Benny!” He picked up his sticks real quick and he said “Papa Zita. Papa Zita.” So, after that everybody in the studio started calling him Papa Zita. (Justman 2002, 0:33:15 to 0:33:31)

Benjamin’s alcohol addiction is one of the main reasons why Richard “Pistol” Allen joined the Funk brothers as the second drummer. According to “Pistol” Allen, his first involvement in Motown occurred because “Benny Benjamin was drunk on a session, so they asked me [Allen] to come down and fill his spot” (Slutsky and Zoro 1999, 79).

Benjamin’s battle with these addictions eventually led to a stroke and Benjamin died on April 20, 1969 in Detroit, Michigan at forty-three years old.

Richard “Pistol” Allen was born August 13, 1932 in Memphis, Tennessee. Joining the Funk Brothers in 1961, Allen brought his own experiences in music to Hitsville, U.S.A. Like so many others, the booming auto industry in Detroit drove Allen to relocate from Memphis to Detroit. Even as he worked as a car factory worker, Allen was soon known around town as a fantastic jazz drummer. Along with jazz, Allen was famous for his shuffle groove. While Benny Benjamin and Uriel Jones could both play a shuffle groove, it was Allen’s shuffle that comes to the forefront of Detroit Motown.

The shuffle groove can be loosely described as a triplet subdivision in which the first and third triplet partial are played and the second partial is left out. In his interview with Zoro in 1999, Allen describes playing the shuffle as “his bread and butter.” Allen goes on to say that “People hired me for that groove [the shuffle], and it wasn’t just Motown. In fact, I played Wilson Pickett’s first shuffle” (Zoro and Slutsky, 79). Allen’s shuffle can be heard on hit Motown songs like “Baby Love” by the Supremes and “Heat Wave” by Martha & The Vandellas.

The other groove from Motown that is largely credited to Allen is Four-On-The-Snare. This groove can be described as eighth notes on the hi-hat, quarter notes on the snare, and bass drum following the bass guitar line. Again, Benny Benjamin and Uriel Jones both showed proficiency in this style of groove, but it was Richard “Pistol” Allen who was credited on hit songs like “Uptight (Everything’s Alright)” by Stevie Wonder and “Bernadette” by the Four Tops that feature the Four-On-The-Snare groove.

Before passing away from cancer in 2002, Allen was featured on the documentary *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* in which he was able to verify a few of the songs he and Benjamin played on. His interview with Zoro and Slutsky also gave valuable insight into who played drums on which songs.

Of the three Funk Brother drummers, only one was born in the same city that birthed the Motown sound. Introduced as a member of the Funk Brothers in 1964, Uriel Jones was brought in originally to mimic Benny Benjamin’s playing style. Jones brought in a similar musical background to Benjamin and Allen in the areas of jazz and blues. However, Jones also brought a different approach to his playing as he had extensively played early rock and roll and R&B before being brought in to play for Motown records.”

This combination of styles helped define Jones's approach to the drums, which could be described as open and relaxed.

According to Jones in an interview with Allen Slutsky, "I started in 1962 playing as a live, road-show drummer for Marvin Gaye" (Zoro and Slutsky 1999, 84). Prior to that experience, Jones credits jazz as a huge source of his inspiration for drumming. When not gigging, Jones would "strictly listen to Coltrane, Miles, and Blakey. Anything that was jazz. I was teaching myself just by listening to the records" (Zoro and Slutsky 85). It was this background that would lead him to develop his specialty of funk and R&B playing within Motown records. Uriel Jones created unique grooves on tunes like "Cloud 9" by the Temptations and "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell that were a reflection of his diversified listening and background.

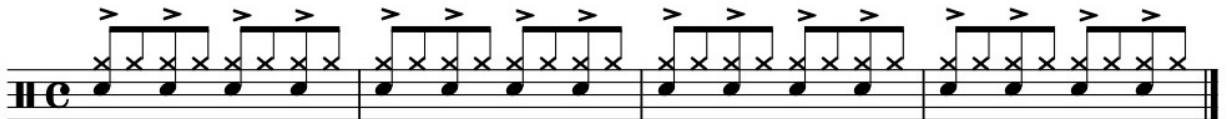
Benny Benjamin was the original heartbeat of Motown. He was the source of most of the original grooves and signature licks. It was his base upon which "Pistol" Allen and Uriel Jones would build. Allen owned and perfected the shuffle grooves and the Four-On-The-Snare for which Motown was famous. Jones brought his own unique style and background to expand upon each of these drummers' work. While there was a variety of influences that shaped each drummer's path to the Funk Brothers, there were threads that tied these three drummers together. This connection was a combination of musical knowledge and experience, such as jazz, shuffle, or the blues. These are the same threads that eventually connect the Funk Brother drummers to the modern popular music drummers.

Chapter 2: Categories of Motown Grooves

There are three main grooves that were popularized by Motown drummers that are still used in popular music genres by session and touring drummers. They will be called Four-on-The-Snare, The Bounce, and The Groove. Benny Benjamin and Richard “Pistol” Allen were primarily responsible for the creation of the unique sounds of these grooves, while Uriel Jones was also key in their further development. These three grooves have been, and are still being, utilized by session and touring drummers in the popular music genres.

