Broken Time Drumming

A Complete Concept for the Development of Broken Time Drumming

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This book is dedicated to every struggling artist. Never, ever give up.

Preface

Jazz drumming is a popular and well represented topic amongst educational media. Some of the world's best drummers, jazz players or otherwise, have tackled the topic in some form or another, and virtually all of them have something valuable to offer the willing student. Broken time drumming, however, is a distinctly under-represented specialism within the jazz drumming field, and very few dedicated sources exist to guide the student through what is a very difficult and enigmatic style.

My solution, therefore, was to tackle the topic for myself, not as a master of broken time drumming, but as a student. I learn an awful lot when I am shown the concept that helped inform how and why something was played, where that pattern came from and how it links to other pieces of vocabulary. Concept is everything: it explains why a certain piece of drumming sounds the way it does, how the drummer achieved it, how it can be learned and practised, and why. Without it, we are all just mimicking the patterns we are shown without any understanding of what we are *saying*.

The material in this book is analytical in nature; the concepts, musical devices, and methods of learning are studied and considered with great depth, and while I do not wish to deter any potential students, no apology is made for this. This book is about concept, and concept must be understood as deeply as possible so that it can be employed to its fullest. Do not be afraid to reread and really study the analysis which follows. Fight the urge to jump straight to the combinations or you will be practising blindly. Understand the concept, and you will be able to do a great deal with very little.

As with my book on linear drumming, **Linear Freedom**,[1] this book was written in tandem with my own journey through a challenging style of drumming. The concepts and material developed as I developed alongside them. Because of this, I have tried to retain an air of discovery and exploration throughout this book, as those revelatory moments are the ones that really push us forwards. Whenever I experienced a breakthrough moment, I tried to keep and share some of that excitement within this text.

During the research and writing of this book, I was lucky enough to consult with John Riley, author of the seminal **Art of Bop** and **Beyond Bop Drumming**.[2] John kindly helped to fill in any gaps in my understanding, refine my material, and gently push me in the right direction, as well as provide a fair number of revelations regarding my own playing.

As with all things musical, the best education of all will come from doing it for real. Where possible, play with other musicians and try to incorporate what you are working on. Listen to the greats who pioneered broken time drumming, and work out what makes their styles tick. I can provide a concept to help you with the material on an academic level, but the real musical application must ultimately come from you.

I wish you all the luck in the world.

Jonathan Curtis

October 2020

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[1] Artificer Productions, 2017
[2] Alfred Publishing, 2005

Acknowledgements

As with any large scale work, this book would not have been possible without support and friendship in all of its forms. My parents have shown constant support through turbulent times, my wife Katherine has put up with endless bouts of my musician's self-doubt, and my friends and colleagues have always had nothing but positivity and encouragement to send my way.

I am particularly grateful to John Riley for his insight and subtle pushes in the right direction; to Colin Stump, Stephen Green, Todd Bishop, Manuel Lorenz, Jim Frink, Alex Dobbs, and Bill Stieger for their detailed feedback and comments on various drafts of this book; to my YouTube supporters who have followed my live streams and videos as I developed this material; and to my friends on Drummerworld.com for being such a consistent source of knowledge, intelligent discussion, and encouragement.

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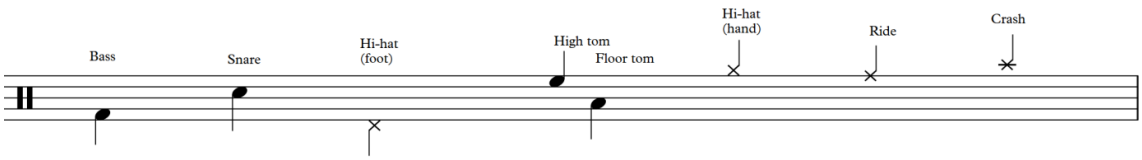
Jonathan Horne – Sam Jackson – Matt Anderson

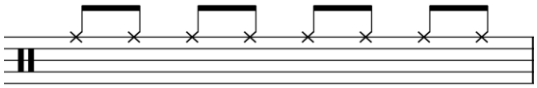
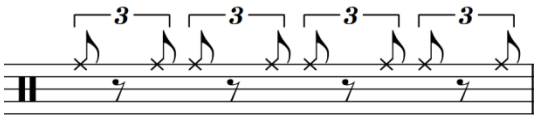
Sam Leak – Iain Mundell – Rick Dior

