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Chameleons Of Modern Drumming: Mastering Diverse Commerical Styles

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CHAMELEONS OF MODERN DRUMMING: MASTERING DIVERSE COMMERCIAL STYLES

By
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A RESEARCH PAPER

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Accepted on behalf of the Graduate Faculty of the School of Music by the Mentoring Committee:

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	Bruce Dudley, D.M.A. Second Mentor
	Peter Lamothe, Ph.D. Third Mentor
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Introduction

The purpose of this research paper and lecture recital is to provide a detailed analysis of the artistry of five drummers whom I find to be some of the most well-rounded musicians contributing to recorded music in the modern commercial era. All of these drummers have found success in their career by working in recording sessions, where they are hired to lend their talents to an artist's compositions by creating drum parts that will complement the overarching song arrangement. In this type of work, it is advantageous to be fluent in many different styles of drumming, as the music of each artist will require different techniques. The five drummers I have selected for analysis are Steve Gadd, Vinnie Colaiuta, Matt Chamberlain, Brian Blade, and Nate Smith. Each of these musicians has mastered not just one, but several diverse drumming styles, which can be heard through their discography. My research will be presented chronologically. I will begin by considering two drummers who made their most notable contributions in the 1970s through the 1990s (Gadd and Colaiuta), followed by two drummers who are currently in the prime of their career, making important contributions from the 1990s to today (Chamberlain and Blade); and finally I will examine the artistry of one musician (Smith) whom I believe is leading the next wave of stylistically diverse drumming, with his earliest recordings being made in the mid 2000s, and many of his most notable recordings to date being made in just the past few years. The styles analyzed in this paper will range from pop and rock to jazz and fusion music.

For each of the five musicians selected, I chose three songs that they have recorded drums on in a studio or live setting, with each song representing a different style of drumming. For example, the first song analyzed may be from a popular rock artist, a second from a funk band, and a third from a jazz group. Generally, the analysis is organized in a manner that moves from the most approachable style of music towards more complex and niche recordings. After analyzing the drum parts on each of these records separately, I highlight the similarities that can be heard in the drumming on each record. This helps the reader gain a deeper understanding of what makes each drummer unique in taste and technique. Alternatively, the analysis allows me to point out differences in the drumming performances on each record, which reveals how the style of each song, as well as the contributions from other musicians involved in recording, can influence a drummer in making decisions about what to play.

The analysis of this research paper is performed in several ways. I have created transcriptions of drum excerpts from many of the songs studied throughout the paper. Musical transcriptions are one of the most thorough ways to learn the vocabulary of any musician and are especially helpful when paired with listening to the original recording. However, written transcriptions alone are not enough to understand the artistry of a studio drummer. Often, the written notes that a drummer plays in a recording session do not reveal the full scope of their artistry, and the nuances of a player's tone, touch, timing, dynamics, and more must be studied thoroughly to truly understand the performance that was achieved in the recording session. These elements of a drummer's playing are analyzed in as much detail as possible throughout the research paper. I have created a playlist available on Spotify, *Chameleons of Modern Drumming*, which I encourage

anyone reading this paper to utilize as a convenient tool to reference the songs discussed in each chapter (Simons 2019).

Each chapter begins with information on the drummer's background and education, which helps the reader understand how their musical growth was influenced. The chapter then contains three separate sections of analysis, with each section focusing on one of the songs selected to represent the drummer's versatility. After this individual analysis is completed for each song of varying genres, I explain the similarities that can be heard in the artistry of that drummer across all three recordings. This helps the reader understand the individual style of that musician, as well as how they can adapt that style into any given musical situation.

In my lecture recital, I distill my research and analysis down to a succinct presentation, in which I highlight the careers and individual styles of each featured musician, concluding each drummer's portion of the presentation with a musical demonstration. I selected one song for each drummer from my research and performed that song with a live band on stage, where I attempted to embody the style of each drummer featured in my research.

One final point of clarification for readers: it is common for drum notation to use the letters R, L, and K as shorthand to indicate the use of the right hand, left hand, and kick drum (right foot) when a specific sticking is important for executing a figure. While most drummers should immediately understand this shorthand, I felt this clarification could resolve any confusion for those unfamiliar with standardized drumset notation. For further information, see Norman Weinberg's text, *Guide to Standardized Drumset Notation* (Weinberg 1998).

Through this research, I gained a deeper understanding of the artistry of each of these musicians. I hope to provide readers with an idea of how each of these “chameleon” drummers came to find their sound, and simultaneously mold it to fit within so many different musical styles. Each of their careers is inspiring to me and studying the details of their playing has brought many concepts to my attention that I hope to incorporate into my own drumming. I have also compiled an extensive list of interviews, lessons, performances, and more, which I believe will be a helpful resource for future researchers. However you choose to use this information, I hope that you find the material discussed to be helpful in some way, and that you enjoy learning about the artistry of each of these exceptional chameleons of modern drumming.

Chapter One: Steve Gadd

Born on April 9, 1945, in Rochester, New York, Steve Gadd is the eldest drummer included in this study. Knowing a bit of history on how Gadd came to acquire his skills can help one understand why he sounds the way that he does on the drum set. Gadd's first exposure to drums came at the age of seven from an uncle who served in the United States Army as a drummer. During his childhood, Gadd performed tap dance routines with his brother Eddie and performed with the Crusaders Drum and Bugle Corps in high school. Upon graduating from The Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York in 1968, Gadd joined the U.S. Army and spent three years in a military stage band. By the early 1970s, Gadd had moved to New York City and toured with Chick Corea in Return to Forever before transitioning to studio work full-time. His long list of credits is staggering and inspiring, which includes Simon & Garfunkel, Steely Dan, James Taylor, Harry Chapin, Eric Clapton, Kate Bush, Joe Cocker, Grover Washington Jr., Chick Corea, George Benson, Stanley Clarke, Maynard Ferguson, Roberta Flack, Paul Desmond, Chet Baker, Al Di Meola, Kenny Loggins, Michel Petrucciani, and countless more.

"50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" by Paul Simon

Once he became a prominent session musician, Gadd found his niche. Among the thousands of recordings he has worked on throughout his career, Paul Simon's "50 Ways

to Leave Your Lover" remains an outstanding example of Gadd's musical stylings and one of his most celebrated grooves among drummers. The song is the fourth track on Paul Simon's 1975 record *Still Crazy After All These Years* and features two major drum grooves, which frame the verse and chorus sections of the form, respectively. The song opens with Gadd's drumming isolated, introducing the signature verse groove notated below. It is worth noting that the following transcriptions do not include the tambourine hits that can be heard on the second and fourth beats of the verse, and all four quarter-notes of the chorus, as this was a percussion element overdubbed after Gadd's drum take.

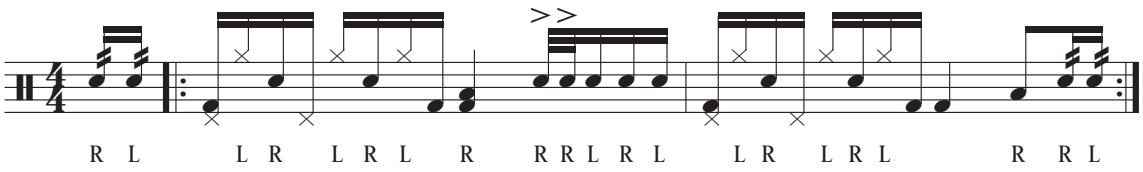

Figure 1.1. "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" transcription, part 1. Verse pattern.

The groove is played open-handed, meaning that Gadd's left hand is positioned over the hi-hat, while his right hand remains primarily over the snare drum. Additionally, Gadd uses both his left hand and left foot to play the hi-hat. Each of these limbs achieves a slightly different attack, with the tip of Gadd's drumstick in his left hand giving a brighter tone than the more subdued left foot stomps. The combination of these limbs used in a linear pattern (meaning the limbs are used in a sequential fashion and never together at the same time) gives Gadd's groove an ebb and flow that would not be present if the hi-hat were played with the same limb on every hit. This pattern also alludes to Gadd's military band and drum corps background, with a tight, march-like sound. Gadd himself described the session by saying that:

> "Fifty Ways" was just a result of sitting at the drums and playing the hi-hat with my left hand. When playing bebop, sometimes the hi-hat will play in four, or in different places, rather than just "two and four". So "Fifty Ways" was a result of using the hi-hat in different places and using the left hand on the hi-hat (Elliot 2008).

In another interview, he added that:

> A lot of times I would stay in the drum booth while Paul [Simon] and Phil [Ramone] were discussing what they wanted to do and I practiced different things. I was practicing a little military beat and Phil heard it and thought we should try it for the first part of the song. We just sort of stumbled on it by chance ("Steve Gadd" 2015).

According to Gadd, his studies in both bebop jazz and military drumming helped inspire this pop / soft rock style groove, one of the most celebrated and well recognized of his career.

While the chorus section of "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" is much more typical than the verse groove, it serves as a critical juxtaposition from the marching feel of the verse. As Paul Simon enters into the chorus melody, Gadd switches abruptly from his open-handed linear pattern into a much more standard "four on the floor" rock rhythm.

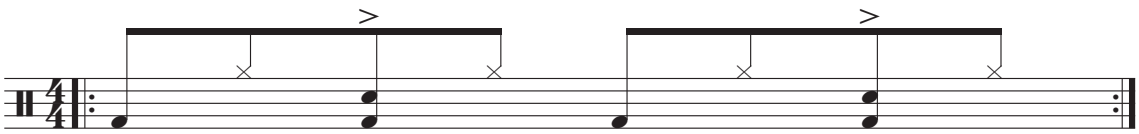

Figure 1.2. "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" transcription, part 2. Chorus pattern.

Gadd explained in his 2015 interview with *International Musician* that while the chorus groove fell into place easily during the recording session, the verse took more experimentation before finding something that worked well. This helps explain why the verse is extremely innovative and unexpected, while the chorus features a standard rock style.

"Aja" by Steely Dan

During the 1970s, Steely Dan was a prominent American rock band which consisted of members Walter Becker and Donald Fagen and featured a wide cast of session musicians on their studio recordings. They infused rock music with jazz, blues, Latin, R&B, and more to become one of the most influential jazz-rock bands of their time. Their 1977 record *Aja* was the band's first platinum album and their best-selling studio release, selling over five million copies. For drummers especially, this album is significant, as it includes performances from some of the greatest session drummers of the era. The cast of drummers includes Paul Humphrey, Rick Marotta, Bernard Purdie, Ed Greene, Jim Keltner, and of course, Steve Gadd. Gadd performed on the title track of the album and famously recorded the entire song in two takes. Belmont School of Music alumni David Dykstra summarized Gadd's performance on "Aja" well in his thesis work:

> Developing from a whisper to a roar over the course of eight minutes, Gadd's musical prowess and versatility take over as his playing references the tasteful simplicity of Al Jackson Jr., the advanced sophisticated styling of Elvin Jones, linear funk of Zigaboo Modeliste, traditional Brazilian drumming, hints of Bernard Purdie, and the Latin-jazz of Art Blakey… All in one impressive display, Gadd is able to tastefully construct a cohesive performance that references his diverse influences in a unified sound that is entirely his own (Dykstra 2016, 45).

Gadd opens the song with cymbal flourishes reminiscent of a jazz ballad, then transitions into a verse groove that Dykstra compares to an Al Jackson Jr. style soul groove, which also features a Brazilian bossa nova rhythm that is heard in the bass drum.

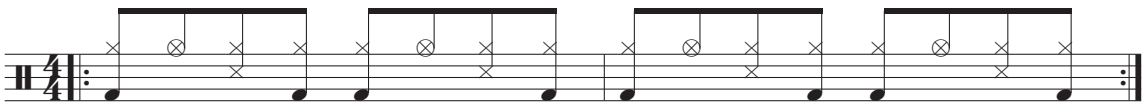

Figure 1.3. "Aja" transcription, part 1. Verse pattern (0:37).

As the song progresses, Gadd continues to build momentum by gradually raising his dynamic level while simultaneously adding new ideas to this simple groove. He alternates between both the hi-hat and ride cymbal as a timekeeper, typically adding two and four with his left foot on the hi-hat while keeping time on the ride. Building on the Brazilian feel, Gadd adds a *surdo* pattern with the bass drum and floor tom at 2:16 in the song.

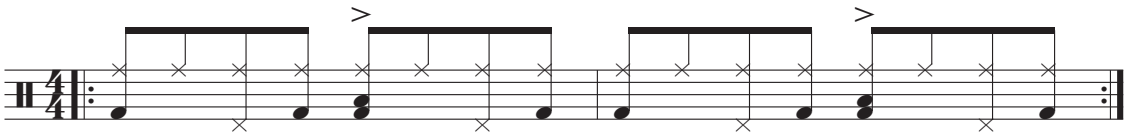

Figure 1.4. “Aja” transcription, part 2. Bridge pattern (2:16).

Another theme that weaves Gadd’s grooves together throughout this song is a halftime element. This is heard in the surdo backbeat played on beat three on the floor tom throughout the instrumental bridge of the song.

