

POP RHYTHM (A Drummer's Point of View)

The drummer is mainly involved with the rhythmic aspect of musical organization. The following represents the principal levels of rhythm as conventionally used in recent American popular music. Various groups and composers achieve original expression through alteration and expansions of these "norms". I will begin with the largest (slowest) levels and work towards the smallest (fastest).

1. CONTEXT: How, when, where the music is presented. A concert, a record, a songbook, a jingle, a soundtrack, a top 40 station, etc.

2. SONG-FORM: The pattern of repetition of phrases. In popular music the drummer expresses the form by changing "beats" (repetitive patterns) to correspond to the musical and lyrical meaning of the various sections. Form is generally represented by calling the first phrase "A", the second "B", the third "C", etc. Expressed in words, a typical song might go: "Introduction" (drummer tries to grab your attention with something unusual); "First Verse" (drummer lays back, stays out of the way of the singer's story, "fills" at the end of phrase to lead back to...); "Second Verse" (drummer plays as in first verse, since the words will only be heard once, "fills" more energetically to lead into...); "Chorus" (the hook, to grab you and stick with you, run through your head--since you'll hear this several times during the song, the music can rise up and challenge the words...it is important to plant the song title, however); "Third Verse" (as before); "Fourth Verse"; "Second Chorus"; "Last Verse"; "Last Chorus" (repeat and fade)...

3. PHRASE: Corresponding to the sentence in spoken language (breath rhythm), phrases are most commonly in multiples of four measures. The drummer will usually keep time through the body of the phrase and "fill" at the end...to lead on to the next phrase. He or she may also catch "hits" (unison accents) with the other musicians. Phrases are counted by substituting the measure number for count "one" of each measure: (1 2 3 4, 2 2 3 4, 3 2 3 4, 4 2 3 4, etc.).

4. PATTERN LENGTH: Grouping of pulses into larger units, one or more "measures" in length. Generally identical to "meter"; four (or eight) or three (or six) times as slow as the basic pulse...the basic unit of chord change (harmonic rhythm). Ask yourself: "Where's 'ONE'?"

5. BACKBEAT: An upbeat accent (most commonly on counts "two" and "four") that functions to emphasize what would otherwise be a weak beat. The backbeat varies in intensity (and importance) from tune to tune and style to style. Recent "Reggae" and "Funk-Latin" styles often use half and/or double time backbeats simultaneously.

6. PULSE: The heartbeat of the music--dancing, marching, patting feet--will

occasionally double or half or change gradually, but usually will remain the same throughout a song. Expressed in "beats per minute", the beat may be explicit (as the bassdrum disco pulse) or implicit (felt but not stated).

7. SUBDIVISION: The consistent pathway upon which the musicians place their melodies, chords, syncopations. Most commonly the beat is divided into two parts (eighth notes), three parts (triplets) or four parts (sixteenth notes). Sometimes the beat may be divided into six (the meeting of 2 and 3). The offbeat may be "shuffled" (consistently placed anywhere between "an" and the next beat). The greater the number of divisions per beat the more possible "single-beat rhythms" are available.

8. FILL: Division of the division. Available only to "fast" instruments, the basic unit of subdivision (#7, above) may itself be divided, thus injecting a burst of energy into the music.

9. PITCH: 20-20,000 cycles per second...

Designing the rhythmic structure is a matter of emphasizing or de-emphasizing the relative importance of these various levels. Innovation on one level --for example, a consistent quintuplet subdivision--may be balanced with traditionally clear and strong backbeat, pulse, meter and phrase length. Compositions might be "improved" (at least in their communicative potential) by analyzing their rhythmic structure relative to the above nine rhythmic levels (our media conditioned expectations). Listening to songs (especially those you don't "like") can become a learning experience by consciously scanning the various levels--counting the measures, phrases, noticing the division of the beat, the "fills", etc. Original ideas can be generated by running a generalized concept (i.e., "poly-rhythm") through the levels and imagining what it means on each (poly-form; poly-phrase; poly-pulse, etc.). As a matter of musical survival, we must communicate our experiments. By understanding and using the conditioned rhythmic expectations of our culture to emphasize and clarify whatever we're trying to get across...we might.