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A Brief History of Jazz Drumming

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Recommended Citation

King, Zachary A., "A Brief History of Jazz Drumming" (2014). *Honors Theses and Capstones*. 210.
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12/26/14
Honors Thesis
A Brief History of Jazz Drumming

Percussion has always been an important part of art and culture, but the development of modern percussion instruments, including the drum set, is recent, spanning a time period of only a little more than a century ago. Jazz music is one of the few musical styles developed in America's cultural past. Ethnic music played in the New Orleans area is generally cited as the origin of jazz. The drum set was developed along side the evolution of jazz music through different styles and approaches.

Marshall Stearns, an American jazz critic and musicologist, cites Congo Square at an empty lot as the heart of the development of jazz. In this place the slaves would sometimes hold public dances, some being "Vodun," also known as voodoo, ceremonies. Most of these ceremonies were held in private, but between 1817 and 1885, some were performed at Congo Square.

*At a signal from a police official, the slaves were summoned to the center of the square by the prolonged rattling of two huge beef bones upon the head of a cask, out of which had been fastened a sort of drum or tambourine called the bamboula. The favorite dances of the slaves were the Calinda, a variation of which was also used in the Voodoo ceremonies, and the Dance of the Bamboula, both of which were primarily based on the primitive dances of the African jungle.... the entire swamp was an almost solid mass of black bodies stamping and swaying to the rhythmic beat of the bones on the cask, the frenzied chanting of the women, and the clanging of pieces of metal which dangled from the ankles of the men.*¹

Jazz was not simply developed from this one tradition. Much of the influence came from military bands at the time. New Orleans was settled with a large amount of French influence, and military bands were very popular in the late 19th century. When the civil war also ended around this time, "many Confederate army bands dumped their instruments in New Orleans pawn shops."² As a result, African Americans could afford the instruments, and New Orleans started to become known for its marching bands. The percussion sections would consist of a player on snare drum and a player on bass drum. One of the most common functions bands were hired for were funerals. They would play marches and hymns, and when they traveled closer to the cemetery would break into more up-tempo tunes and use some improvisation. It could be conceived that instead of African drum rhythms becoming the basis of swing rhythms, instead a perversion of marching rudiments could be the foundation. The high resentment between ethnicities at the time could have led to the mockery of 4/4 marching rhythms by use of triplet meter and a loose feel.³

One of the most influential achievements in instrument development was the invention of the bass drum pedal. "Dee Dee" Chandler was credited to have made the first bass drum pedal, although it was crude and consisted of a spring, which when pulled by a pedal would bring a block of wood toward the bass drum head. Chandler then tied a snare drum, and later other instruments, to the standard marching bass drum used at the time. Other drummers followed

¹ Stearns, Marshall W. *The Story of Jazz*. New York: Oxford Press, 1956.

² Shultz, Thomas. *A History of Jazz Drumming*. *Percussive Notes* 16, no. 3 (1979): 106-132.

³ *Ibid.*

suit, and a variety of different pedal models were made, including ones using baseballs as beaters. Many of the pedals featured a secondary small metal beater, which could be adjusted to strike a cymbal mounted next to the bass drum. The invention of the bass drum pedal was important because it eliminated the need for two musicians on a gig. Instead of separate snare drum and bass drum players, one person could do the same job. Players also started to add other instruments such as temple blocks, Chinese cymbals, cowbells, and various auxiliary percussion sounds.⁴



Early drum set from the Chicago era, pictured left.⁵

Warren “Baby” Dodds started working in marching bands in New Orleans in the early 1900’s and is considered to be one of the first great jazz drummers. After playing with Louis Armstrong in Fate Marable’s riverboat band in 1918, he moved to Chicago in 1921. Many jazz musicians moved around this time period because of the shutdown of entertainment venues in Storyville in 1917, a neighborhood of New Orleans, which housed and employed many artists. The shutdown was due to the construction of a naval base, and restrictions on the surrounding communities. Dodds played in Chicago with a number of artists until his death in 1959, including recordings with Jelly Roll Morton’s Hot Peppers.⁶

Baby Dodds’ time keeping style consisted mainly of quarter note snare drum beats in the right hand, and press rolls in the left hand on beats 1 and 3. His later Chicago style saw a switch to a swing feel with press rolls on beats 2 and 4. Dodds played in a very musical manner, using phrasing horn players would use. This can be hear on his recording, “Baby Dodds Tom Tom,” which is taken from an instructional video made by Dodds.⁷ He uses his foot to muffle and change the pitch of a floor tom, and all the while plays a series of interesting musical phrases. In another recording of Dodds later style, sounds of various other instruments can be heard.⁸ The

⁴ Shultz, Thomas. *A History of Jazz Drumming*. Percussive Notes 16, no. 3 (1979): 106-132.