At 4:42 in the recording, we reach the famous solo section “hits,” including a saxophone solo performed by Wayne Shorter. Shorter performed his solo at a session on a later date than Gadd’s, so Gadd was asked to lay the foundation for an exciting solo section that Shorter would be able to play over. The band hits over which Gadd solos are represented in the figure below, played over a B minor 11 chord.

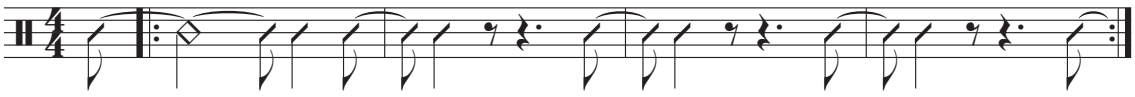

Figure 1.5. “Aja” transcription, part 3. Solo section vamp.

Two different solo sections feature Gadd. The first begins at 4:42 and includes Wayne Shorter soloing simultaneously over Gadd's fills, while the second begins at 6:55 and features Gadd alone. While all fills were completely improvised, his playing on both sections is relatively similar. Therefore, only Gadd's second solo in "Aja" has been chosen for detailed analysis, beginning at 6:55.

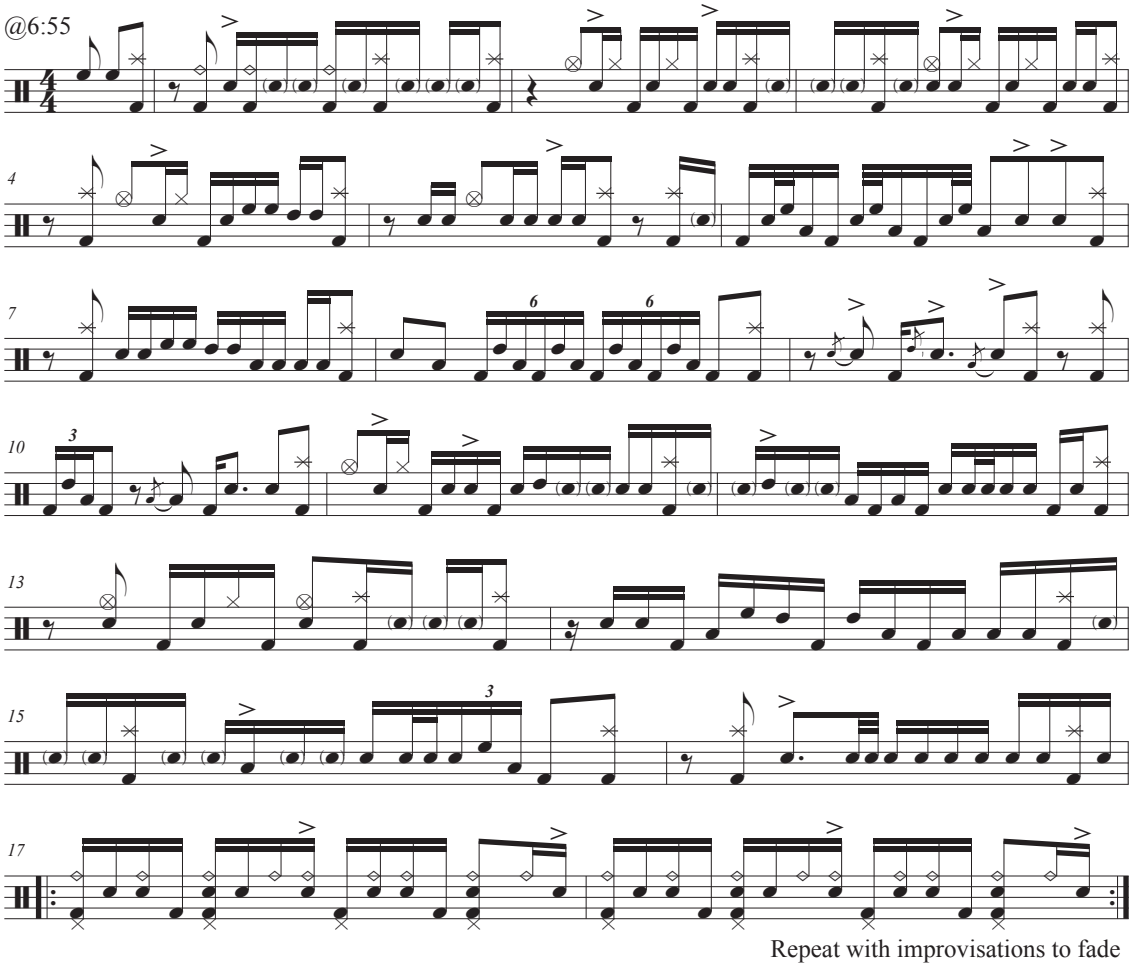

Figure 1.6. "Aja" transcription, part 4. Drum solo outro (6:55).

Gadd highlights the band hits (notated in figure 1.5) throughout the entire solo, primarily with a crash cymbal and kick drum combination. He plays fills between these hits, and while the fills are not incredibly complicated for a drummer of his level to

execute, the beautiful orchestration and precise time feel (pocket) are extremely impressive when you consider that the entire recording was done in two takes and Gadd was essentially sight-reading. Many of Gadd's fills feature a theme of hand-foot combinations, for example, the four-note repeating pattern in measure six that was orchestrated as KRLR, and the three-note sixteenth-note triplet pattern in measure eight (Hudson Music 2008). Other themes include heavy use of the sixteenth-note subdivision throughout the solo and quite a bit of tom work. Gadd ends his solo by playing a samba beginning at measure 17 and continuing through the song's fade-out ending. This groove, referenced by some as the "Gadd samba," is signature to Steve Gadd for both his quarter-note hi-hat placements, as well as the distinct communication between his right and left hands.

The sound of the drums on this recording is outstanding as well, with a low, "fat" sound that is both crisp and precise throughout. This drum solo also happened to be the first-ever recorded on a Steely Dan album. Because of the album's commercial success, this solo served as a gateway to fusion drumming for many listeners like popular music vlogger (someone who creates blogs in video form) Rick Beato who claimed in a YouTube video that hearing the solo changed his life (Beato 2019).

"Quartet No. 2 – Part II (Dedicated to John Coltrane)" by Chick Corea

The third selection to analyze from Steve Gadd's vast collection of recordings is representative of his longtime partnership with jazz pianist Chick Corea. The recording comes from Chick Corea's 1981 album *Three Quartets*, which features Corea on piano, Michael Brecker on tenor saxophone, Eddie Gómez on double bass, and Steve Gadd on

drum set. The recording runs 11 minutes and 50 seconds, and highlights Gadd's abilities in an instrumental jazz quartet context, including a drum solo towards the end of the recording that is similar to his outro drum solo in "Aja." Nate Chinen of JazzTimes magazine lists the recording as one of five classic Gadd tracks (also including my other two selections in his list) and says of the recording that:

> There's a little bit of everything you want from Gadd in this track: deep pocket, swinging ride, punchy interaction, subtle and thematically integrated solo. But what's best here is the depth and elasticity of his rapport with [the other musicians]-all of whom burn with intelligent fire (Chinen 2013).

The form of the song includes a short drum intro, head, solos for piano, bass, saxophone, and drums, and a return to the head before the song ends. Gadd interprets the song's head in his drum intro, which is exceptionally melodic and an excellent example of his ability to play thematically.

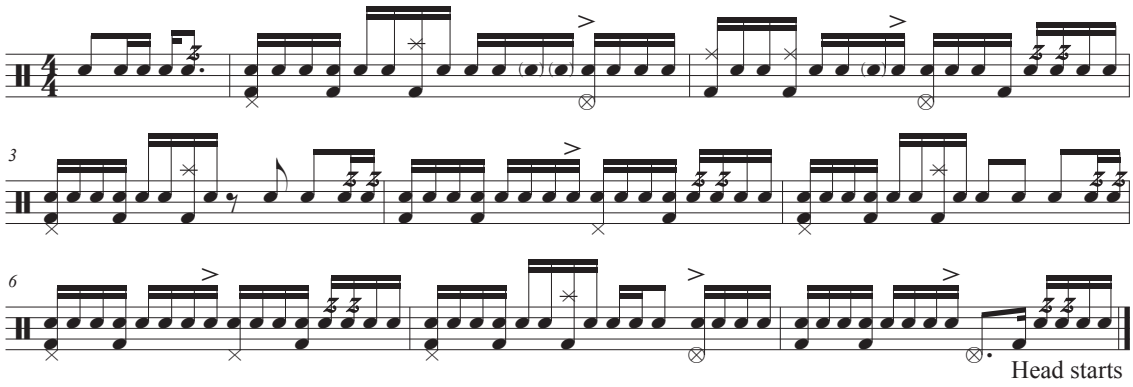

Figure 1.7. "Quartet No. 2 - Part II" transcription, part 1. Drum intro (0:00).

Notice that this opening drum solo heavily utilizes the snare drum in sixteenth-note subdivisions. Gadd's concepts are centered on the snare drum, but he also utilizes the bass drum, hi-hat, crash and ride cymbals. While it would be more typical for a jazz drum intro to include a traditional swing ride pattern with snare and bass drum

improvisation over the top, the A section of this tune is played with a straight eighth-note technique, which likely inspired Gadd to take a different approach. He outlines the melody of the A section clearly, which is represented in figure 1.8.

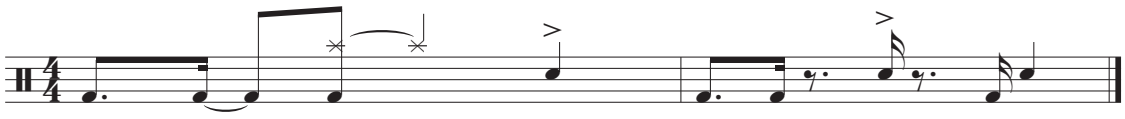

Figure 1.8. “Quartet No. 2 - Part II” transcription, part 2. Rhythmic improvisation outline.

While staying within a loose framework of the A-section melody, Gadd improvises in a military march style. This improvisation continues after the other members of the quartet enter, and Gadd’s sixteenth-note subdivisions help support the rest of the ensemble while they play the head of the tune. At 0:31, the quartet reaches the B section of the head, which is swung in a double-time feel. This section gives a short glimpse into that typical jazz drum style mentioned above, before transitioning back into a second A section, and then a second B section. During the other instrumentalists’ solos, Gadd accompanies expertly. At times he is explosive and bombastic, while at others, he is delicately precise. Through each solo, Gadd continues driving the groove of the song and supplies energy and excitement for the soloist to respond to.

At 8:10 Gadd approaches his own solo, and brings the dynamic down to a whisper, with a long, repeated pattern of sixteenth-note triplets in a RLL repeating hand pattern, with his right hand on the ride cymbal and left hand on the snare drum. He then returns to a snare drum march pattern that expands into more tom utilization. When Chick Corea begins providing a vamp for Gadd to improvise over at 9:14, the solo

develops further. Again, we hear plenty of hand-foot combinations from Gadd, such as the figure at 9:42 in the recording, notated in figure 1.9.

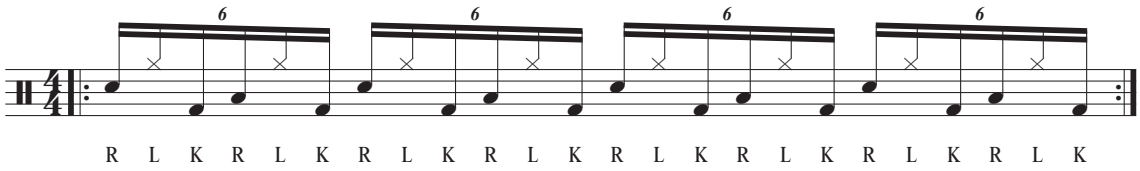

Figure 1.9. “Quartet No. 2 - Part II” transcription, part 3. Drum solo fill example (9:42).

At 10:11, there is a clear use of six-stroke rolls phrased as sixteenth-note triplets, serving as an excellent example of Gadd’s use of rudiments throughout his solo. Also, at 11:27 we hear a familiar three-note grouping from “Aja” that was notated in measure eight of figure 1.6. Phrased as sixteenth-note triplets and likely orchestrated with a repeating sticking of left hand, right hand, right foot, Gadd uses the exact same fill in each of these two settings. Overall, this solo showcases Gadd’s ability to create excitement in both loud and soft moments dynamically, and his unwavering sense of time and groove amidst exciting improvisation.

Conclusion

Peter Erskine perhaps said it best, stating that “Steve Gadd is to drumming as Pablo Picasso is to painting: modern yet elemental, groundbreaking but earthy, simple yet complex” (Erskine 2020). While Gadd may not be the most “flashy” or technically astounding drummer of his era, his artistry and influence are really in the details of his playing. As a session drummer, Gadd’s job is primarily to make the song feel good. While I have chosen to analyze songs that certainly showcase Gadd’s improvisational soloing abilities, what I find inspiring about Gadd’s soloing is not his facility on the

instrument but rather that no matter how fast or slow, loud or soft he is playing, it always *feels* great.