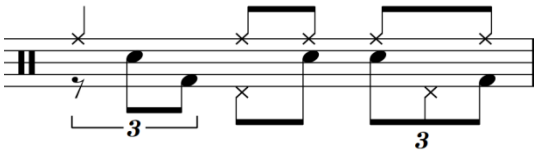
Mark Law and Bosphorus Cymbals

I proudly endorse **Bosphorus Cymbals**

Notation Key



Unless otherwise stated, all notated examples, motifs, and exercises in this book are to be considered *swung*.[3]

In swing time, the above ride cymbal pattern would be interpreted as follows:

Because the swung 8th notes imply triplets, triplet brackets are not used above the ride cymbal, regardless of whether a triplet motif is played below it.



In the above example, the third beat of the motif contains a triplet between the snare, hi-hat, and bass drum. The ride cymbal plays on the first and third notes of this triplet. Because the swung 8th note already implies triplets, the triplet bracket has not been included on the ride cymbal for the sake of legibility. Nevertheless, it should be treated as a triplet partial,[4] as would all swung 8th notes.

[3] *Swing* is a form of rhythmic modulation in which 8th notes are treated as the first and third notes of a triplet. This is for the sake of legibility; a swing interpretation removes the need for a change of time signature or an excessive use of triplet brackets.
[4] Specifically, the first and third note of a triplet, with the middle note treated as a rest.

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Introduction

Broken time drumming describes the act of playing time fluidly, across all four limbs, without the reliance on a particular pattern or ostinato. This concept was largely developed in the post-bop jazz era of the 1960s, and further developed within contemporary jazz and the ECM[5] movement of the 1970s. Drummers such as Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, and Roy Haynes revolutionised what it meant to play time within a jazz ensemble, while their contemporaries like Jack DeJohnette and Jon Christensen brought the style forward into the modern era.

Traditionally, jazz drumming maintained a recognisable ride cymbal and hi-hat pattern, with improvisation – comping – occurring within this ostinato. With the advent of the post-bop era, in which a more exploratory approach was adopted, drummers began to keep a looser and less rigid time, introducing the hi-hat into their comping phrases and, ultimately, breaking the ride cymbal pattern itself. The term 'broken time' refers to the fact that a consistent and rhythmic time feel is played, while the repetitive patterns are broken.

Due to the improvisational nature of this style, it can be difficult to practise and develop. Many of the drummers adept in this style developed their particular time-keeping abilities over many years of playing within the types of music for which this type of drumming is most suited, evolving their vocabulary and technical ability over the course of their tenures with world-class musicians. While listening to these players is vital for understanding and, ultimately, learning this style of drumming, it can be very difficult to work out the *how* and the *why*, even if the studious listener can work out the *what*.

This book aims to break the barrier to this difficult style of drumming in a number of ways, firstly by focusing on the acquisition of vocabulary. Vocabulary in this context refers to the accrued language on the instrument upon which the player can call at will. This is material that has been thoroughly practised and learned to such an extent that it can be played without effort or thought, and is available upon request. Needless to say, taking any material to this level requires substantial effort and a great degree of familiarity. Understanding both where the vocabulary comes from and how it can be internalised and integrated effectively, we can begin to see how the broken time style can be attained.

An analogy with language is a useful one. Native speakers of English have enough combined experience and knowledge to form words and coherent sentences. They can convey and understand *meaning* without any conscious effort. To new students of a foreign language, even the pronunciation of the basic sounds can be a challenge, and conscious thought is needed to form sentences that convey any meaning at all. This is what playing broken time feels like for the first time.

To overcome this, we can treat it like learning a new language: we learn the basic alphabet and pronunciation of the sounds, we study fundamental sentence structure, we look at many different uses and contexts for words and phrases and how these can alter the meaning, we learn and acquire vocabulary with which to speak and express meaning fluently.

[5] Edition of Contemporary Music: a record label founded by Karl Egger, Manfred Eicher, and Manfred Scheffner in 1969.