The first groove, the Four-on-the-Snare, is a groove that can be linked to groups like the Four Tops and the Supremes. Four-on-the-Snare puts a heavy emphasis on each quarter note beat in common time. This groove is achieved through usage of three of the four limbs. The first limb, the right arm, plays a consistent eighth note pattern on the closed hi-hat. The drummer plays eighth notes on the hi-hat and accents each downbeat with a downstroke. Each accented hi-hat hit is coupled with an accented snare drum hit, which reinforces each individual downbeat. This snare drum hit is created with the second limb, the left arm. The combination of the use of these two limbs is what helps create a strong anchor to the downbeats, as shown in Example 2.1.

Example 2.1 Four-On-The Snare Groove



The accented hi-hat hit followed by an unaccented upbeat hit on the hi-hat creates a consistent grid that allows the third limb, the right foot, to play a syncopated rhythm that helps define this groove.

Syncopation is a displacement of the beat, typically caused by putting an emphasis on the weak beat. One simple way to stress a weak beat is to play an accent on an upbeat. Benjamin, Allen, and Jones utilize this by consistently using the kick drum for syncopation, particularly during the Four-on-the-Snare groove. For example, in “I Can’t Help Myself” by The Four Tops, the kick drum plays on beat one of every measure in the main groove. This creates an emphasis on beat 1 of the grooves, which acts as an anchor. On this particular track, Benny Benjamin also uses the kick drum on the upbeats of beats three and four in contrast to the downbeat accents occurring around them. This creates slight tension at the end of each measure that is immediately resolved on beat 1 of the next measure.

Example 2.2 Measures 8-11 “I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch)”



Example 2.2 displays the entirety of the Four-on-the-Snare pattern used. This pattern was featured in the songs “I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch)” by The Four Top and “Stop in the Name of Love” by The Supremes. “Stop in the Name of Love” topped the Billboard pop singles in 1965 while “I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch)” hit number one in the Billboard Hot 100 in 1965.

The Bounce can be understood as the New Orleans street beat mixing with the new Detroit sound. This groove introduces a crucial element that continues to be

important in drumming today. This element draws from jazz and is referred to as swing. Defining swing is no easy task as the term itself is open to interpretation. Swing, in the context of the Motown drum grooves, can be described as the movement away from a consistent eighth note spacing to different degrees. For example, if quantized eighth notes are placed on a grid at a consistent tempo in a DAW, they will fall in an exact place within a particular grid. In swing, these notes also have a placement within the subdivision of the grid, but they can vary in their placement. Essentially, the notes are less fixed compared to perfectly quantized eighth notes.

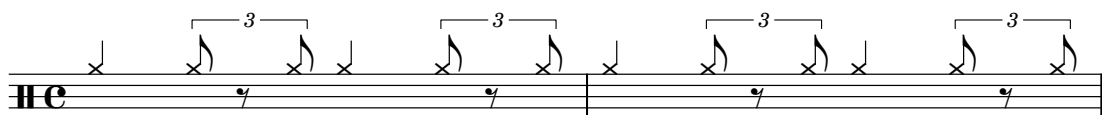
Swing originates from the African-American experience of Musicmaking in the United States. In an interview for the Polar Music Prize in 2007, jazz saxophone legend Sonny Rollins said that “jazz is a force of nature, it’s a feeling, it’s a sense of liberation. Sense of communing with nature, with higher things. It’s a sense of hope, that life can be better. That things can be better, it’s a sense of happiness. That’s what jazz is” (Rollins 2007). As jazz and swing go hand in hand, it is important to dive deeper into what was happening prior to the 1960s in music. However, this will only slightly scratch the surface.

There are ebbs and flows to jazz and swing that vastly changed the landscape of popular music preceding the 1960s. Beginning in the 1920s with early jazz coming from New Orleans, the feel was known for being very loose and open and had a profound influence later on the drummers of Motown. Jazz then moved into the Big Band Era where drummers like Sonny Greer, Papa Jo Jones, Chick Webb, and Gene Krupa redefined drumming by playing with big sounds and full-sized jazz ensembles. This was before it moved into the Bop era with drummers like Max Roach, Philly Joe Jones,

Kenny Clarke, and Art Blakey pushing drumming to new heights with syncopated rhythms and a new style of swing.

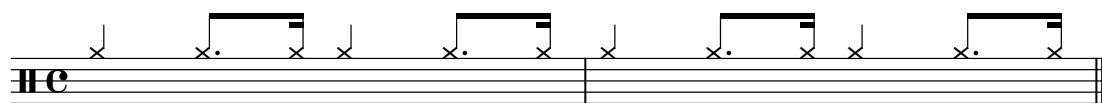
The evolution of jazz and diversity of how swing is felt can be partially displayed through the common notations of the modern ride cymbal swing pattern. In Example 2.3, the swing pattern is displayed in a triplet grid.

Example 2.3 Swing Pattern in Triplet Format



Example 2.3 could be argued as being a looser approach as the triplets suggest a more open feel. In Example 2.4, the ride cymbal swing pattern is shown in the sixteenth note grid.