Gadd's feel comes primarily from a combination of his technique and time. With his background in drum and bugle corps rudimental drumming, Gadd's technique has a tight and precise sound that always carries intention behind each note. He utilizes the tip of his drumstick to achieve this sound, and he rarely plays rimshots, which would open the drum up for longer sustain and create more overtones. Gadd's snare drum placement reflects this as well, as it is tilted at a relatively aggressive angle towards him, which helps discourage these rimshots. As discussed previously, he often plays in a style with subtleties of a march, playing the snare drum in a sixteenth-note subdivision while using the bass drum and other drums and cymbals to highlight accents. However, in contrast to a marching style that is often locked into the tempo to a metronomically perfect degree, Gadd's time typically lies behind the beat and has much more ebb and flow to it. His timing sounds relaxed and patient, which juxtaposes the precise sound that he pulls out of the drums.

In all three recordings, Gadd's drums are tuned low with relatively little sustain. His cymbals have a fast decay, in fact, he is known to play cracked crash cymbals from time to time to contribute to this fast decay. His snare drum of choice in the 1970s was a Ludwig Supraphonic with a muffling ring on the batter head, which was cut out from an old drum head. While it is impossible to know exactly what drums were used in each of these sessions, they each sound remarkably similar, considering the difference in genres. When comparing snare drum tones between songs, the snare on "50 Ways" is the "crunchiest" of the three (meaning the recording possesses more preamplifier distortion),

while the snare sound on “Aja” has the most crack with a clearer, more high fidelity sound. However, all snares are tuned to a medium pitch with a similar crispness in the attack. Of course, each session took place in a different studio, with different microphones, producers, and engineers involved. With all of this considered, it is clear that Gadd has developed a distinct sound that he is able to carry across genres.

Just like his sound, Gadd also carries his improvisational concepts across genres. While improvising, Gadd uses many hand-foot combinations. Some of his favorites include RLK, LRK, and RLRK. He often uses flams at slower rates as a way to break up some of his faster and more rudimental ideas and uses the RLL hand combination in extended periods. This combination is often orchestrated with right hand on the hi-hat and left hand on the snare, and the bass drum paired with right hand strokes. The six-stroke roll also appears frequently amidst Gadd’s improvisations. While it is not featured in any of my selections, it would be remiss not to mention Gadd’s affinity for the cowbell. Typically mounted above his bass drum and in between two mounted toms, a quick YouTube search of “Steve Gadd drum solo” will reveal plenty of examples of Gadd’s cowbell grooves, often paired with his signature “Gadd samba” discussed previously in the outro of “Aja.”

Before Steve Gadd became a household name among drummers, everyone wanted to be in a band. The idea of being a session drummer or hired gun was made popular by Gadd’s success beginning in the 1970s, and among his many qualifications to be included in this study, this idea may be the most important of all. From work with singer-songwriters and rock groups to his contributions in jazz, fusion, blues, R&B, and beyond,

Gadd's performances are as diverse as they come. To me, Steve Gadd is the original chameleon of modern drumming.

Chapter Two: Vinnie Colaiuta

In November 1982, *Modern Drummer* wrote their first cover story on a young, up-and-coming drummer that everyone in Los Angeles was talking about named Vinnie Colaiuta. Colaiuta was 26 years old and had just left Frank Zappa's band to pursue studio work full-time. An article by Robyn Flans opens with a quote from an uncredited producer, who once said that "if you threw Tony Williams and Steve Gadd into a blender, Vinnie would be the tasteful concoction" (Flans 1982, 8). Since then, Vinnie has become much more than a hybrid of two of his greatest influences, but the description does say quite a bit about his style. While Colaiuta has been recognized as a master of subdivisions, odd time signatures, metric modulation, and other rhythmic concepts, he has also been very successful as a session drummer for high profile, mainstream artists. His career includes work with Sting, Frank Zappa, Jeff Beck, Joni Mitchell, Quincy Jones, Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, Allan Holdsworth, Robben Ford, Jimmy Haslip, Mike Stern, Michael Landau, Gino Vannelli, Barbra Streisand, Olivia Newton-John, Billy Joel, John Patitucci, Leonard Cohen, Ray Charles, The Temptations, SheDaisy, Steely Dan, Faith Hill, Michael Bublé, James Taylor, Megadeth, Josh Groban, Paul McCartney, Brian Wilson, and so many more.

Growing up in Pennsylvania, Colaiuta began teaching himself to play on a toy drum set at the age of seven. However, it was not until middle school that he received his first lesson from a junior-high school band director. Colaiuta took to the instrument

quickly and recalls being just as interested in music notation, rudiments, and technique as he was in playing his favorite songs. After spending high school in drum corps, summer music camps, and private lessons, Vinnie played in local bands for one year before enrolling at the Berklee School of Music, at the encouragement of a friend he had met at a big band gig, named Steve Smith (Journey, Vital Information). Colaiuta studied with Gary Chaffee for one year at Berklee, where he moved through Chaffee's entire curriculum in his first semester and spent the rest of his year listening to Tony Williams records and "jamming" with Chaffee. While Colaiuta wanted to continue his schooling to learn more about composition and arranging, financial constraints led him to begin his professional career in the Boston area instead. At the age of twenty-two, Colaiuta decided to move to Los Angeles to try his luck in the studio scene. After a few months of financial struggle, Colaiuta landed the gig with Frank Zappa, with whom he recorded three albums, further developed his style, and began to spread his name within the Los Angeles music scene. After leaving Zappa's band in 1981, Colaiuta proved himself in the recording studio and began a long and successful career as a sideman for various artists. Colaiuta can play as fast and powerful on the drum set as anyone, but the depth of his conceptual ideas is what sets him apart and justifies his widely celebrated label as one of the greatest drummers of all-time.

"Seven Days" by Sting

After leaving The Police in 1984 and launching a solo career, Sting released several successful projects under his own name. His fourth studio album was released in 1993, titled *Ten Summoner's Tales*. The album was nominated for six Grammy Awards

and was also the first to feature Vinnie Colaiuta on drums, who would remain a member of Sting's band for four album cycles. After a successful studio career throughout the 1980s, it was unexpected for Colaiuta to take on a long-term project with one artist at this point in his life. Nevertheless, he recalls receiving a call from Robben Ford in the early 1990s asking if he would be up for doing the gig.

> I said, "Are you kidding? I wouldn't go out of town with anybody except Sting or Peter Gabriel." It just had to be musically on that level of real in-touch music. Months went by, and it didn't happen, so I wrote it off. But then all of a sudden, I got a phone call from one of his managers. He said, "We represent Sting and he would like you to come to England to play with him. Are you into it?" I said sure and he said, "Would you be willing to pay your own way over here?" I said, "I'll tell you what, if you're auditioning me, I'll pay my way if I'm not the chosen person." They bought me a round-trip ticket, and I don't want to jump to the end of the story, but I didn't have to pay them back for the ticket (Flans 1993, 20).

Ten Summoner's Tales features several notable performances by Colaiuta and especially highlights his ability to make a song written in an odd time signature sound commercial. "I Hung My Head" and "Saint Augustine in Hell" are both excellent performances in the 7/4 time signature, but "Seven Days" stands out as one of the most celebrated tracks among drummers with Colaiuta's sophisticated 5/4 pattern driving the song along with a signature rhythmic ostinato from the rest of the band.

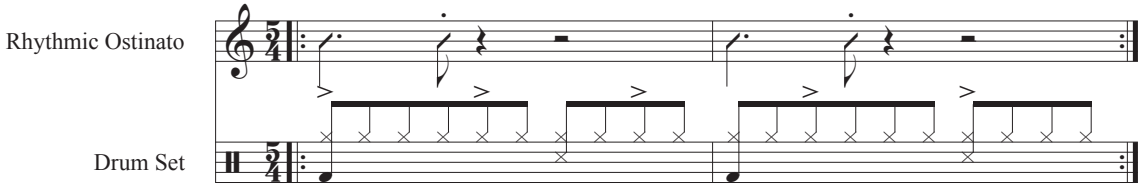

Figure 2.1. "Seven Days" transcription, part 1. Verse pattern with rhythmic ostinato.

The most notable part of this performance is Colaiuta's use of accents to provide the song with a consistent half-note pulse over the odd time signature. By accenting every

fourth eighth-note in the verse, the hi-hat pattern accents beats one, three, and five in the first measure, and beats two and four in the second measure before repeating. According to Colaiuta, this idea was originally presented by Sting in the form of a triangle pattern in the demo of the song (O'Shea 2016b). Sting wanted the audience to hear a steady pulse so that they could clap throughout the song despite it being written in an odd time signature. Colaiuta approximated this triangle pattern (notated in figure 2.2) from Sting's demo with his hi-hat pattern in the studio.

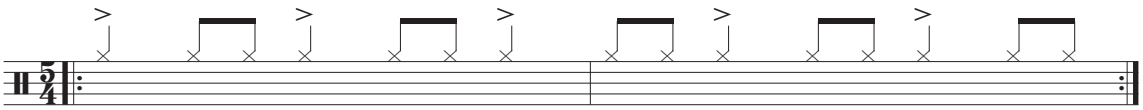

Figure 2.2. "Seven Days" transcription, part 2. Triangle ostinato from Sting's demo.

As the song develops, Colaiuta presents other rhythmic ideas to create further polyrhythms in the song, such as groups of three eighth notes, which can be heard at the end of the introduction as a two-measure fill.

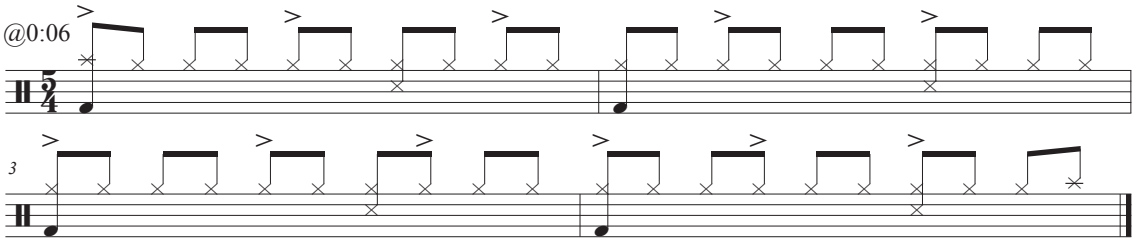

Figure 2.3. "Seven Days" transcription, part 3. Three-note grouping example (0:06).

Once the song reaches its chorus, Colaiuta moves his right hand to the ride cymbal, where he keeps the same accent pattern by using the bell of the ride on accented

notes. This technique can also be heard in a 7/8 time signature on the next track of the album, “Saint Augustine in Hell.”

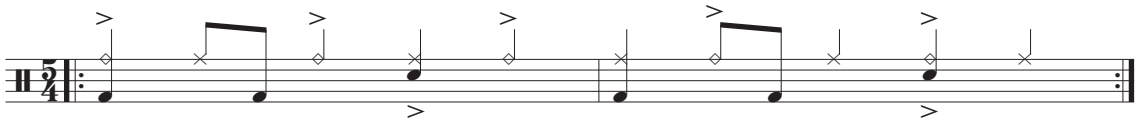

Figure 2.4. “Seven Days” transcription, part 4. Chorus pattern.

The performance is capped off with an exciting outro, where Colaiuta incorporates a “five on the floor” bass drum pattern of consistent quarter-notes while letting loose in his fill vocabulary by incorporating several polyrhythms into his improvisations. This outro gives the song an exciting, high-energy ending, which further proves Colaiuta’s control over his limb independence and advanced rhythmic phrasing. Overall, Colaiuta’s performance on “Seven Days” feels so comfortable that it is easy to forget that the song is written in an odd time signature. Throughout both verses and choruses, he retains a half-note pulse that moves over the bar line and gives the listener a familiar pulse to latch on to. When Colaiuta does deviate from this pulse, it is only to make room for fills in short periods, where he takes further advantage of the odd time signature to phrase unconventional accented groupings that bring additional interest to the song’s rhythms. “Seven Days” is a masterclass in simplifying advanced rhythmic concepts to make them more commercially viable, a skill that Colaiuta has put to use many times throughout his career.

"Keep It Greasy" by Frank Zappa

While Sting's songwriting style frequently frames complex musical concepts in a popular music context, Frank Zappa's writing style is much less concerned with marketability to the masses. Considered by many to be one of the most innovative and stylistically diverse rock musicians of his generation, Zappa was both an incredible guitarist and composer who was known to be one of the most selective artists of his time when it came to finding talent to accompany him in live and studio situations. In April 1978, Colaiuta heard that Zappa was looking for a new rhythm section. As a fan of Zappa's music, he was eager for a chance to audition for a spot. He recalls in an interview that:

> I had always been a big fan of Zappa's and had every record. In fact, I had just bought [*Zappa*] *in New York* and loved it. It was funny and it was musically great. The irony is that I called the office and bugged the hell out of them, asking if I could bring a tape by. They said, "No tapes," but I dropped one by anyway. I'd go there every day until one day they called and said "Alright, Mr. Zappa will listen to you Wednesday night." My heart dropped and I literally sank to the floor. I was so happy, not just at the prospect of a gig, but because it was him! (Flans 1982, 10).