Throughout this book, we will cover various ways in which the broken time effect can be achieved. This will include the development, acquisition, and combining of motifs, the interpretation of rhythmic themes into drum kit phrases, and the analysis of examples of broken time playing. The following chapters present examples, motifs, and combination possibilities to consider and practise.

We must always remember that the aim of this process is to attain the ability to play the drums in a musical, rhythmic, and relevant way. Simply combining phrases together randomly will not produce music. We must remember that these are *practice methods* which have a particular goal in mind, based on a particular concept: learning vocabulary grants the ability to apply that vocabulary at will.

The musical content within this book exists to provide an insight into the drumming equivalent of linguistic fluency. Practising specific motifs improves pronunciation (our ability to execute the motif on the drums); it helps us to learn how that motif sounds, its rhythmic properties, how it interacts with other motifs, all of which we can consider as *meaning*. Combining motifs together allows us to form sentences.

Of course, randomly combining words to form sentences will rarely produce anything other than nonsense, but if we consider the fact that the motifs are provided in sets which all vary the thematic properties of a base motif, we can form sentences which naturally follow on from one another. Furthermore, applying the concepts espoused in the rhythmic analysis sections of this book enables us to understand *how* and *why* such motifs can or should be combined.

It is therefore recommended in the strongest possible terms that the exercises and methods in this book are treated as a means to an end. We are trying to learn a difficult language, and this book attempts to act as both dictionary and phrase book and language tutor, all in one. We look at the words themselves in order to learn how to pronounce them, we look at their rhythmic properties so that we can understand them, and we look at how they can be combined into sentences so that they can provide our musical content with substance, all with the aim of achieving the broken time effect that we know and love from the great jazz musicians to whom we enjoy listening.

Broken time, as expressed in this book, is ultimately all about *movement*. We are trying to generate a strong, undeniable forward momentum that carries everything else along with it. We are dancing *around* the beat rather than sitting *on* it, but the result is the same: movement.

John Riley suggests that broken time playing is about exploring space, which is an accurate statement. We can perhaps expand on that by saying that broken time playing is about exploring *movement through space*. Try to keep this thought in mind when exploring this material.

Part 1

An Analysis of Broken Time Phrasing

> "It's like breathing. It's fun. The music should have dynamics. If it stays on one thing all the time, it's boring."
>
> – Jack DeJohnette

Motifs and Their Development

Despite the ease with which masters of this style play and improvise, nothing is random. Randomness does not suit music in any sense, and one should be wary of improvisational concepts which involve *randomly* playing phrases. Musicality, creativity, and expression are all things a musician should strive for and to play with, all of which rely on intent. The intention of the player to respond to a certain musical call with a relevant response is the corner stone of musicianship in general, and jazz music specifically.

To achieve this, the musician requires a deep and familiar vocabulary upon which they can draw and manipulate freely. Considering how much time it can take to fully master and internalise a new phrase, groove, pattern, or lick, one may start to think that there is simply not enough time to practise all of the possible vocabulary required to improvise with the freedom towards which we are working. However, the holistic nature of familiarising and internalising vocabulary should not be underestimated. A deep familiarity with even a single phrase can yield exponential results with regard to subtle variations and motivic development.

We begin with a simple motif:
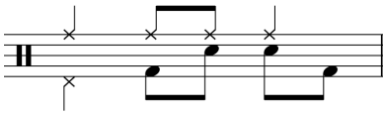
Fig. 1.1

The above figure shows a three-beat motif involving all four voices.[6] The ride cymbal is incorporated into the pattern alongside the other three voices, rather than existing separately. It is written here without a time signature, though it can be seen to be three beats long. We can therefore consider this to be a *three-beat motif*.
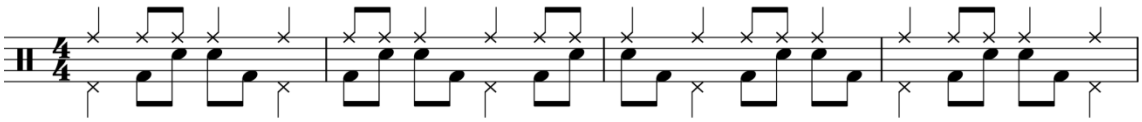
Fig. 1.2

Phrasing the motif within a four-bar phrase in 4/4 time creates a polyrhythmic effect, during which we must consciously keep track of where we are within those four bars at all times. This allows us to internalise the motif across a broad variety of rhythmic contexts, and further allow us to expand outwards into other time signatures.

