

## Building a Strong Foundation for Your Drumming

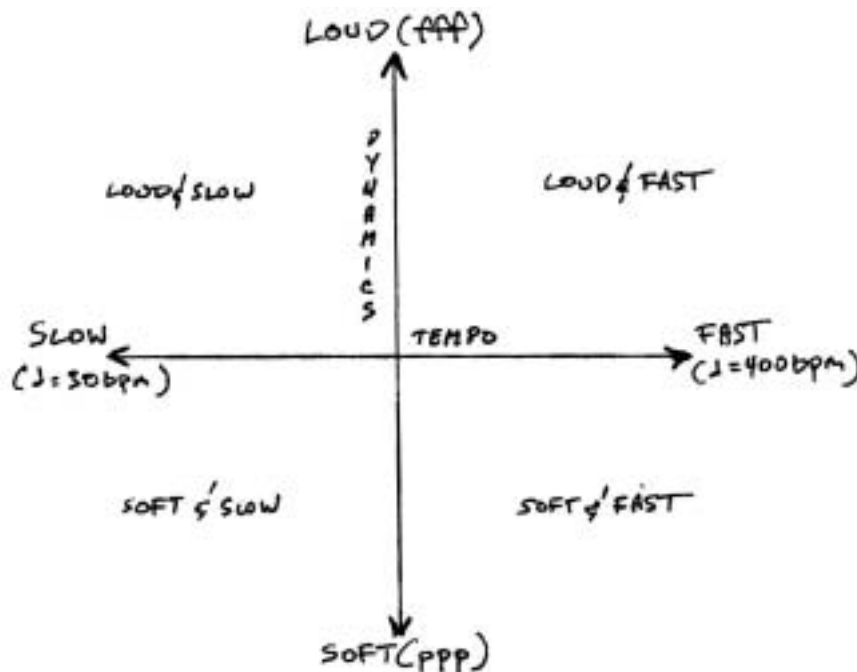
### I.) Play for the Music!

As practitioners of a rhythm instrument of “indeterminate pitch” drummers are often, and sometimes rightly, accused of being self-indulgent. A strong knowledge of melody, harmony and song form is helpful in informing the choices you make about WHAT to play on the bandstand, and knowledge, as they say, is power. If you’re accompanying and propelling the band, a clear understanding of the form helps you steer the direction of the tune to maximum effect. When soloing, you deal with the same melodic and harmonic references as those you accompany, adding continuity to the shape of the piece.

Learn to identify basic song forms like 12 bar blues, 32 bar AABA form, and basic verse/chorus/bridge structures, not just by the number of bars or sections, but also by the chord movement. A drummer that understands harmonic movement and basic concepts of tension and release is just as valuable to the rest of the band as the melodic & harmonic players who also have a strong sense of time and groove are to us, and more valuable than one who doesn’t!

### II.) Horizontal & Vertical Musical Control

A strong sense of tempo(s) is a major priority for a drummer. A keen control of dynamics is another absolute necessity. Artistry lends itself to abstract thinking. I sometimes visualize the tempo range in music as a horizontal line, stretching as it slows, compressing as it becomes faster. In the same manner I visualize dynamics in music in a vertical line, rising while growing louder, sinking when it gets softer. Observe the following diagram:



When tempo and dynamics are combined in this diagram it becomes easy to recognize certain challenges that the combination sometimes presents to us. Keep in mind as you learn a beat or rudimental pattern, for example, that once you’ve got the coordination together—that is just the beginning! Beware of what I’ve heard drumming great Peter Erskine refer to as “the practice room tempo” – a generally unchallenging tempo that can fool you into thinking you mastered something once you’ve (only) put it together. Bandstand tempos can vary greatly in extremes. Add dynamics into the mix and you’ll discover that playing loud and slow is just as tricky as playing fast and soft. Try a few grooves, rudiments, or licks you feel comfortable playing and one at a time, with the help of a metronome, experiment with various “destination points” along the diagram. It just might change the way you practice!

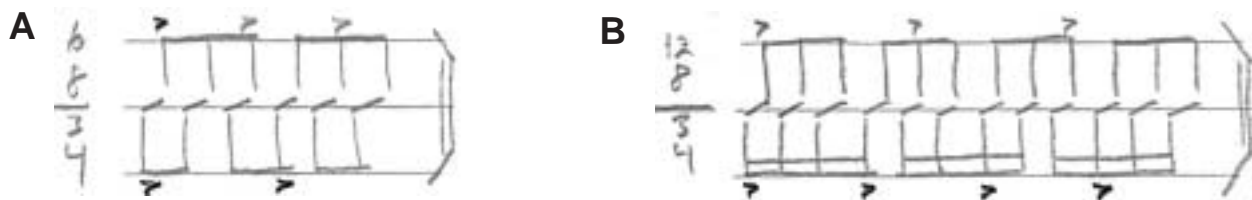


the difference? Experience, usually. That and “how big your ears are” (how well you listen). Feel comes from a relaxed approach to the music combined with knowing how to “manipulate the time” as well as a broader knowledge and application of the variety of sounds available to you, per drum or cymbal, if you “know how to hit ‘em!”