Colaiuta recalls that on his audition day, he waited in the hall of the rehearsal space with several other drummers, waiting for his opportunity to impress Zappa. Many of the auditions lasted "like fifteen seconds," but when Colaiuta got his chance, Zappa was so impressed with his sight reading, soloing, and natural musical instincts that he asked Colaiuta on the spot when he could start.

Colaiuta would remain in Zappa's band for two and a half years, and they recorded three albums, including one of Zappa's most celebrated, *Joe's Garage*. This album includes many impressive performances from Colaiuta, but his playing on "Keep It Greasy" stands out as one of the most impressive odd meter performances ever played

on a drum set. Much of the song is in 19/16, a very uncommon meter. The verses can be subdivided into a measure of 4/4, plus an extra three sixteenth notes tacked on to the end of each four-beat bar.

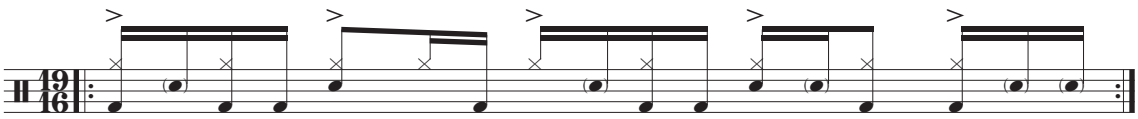

Figure 2.5. “Keep It Greasy” transcription, part 1. Verse pattern.

Colaiuta’s groove through the verses (notated in figure 2.5) includes a backbeat on two and four of each measure, but the extra three sixteenth notes added on at the end of the measure give the rhythm a jarring rub that keeps the listener on their toes and makes the pulse of the song difficult to keep track of. Colaiuta also improvises regularly throughout this song, adding the energy of a live performance that Zappa desired on his recordings.

Once the band reaches the solo section at 3:16, they incorporate a new subdivision by separating the groove into groups of 7/16 + 5/16 + 7/16. Colaiuta mimics the bass line’s pattern at times by adding two left-handed ghost notes to the end of each group, making each grouping an odd number.

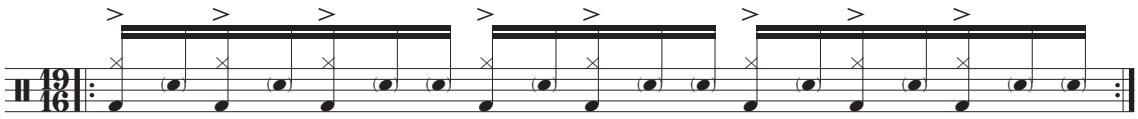

Figure 2.6. “Keep It Greasy” transcription, part 2. Solo section pattern.

While this concept helps simplify the groove to some extent, it still comes off quite chaotic in the recording. Colaiuta constantly improvises with tight hi-hat and ride

cymbal bell accents, rolling tom fills, and diverse groups of sixteenth-note ideas. He breaks his ideas into several different groupings, including the concepts demonstrated in both figures 2.5 and 2.6. His comping is broken up into eight-measure phrases, marking the beginning of most phrases with a crash cymbal on the downbeat. The first eight measure phrase is transcribed in figure 2.7. Different strategies used to subdivide this odd meter are notated in the transcription, which helps unpack some of Colaiuta's strategy in his improvisation.

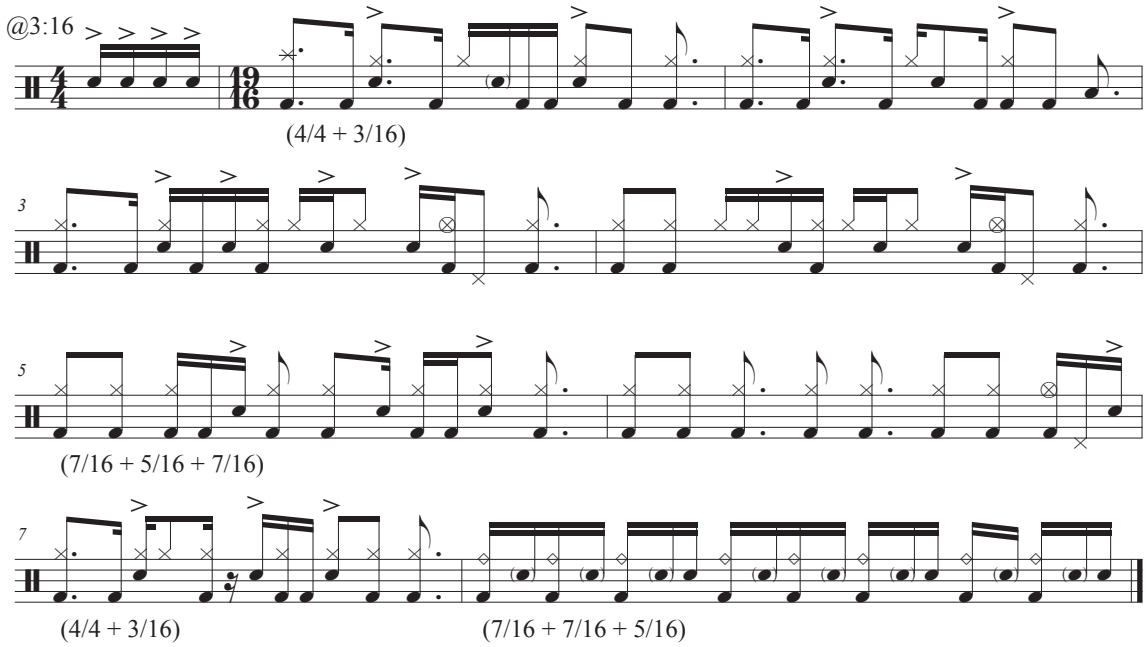

Figure 2.7. "Keep It Greasy" transcription, part 3. Solo section comping (3:16).

The drumming performance on this song requires acutely accurate note placement, which even in his twenties Colaiuta could clearly handle. Amazingly, "Keep It Greasy" was recorded by the entire band in one take, with no overdubs or punch-ins. Colaiuta has stated that *Joe's Garage* was one of the most challenging recording experiences of his career, and "Keep It Greasy" stands out as one of the most difficult

recordings from the album. Zappa himself has acknowledged Colaiuta as being "the best drummer he ever worked with in terms of his understanding and feel for complex rhythms and time signatures" (Mattingly 1995, 8). Considering Zappa's lineage of drummers, including Terry Bozzio, Chester Thompson, and Chad Wackerman among others, this compliment cannot be taken lightly. While Colaiuta has performed in just about every commercial genre out there throughout his long career, this work with Zappa helped put him on the map as a young drummer and remains some of the most impressive progressive rock drumming ever recorded.

"Humpty Dumpty – Live" by Chick Corea Akoustic Band

Chick Corea is one of the most prominent and influential jazz pianists to emerge in the post-John Coltrane era. Serving as a member of Miles Davis' band in the late 1960s, Corea went on to contribute to the birth of the jazz fusion genre and has continued to explore a variety of musical styles throughout his more than five-decade career. In 1992, the Chick Corea Akoustic Band (an acoustic jazz trio reduction of the well-known Chick Corea Elektric Band) recorded a live album and DVD entitled *Live from the Blue Note Tokyo*. The trio consisted of Corea on grand piano, John Patitucci on bass, and Vinnie Colaiuta on drum set. This album is an excellent example of Colaiuta's playing in a jazz trio format. The opening track, "Humpty Dumpty" was initially recorded on Corea's 1978 album *The Mad Hatter* with Steve Gadd on drums. Colaiuta's interpretation of the song leans heavily on the rhythmic syncopations of the song's melody and includes the unconventional placement of many accents. The song is performed at roughly 272

beats per minute, which contributes to a highly energetic drum performance from Colaiuta.

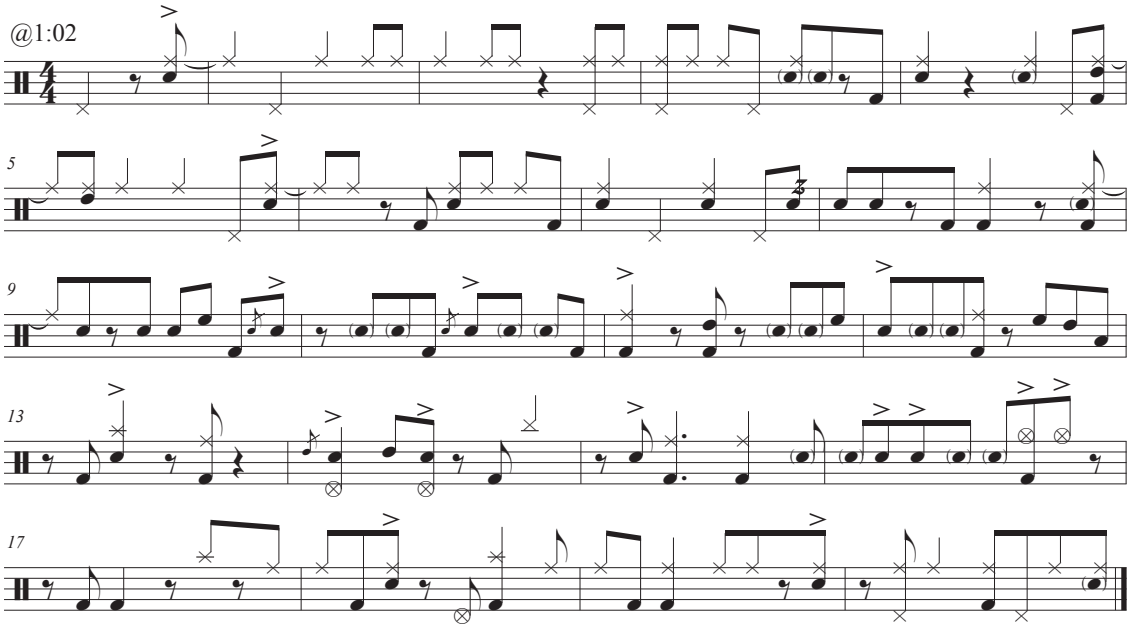

Figure 2.8. “Humpty Dumpty – Live” transcription. Comping over the head (1:02).

After a solo piano introduction, Colaiuta comps over the first head of the song, beginning at 1:02 (transcribed in figure 2.8). Corea's rhythmic melody guides Colaiuta's rhythmic choices. Rather than filling in between Corea’s melody, Colaiuta plays a drum set interpretation of the syncopated lead line with Corea. In fact, in the official video recording of this performance, you can see Colaiuta picking up sheet music and positioning it on his music stand while Corea plays the piano introduction. Considering that Colaiuta did not play with the Chick Corea Akoustic Band nearly as much as Dave Weckl did, it seems reasonable to believe that Colaiuta may have wanted the music in front of him to rely on his superior sight reading skills while referencing and guiding his improvisations to match Corea’s written lead line.

This transcription was deceivingly difficult to create, as Colaiuta's playing is a consistent stream-of-consciousness reaction to the music being made. He is not regularly marking downbeats or other common points in the measure that a jazz drummer would commonly point the band's attention to in an attempt to keep everyone together. While Colaiuta's drumming is impressive throughout this song, the rest of the trio's ability to feel the pulse independently and avoid being deterred by Colaiuta's unconventional ideas is equally impressive.

The influence of Tony Williams can be heard in Colaiuta's playing throughout this song, especially in the quarter-note hi-hat pulse that Colaiuta employs during much of Corea's solo, and in the impressive physical speed demonstrated. During Patitucci's solo, Colaiuta does eventually settle into a more common two-and-four accented jazz rhythm, but even then, his playing continues to be incredibly energetic. At 6:36, Corea and Colaiuta begin trading solos, and Colaiuta's speed and power on the drum set are showcased heavily. He retains an upbeat jazz ride cymbal pattern throughout this entire section with only a few exceptions, when his soloing leads him to move his right hand to other pieces of the drum set. Overall, the incredibly high level of musicianship possessed by all three members of the Chick Corea Akoustic Band is evident throughout this recording. While Colaiuta may not have spent a great deal of time in his career playing music in the straight-ahead jazz genre, "Humpty Dumpty – Live" is more than enough evidence that he is capable of performing with anyone in this genre, including some of the most prominent jazz performers that are alive today.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, when discussions regarding the greatest drummers of all-time come up, Colaiuta must be considered. Rick Mattingly captured the essence of Colaiuta's brilliance well in a 1995 *Percussive Notes* article:

> Most people don't even bother trying to describe it in technical terms. They just call it "Vinnie stuff"—those licks and fills that defy analysis. One can throw words like "polyrhythms" and "multi-meters" at it, but the mathematical approach those terms imply seems at odds with the pure feel and animal aggressiveness that permeate Vinnie Colaiuta's drumming… However much Vinnie might be able to explain exactly what he's doing, he never sounds as though he's sitting there counting and subdividing. There's a sense of wild abandon as if he is simply going for it with no fear of the danger involved in exploring uncharted rhythmic territory. At times, one senses that Vinnie is rushing straight towards a musical brick wall during a fill or solo, but then, at the last moment, he finds the opening in that wall and slides right back into the tune's solid groove (Mattingly 1995, 8).