In *Fig. 1.2*, we see the motif in this context. A three-beat motif in 4/4 resolves after the third bar; we can see in this figure that the fourth bar is the same as the first. However, we must be sure to keep thinking in terms of four-bar phrases. We could continue this figure

[6] Bass drum, snare drum, hi-hat (with the foot) and ride cymbal.

on for another four bars, and then another; after this 12-bar span, the whole four-bar figure would resolve and start again.

Applying the motif in this way has created a broken time pattern. Because the ride cymbal phrase is integrated into the motif itself, when seen in this 4/4 context, it is playing a naturally broken pattern rather than the traditional repetitive ride pattern. Due to this ride cymbal integration, the motif combines the four voices to create the broken time effect. The repetition of a simple three-beat motif is disguised by the context in which it is played.

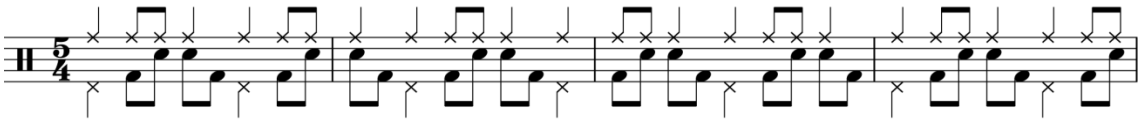

Fig. 1.3

This effect is present in other time signatures as well, as we can see above in 5/4. Practising in this manner allows us to feel the motif free from any confines of the meter in which we are playing. The goal is to be able to play this motif at will, no matter the time signature or the beat of the bar on which it is begun. Practising the motifs across a four-bar phrase in 4/4, regardless of the motif's length, will go a long way towards achieving this freedom.

Familiarity breeds the ability to vary and change with little effort. If we are familiar with this figure and how it feels to play, it can be changed in some manner relatively easily.

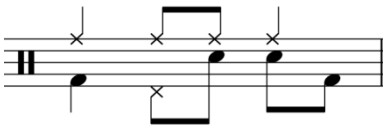

Fig. 1.4

The above figure shows a minor variation of the motif: the first hi-hat and bass drum strokes have swapped places. Making this switch is not a technically demanding or mechanically difficult task so long as we are familiar enough with the original phrase.

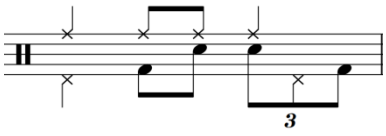

Fig. 1.5

Here in *Fig. 1.*5, the original notes from *Fig. 1.1* have not moved or changed, but the middle note of the implied triplet on the third beat is now voiced on the hi-hat.

We can call the motif in *Fig. 1.1* 3a, and the two variations in *Figs. 1.4* and *1.5* 3b and 3c respectively. We can now create a combination, playing the motif and its variations sequentially: 3a–3b–3c.

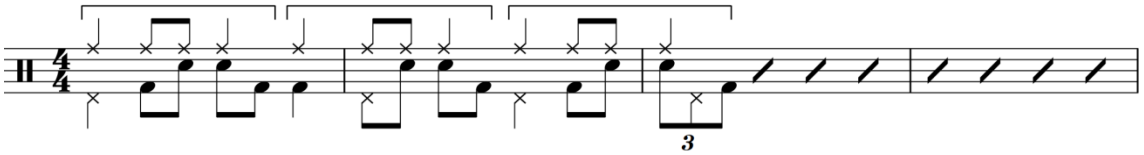

Fig. 1.6

In *Fig. 1.6*, we can see these three motifs within a four-bar phrase in 4/4. Across all four bars, our 3a–3b–3c combination has occupied nine of the sixteen beats. At this point, we can choose to simply repeat the combination, continuing the 3a–3b–3c sequence until we reach the end of the fourth bar.