### IIIa.) Feel

In western music we tend to subdivide the pulse into simple (or duple) subdivisions (groups of 2 or 4) or compound subdivisions (groupings of 3 or “triplets”). They may seem exclusive to each other but in reality they fit together in an incredible way that adds a heightened tension to the music the same way a suspended chord or leading tone does until you resolve it to the tonic. This is known in music as Hemiola, or a polyrhythm (think three notes over the same pulse as two).

Not every groove utilizes this tension but many do. Once you have a strong sense of time and learn how to combine these rhythms, you can be very creative in how you apply them. And THEN, you can learn how to play “in the cracks” between them. That’s really fun. The basic quarter note pulse is solid but the subdivisions inside (that we refine so exactly with the “Rhythm Scale”) can now become more liquid or elastic. Some players can do this quite naturally, it’s somewhat common, but often misunderstood.



Observe the above examples in what I call “dual time signatures.” Example A outlines the polyrhythm felt as either “3 over 2,” or “2 over 3.” It’s the same sound either way, but if you want “3 over 2,” you need to be in a meter with a two beat pulse as its foundation (like the dotted quarter pulse of the compound meter 6/8). The meter subdivides the six eighth notes into a foundation of three eighths per dotted quarter. Now phrase the eighths into three groups of two to play an evenly subdivided three quarter notes over the top of the dotted quarter pulse.

The polyrhythm flips to “2 over 3” when you use a the simple meter of 3/4 time, providing a three beat pulse as the foundation, the six eighths subdivided into three groups of two. Now phrase the eighths into two groups of three to play an evenly subdivided dotted quarter pulse over the top of the quarter note pulse. Viola!

Example B follows the same principals as Example A, outlining “3 over 4,” or “4 over 3.” Once you’re familiar with these combined rhythms you’ll start to hear them popping out of music you’ve heard your whole life and didn’t realize it. If you pursue it deeper you find it’s in the foundations of groove music worldwide, thanks to its African roots. You can add great drama and surprise by emphasizing “either side of the pulse” in a groove or solo with this knowledge, a voodoo-like skill that New Orleans pianist Dr. John likens to what he calls “mujicians!” Check it out.

### IIIb.) Incorporating Tone Color

Another important factor in developing a great feel (in league with a strong “inner clock”, good dynamic/interdynamic sense, and great musical taste), is knowing “how to paint” on your drumset with a broad palate of tone colors. Each drum or cymbal has an incredible variety of sounds within it, all depending on how, where and with what you strike it. Use your imagination, listen to (and WATCH) lots of other players when possible. The way we play any really common, standard beat can vary greatly based on how we interpret the tone color.

Let’s apply the concept to a classic beat that every drummer should know, originally played by “the funky drummer” himself, Clyde Stubblefield, with “The Godfather of Soul”, James Brown, on the hit record “Cold Sweat.”

Change the tone color, while keeping the basic beat the same, by interpreting it with the following suggested variations:

"Cold Sweat"

The image shows two musical staves for a drum set. The top staff is for the Right Hand (RH) and Left Hand (LH). The bottom staff is for the Right Foot (RF) and Left Foot (LF). The RH part has a series of asterisks with beams and accents (circles and pluses) above them. The LH part has a series of dots with beams and accents. The RF and LF parts have a series of dots with beams and accents. The title "Cold Sweat" is written above the first staff.

- 1.) Play pattern as written. Voice LH stick in the center of the SD head (open tones, no rimshots).
- 2.) Play pattern as written. Voice LH stick in the center of the SD head (open tones, accents as rimshots).
- 3.) Drop RH down to mute SD head w/palm of hand. Pull LH back so edge of stick strikes closer to the rim of the drum (muffled tones/higher pitch on SD).
- 4.) Revoice LH hand, playing accented backbeats as crosstick. Play ghost notes by tapping fingers on SD head.
- 5.) Play all ghost notes in LH with crosstick. Now play the backbeats on the SD w/the RH moving it back & forth from the HH.
- 6.) Keep RH moving to SD from HH for backbeats. Add ALL offbeat 16ths to pattern in LH as ghost notes, slightly accenting the ones originally included in the pattern.
- 7.) Play RH doubling the tip of the stick on the HH and the butt end on the SD in unison. LH plays its original part, playing the backbeat and written ghost notes only on the SD.
- 8.) Stick & brush variation: Play LH w/stick as in Variation 4. With a brush in RH, play HH rhythm on SD, using vertical tap strokes to simulate the closed 8th notes, and a horizontal sweep over the head to simulate the open HH 8ths.
- 9.) Find your own variations on the drumset!

In conclusion, the concepts presented here are broad enough to work in any musical style because the focus is on what's good for the musician and the music in the broader sense. I hope you've found some inspiration in that. Duke Ellington also said "There are two kinds of music – good and bad!" Each of us can decide for ourselves what that means. What a beautiful gift that is. Remember to enjoy the journey and every chance to play. Good luck to you!