As someone who has spent a great deal of time attempting to research and analyze the artistry of Vinnie Colaiuta for this project as well as my own musical growth, I could not agree with Mattingly more. Colaiuta's rhythmic sophistication and undeniable athletic ability on the drum set are as developed as any musician I have ever heard, and often feel beyond complete analysis.

Regarding his chameleon-like abilities on the instrument, Colaiuta struggled at times to convince producers that he was capable of simply serving the song. After his time with Zappa, Colaiuta was the talk of the Los Angeles music scene, yet it still took him a few years to find his footing in the world of sessions and studio dates. Some were afraid that Colaiuta would be unable to restrain from using his infamous fills in more straightforward musical scenarios. Nevertheless, Colaiuta possessed enough friendships with established session musicians that he was eventually able to prove himself in the studio. Once the opportunity did arrive, he quickly dispelled any doubt of his musical

maturity. Again, Mattingly summarizes this element of Colaiuta's playing well when he says, "had Colaiuta never played an odd-time signature in his life, it's likely he would still be a major player in a league with Jeff Porcaro, Jim Keltner, or Kenny Aronoff, simply for his ability to make a tune feel good with a less-is-more approach" (Mattingly 1995, 9).

In just about every category you could come up with, Colaiuta—more often referred to as simply "Vinnie"—has proven himself to be one of the greatest drummers of all-time. Returning to his list of recording credits, Vinnie has worked with everyone from Faith Hill to Megadeth and has contributed his versatility and stylistic flexibility to the work of innovators from Paul McCartney to Herbie Hancock. All of this considered, he is an incredibly important addition to this list of versatile drummers who has inspired countless musicians to reach for his level of excellence in their own careers.

Chapter Three: Matt Chamberlain

Matt Chamberlain grew up in San Pedro, California, a community within Los Angeles. He began playing drums at the age of 10 and was initially inspired by the punk rock scene of San Pedro in the 1980s. Growing up in Los Angeles, Chamberlain was lucky enough to study throughout high school with some of the greatest instructors of the era, including David Garibaldi, Murray Spivack, Chuck Flores, and Gregg Bissonette. After receiving a scholarship to study at North Texas State University (now the University of North Texas), Chamberlain moved to Denton. After spending less than one year in school, he dropped out of college to play professionally in the Dallas music scene full-time. By the early 1990s, Chamberlain had toured and recorded with Edie Brickell & New Bohemians, and Pearl Jam and was offered a spot in the *Saturday Night Live* house band. He chose to leave the lucrative television gig after one season and moved back to Seattle, Washington which allowed him to "experiment and make crazy music with friends and not have to worry too much about my monthly nugget" (Dawson 2012, 51), as the cost of living in Seattle was a fraction of New York City in the 1990s. Much of that "crazy music" was made in the experimental rock-electronic group Critters Buggin, of which Chamberlain was a founding member. At the same time, Chamberlain continued to build his reputation as an excellent studio drummer and recorded on two highly successful records in 1996 that helped spring his career forward: *Bringing Down the Horse* by the Wallflowers, and *Tidal* by Fiona Apple. In the more than 20 years since

then, Chamberlain has recorded on a staggering amount of records as a studio drummer, including work with David Bowie, Soundgarden, The Who, Bill Frisell, Tori Amos, Morrissey, Kanye West, Bruce Springsteen, Rufus Wainwright, Bob Dylan, John Mayer, Leonard Cohen, Frank Ocean, Elton John, Brad Mehldau, Miranda Lambert, Keith Urban, Randy Newman, and many others. He was recognized twice as *Modern Drummer*'s Studio Musician of the Year in 2016 and 2019 ("Modern Drummer Reader's Poll…" 2020), and twice by the *American Country Music Awards* as Studio Drummer of the Year in 2013 and 2019 ("Studio Recording Awards" 2020).

"Bigger Than My Body" by John Mayer

"Bigger Than My Body" is the first single released from John Mayer's 2003 sophomore album, *Heavier Things*. In addition to Mayer on vocals and guitar, the song features Matt Chamberlain on drums, as well as Lenny Castro on percussion, David LaBruyere on bass, Jamie Muhoberac on keyboards, and Greg Liesz on lap steel guitar. Mayer found inspiration while writing the song by experimenting with the sequencing capabilities of Roger Linn Design's "AdrenaLinn" stomp-box effects processor. This effects pedal was released shortly before Mayer began writing "Bigger Than My Body," and the guitar hook heard in the introduction of the song was created by playing an electric guitar through the pedal's factory default preset 150. Each preset on the pedal has a drum machine pattern associated with it, and in the case of preset 150, drum beat 61 is pre-saved in the pedal. This entire process is explained and recreated in a YouTube video titled "How to Setup Adrenalinn [sic] III for John Mayer's 'Bigger Than My Body'" (Rmoesgaard 2011). This drum machine pattern is the exact groove that Chamberlain

plays in the introduction of the recording, so it is appropriate to assume that when Chamberlain arrived for the session, Mayer and producer Jack Joseph Puig asked him to re-create the drum loop that they had become used to hearing from the AdrenaLinn. This is a common scenario for Chamberlain, as discussed in a 2012 interview with *Modern Drummer*.

> There's no one way of working, which is great. Some people will want to just get together in the studio with a bass player and track everything live. Some people will have the vocals and all the other stuff in Pro Tools, and they just want you to put drums on it… A lot of people will write to loops and get married to that sound, so I'll ask if they're going to use that loop and have me play on top or if they want me to re-create that loop. Or are they looking to go someplace else entirely? (Dawson 2012, 54).

In the case of "Bigger Than My Body," Chamberlain re-creates a loop from the AdrenaLinn, playing an identical groove in the intro as well as the verse.

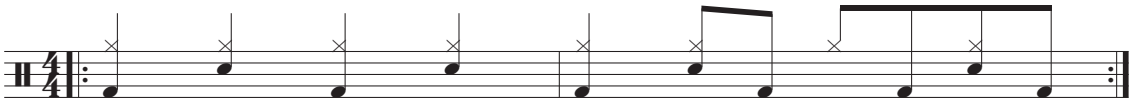

Figure 3.1. "Bigger Than My Body" transcription, part 1. Verse pattern.

While the transcription in figure 3.1 is accurate for both Chamberlain's recording and the original drum loop, the added character that Chamberlain contributes to the groove is undeniable. Chamberlain incorporates tasteful fills throughout, often so subtle that one may not notice when the groove changes slightly if one is not listening carefully. When the recording reaches the first chorus, Chamberlain alters the bass drum pattern slightly, which helps to distinguish these two sections of the song.

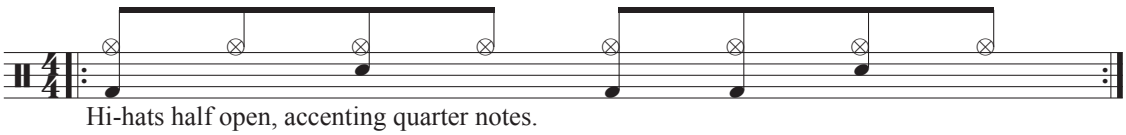

Figure 3.2. “Bigger Than My Body” transcription, part 2. Chorus pattern.

Additionally, he moves from a two-measure drum groove to a one-measure groove, and transitions from a quarter-note hi-hat pulse to an eighth-note pulse, opening the hi-hat slightly to alter the tone of the cymbals from the verse. These small alterations in Chamberlain’s playing are part of what makes him such a desirable asset to artists and producers. The recording is undeniably human, yet still holds a disciplined structure that can help make a song more commercially digestible for listeners.

“Fast as You Can” by Fiona Apple

“Fast as You Can” is the lead single from Fiona Apple’s 1999 sophomore album *When the Pawn…* The record was produced by Jon Brion, who took an interesting strategy with Apple when creating the album. Instead of following the conventional approach of beginning the recording process with drums and bass and building the arrangement around those tracks, Brion and Apple chose to begin by recording Apple’s piano and vocal performances to a click track and added drums and additional instruments around those initial recordings. In an interview with *Performing Songwriter*, Brion justified the decision explaining that “Often when you do the drums first, that can result in a less creative drum track. People try to get drum tracks as metronomically right and as high fidelity as possible. And I actually don’t like the way records made that way feel. I like to hear drummers playing with the songwriter” (Zollo 2000). While this

approach may not work for every recording situation, Brion was confident in Chamberlain's ability to craft a creative drum part and play it in a precise fashion that would lock in rhythmically with Apple's pre-recorded performance. This is a specific draw of Chamberlain as a session drummer. As Brion put it, "As soon as [Fiona] played "Fast as You Can," I knew *exactly* what I wanted it to be. I knew I wanted it to be Matt Chamberlain on drums. He can play all this beautiful machine-influenced stuff, but with human feel" (Zollo 2000). Chamberlain's interest in electronic music, drum loops, and programming has helped separate him amidst a crowded field of talented session drummers, and his training on drum set strongly supports those electronic interests. Chamberlain can perform at the highest level as a drum set player or an electronic drum programmer, but it is the combination of these two skills that have helped him carve out a niche as an expert of the hybrid acoustic-electronic sound that is so desirable in the modern commercial music climate.

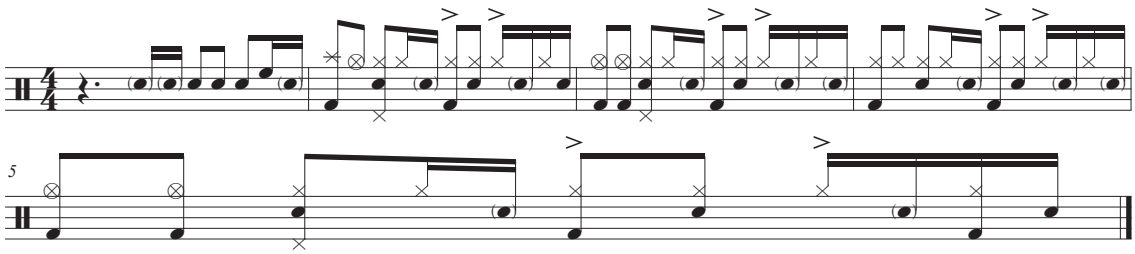

Figure 3.3. "Fast as You Can" transcription, part 1. Intro pattern (0:05).

The song opens with multiple layers of percussion loops, beginning with what sounds like a *doumbek* rhythm, followed by the addition of an over-compressed drum groove. At 0:05, Chamberlain's main drum track enters with Apple's piano groove, as transcribed in figure 3.3. As Brion described, this groove has a fast-paced, machine-like

sound to it. However, it also has an undeniable human element to it. Chamberlain locks in with Apple's piano part effortlessly and adds sensitive dynamic touches that contribute to the humanness of his drumming. Notice the hi-hat accents on beats three and four of each measure, which contribute an ebb and flow to the groove that would be difficult to create with a drum machine. The contrast of snare strokes between ghost notes and rim shots is stark and creates two completely separate sounds from one drum. These two voices are consistent throughout the recording, reminiscent of a drum machine utilizing two separate samples. However, the sounds vary just enough from one stroke to the next that the listener can be confident that they are indeed hearing a human performance. The open hi-hat notes are tight and precise, ending promptly with a left foot stomp at the onset of the next eighth-note. Again, this precise technique is highly influenced by electronic music but is still distinguishable from an electronic performance.

When the recording reaches the bridge section at 1:22, there is a sudden tempo change from 138 quarter-notes per minute to 180 eighth-notes per minute, and the time signature is altered to 6/8.

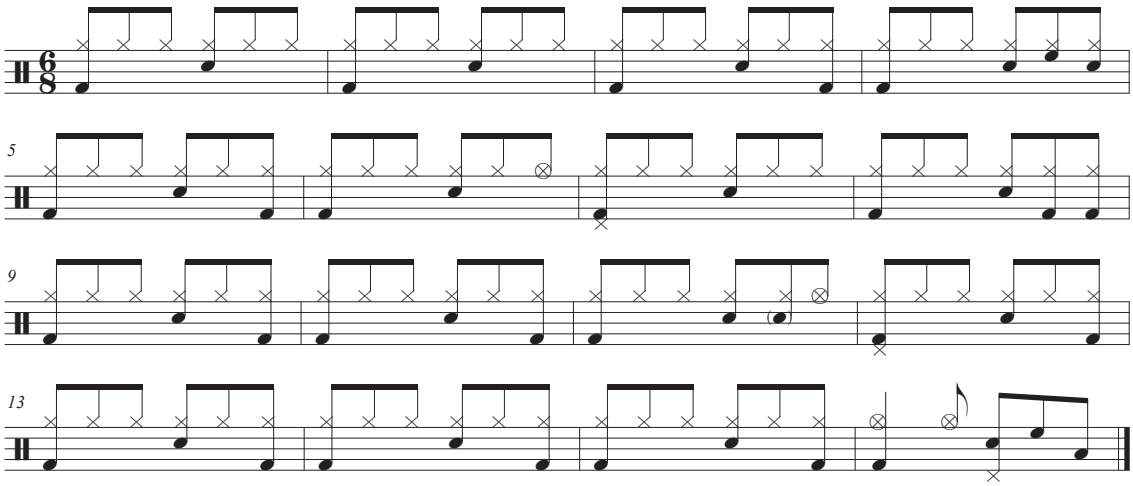

Figure 3.4. "Fast as You Can" transcription, part 2. Bridge pattern (1:22).