Example 2.4 Swing Pattern in Sixteenth Note Format



Example 2.4 shows the swing pattern applied to what is perceived as a tighter rhythm. The jazz drummers from different eras all played with different types of spacing that could vary anywhere in between or beyond Example 2.2 or Example 2.3. The slight ambiguity to the swing rhythm was what later influenced the stylistic approaches that the Motown Drummers took.

Taking a scientific approach, Scarth states that Roger Linn introduced a percentage system on a drum machine in 1979 in which you could express the amount of swing applied to every note in sixteenth note swing,

The percentages pertain to the degree that every second 16th note is positioned in relation to the beats either side of it. 50% swing refers to straight timing, where every second note is played exactly halfway between the two beats either side of it. At a 60% swing setting, the first beat would take 60% of the 8th note. The higher the level of swing, the more evenly numbered 16th notes are delayed.

In other words, as the percentage increases from 50, there is more separation between the first and second note that repeats. Based on this scale, the Linn Scale “permits swing variations of 50%, 54%, 58%, 60%, 62%, 66%, 70%, and 75%” (Linn 2013). Using a base of 50% swing as straight timing and “66% swing as perfect triplet swing, meaning that the first sixteenth note falls on a perfect eighth note triplet” and through listening, I have placed certain grooves from Motown on the scale depending on how open (higher percentage) or straight the rhythms are played (Linn 2013).

In the case of Richard “Pistol” Allen’s playing on “Where Did Our Love Go” by The Supremes, swing was used in two of the three limbs that are involved in the rhythmic pattern, The Bounce. The one thing that remains constant in The Bounce is the left-hand snare drum hit that always plays within the straight grid, on beats two and four. The right hand plays a shuffle pattern on the hi-hat, which falls around the area of 58% swing on the Linn scale. To further break down the swing pattern of the right hand, the hi-hat always hits directly on the down beats, but the upbeat notes are slightly delayed. Starting on beat one, the hi-hat plays right on the downbeat. There is then an extra space between the next note that pushes it into a gray area that is not quite an eighth, triplet, or sixteenth note. This is repeated during the main groove to create the shuffle pattern over the snare hits on beats two and four.

Similar to Four-On-The-Snare, the kick drum once again anchors the down beat on beat one. The right foot, similar to the right hand, plays on both down beats and

upbeats. The kick drum notes on beats one and three are consistent in falling exactly on the down beats. The notes that precede the downbeat kick drum hits reflect the 58% swing that the hi-hat uses. The issue with showing this figure is that it does not necessarily fit into the straight 4/4-time signature grid. Therefore, to show the 58% swing, triplets were used to get as close to the spacing as possible. Example 2.3 shows the transcription for The Bounce.

Example 2.5 2 measure example of The Bounce Groove



This bass drum figure shown above is crucial in the later development of “pocket playing.” Pushing the upbeat kick closer to the down beat brings back the tension-and-release idea from the Four-On-The-Snare groove. It also is essential in the development of the quintessential Motown groove called The Groove.

The last groove is titled The Groove, and it is probably the most well-known of the three Motown grooves. It contains elements of both Four-On-The-Snare and The Bounce, but creates a unique and solid rhythm that can be identified in a number of popular music songs released after the Motown era. For example, “My Girl” by The Temptations shows that this is predominantly a three-limb groove with the main component being the right leg, kick drum pattern. The kick drum is played on the down beats of beats one and three, similar to The Bounce. In Example 2.6 an additional kick is added on the upbeats of beats two and four. There can be quite a few variations; however, the figure below in Example 2.6 shows the most common kick pattern.

Example 2.6 Four measure example of a common kick pattern from The Groove



Like *The Bounce*, *The Groove* also has a syncopated kick drum pattern that is swung. However, the main difference between *The Bounce* and *The Groove* is the width of the swing rhythm being played on the kick drum. The swing in the kick drum during *The Groove* can be described as a slightly swung feeling. Compared to the 58% on the Linn scale for the shuffle, this one is placed more in the area of 54%. Despite the slight difference, there is a noticeable difference in the tension-release in the relationship between downbeat and upbeat hits. There is a more noticeable laid-back feel as the two back-to-back kick drum hits are less close together. This gray area between 50% swing and 58% swing is the place where pocket drummers like to live.

Additionally, layered on top of the 54% swing kick drum pattern, the hi-hat maintains a constant straight eighth note pattern. The snare drum locks down the backbeat on beats two and four, consistently in the straight grid. Two of the limbs are playing straight time, while tension and release are created by the third. There is no exact way to notate this 54% swing in drum transcriptions. Example 2.7 shows the pattern from “*My Girl*” by the Temptations and “*Come See About Me*” by the Supremes; however, it should be noted that the kick drum is slightly swung.

Example 2.7 Measures 5-8 of “*Come See About Me*”



All three of the essential Motown grooves have certain things in common. They rely heavily on tension and release, which is particularly dependent on the kick drum pattern. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the snare drum hits typically fall within the straight eighth note grid. The hi-hat can be either straight or swung, although in the Groove and the Four-on-the-Snare the hi-hat tends to be straight. The various combinations of swung and straight are what make these grooves so effective. The effectiveness is one of the reasons that the three main grooves, along with some variations, are used on most Motown records.

