

DRUM PARTS

There are a lot of parts to a drum kit as anyone who has every helped a drummer to unload his gear knows. But if you want to learn about music for drummers, read on.

A GUIDE TO BIG BAND DRUM PARTS

An arranger/composer/band-leader expects the drummer to do 4 things:

1. to keep time,
2. to play different rhythmic styles,
3. to highlight certain accents in the phrases played by the front-line players,
4. to play fills where needed.

Regarding the first point, it should be borne in mind that other members of a band listen to the drummer to find out where the precise beat is. A band without a drummer usually is quite ragged because all the players will have their own idea of where the beat lies. Busy playing can be confusing to them, particularly as most drummers falter occasionally. Busy playing, except when this is specifically called for, can also wreck havoc with legato phrasing and blur inner harmony voices.

Different rhythmic styles are the domain of the drummer, and arrangers - especially in Latin American music - are only too happy to leave this side of things up to the drummer most of the time. It is essential though that the drummer should still follow the part as there may be phrasing to play or an odd number of bars or beats to contend with.

Highlighting the accents played by the horns is important. But every single accent does not have to be heavily emphasised. There is no substitute for experience and listening to good unobtrusive drummers like Mel Lewes.

Concerning fills, the name is what it suggests - something played to fill in the gaps where nothing much is happening, or to keep up the momentum between accented notes. Fills can range from a few meaningful well-placed 'notes' to an almighty blitzkreig. Throwing in everything bar the kitchen sink at every opportunity is not needed. Coming to a climax too soon can leave you with nothing saved for later, a condition which many wives and girl-friends would recognise.

Turning now to actual drum parts, it should be remarked that very few arrangers are themselves drummers. To make matters easier all round, certain conventional ways of writing drum parts have developed which act as a guide to drummers which they can then interpret in their own individual way. The most used method is as follows. Let us take a bar in common-time and with a swing feel (bar 1 or bar 3).



In the first example, the bass drum part indicates that it is 'in 4', ie. there are 4 notes to the bar on the bass. The second example is 'in 2', where the bass plays 2 main beats to the bar, although there may be other notes of lesser importance.

These notes on the bass drum part do not need to be played, especially where there are four notes involved. In fact in these post-bebop days, to do so would make a band sound very leaden. The reason why it is written thus is partly out of tradition but also to indicate the type of bass line that exists. Some drummers also like to use the four notes on the bass drum part to help them count when there are various off-beat accents written on the snare drum line. If four notes on the bass drum are required, the bass drum notes would be accented or the word *Play* would be written.

Where the bass line deviates from this pattern, it is quite acceptable to play the line, since the bass itself may be phrasing with other sections of the band. For instance:



In the first bar, the bass drum line can be ignored, but in the following bars it can be played to reinforce the bass.

In Latin American music, the drummer can do his own thing and the part will merely state the kind of rhythm required, thus:

SAMBA

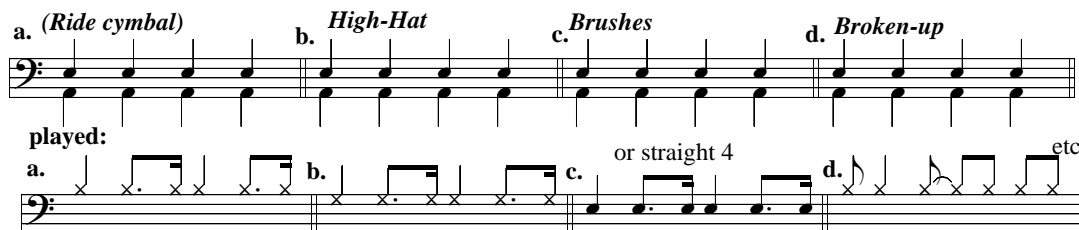


The same way of indicating other dance rhythms is used - cha chas, beguines, rumbas, etc, although tangos, mambos and pop rhythms may be written differently.

Jazz arrangements often include a **LATIN** section. This rarely signifies that an authentic rhythm should be played by the drums. Rather, it is a shorthand way of asking for a quasi-Latin style - mostly a watered down Samba or Chacha. In its loosest sense, it simply means play broken-up even quavers on the cymbal (or bell of the cymbal) as opposed to the triplet feel of Swing.

Where nothing specific is required for long periods at a time, even these rudimentary parts may be dispensed with and be replaced with the words *Play 8*, or whatever.

As regards to the snare drum line, this -as written- merely means keep time. Here are a few examples:



The bass drum part has been omitted for clarity.)

Nowadays many drummers would break-up the cymbal rhythm anyway rather than stick to that shown in **a.**, but the conventional pattern is sometimes what is wanted.

Accented passages can be accommodated into this scheme. This would tend to indicate that the arranger wants all the accented notes played and is used particularly for full ensemble passages of a punchy nature. Where the phrasing is written above the staff on the other hand, it often means that the drummer can choose which accents to play. Arrangers may use either method, or indeed both. Examples of both are shown below.

Example **a.** shows a sequence of accented notes on a bass staff. Example **b.** shows a sequence of accented notes with phrasing written above the staff, including rests and slurs.

Note that the second example is much fuller and the complete phrasing of the front line has been copied down. It is possible that in both instances legato phrasing, (by the sax section, for instance), might occur in between the accents, so it is unwise, at least the first time through, to fill in between the accents. This could destroy a sax line which may taken several hours to write plus a lot of effort by the players involved in getting right. If the word **Brass** is written above the staff, be wary about putting in fills. But if the word **Ensemble** (or **Ens**) is written, it is usually safe to fill it out.

Drum fills are usually indicated by hatches, sometimes with the word **fill** written above. In loud ensemble passages, fills come into their own and it is expected that the drummer will fill in between the accents, even if it is not actually marked. Here is an example.

The same passage with the bass phrasing with the front line

It should be pointed out that different arrangers do not always adhere to this system. Some American arrangers, Bobby Brookmeyer, for instance, like to use four single hatches to denote bars of time instead of writing four crotchets on the bass drum and snare drum lines. In the context it would be apparent that it was *time* and not *fills* that were needed.

Where the arranger wants a definite drum pattern or a part of the kit to be used, he/she will attempt to get it right, but often fail miserably. Heavy off-beats and such like are no problem, but written fills may need to be adjusted to sound right, for instance, you may have to substitute a small tom-tom for the snare, or vice versa. Try and play as

written and if you and the arranger are not happy with it, change it. This happens with all instruments - pianists may change the voicings of chords, front-line players change slurs and bass players may even change a note here and there. Do remember, however, that an arranger has spent a long time over a score and knows how all the parts relate to one another. Don't dismiss parts until you've had a good shot at playing them as intended. You may be surprised - they may actually work!

Finally, a word must be said about dynamics and cues. Even if dynamics are not marked, you must observe them by fitting in with the general dynamic level. Ensemble passages are usually loudest of all, particularly when all the horns are playing block chords together. Where the brass play against the saxes, the intensity gives the impression of loudness even though it may not be as loud as full ensemble passages. Trumpets and trombones together are much noisier than a sax section, even when there are an equal number of brass and saxes. Be wary of muted brass, most especially harmon mutes which cut the volume tremendously. Piano solos used to require very soft backing but with amplified keyboards, there is no great need now to go down to a whisper unless directed. As for drum solos... (pardon?!)