I have chosen to transcribe the entire first half of this bridge in an attempt to demonstrate the intricacies of Chamberlain's orchestration choices. His groove is rooted in the most basic form of a modern 6/8 drum track, using eighth-notes to keep time on the hi-hat, playing the bass drum on the first eighth-note of each measure, and playing the snare drum on the fourth eighth-note of each measure. However, when looking at the transcription more closely, it is evident that there is a great deal of improvisation in Chamberlain's drumming, as he never plays a four-measure grouping the same throughout the whole bridge. Just as Brion discussed in his interview with *Performing Songwriter*, Chamberlain is not just playing a drum part in isolation, but rather is playing with Apple and responding to her melodic phrasing in his fills and orchestration choices. Figure 3.5 demonstrates one specific example of the symbiotic relationship between Apple and Chamberlain's performances, which occurs at 2:06. In measure two of figure 3.5, Apple begins a vocal fill on the second eighth-note and varies between eighth- and sixteenth-note subdivisions, just as Chamberlain's fill in measure three does. This direct response is disguised by Chamberlain as his fill is swung, as opposed to phrasing it straight like Apple does. Furthermore, the main drum groove of the song (see figure 3.3) is clearly rhythmically inspired by Apple's piano riff and would likely come off differently if Chamberlain had recorded his drum performance before Apple's piano and vocal tracks.

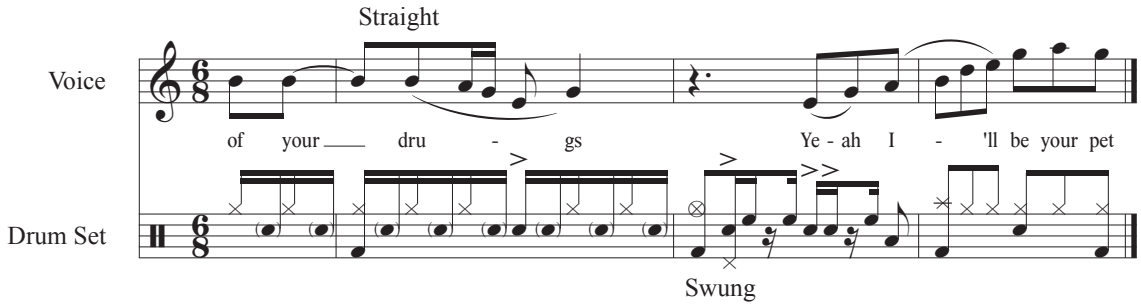

Figure 3.5. “Fast as You Can” transcription, part 3. Melodic phrasing relationship (2:06).

Chamberlain’s musical interests are incredibly diverse, which helps him adapt to any musical situation he finds himself in. He has discussed his listening habits by saying,

> I love experimental electronic music. I love improvisational music, like jazz. I love songwriting. There’s so much music to dig. Then there’s so much from other countries. All the amazing drumming, cool grooves, and textures from Africa. I love Northern African music, like Moroccan and Persian music (Stanfield 2018).

“Kickstand Hog” by Critters Buggin

If Chamberlain has one creative endeavor that genuinely showcases his diverse musical interests, it is Critters Buggin. Critters Buggin was co-founded by Chamberlain in Seattle during the early 1990s, and possesses an eclectic jazz fusion sound, described by Chamberlain as being “jazzy, funky, rocky… it has African rhythms, too. African, industrial, tribal music” (Ho 1994). This band features so many different styles that it is difficult to choose just one song to represent their work.

Nevertheless, I have selected “Kickstand Hog,” the second track on the band’s 1994 debut album *Guest*. This selection features a heavy backbeat from Chamberlain, as well as a great deal of improvisation. It begins with an upbeat 6/8 groove, led by a riff played on electric bass.

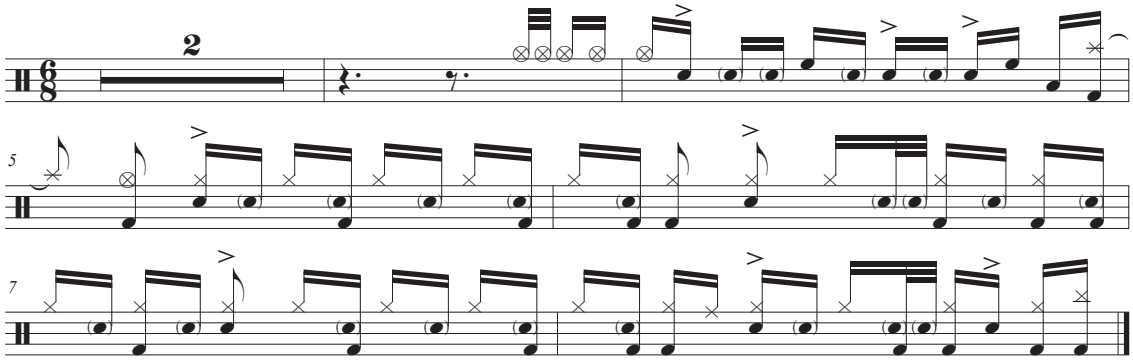

Figure 3.6. “Kickstand Hog” transcription, part 1. 6/8 groove excerpt (0:00).

The groove has a bouncing sensation created by the variation between hi-hat notes on downbeats and snare drum ghost notes on upbeats. The snare drum rim shots on the third eighth-note of each measure provide a consistent theme for the listener to latch onto, while syncopated kick patterns vary slightly from one measure to the next.

The song varies between the original 6/8 section and a 4/4 section, which retains the same eighth-note tempo. In the 4/4 section, Chamberlain continues with a similar pattern, while adding more consistent backbeats on the second and fourth beats of each measure.

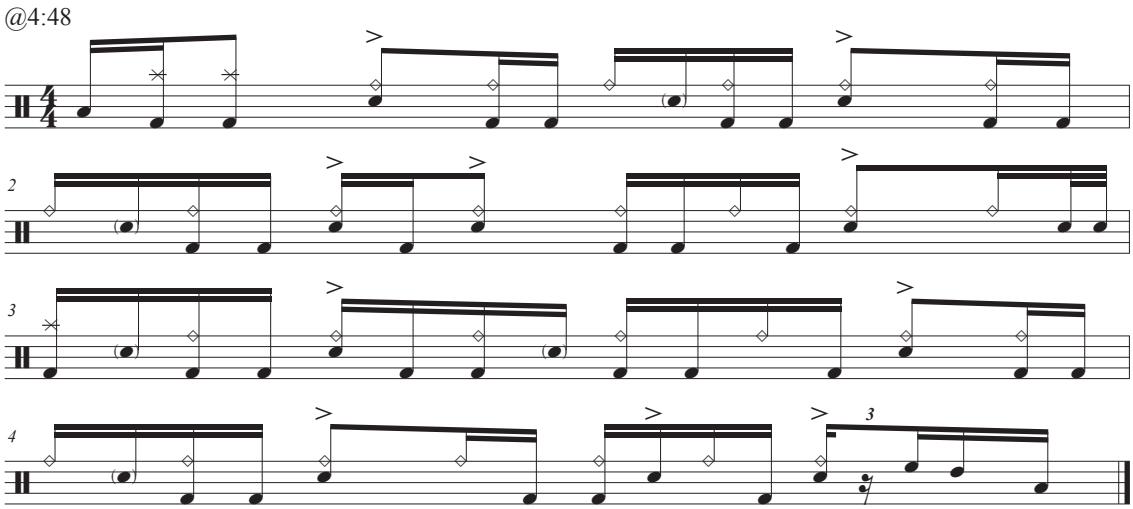

Figure 3.7. “Kickstand Hog” transcription, part 2. 4/4 groove excerpt (4:48).

This groove is a relatively typical upbeat rock pattern, using the same syncopated kicks and accented snare hits as the 6/8 section. Chamberlain does limit his ghost notes compared to the 6/8 section of the song, which provides a straightforward, driving rock sound here. He also moves his right hand from the hi-hat to the ride cymbal bell, which contributes a more aggressive timekeeping sound.

Overall, this song showcases Chamberlain’s improvisational skills, especially while interacting with a live band. His technique reflects the precise and consistent skills of his life as a session drummer, yet he takes many more risks in his improvisational ideas, at times reminiscent of Elvin Jones’ improvisational sound of “just going for it.” The recording is rawer than the majority of Chamberlain’s work in more commercial environments, yet the drumming is still very much Chamberlain. In the band’s biography on Chamberlain’s website, he is credited for “drums, percussion, piano, programming, synth, loops, samples and digital editing” (“Bio” 2020). A creative venture like Critters Buggin provides Chamberlain with an opportunity to try out new ideas, and also acts to

an extent as a business card for him to send to producers. While the music is not likely to be consumed by the masses, other musicians may be interested not only in Chamberlain's drumming, but his programming and other electronic work with the band. This could lead them to hire Chamberlain for a session, as John Mayer and Jack Joseph Puig did when they possessed a desire for a drummer to replicate the AdrenaLinn drum machine pattern that they had grown fond of, or as Fiona Apple and Jon Brion did when they wanted a machine-influenced sound with a human feel.

Jeff Himmelman explains that when country music superstar Keith Urban was working on his 2015 single "John Cougar, John Deere, John 3:16," Urban had the song written but was not happy with the basic acoustic guitar instrumentation he had come up with. "He was looking for a particular hybrid of electronic and acoustic drum sounds to make the song stand out… He'd been listening to the rapper Kendrick Lamar and wanted a groove that could not only propel the song but inspire an altogether new sound for it" (Himmelman 2016). Nashville, the city in which Urban lives and works, happens to have an embarrassment of riches in skilled session drummers. Nevertheless, when he wanted a machine-influenced sound, whom did he call? Chamberlain, of course, who was flown from Los Angeles out to Nashville to help Urban finish the song that went on to peak at number two on Billboard's "Hot Country" chart ("Keith Urban…" 2020).

Conclusion

In the thirty years that Chamberlain has been a professional musician, the climate of the music industry has shifted drastically. The development of the internet has reshaped nearly every industry, but musicians have had an especially difficult time

adjusting to this new climate. Chamberlain, however, is busier than ever. After permanently moving back to Los Angeles in 2011, Chamberlain said, “For me things haven’t really changed at all. The music industry is changing, obviously. But since I moved down [to L.A.], I’m busier than ever” (Dawson 2012, 51).

Chamberlain is an innovator and always evolving. Many recordings on which he has been featured possess a “dead,” de-tuned drum sound with heavy compression and some preamplifier distortion, as can be heard on Fiona Apple’s “Criminal.” However, at other times he has a clean, bright tone as heard in Mayer’s “Bigger Than My Body.” He is notorious for searching out new gear endorsements, and never staying with one product or company for too long. Some may find that this quality demonstrates a lack of commitment to companies that Chamberlain has worked with in the past, but I choose to view it as a stronger commitment to creative explorations and progression. Chamberlain’s left hand may be one of his most distinguishing features. With a distinctive traditional grip placed far back on the drumstick, he has a clean and precise attack that sometimes utilizes rim shots for added brightness, and at other times plays softly and allows heavy compression to make his drums sound big in the song’s mix. Many tracks on which he plays feature an eighth-note hi-hat pattern with snare drum ghost notes filling in the sixteenth-notes in-between. This technique is heard on both “Fast as You Can” and “Kickstand Hog,” and his touch is so delicate when using this technique that it may often be felt more than heard, giving the song an ebb and flow between the two voices. He has also had a long-standing fascination with sound texture in his drum tracks. While many session musicians prefer to leave the loops and auxiliary percussion work to producers, Chamberlain is fascinated by percussion, drum loops, and electronics.

Each of these techniques can help explain Chamberlain's artistry, but his innovation and constant search for new inspiration are likely at the center of his identity. He releases new experimental solo and side projects nearly every year, while somehow continuing to manage a schedule of recording that creates an unbelievable list of record credits in pop, rock, indie, jazz, experimental electronic, and film music. Chamberlain's love for creativity and progress has kept him at the top of the session world for more than twenty years, and his versatility will likely maintain his position as a first-call drummer throughout the entirety of his career.

Chapter Four: Brian Blade

From deep in the American South, Brian Blade was raised in Shreveport, Louisiana, where his father was the pastor of Zion Baptist Church. The church played an integral part in Blade's exposure to music and provided him with his first opportunity to play drum set, after his older brother Brady left their hometown for college. Blade grew up listening to a variety of musicians, such as gospel groups like the Staples Singers, and R&B artists like Stevie Wonder and Al Green. While studying drum set in high school with teacher Dorsey Summerfield, Jr., Blade began listening to jazz musicians including John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Thelonious Monk. His jazz education continued when he moved in 1988 to attend college at Loyola University New Orleans. It was in New Orleans that Blade met his teachers John Vidacovich and Herlin Riley and found a mentor in the famous producer Daniel Lanois. Lanois, who is known for his production work with U2, Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Peter Gabriel, Emmylou Harris, Willie Nelson, and many more, was deeply impressed by Blade's playing and introduced him to many of these artists in the studio.