Chapter 3: Signature Drum Licks

Along with the three main grooves outlined previously, there were a number of signature drum fills that were used extensively during the Motown era. These drum fills, also known as licks, were typically used to kick off tunes or signify transitions within the song. While there are several different variations of drum fills, the signature licks can be derived from two skeleton rhythms. The first one was duple-based and occurs on the third and fourth beats of a 4/4 time signature as seen in Example 3.1.

Example 3.1 Signature Fill Skeleton Rhythm 1



This duple-based rhythm can typically be found in The Groove and the Four-On-The-Snare grooves and serves as a base for some of the most iconic drum fills of all time. The originator of these fills can be difficult to discover because there were multiple drummers Motown used for various songs. There were even some tracks in which multiple drummers played on the same track. By examining some credits and through intense listening, I was able to determine that there were certain variations that particular drummers liked to utilize. While they all used very similar—or nearly identical rhythms—there were distinct attributes to certain fills.

The first variation is a variation lick played by Benny Benjamin in “My Girl” by the Temptations and “The Tracks Of My Tears” by Smokey Robinson & The Miracles.

Benny Benjamin took the skeleton rhythm and moved the last eighth note to a different pitch, as seen in Example 3.2.

Example 3.2 Variation 1 of Skeleton Rhythm 1



While not vastly different from the skeleton rhythm, the movement of one note to the rack tom helps signify the beginning of a new section. In this particular instance, it comes after the four-bar introduction to lead the rest of the band into the first verse.

In a similar fashion, while playing “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” by Marvin Gaye, Uriel Jones used the same skeleton rhythm but orchestrated it slightly differently. Jones took the first partial on the downbeat of beat three and moved it to the rack tom. He kept the rest of Benjamin’s form by playing the following two notes on the snare drum and finished with the last partial on the rack tom as seen in Example 3.3.

Example 3.3 Variation 2 of Skeleton Rhythm 1

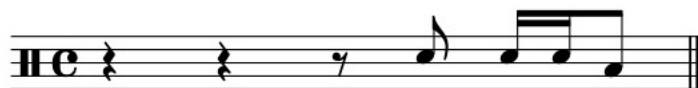


It is important to note that “Pistol” Allen also has drum credit on this track; however, the rhythmic figure fits more of Jones’s profile.

While both Benny Benjamin and Uriel Jones seemed to use the dotted sixteenth note rhythm, “Pistol” Allen put the space in a slightly different place. This is the most different variation from the skeleton rhythm, but it is in the same beat three and four placement. In addition, when the listener encounters this, it is very easy to hear the similarities to the original skeleton rhythm. There is an example of this in “Reach Out I’ll

Be There” by the Four Tops where “Pistol” Allen plays the upbeat of beat three followed by two sixteenth note partials and an eighth note partial as seen in Example 3.4.

Example 3.4 Signature Fill example from Measure 8 of “Reach Out I’ll Be There”



This keeps the beat placement of the original skeleton rhythm. While the original skeleton rhythm begins earlier, it takes place on the same counts while placing a larger emphasis on beat 4. This helps drive the music to the next measure.

Both of these variations, along with the skeleton rhythm, are very open and have a lot of space. This made it a useful tool in transitions, but in order to drive into bigger sections another variation was used. This variation filled in the second and third sixteenth note partials on beat three of the skeleton rhythm as seen in Example 3.5.

Example 3.5 Variation 3 of Skeleton Rhythm 1



Similarly, if double stroke notes (sometimes referred to as diddles) are added to the second and third sixteenth note partial of beat three, the most iconic lick from Motown is formed as seen in Example 3.6

Example 3.6 Variation 4 of Skeleton Rhythm 1

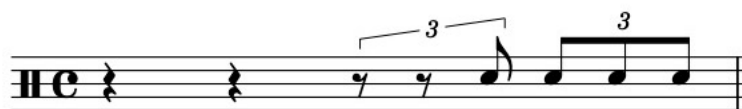


“I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch)” by the Four Tops, “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough” by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell, and “Ain’t Too Proud To Beg” by The Temptations all share this signature lick. It serves as a solid lick to bridge the gap in high energy tunes. The contrast between the intensity on beat three and openness of beat four serves as the kickoff for many Motown tunes.

The secondary skeleton rhythm is similar to the duple-based skeleton. It typically takes place during beats three and four of fills in songs that utilize The Bounce groove. There are two versions of the secondary skeleton rhythm due to the swing factor of The Bounce groove. They are generally used to connect sections together or kick off a particular tune.

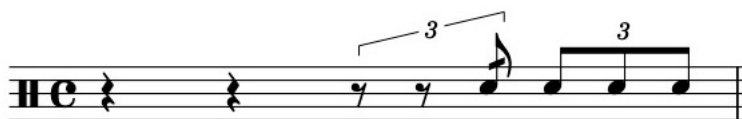
The first version is triplet-based and appears in songs such as “My Guy” by Mary Wells, “Baby Love” by the Supremes, and “Where Did Our Love Go” by The Supremes. Using the swing scale from the Motown Grooves section, this would be close to 66.6% (closest to an eighth note triplet) as seen in Example 3.7.

