

Syncopation Studies and Application Part II: Fills and Advanced Comping



by Chis Munson

Background

In the last article I discussed some of the basic approaches to jazz comping using the eight syncopation solos in Ted Reed's book, 'Syncopation.' As we move forward, the variations on these solos will become increasingly more difficult. It has been my experience as both an educator and student that there is not a universal learning curve for these exercises.

You will likely find that just as you have become comfortable with the exercises, you suddenly hit a brick wall with a new variation. When this happens, break the exercise down to individual notes, bars, and systems before tackling the entire solo. Its not uncommon for students to tell me they struggled with a variation for several days or weeks before it finally clicked and all fell into place.

The variations below provide a means to develop a vocabulary of fills and more expressive comping. The main difficulty is that they all require visualizing notes that are not on the page. In all of the variations below you will be required to fill in the missing partials of the triplets. Remember that 'swung' 8th notes are triplet based and that they fall on either the downbeat or 'a' of a triplet. The example below shows the syncopated line on top of the staff with a steady stream of triplets below. The accented notes correspond with the line while the bracketed notes are the triplet partials being filled in.

Musical notation for a syncopation exercise in 4/4 time. The notation consists of two systems, each with two staves. The top staff of each system contains a syncopated line of eighth notes. The bottom staff of each system contains a steady stream of triplet eighth notes. The triplet notes are grouped with a '3' and an accent (>). The syncopated line notes are accented (>) and correspond to the downbeats and 'a' of the triplets. The triplet notes are bracketed to indicate the partials to be filled in. The first system has 8 measures, and the second system has 8 measures.

Fills and Advanced Comping Exercises

Below are descriptions of six variations. I have included four bar examples of each variation. As with the previous exercises, visualization is extremely important. Some of these exercises can be frustrating at first so be patient and take them slowly at first.

- 1) Play the line on the toms and fill in the triplets on the snare. The floor tom plays notes on beats 1 & 3, the hi-tom plays beats 2 & 4.
- 2) Same as above except all notes on the snare are double strokes.
- 3) While playing triplets, accent all short (8th) notes on the snare and all long (quarter) notes on a cymbal with bass drum unison.
- 4) The ride cymbal and kick play the line in unison while the left hand fills in all triplets on the snare.
- 5) Same as above except that the ride now plays time.
- 6) The hi-tom plays all short notes and the ride / kick plays all long notes while the left hand fills in triplets on the snare.

History and Transcription

Many of the drummers mentioned in the last article played fills and solos using the first three variations above. However, when looking for source material to understand how to apply variations 4-6, you should focus your listening on Elvin Jones.

In the early 1960s, Elvin turned jazz drumming on its head with his turbulent, polyrhythmic comping style. The ride cymbal and hi-hat were no longer relegated to the simple task of timekeeping. Elvin utilized all four limbs simultaneously to create a propulsive, highly syncopated style that interacted with and supported the musicians around him.

His work with the John Coltrane Quartet from 1960-66 highlights some of the best examples of this style of comping. Particularly important are the instances when the rhythm section would drop out leaving Elvin and Coltrane to play duets. Many of these passages were rubato (free time) and his style of playing provided constant momentum in the music even in the areas where it is difficult to determine a pulse.

Elvin appeared on several albums with John Coltrane as well as Wayne Shorter and Joe Henderson (among many, many others).

Below are examples of the six variations and some transcriptions of Elvin Jones use of these devices.

Harrell, Jorma Kaukonen, Jon McEuen, Tim O'Brien, Greg Osby, Anders Osborne, Merl Saunders, Jamey Simons, and Trout Fishing in America. Albums he has appeared on have earned numerous awards including two Grammy nominations.

Insert audio examples:

LH Triplets RH Time.mp3

LH Triplets.mp3

Snare and Cymbals.mp3

Tom Short Ride Long.mp3

Toms Read Line with Double Strokes.mp3

Toms Read Line.mp3