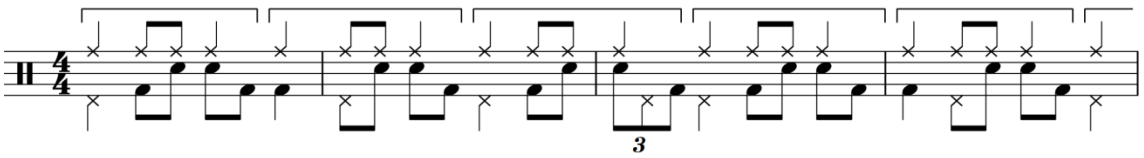

Fig. 1.7

In *Fig. 1.7* we see the 3a–3b–3c combination repeated, with the second repetition beginning on beat 2 of the third bar. We can see that 3a and 3b can both be played in their entirety, while the second repetition of 3c begins on the very last beat of the phrase. We could choose to keep going into a second four-bar phrase (ultimately resolving the figure after twelve bars), or we could choose to end the phrase, regardless of not completing the 3a–3b–3c combination a second time.

Taking this four-bar arrangement as a complete phrase, we may choose to consider it as five iterations of a three-beat motif (equating to fifteen beats) with one beat left over, to be filled as we so choose. We can call this whole combination a 3–3–3–3–3–1.[7]

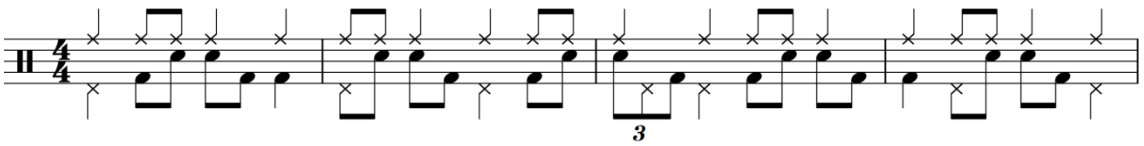

Fig. 1.8

Fig. 1.8 shows the whole phrase with the brackets removed. Without the prior analysis, the three-beat motif and its variations would not be immediately obvious; our natural

[7] This naming convention lists the phrase length without making reference to any particular variations of motifs. This naming scheme can be used to label combination possibilities without the need to specify the particular motif to be played.

tendency would be to view this as four disparate bars within the 4/4 context. When viewed and heard in this way, the broken time feel is created.

The broken time feel is created by the use of motivic phrasing. In the prior examples, three-beat motifs are combined together across four bars of 4/4. The use of shorter or longer motifs constitutes the substance, the vocabulary of what is played in broken time contexts.

As stated above, improvisational playing like this is not random (though it may appear so to the listener), and it is not confined to single bars or single patterns. Generally speaking, we can sum up the broken time style as the use of polyrhythmic motivic phrasing variations which combine to create a flowing and organic time feel, not reliant on the traditional jazz drumming ostinatos.

With that said, it would not be fair or accurate to claim that broken time is *solely* the employment of motivic phrasing, just as it would be similarly inaccurate to summarise conversation between to speakers as being *solely* the recitation of learned phrases. Native speakers of a language employ all sorts of spontaneity in their speech that decorates, flavours, or otherwise characterises the words, sentences, and meanings they are expressing.

Likewise, drummers fluent in the broken time style use their motivic vocabulary as their basis, from which they can experiment with well informed permutations, variations, or other improvisational explorations.

Indeed, the deeper our motivic vocabulary is, the more able we will find ourselves to make these spontaneous choices, and this essentially sums up the conceptual approach for this book.

Tension and Release

A key concept in music generally, and jazz specifically, is the build-up and release of tension.
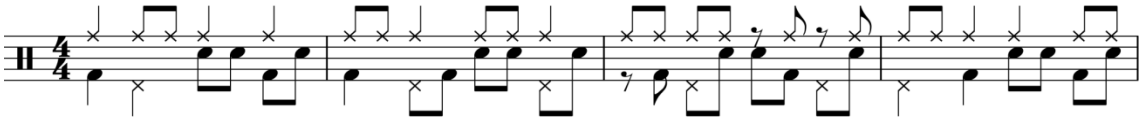
Fig. 2.1

In *Fig. 2.1*, the four-bar phrase consists of four four-beat motifs. Essentially, the motif in the first bar is repeated with a subtle variation each time. Due to the innate rhythmic resolution of this, it is stagnant. Each motif fills each bar, with four motifs across four bars. Instead, we can use shorter or longer motifs to create tension throughout the phrase.