⁵ Gillaspie, Deborah. "Antique Drum Equipment from the "Chicago" Period." Antique Drum Equipment from the "Chicago" Period. The University of Chicago Library, 30 July 2006. Web. 25 Dec. 2014. <<http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/cja/cymbal.html>>.

⁶ Gottlieb, Danny. *The evolution of jazz drumming: a workbook for applied drumset students*. Ed. Joe Bergamini. Hudson Music, 2011. Pg.23

⁷ Gottlieb, Danny. *The evolution of jazz drumming: a workbook for applied drumset students*. Ed. Joe Bergamini. Hudson Music, 2011. CD

⁸ Dellino, Clive. "Drum Improvisations - Baby Dodds." YouTube. YouTube, 06 Nov. 2014. Web. 24 Dec. 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plfshlhD_BY>.

phrasings of the tom toms again sound like horn player structures. His playing on the snare drum in this solo is reminiscent of marching rhythms. The cross rhythms he plays amongst the temple blocks, cowbell, and drum rims is imitative of tap dancing rhythms, another popular art form in Chicago at the time. His solo features bass drum beats on each quarter note, which was the common use of the bass drum, but later Dodds used it for other rhythms. This late 1946 recording shows Dodds at a developed point in his career, but unfortunately due to the recording processes in the early 1900's, bass and snare drums were not permitted on recordings because of their disruptive frequencies to a needle on wax.⁹

As evidenced by Dodds' style, early drum set players did not often use cymbals in their playing. Both sticks would be used on drums and auxiliary percussion to keep time. Since drummers served a secondary role in early jazz bands, drum solos were a rarity. Usually these solos were confined to live playing, and when given the opportunity, many of these solos were march-like in sound. Zutty Singleton, another drumming pioneer alongside Dodds, said, "We just kept the rhythm going and hardly ever took a solo."¹⁰

The focus of jazz in the 1920's moved to Chicago, where more stylistic changes took place for drum set players. "The Chicago drummers were concerned with technical skill, and experimented with the cymbals and bass drum. They allowed the cymbals to ring, instead of choking them as New Orleans men often did."¹¹ Well-known drummers of this era included Gene Krupa, "Papa" Jo Jones, and Big Sid Catlett. Gene Krupa is known for his explosive style in the development of swing, and he also made the drum set more of a solo instrument, breaking it from its secondary role in the band further. Arguably one of the greatest influential figures of the time was "Papa" Jo Jones. Previously drummers had kept time with the bass drum and played various instruments and rhythms with their hands across the rest of the set. Jo Jones moved the time keeping role to a new addition of the set, the hi-hat.¹² The hi-hat was still developing at this time.

*The forerunners of the hi-hat came on the scene in the twenties. First was the "Snow Shoe Cymbal Beater," where the cymbals were held horizontally, but very close to the floor. Next came the Low Boy, in which the cymbals were placed in a vertical position, still close to the floor. This was used for a number of years, until the hi-hat, or sock cymbal replaced it.*¹³

In a video recording taken from Hudson Music's *Classic Jazz Drummers*, the listener can see a variety of techniques and rhythms used by Jo Jones.¹⁴ Most importantly were his hi-hat feel, and the way he played rhythms across bar lines. Many comment on his joyous facial expressions as he plays, and many videos focus in on this. Jo Jones frequently set up his kit with an additional floor tom to the left of his hi-hat. In many instances he puts down his drum sticks and plays with his hands, or puts both sticks in one hand and performs a variety of visual movements across the drums and cymbals. The orchestral training of Jo Jones can be seen in his technique and his use of thumb rolls on drum heads across his kit.

⁹ Shultz, Thomas. *A History of Jazz Drumming*. Percussive Notes 16, no. 3 (1979): 106-132.

¹⁰ Leonard Feather, *The Book of Jazz* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), p. 124.

¹¹ Shultz, Thomas. *A History of Jazz Drumming*. Percussive Notes 16, no. 3 (1979): 106-132.

¹² Gottlieb, Danny. *The evolution of jazz drumming: a workbook for applied drumset students*. Ed. Joe Bergamini. Hudson Music, 2011. pg.48

¹³ Ludwig, William F., Sr. "67 Years of Drum Pedals," *The Ludwig Drummer*, Spring 1962.