While Blade did record jazz records in the early 1990s with artists like Joshua Redman, much of his early career consisted of work with Lanois in the rock and funk realm. By the end of the decade, Blade had recorded on Emmylou Harris' 1995 album *Wrecking Ball*, Bob Dylan's 1997 record *Time Out of Mind* (both of which were Grammy-nominated), and joined one of his longtime musical heroes, Joni Mitchell, on

her 1998 album *Taming the Tiger*. Around the same time that Blade recorded with Mitchell, he released his first album as a leader, the 1998 record *Brian Blade Fellowship*. This band continues to work together today, over twenty years later. In 2000, Blade was asked to join the demanding and prestigious quartet of jazz legend Wayne Shorter, where he reworked many of Shorter's compositions from the 1960s that initially featured Blade's idol Elvin Jones on drums. Blade has also worked extensively with pianist Chick Corea in the past ten years, in a trio format that also includes bassist Christian McBride.

Furthermore, Blade has worked with John Patitucci, Danilo Pérez, Kenny Garrett, Chris Potter, Herbie Hancock, Michael Brecker, Roy Hargrove, Brad Mehldau, Bob James, Bill Frisell, Elvis Costello, Burt Bacharach, Seal, Norah Jones, Iron & Wine, and many others. Blade's versatile style has been described well by *Modern Drummer* contributor Ken Micallef, saying, "Blade's drumming conversation is as animated as Tony Williams', as expansive as Elvin Jones', and as magically quirky as Jim Keltner's" (Micallef 2008, 64). While every drummer included in this study is expertly capable of performing at a high level in numerous genres, Blade may stand on his own as someone who sounds entirely like a jazz musician in a jazz context, and entirely like a rock musician in a rock context. In both situations, Blade seems to be less concerned about his own drumming persona and is just pleased to be a part of the music.

"Where Will I Be" by Emmylou Harris

Emmylou Harris is an American singer, songwriter, and musician who has been active primarily in the folk and country genres throughout her forty-year career. The 1995 album *Wrecking Ball* won the Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Album and was

considered a departure from her earlier country records, described as “a leftfield masterpiece, the most wide-ranging, innovative, and daring record in a career built on such notions” (Ankeny 2020). Produced by Daniel Lanois, the majority of the songs on *Wrecking Ball* feature Larry Mullen, Jr. of U2 on drums. However, the album’s opening track “Where Will I Be” instead utilizes Blade’s delicate touch and musical embellishments to set the tone of Harris’ atmospheric and earthy record.

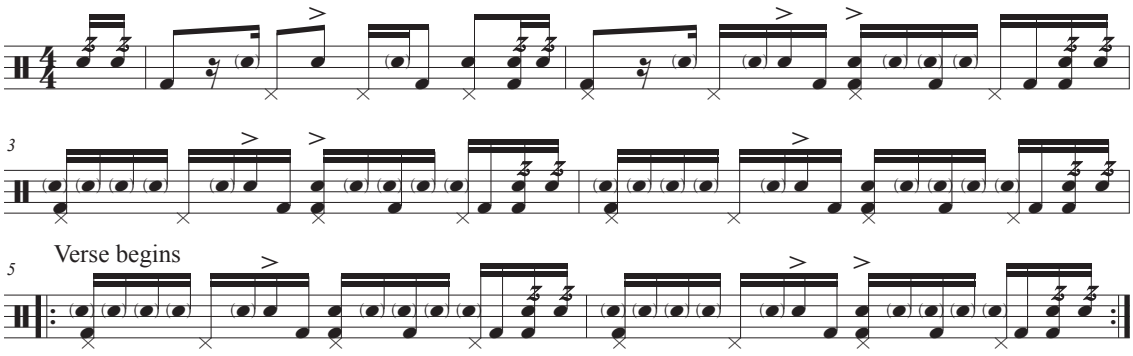

Figure 4.1. “Where Will I Be” transcription. Intro and verse (0:00).

This groove features an updated New Orleans style snare march that is also reminiscent of Steve Gadd’s march-style snare drum technique analyzed in Chapter One. Blade’s left foot establishes a precise pulse on the quarter-note with the hi-hat, while consistent syncopated bass drum notes give the groove a light, bouncing quality. This style of drumming reflects the influence of New Orleans drumming on Blade, as the groove feels rooted in a second line-style march; yet at the same time, it is updated for the drum set and the alternative folk music genre. As visible in figure 4.1, Blade’s playing begins with a bit more space but settles into a repeating theme beginning in measure three with only slight dynamic variations. As the song progresses, Blade weaves in subtle fills and embellishments and uses the crash cymbal to mark important transitions in the song’s

form. Nevertheless, the groove, as written in figure 4.1, is present throughout the entire song with relatively little variation heard.

Although “Where Will I Be” was initially performed by Harris, Lanois is credited as the sole songwriter and has recorded his own version of the song, which can be found on his 2007 record *Here Is What Is*. The recording on his album is much funkier than Harris’. Brian Blade, Brady Blade, Jr., and Steven Nistor are all drummers credited on the record, so it is impossible to know exactly who contributed to this track; in fact, on this song two drum tracks play simultaneously, with one panned hard right and the other hard left. Hand percussion is also prominent on the left side of the stereo field. Listening to the sporadic and highly improvised playing on Lanois’ recording provides further context for the patience and consistency displayed by Brian Blade on Harris’ version of the song.

When asked about New Orleans in an interview with *OffBeat Magazine*, Blade once said, “The time that I spent there was a very special time in my life. I was just supposed to have been there. Now it’s in everything that I play and write. I may not even realize it. There are pieces of it that manifest themselves. I might hear a song we recorded five years ago and think, ‘Oh, wow, that’s just a second line really!’” (Wyckoff 2017). To my ear, Blade’s performance on Harris’ “Where Will I Be” is, without a doubt, one of these instances and furthermore an excellent example of Blade’s ability to provide a song with an egoless drum track that prioritizes serving the song above all else.

"Ring the Alarm" by Black Dub

Black Dub is a Daniel Lanois-instigated collaboration that features Lanois on guitar and keyboards, Brian Blade on drums, Daryl Johnson on bass, and Trixie Whitley (daughter of singer-songwriter Chris Whitley) on lead vocals. The music blurs reggae, blues, soul, and rock in their sound on their 2010 self-titled album. The band created significant excitement among early fans by releasing professionally recorded rehearsal footage on YouTube throughout late 2010 in a series of videos titled "Live Off the Floor." These videos are still available for viewing and serve as an incredible resource to watch Brian Blade perform in a highly diverse rock context.

"Ring the Alarm," which was initially recorded in 1985 by Jamaican dancehall singer Tenor Saw, is the only cover on the album. While the original version of the song features a reggae "Stalag riddim," Black Dub's version of the song takes on a much different sound, with elements of experimental rock, surf-rock, shoegaze, and jam rock. Lyrically, Black Dub's recording only draws from the chorus of Tenor Saw's version of the song and is primarily an instrumental jam reminiscent of the "dub" subgenre of reggae, which is an instrumental remix with much of the vocal material removed from the arrangement. We hear Blade play three main grooves in the song. The first fades in from the beginning of the song and features a sixteenth-note snare groove with pulsing quarter-note bass drum hits and hi-hat stomps.

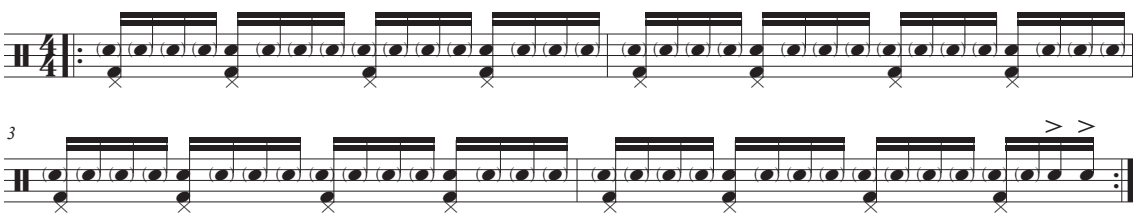

Figure 4.2. "Ring the Alarm" transcription, part 1. A-section pattern.

While this groove features subtle improvisation throughout, figure 4.2 represents the basic concept that Blade plays throughout the recording. This idea is punctuated with many improvised fills throughout the A-section of the song, for example the fill transcribed in figure 4.3.

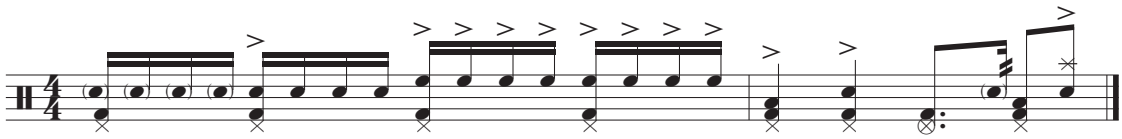

Figure 4.3. “Ring the Alarm” transcription, part 2. Fill example.

This specific excerpt is transcribed at 0:59 from the “Live Off the Floor” YouTube series video. The idea heard on the third and fourth beats of measure two is especially popular with Blade throughout this song, as he crashes on the “and” of four quite often throughout. We also hear many sixteenth-note tom runs beginning on the mounted tom and often moving down to the floor tom. He finishes most fills with a punctual crash, often on either the downbeat of the measure or in a syncopated pattern accenting the upbeats as transcribed in figure 4.3.

The second groove heard in the song is played during the B section of the form, where Blade moves to an eighth-note ride groove. The following transcription comes again from the “Live Off the Floor” YouTube video performance, at 1:23.

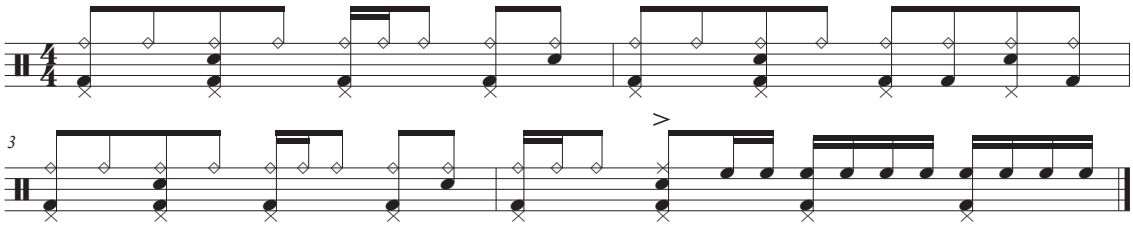

Figure 4.4. “Ring the Alarm” transcription, part 3. B section pattern.

While this groove changes subtly in every measure that Blade plays it, figure 4.4 captures the essence of the idea. In this section of the form, Blade typically moves to the ride cymbal, sometimes playing on the bell and sometimes on the bow of the cymbal. In each case, he plays an eighth-note pattern and intersperses sixteenth-note embellishments, reminiscent of an up-tempo jazz ride pattern. The pulsing quarter-note bass drum hits and hi-hat stomps also continue throughout this section of the song, and again the majority of Blade's fills contain sixteenth-note tom rolls and crashes accenting upbeats.

The final primary groove begins at 4:12, when Blade moves to a halftime feel that remains through the rest of the arrangement, accompanying an extended instrumental jam and guitar solo. The bass drum hits and hi-hat stomps continue, but now primarily on the first and third beat of each measure. Blade continues the same thematic ideas with tom fills and upbeat crash accents, but this time in a more subdued style, taking his time to build the song throughout Lanois' guitar work.

Overall, this song displays Blade's ability to give a high energy, up-tempo performance in a rock setting. It is evident, especially when watching video footage of the band performing together that Blade is supplying much of the energy that elevates the rest of the group's performance by utilizing a wide range of dynamics and rates of subdivision in his playing. He can play at fast tempos all around the drumset without ever sacrificing the song's groove or driving quarter-note pulse. Blade showcases his consistency, dynamic control, and time awareness in an excellent performance that should convince anyone that he is much more than "just" a jazz drummer.

"Jazz Crimes" by Joshua Redman

Joshua Redman's 2002 album *Elastic* featured an outstanding trio consisting of Redman on saxophone, Sam Yahel on keyboards and organ, and Brian Blade on drums. It was Redman's first full-length album to take advantage of electric instruments, overdubbing, and signal processing, which helps create a great deal of sound for three musicians. The second song on the album, "Jazz Crimes," was especially celebrated among drummers, as Blade combines tight funk grooves with improvisational jazz concepts. The song's instrumental hits are reminiscent of Thelonious Monk's composition "Evidence," as the similarity in subject matter of the respective songs' titles suggests. Figure 4.5 notates the first eight measures of "Jazz Crimes," showing both Blade's transcribed drum groove as well as the rhythmic hits that Yahel is playing underneath Blade's syncopated funk groove.