Example 3.7 Signature Fill Skeleton Rhythm 2



This four-note fill utilized frequently by Benny Benjamin, kicks off the tune “My Guy” by Mary Wells. In addition to this fill, there was a slight variation that was frequently employed by the Motown drummers. They would use the exact same rhythm but add a diddle to the third triplet partial of beat three shown in Example 3.8.

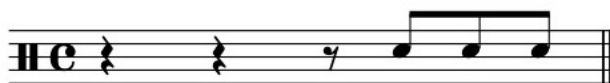
Example 3.8 Variation 1 of Skeleton Rhythm 2.



“Pistol” Allen frequently used this in his playing, including on the tracks “Baby Love” and “Where Did Our Love Go” by The Supremes.

“Where Did Our Love Go” by the Supremes is one of the unique tunes that included fills on both sides of the swing scale. Besides using the triplet swing variation, a fill was used that applied an eighth-note swing.

Example 3.9 Variation 2 of Skeleton Rhythm 2



While this figure looks simple, it is actually necessary to point out that this eighth-note rhythm is swung. While the downbeat of beat four fits into the straight eighth-note grid, the two upbeats are played “later” than written. Pushing the upbeats further back onto the grid separates them from the more even sounding triplets.

These two skeleton rhythms occur in most Motown songs during the Detroit era. Benny Benjamin, “Pistol” Allen, and Uriel Jones all helped create and develop these simple fills. Simple as they are, there is a reason that the Motown drummers used them in so many of their tracks. The licks functionally served as solid transition pieces, but more importantly the licks created a sense of stability. The signature licks did not interrupt the grooves within which they fell, and the drummers could perform them consistently

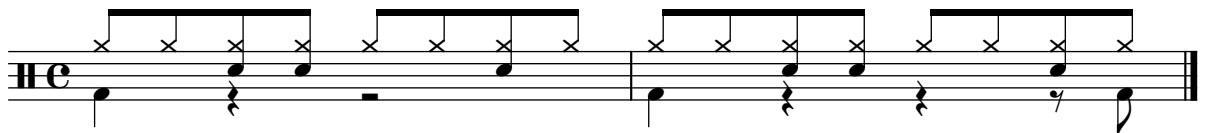
during numerous sessions. These qualities are what enabled these fills to persist throughout popular music beyond Motown.

Chapter 4: Transmission into Popular Music

In the summer of 1972, Motown Records packed up and moved to Los Angeles. While they continued to pump out hit songs such as “Higher Ground” by Stevie Wonder, “Let’s Get It On” by Marvin Gaye, and “Machine Gun” by The Commodores, the influence of the Detroit Motown drummers had long since spread throughout various genres of popular music in the United States.

Most notably, Motown held a profound influence on The Beatles, who were one of the most popular international bands to come to the United States. The Beatles did more than simply cover songs like “Please Mr. Postman” by the Marvelettes and “You’ve Really Got A Hold On Me” by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. There were also elements of Benny Benjamin, Richard “Pistol” Allen, and Uriel Jones’s playing present in the drum lines. The influence of the Motown drummers can most clearly be heard in the Beatles song from 1963 entitled “It Won’t Be Long.” The main drum groove from “It Won’t Be Long,” shown in example 3.1, is nearly identical to the main drum groove from “Please Mr. Postman” by the Marvelettes.

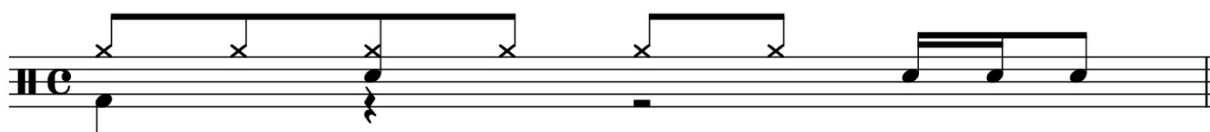
Example 4.1 Measures 1-2 from “It Won’t Be Long”



The only difference in the two grooves is that in “Please Mr. Postman” by the Marvelettes, the upbeat of beat four is played on the floor tom instead of the kick drum. Ringo Starr, the drummer for The Beatles, also incorporated swing into the kick pattern reminiscent of The Groove category from Chapter 2.

Starr also utilized a major element of Motown in the form of a signature drum lick. In the transition from measure twenty-three to measure twenty-four, a variation of a Motown signature lick is played. In Example 4.2, the last measure of the first Chorus is shown including the variation fill.

Example 4.2 Measure 23 drum fill from “It Won’t Be Long”



While this does not include the upbeat of beat three being played on a drum, the rhythm of beat four can be compared to one of Richard “Pistol” Allen’s signature drum licks that can be heard on tracks such as “Reach Out I’ll Be There” by the Four Tops.

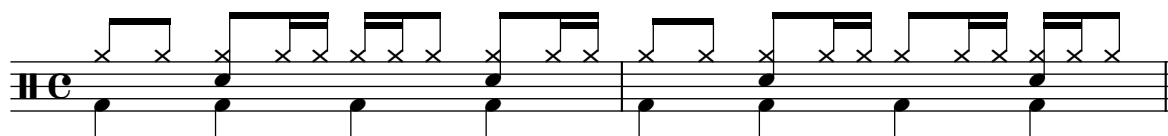
Motown and the trio of Motown drummers also had a significant impact on one of the greatest musicians and songwriters in American history. Stevie Wonder has charted ten Number 1 songs on the Billboard Hot 100 including works like “Superstition,” “You Are the Sunshine of My Life,” and “Sir Duke.” Wonder’s career at Motown began with a contract in 1961 and exploded from there. One of the distinctive characteristics of Wonder’s biggest hits was the drumming. The drumming displayed the integration of swing elements into drum grooves that drummers of Motown had perfected.