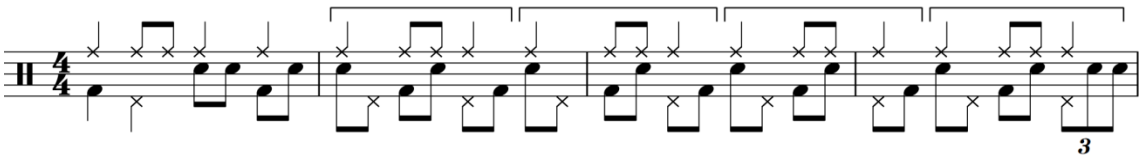

Fig. 2.2

Now, the first four-beat motif is followed by a series of three-beat motifs which resolve at the end of the fourth bar. The three-beat motifs serve to build a sense of tension by seeming to *compress* the time. This compression occurs because the motif is shorter than the rhythmic framework in which it is being played. In other words, a three-beat motif is shorter than a bar of 4/4.

The playing of a shorter motif in a longer bar gives the impression of *speeding up* or *cutting short* the rhythm; the listener's expectation is circumvented with this illusion before the resolution point at the end of the fourth bar re-establishes the expected rhythm. We can say, therefore, that a motif that is shorter than the meter in which it is played serves to build tension by *compressing* the time feel.

Conversely, we can state the opposite for longer phrases. A motif that is longer than the meter in which it is played will build an opposite sort of tension by *stretching* the time, giving the illusion of *slowing* or *extending* the expected rhythm.
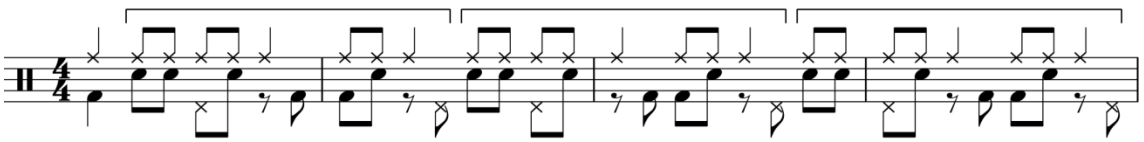
Fig. 2.3

In *Fig. 2.3*, a five-beat motif begins on the second beat of the first bar, and repeats three times to the end of the measure. As the motif is longer than the individual bars, tension is

created by a perceived stretching of the time feel. The motif aligns with the end of the fourth bar, resolving the figure and releasing the tension.
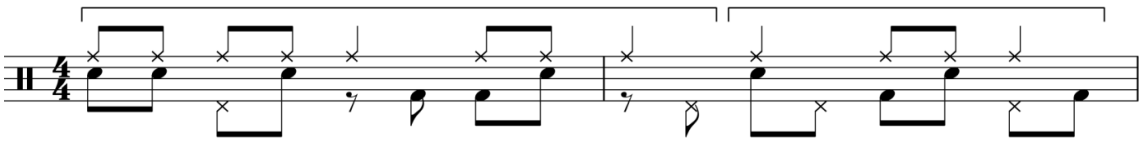
Fig. 2.4

In this two-bar figure above, a five-beat motif is followed by a three-beat motif, resolving at the end of the measure. This is an interesting combination, quite self-contained, as the 5 at the beginning stretches the perception of time, while the 3 after it immediately condenses it, such that it still resolves in the expected place.

If we conceive of time as being elastic, able to be stretched and manipulated, the overall value of the meter demands that the values remain consistent. In other words, if we stretch time in one part of the measure, we have to condense it somewhere else: what we take from somewhere, we have to give back somewhere else. *Fig. 2.4* demonstrates this neatly; the first motif takes a beat from the second bar, so the second motif gives it back by being a beat shorter. This gives a stretching effect immediately resolved by the condensing shorter motif.