¹⁴ Gottlieb, Danny. *The evolution of jazz drumming: a workbook for applied drumset students*. Ed. Joe Bergamini. Hudson Music, 2011. DVD

In the 1930's, jazz musicians started moving to New York. The swing scene was popular in both New York and Chicago at the time. It was at this time that the drum set became very similar to what is used today. Cymbals used became larger and thicker, and players tended to use them more frequently, leading to time being played on the ride cymbal.¹⁵

Max Roach was one of the drummers responsible for the transition from the swing era of jazz to be-bop. Max worked with greats such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Coleman Hawkins, Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, Sonny Rollins, and is known for his legendary work with trumpet player Clifford Brown. His work in the late 1930's and beyond helped to establish the drum set player as a melodic player in the band, and further breaking players out of the role of time keeper.¹⁶

*Be-bop broke one of the last restraining links of the chain that bound the drummer to the military (march) tradition: the bass drum. The bop drummer saw no logical reason for his duplicating the steady four of the bassist with his right foot; instead he used the bass drum as another tone color in his expanding spectrum of sounds. Time keeping was confined to the top cymbal; later the sock (hi-hat) cymbal, sharply closed on the afterbeats, was added as a timekeeping device.*¹⁷

The 1954 recording of "Joy Spring" from Clifford Brown and Max Roach is a great example of Max's melodic playing. The be-bop style of playing can also be heard prominently, along with the use of wire brushes. For most of the solo section, Max keeps a steady hi-hat pulse on beats 2 and 4. Although his bass drum pattern in this tune features mostly feathering, other tunes on the album show off his independence skill with the bass drum comping, and also his use of the double time ride pattern used on the up-tempo tunes. In "Joy Spring," his melodic ideas become more obvious if the listener hums the tune over Max's solo, which begins at 4:55 in the original recording. Some of the set ups used in the head of the tune come back in this solo section, as well as some rhythms from the tail ends of the melodies played. In the fifth through eighth bars of the solo, as well as other portions of his playing, he strays away from the melody slightly to play an idea that falls nicely onto the drums. Also in this section, as well as an idea he plays in the twenty-third and twenty-fourth bars of his solo, Max seems to be echoing an improvised line from the trumpet solo heard earlier in the recording at 2:56. Max's influence from drummers before him can be heard in various places, most obviously on his track, "For Big Sid," in which he plays the melody from the tune "Boff Boff," a Coleman Hawkins song which Sid Catlett played on. The solo drum tune by Max Roach was one of several on his album *Drums Unlimited*, released in 1966. This album has inspired generations of drummers to this day.¹⁸

The be-bop era sprouted another similar type of playing referred to as cool jazz or west coast jazz. Sheldon "Shelly" Manne was a big player in the cool jazz movement, and is most noted for his time with Stan Kenton's big band. Also at this time came about the hard bop style, with Art Blakey being a player who propelled the drummer's role once again. Blakey experimented like those before him with alternate time signatures layered over 4/4 such as 3/4, 5/4, and 6/4. He became part of the legendary Jazz Messengers, which was later run by him

¹⁵ Shultz, Thomas. *A History of Jazz Drumming*. Percussive Notes 16, no. 3 (1979): 106-132.

¹⁶ Gottlieb, Danny. *The evolution of jazz drumming: a workbook for applied drumset students*. Ed. Joe Bergamini. Hudson Music, 2011. pg.102

¹⁷ Hoefler, George. "History of the Drum in Jazz," *Jazz*, November, 1965.

¹⁸ Gottlieb, Danny. *The evolution of jazz drumming: a workbook for applied drumset students*. Ed. Joe Bergamini. Hudson Music, 2011. pg. 102

once Horace Silver left the group. He played with greats such as Wynton Marsallis, Wayne Shorter, Freddie Hubbard, Keith Jarrett, Chuck Mangione, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and many more. Blakey was known for being very explosive in volume, and his album *Caravan* features a number of open drum solos. “His fiery, volcanic playing is sometimes raucous, and he has been known to knock over his floor tom while playing.”¹⁹ Blakey would play rhythms over multiple bar lines, almost creating a sense of a new time signature. A figure he frequented was a quick burst of three sixteenth note triplets, as can be heard in his recording of “Caravan” off the 1963 album *Caravan*.²⁰

Another influential hard bop drummer was “Philly Joe” Jones, not to be confused with “Papa” Jo Jones, although Philly Joe definitely took inspiration from Papa Jo, along with Max Roach, Art Blakey, and Sid Catlett. Philly Joe was born in Philadelphia in 1923, and eventually moved to New York city in 1952 to play with Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Paul Chambers, amongst others like Lee Konitz and Tad Dameron.²¹ One of Philly Joe’s great solos can be heard on John Coltrane’s *Blue Train*, on the song “Lazy Bird.” His solo begins at the 5:44 mark, and features many aspects of drummers that came before him, including rhythms played over the bar lines and a hi-hat pulse on beats 2 and 4. During this solo Jones does not feather the bass drum at any point, and at times uses the hi-hat as its own voice. Nods are made to early era jazz with splashes on the hi-hat backed with bass drum, like the bass pedals of early drum sets that had cymbal attachments. Again, if the listener were to hum the head of the tune over his solo, some melodic ideas would line up. Jones’ melodic playing here is a bit more difficult to pick out in this manner because of the increasing complexity of the figures being played over the bar lines as compared to previous drummers. Jones enjoyed alternations between the feet and hands, along with stick-on-stick rim shots bouncing back and forth between the snare and the tom toms.