This is especially prevalent in Wonder’s songs “Higher Ground” and “Superstition.” The resemblance can be credited to Benny Benjamin and “Pistol” Allen

who impacted Stevie Wonder in his early days as a musician. Allen, for example, can be credited with sharing his knowledge and playing style with a young Wonder. In an interview with the drummer Zoro, Allen states that “I was his (Stevie Wonder) first drum teacher and even gave him his first drum pedal” (Zoro 1999, 83). Allen also emphasizes Wonder’s influence on Motown by later saying “Don’t forget, Stevie played drums on some Motown records too. He was like an octopus, and man could that brother groove. He played drums on most of his own hits in the ‘70s” (Zoro 83).

“Superstition” was one of the 1970s hits that Wonder played drums on himself. The main groove of Superstition centers around a consistent eighth note pulse. In Example 4.3, one of the central grooves is notated.

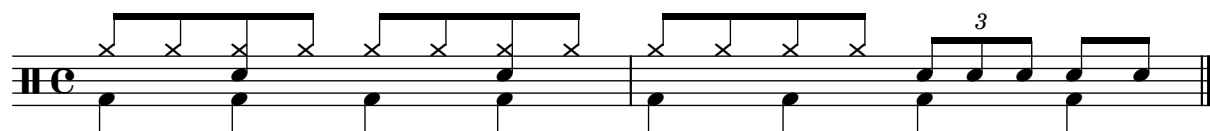
Example 4.3 Measures 2-3 of drum groove in “Superstition”



The callback to Motown does not quite show up in notation. It comes from the swing element mentioned in Chapter 2. While the snare, kick, and hi-hat are all played in the straight eighth note grid, the sixteenth note hi-hat rhythms are all swung. The swung 16th notes are a call back to the New Orleans influence of The Bounce groove from Chapter 2.

In addition to “Superstition,” Wonder played drums on “Higher Ground.” While the main groove could be called a shuffle, the influence of Benny Benjamin is shown off in some drum fills. Shown below in Example 3.4, measures 5 and 6 of “Higher Ground” provide an example of the influence that Benjamin had on Wonder’s playing.

Example 4.4 Measures 5-6 of drum groove and fill in “Higher Ground”



In this groove, all the eighth notes are swung while the kick and snare are on the straight grid. The fill comparison comes into play with the placement of the fill and shape of the fill. Like quite a few Benny Benjamin fills, it begins on beat three with a faster rhythm. It is followed by a more open rhythm to set up the downbeat of the next measure. Wonder introduced his own element to this fill style by emphasizing the swing with the triplets but stayed true to the overall structure of Benjamin's signature fill.

Nine years after signing Stevie Wonder, Motown records signed arguably the biggest pop star of all time. With thirteen Grammy Awards and a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, Michael Jackson kicked off his career in a music group with his brothers as The Jackson 5. One of their early hits, "I Want You Back" went Number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. While there is no official confirmation, it is generally accepted by drummers that Gene Pello was the drummer who played on this track. Pello began receiving credit for tracks in 1972 as one of the Funk Brothers, and the Motown style of Benny Benjamin is reflected heavily in his playing for "I Want You Back." In measure forty of "I Want You Back," Pello imitates a variation of Skeleton Rhythm 1 from signature fills. In Example 4.5, Pello leaves out the first partial of beat three while copying Benjamin's signature fill of sixteenth notes into eighth notes on beat four.

Example 4.5 Measure 40 drum fill from “I Want You Back”



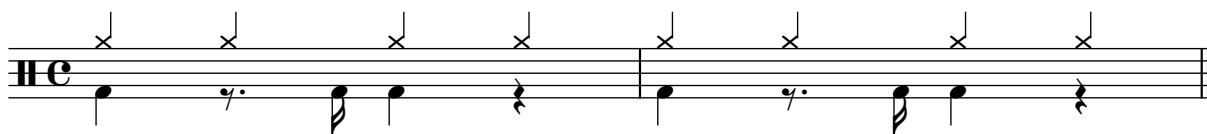
Years later when Michael Jackson released “P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)” with Leon Ndugu Chanler on drums, there were still noticeable elements of Motown drumming. While nearly thirteen years had passed between the release date of “I Want You Back” and “P.Y.T (Pretty Young Thing),” the drummers continued the usage of signature drum licks from Motown. One of the qualities that encouraged drummers to do this was how the Motown fills kicked off tunes with tension and release. In measure eight of “P.Y.T (Pretty Young Thing),” Chanler took Skeleton Rhythm 1 from Chapter 2 and does not change the rhythm. He created his own version by using different drums with the same rhythm as shown in Example 4.6.

Example 4.6 Measure 8 drum fill from “P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)”



During the same time frame as Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson’s Motown success, Bill Withers and Grover Washington Jr. released a song that would win the Grammy Award for Best R&B song in 1982. The drums on “Just the Two of Us” were recorded by an artist who is widely regarded as one of the best studio drummers of all time. Steve Gadd laid down a groove that took swung Motown elements to the limit. Gadd manipulated time by waiting as long as possible to play the upbeat kick drum note on the fourth subdivision of beat two, displayed in Example 4.7.

Example 4.7 Measure 5-6 drum groove “Just the Two of Us”



While Example 4.7 is written as a sixteenth note type pickup, the note before beat three is pushed as far as it can go on the sixteenth note grid before the next note. Gadd also flashed a variation of a Signature Motown Fill in measure forty, to connect sections of songs like Uriel Jones and Benny Benjamin, shown in Example 4.8.

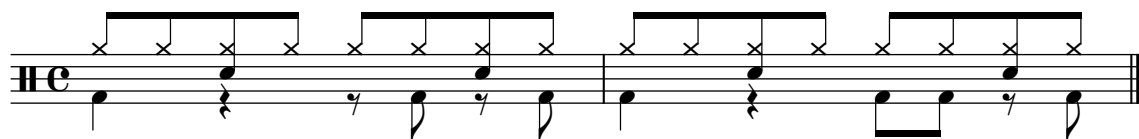
Example 4.8 Measure 40 drum fill from “Just the Two of Us”



Taken from Skeleton Rhythm 1 of Chapter 2, Gadd utilized one of the variations that Uriel Jones used frequently in Motown sessions. The combination of the manipulation of time and use of Motown fills carry the influence of Benny Benjamin, Richard “Pistol” Allen, and Uriel Jones forward past “Just the Two of Us.”

The influence of Benjamin, Allen, and Jones on international artists continued far beyond The Beatles. Amy Winehouse’s release of the album *Back to Black* contained several Motown drum styles. The track “You Know I’m No Good” is a clear example of this as it contains two separate Motown Grooves. “You Know I’m No Good” outlines both The Groove and Four-On-The-Snare grooves explained in Chapter 2. During the Verse and Chorus, the drums reflect The Groove from Chapter 2 shown in Example 4.9.

Example 4.9 Verse drum groove from “You Know I’m No Good”



Leading into each chorus, the drums transition from this variation of The Groove to a Four-On-The-Snare shown in Example 4.10.

Example 4.10 Pre-Chorus drum groove from “You Know I’m No Good”



“You Know I’m No Good” essentially uses the same drum beat as “I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie Honey Bunch)” by The Four Tops. The variation of the Four-On-The-Snare groove is used to cause tension leading into the chorus where it is released by reverting to The Groove variation. Essentially, the Four-On-The-Snare is used as an elongated, transitional fill to connect sections in a unique way.

In “Fragments of Time” by Daft Punk from the 2015 Grammy Album of the year, drummer Omar Hakim displayed the influence of Motown in a particular drum fill. Hakim created his own type of skeleton rhythm that he expanded on throughout the track. In Example 4.11, Hakim uses the basis of Skeleton Rhythm 1 from Chapter 2 to create his own set of fills.

Example 4.11 fill from Intro to Verse 1 in “Fragments of Time”



The sixteenth to eighth note transition applied comes from Skeleton Rhythm 1. The major difference is that the fill in Example 4.11 starts on the and of beat two instead of beat three. This achieves a similar goal as the quick rhythm transitions to a more open eight note rhythm.

Hakim took this rhythm and uses it as a basis for some other transitional fills. In Example 4.12, Hakim fills the first beat and a half before with sixteenth notes on the snare drum.

Example 4.12 fill from Chorus 1 into Solo 1 in “Fragments of Time”



Both the use of the rhythms in transitions and the fundamental rhythms used are similar to Uriel Jones and the signature fills he used throughout his career as a Motown drummer.

Despite the amount of time between Motown in the 1960s and 2017, the connection to Motown is still very alive. On John Mayer’s track “Still Feel Like Your Man,” Mayer enlisted Steve Jordan to play drums. Jordan, originally a student of jazz like the Motown drummers before him, is known today as a phenomenal pocket player. The Groove from Chapter 2 used a combination of slightly swung notes and straight notes to create a pocket. Example 4.13 outlines the main groove throughout John Mayer’s track.

Example 4.13 Verse drum groove from “Still Feel Like Your Man”

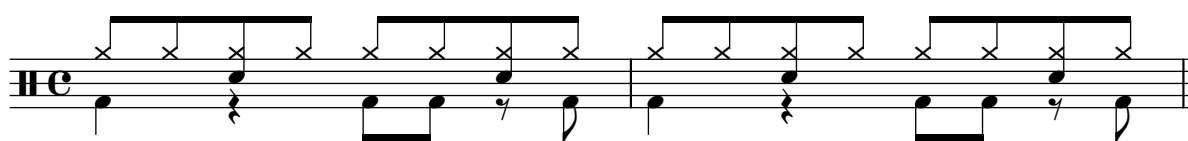


The hi-hat and snare drum are located on the straight grid. The kick drum, however, has a slightly swung feel to it created by the sixteenth notes. The slightly delayed kick drum notes are a reflection of The Groove from Motown.