Born in 1927, Elvin Jones was an influential drummer to modern jazz. Jones grew up in Michigan with his musical brothers Thad and Hank Jones. He received rudimental training in his high school’s marching band, and went on to serve in the military. When he returned home, he moved to New York and played with greats such as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Larry Young, Wayne Shorter, and many more. He is well known for *A Love Supreme*, recorded with John Coltrane’s quartet. Elvin had a very unique style, furthering the types of rhythms played over bar lines that drummers before him had used. In McCoy Tyner’s *The Real McCoy*, one can hear Elvin’s time keeping feel. He would constantly change his comping, so that there was an evolution throughout the song. Some use the metaphor of clothes in a dryer. The clothes are constantly cycling, sometimes hitting the bottom of the dry each rotation, and sometimes almost never reaching the bottom of the dryer before getting swept up and tumbled again. Elvin also had an interesting approach to a latin style of playing, which tended to blend both swing and latin feels together.²²

Another great recording of Elvin Jones appears on Larry Young’s album, *Unity*. Young plays organ, with bass lines being controlled by pedals. This gives the comping and harmonic structure of the rhythm section a tight and together feel. On the track “Monk’s Dream,” the drum solo, which begins at the 3:51 mark, sounds extremely erratic and nonsensical upon a first

¹⁹ Shultz, Thomas. *A History of Jazz Drumming*. Percussive Notes 16, no. 3 (1979): 106-132.

²⁰ Gottlieb, Danny. *The evolution of jazz drumming: a workbook for applied drumset students*. Ed. Joe Bergamini. Hudson Music, 2011. pgs.112-115

²¹ Shultz, Thomas. *A History of Jazz Drumming*. Percussive Notes 16, no. 3 (1979): 106-132.

²² Gottlieb, Danny. *The evolution of jazz drumming: a workbook for applied drumset students*. Ed. Joe Bergamini. Hudson Music, 2011. pgs.184-197

listen. The head of the tune is a thirty-two bar form, consisting of an AABA structure. Gene Perla, who played with Elvin Frequently, remarked about his soloing. "One of the hardest things to follow when listening to Elvin is just exactly where "one" is during a solo! Many times Elvin played a ferocious solo, with all kinds of twisted rhythms, and somehow, magically, the band came right back in, together, on a downbeat."²³ Elvin used a variety of different rhythms in his solos, including groups of threes, fives, sixes, and probably more. This is evidenced on the recording of "Monk's Dream," where rhythms are played over the bar lines, and down beats never seem to happen. Cymbal crashes can fool even the most careful listener, and sometimes they fall on a partial of an odd note grouping. Larry Young does an excellent job of counting, and most likely felt larger phrases like Elvin did in his phrasing. Elvin would commonly play similar melodic ideas on the set, and morph them by changing the note grouping used. The result is a feeling of slowing and speeding up at a seemingly random rate, but one that is very in line with the melody of the head and completely in time.

Tony Williams was probably the most popular of the late modern jazz drummers, amongst others such as Jack DeJohnette. Williams played with Miles Davis when he was only eighteen years old, being featured on many of his records such as *Four and More* and *ESP*. He greatly influenced Miles' music, and later joined forces with John McLaughlin and Larry Young to form a fusion group. At this point, jazz had reached a very evolved stage, and the drum set was starting to change again. Drummers now had the option to expand the amount of tom toms and cymbals they used.²⁴

Throughout the years of jazz evolution, drum set players have been a crucial role in the band. Initially in the early 1900's, the role of the drummer was seen as secondary, although a solid sense of time was key. Throughout the past century and more, revolutionary artists have brought the drum set from its secondary role in the jazz band, to one of utmost importance in establishing energy and communicating complex rhythmic and melodic ideas. Jazz is a combination of a potpourri of genres, including ragtime, blues, marches, New Orleans, Dixieland, Chicago, swing, Kansas City, bebop, cool or west coast, hard bop, avant-garde, fusion, and much more.²⁵

Becoming familiar with the history of one's instrument is important in understanding its capabilities and possibilities. In particular, jazz drumming is important because it is the root of most popular music performed currently. Understanding the approaches of past musicians strengthens a player's technique and inspires unique approaches to practice and performance. The relatively recent development of the drum set leaves a variety of possibilities for its expansion of use in modern music.

²³ Gottlieb, Danny. *The evolution of jazz drumming: a workbook for applied drumset students*. Ed. Joe Bergamini. Hudson Music, 2011. pg. 186

²⁴ Ibid. pg. 177

²⁵ Shultz, Thomas. *A History of Jazz Drumming*. Percussive Notes 16, no. 3 (1979): 106-132.