The connection goes deeper: as drummer Steve Jordan, in “Standing in the Shadows of Motown” documentary, states “I was heavily influenced by the inimitable blend of virtuosity and soulfulness that marked all the largely unheralded work the Funk Brothers did for Motown” (Justman 2002, 0:8:51-0:09:11). Using a kick pattern that was perfected by Benny Benjamin, “Pistol” Allen, and Uriel Jones, Jordan displays a mastery of The Groove rhythm from Motown.

Having brought in Smokey Robinson for his album *Ventura*, Anderson .Paak employed strings and a groovy bassline to emulate Motown on his song “Make It Better.” Sonically the drums are consistent with Motown sounds primarily focused on the hi-hat, snare drum, and kick drum. The consistency of the drum pattern with its laid-back feel calls back to the openness of the swung rhythms of The Groove and can be seen in Example 4.14.

Example 4.14 Measures 1-2 of the drum groove in “Make It Better”



Similar to “Still Feel Like Your Man” by John Mayer and “You Know I’m No Good” by Amy Winehouse, the hi-hat and snare drum stay consistent on the straight grid. The slight swing The Groove is known for is created by the kick drum. The swing of the kick drum occurs strongest on the upbeat of beat four into beat one of the next measure. While there is slight space in the kick drum eighth notes of beat three, it is not nearly as notable as the lateness of the upbeat of beat four.

In 2021, Anderson .Paak formed the duo Silk Sonic with Pop artist Bruno Mars and recorded another song heavily influenced by the drumming of Motown. With .Paak on drums, the duo emphasized the influence of Motown drummers primarily by using a consistent groove that creates a solid pocket that consists of a slight swing and a modified version of a signature drum lick.

The consistency comes from the kick drum. Example 4.15 shows the drum pattern used in the verses.

Example 4.15 Verse drum groove from “Leave the Door Open”



While the notes are used in a linear fashion, the Motown influence is once again drawn from the kick drum. Sonically, the hi-hat and snare drum consistently hit in the straight grid. The pocket, like in The Groove, is created by the kick drum. While the rhythm in Example 4.15 is notated correctly, when listening to the groove, there is the slightest swing to the upbeat kick drum that pushes the note to sound almost late. Benny Benjamin, “Pistol” Allen, and Uriel Jones consistently used this technique and timing to create The Groove.

Anderson .Paak used a fill that is extremely similar to Steve Gadd's fill in Example 4.8. The only major difference in Example 4.16 is the placement around the drums.

Example 4.16 Transitional fill in "Leave the Door Open"



As discussed previously, .Paak's take on Skeleton Rhythm 1 of signature drum licks varies from Gadd's. .Paak's version is rhythmically the same and echoes the style and fill used by Uriel Jones. Sonically, .Paak chooses to end it on a kick drum. This gives a more solid finish and, since the kick drum in the recording does not ring, it creates a more definitive pause before the next section.

Conclusion

Benny “Papa Zita” Benjamin, Richard “Pistol” Allen, and Uriel Jones each brought different elements into drumming for the popular music genre of Motown in the 1960s. They each had a slightly different style and were masters at different rhythms, but together they created a significant impact on popular music drumming that continues today.

The Four-On-The-Snare groove that stemmed from songs like “I Can’t Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch)” by the Four Tops demonstrated an aggressive, upbeat sound that drove songs forward. The downbeat snare combined with the back beat provided by the kick drum anchored a solid groove. This groove had a profound influence on drumming styles in popular music, exemplified in its use decades apart by two very different British artists, the Beatles and Amy Winehouse.

The New Orleans feel of The Bounce groove leaned heavily into the swing and shuffle styles at which “Pistol” Allen excelled. Allen noted, “they used Pistol here for this feeling, Benny here for this feeling, and Uriel for another kind of feel,” but Allen takes credit for some of the most masterful swung rhythm playing behind the beat on tunes like “Where Did Our Love Go” by The Supremes (Allen 1999, 78).

The most influential Motown groove, The Groove, came to be through a combination of different elements of The Bounce and Four-On-The-Snare. The Groove can be identified in most of the songs that were selected for the post-Motown portion of the recital. The combination of a slightly swung, syncopated kick pattern and consistent

backbeats on the snare drum laid the groundwork for many popular music drummers moving forward.

These grooves would not be complete if not for the creation of the signature licks that Benny Benjamin created. “Pistol” Allen and Uriel Jones brought their own styles to each of the different licks, but the emphasis of beats three and four occurred in all three drummers playing. Each lick may be unique to individual drummers in terms of rhythmic placement, but the overall transitional effect of them is what remains in place today. The sixteenth note to eighth note transition from beats three to four in these licks clearly stated new sections and connectivity between phrases.

Through the analysis of Benny “Papa Zita” Benjamin, Richard “Pistol” Allen, and Uriel Jones playing, the recital performance was heavily influenced by key factors of Detroit Motown era style. The approach to the drums in terms of swing, touch, and feel are key to mimicking these drummers. Tracing these Motown grooves and signature licks throughout the popular music era post-Motown also provided an opportunity to display how other master drummers have interpreted the playing of these three Motown drummers. In the author’s recital, integration of the post-Motown drummers’ playing styles was large focus, including the display of the author’s knowledge and interpretation of the drum grooves and licks that originated from Motown.

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