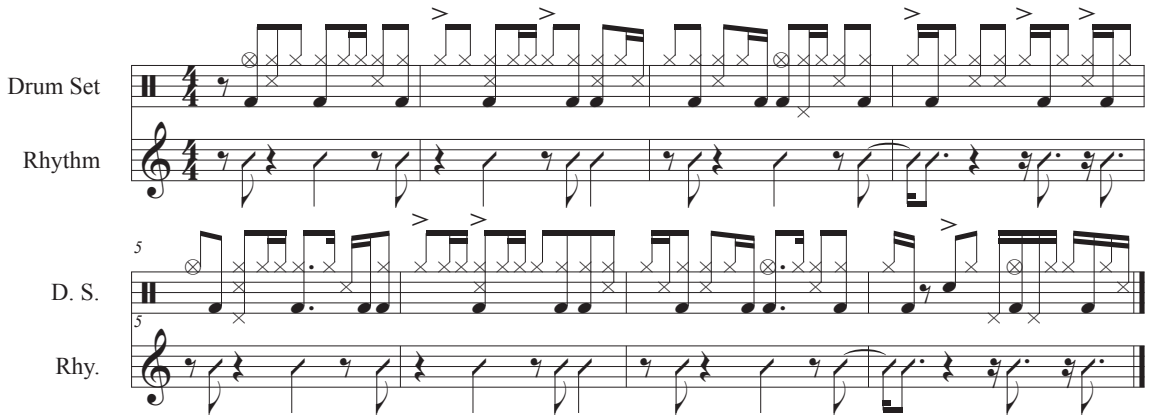

Figure 4.5. "Jazz Crimes" transcription, part 1. Intro drum pattern and rhythmic ostinato.

As seen in figure 4.5, Blade's bass drum pattern matches the rhythmic organ hits played by Yahel throughout the head of this recording. He combines this syncopated bass drum voice with a funk style hi-hat and cross-stick snare drum pattern reminiscent of the

drumming of Clyde Stubblefield and John “Jabo” Starks of James Brown’s band. Blade’s playing is exceptionally tight, primarily subdivided in eighth-notes with sixteenth-note embellishments throughout. It also features a great deal of improvisation, with no two measures of Blade’s playing remaining the same. This groove demonstrates Blade’s ability to combine influences in both funk and modern jazz music to create a highly engaging drum part.

At 5:32, Blade’s iconic drum solo begins. Both Redman and Yahel play rhythmic hits in a vamp style that allows Blade to improvise freely while retaining a form to guide his musical choices.

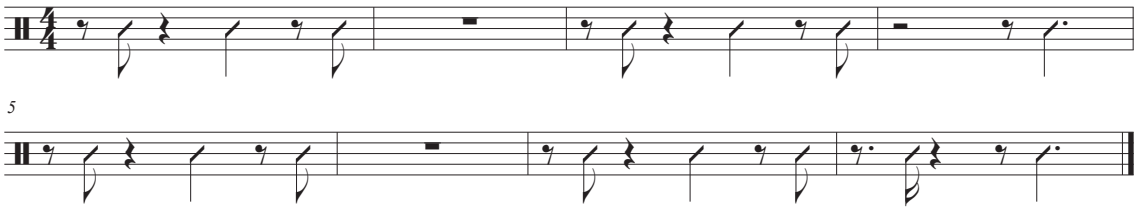

Figure 4.6. “Jazz Crimes” transcription, part 2. Drum solo vamp rhythmic hits.

This vamp continues throughout the entirety of Blade’s solo, which lasts twenty-four measures (three times through the eight-bar vamp). His entire solo is transcribed in figure 4.7, which displays a masterful demonstration of improvisation from Blade.

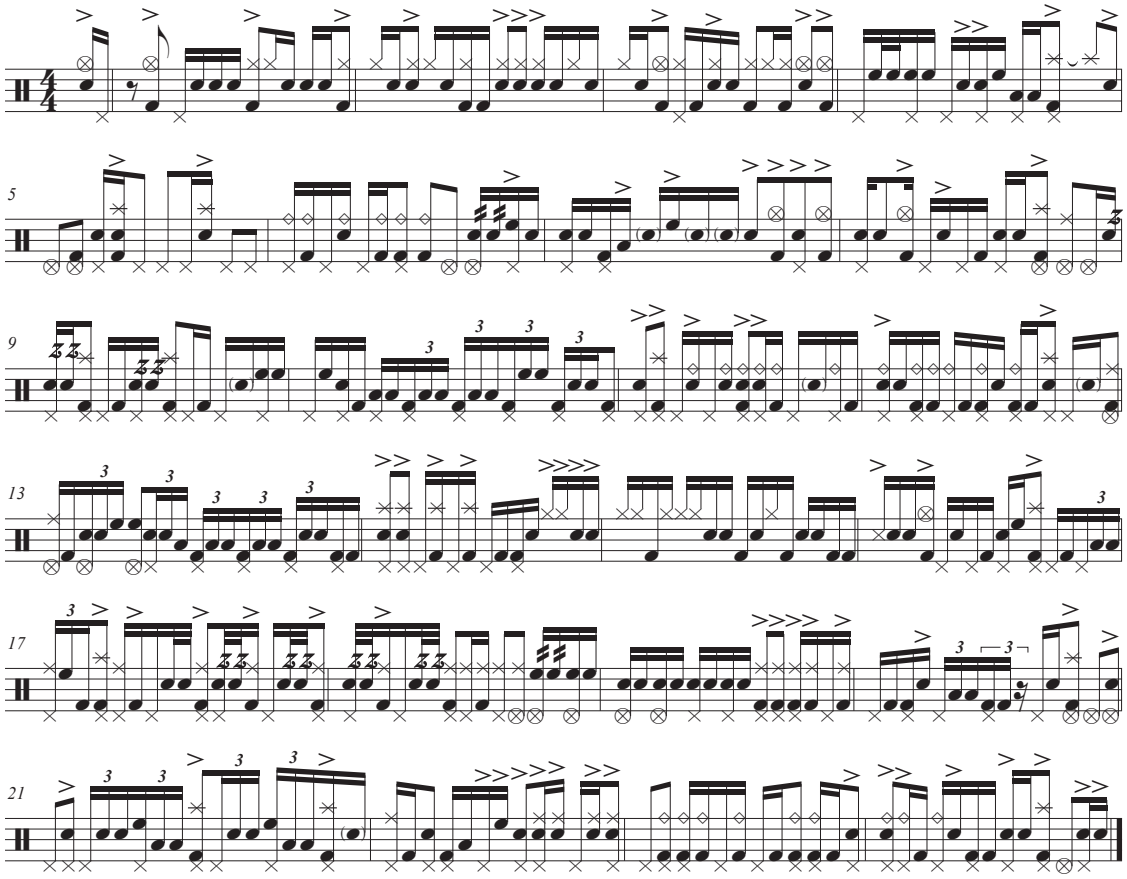

Figure 4.7. “Jazz Crimes” transcription, part 3. Drum solo (5:32).

This drum solo showcases Blade’s highly advanced technique and musical approach to improvising. Blade’s timing locks in perfectly with Redman and Yahel throughout the entire solo, and he ensures that the listener never loses sight of the rhythmic hits that he is shaping his ideas around. Blade displays syncopated limb independence in sections such as measures 11 and 12, where he retains a constant eighth-note hi-hat pulse with his left foot, while playing different combinations of both stacked and linear concepts between his hands and right foot. He uses a variety of subdivisions throughout the solo, in a nod to the improvisations of one of his most-cited influences, Elvin Jones. He also uses precise and intentional dynamic control to create distinctly

different sounds between his accented and unaccented notes, reminiscent of Tower of Power's drummer David Garibaldi. Overall, Blade's performance on "Jazz Crimes" is in some ways quite out of character, as it displays more athletic "chops" than many of his recordings. Nevertheless, while his playing may be busier than usual, this is an incredibly melodic and musical display of Blade's facility on the drum set, which is what gives this recording away as something that is still undeniably Brian Blade.

Conclusion

While it is true that the versatility of each drummer featured in this research work made it very difficult to choose just three songs to showcase their artistry, Brian Blade was likely the most difficult of all to narrow down to three individual performances. Blade's own group, Brian Blade & the Fellowship Band has been a great inspiration and point of study for me personally as I have searched for jazz music that goes beyond athleticism and intellectualism and reaches into the soul of improvisational music compositions. It is with regret that I was unable to analyze any of the group's works in detail for this study. Furthermore, Blade's work with the Wayne Shorter Quartet and the Chick Corea Trio has provided incredible recordings that are as deserving to be included as any of my selections.

That said, the goal of my work is to highlight musical diversity throughout each of these drummer's careers. For Blade, I chose a subtle singer-songwriter performance, a high-energy improvisational rock tune, and a modern jazz work. I felt that there was no modern jazz recording more celebrated among drummers than his playing on Redman's

"Jazz Crimes," and leaving this piece out would warrant just as many concerns, if not more, than any of the absent work mentioned above.

As I alluded to in the introduction of this chapter, I feel that Brian Blade may be the most complete chameleon of modern drumming in this entire study. He adapts to a variety of musical situations in a completely authentic way, most notably bridging the gap between rock and jazz styles with more authenticity than most any other musician I have encountered. Blade seems to be unphased by the limitations of different genres, saying, "I think we get caught up in terminology too much. Maybe it's just where I grew up, but for me the music was this singular thing. I never put up too many walls between genres and all this" (Panken 2011).

Blade has a deep musicality that is expressed through his time feel, fast reflexes in improvisational choices, and extensive use of dynamics. He has cited Levon Helm (of The Band), Elvin Jones, and John Bonham (of Led Zeppelin) as three of his favorite drummers, and I hear a connection between each of these traits in those respective drummers. It is also worth noting that all three of the songs I have selected for analysis feature a pulsing left foot hi-hat technique, which I believe Blade uses to secure the time feel of the song while he improvises more freely over the top of this pulse.

One of Blade's "signature moves" is his technique when crashing cymbals with very high energy, where he often lifts himself entirely off his seat and onto his feet. It is an exciting technique to watch, and one that audiences often respond to with a reciprocal excitement. However, when Blade is asked about his full-body drumming technique, he seems only to be concerned about the sound that it achieves:

> Hopefully it gives me flexibility and interpretation. It's hard for me to see it any other way. As I've developed, I've come to my own processes of how to get a sound… I feel like I'm all wrapped up in it. I never practiced posture so much… If I have to get up to hit the cymbal, at that moment it must be needed (Micallef 2008, 68).

These quick musical reflexes make him a joy for other musicians to create music with in a variety of settings and have helped Blade maintain his status as a first-call drummer in not just jazz, rock, folk, blues, funk, or fusion alone, but in all of these genres at once.

Chapter Five: Nate Smith

When considering drummers to include in this study, I intended for there to be a chronological aspect to my work. I selected Steve Gadd and Vinnie Colaiuta to represent the chameleons of drumming's past, as well as Matt Chamberlain and Brian Blade to represent drummers that have been active since the 1990s and are still currently enjoying some of the busiest years of their careers. Lastly, I chose to select a drummer that has been active long enough to have a significant list of recordings to analyze, yet still may be on his way "up the ranks." In other words, I wanted to include someone that I felt is still on their way to being one of the next great chameleons of modern drumming. After considering many drummers worthy of this title, I found that Nate Smith stood out among the competition. I feel that there is no one better to finish this research work and point our eyes towards the future of commercial drumming.

While Nate Smith has been active in the jazz world since the early 2000s, he has become a household name among musicians in recent years, partly due to his diverse performances outside of jazz. He was born in Chesapeake, Virginia, and began playing drums at age 11. Smith has explained that he began as a rock and funk drummer, citing Steward Copeland (The Police) and Will Calhoun (Living Colour) as two of his earliest influences. Unlike every other drummer in this paper, Smith was primarily self-taught, relying on his participation in marching and symphonic bands to build his skills on the drum set. In college, Smith continued to live as an outlier, earning a B.S. in Media Arts

and Design from James Madison University instead of a music degree. Although Smith did not major in music, he played in every ensemble available to him on campus at JMU, taking on as many extracurricular opportunities as possible. Included in those extracurriculars was his participation in the 1995 Disney Grammy band and a trip to the 1996 International Association for Jazz Education with a band from James Madison. While performing at the IAJE, Smith was heard by the legendary jazz vocalist Betty Carter, who subsequently recruited him for her Jazz Ahead program at New York City's Lincoln Center (where drummer Eric Harland was also a participant). Smith went on to earn a graduate degree in Jazz Performance from Virginia Commonwealth University, where he met bassist Dave Holland and joined his quintet in 2003. When *Modern Drummer* wrote their first feature on Smith in 2012, his versatility was already evident. Ken Micallef wrote:

> Beyond his potent jazz drumming abilities, which he pursues with, among others, tenor saxophonist Chris Potter, vocalist Claudia Acuña, guitarist Adam Rogers, and his band The Wink and the Gun… Smith is an adept R&B and soundtrack producer. His music has been heard on PBS and the Discovery Channel, and [he has produced several soul albums]. Most recently he produced and mixed Jarrard Anthony's *Ready to Live*. Smith even cowrote and coproduced "Heaven Can Wait" for Michael Jackson's *Invincible* album. A rare musician who's seemingly unconstrained by genre, Nate is touring this summer with the iconic '80s new wave artist Joe Jackson (Micallef 2012, 29).

Since then, Smith has continued to stretch his limits, working with Robin Eubanks, Lionel Loueke, John Patitucci, Nir Felder, Ravi Coltrane, José James, Randy Brecker, and Paul Simon, among many others.

While touring with José James in 2017, a series of videos shot by the vocalist introduced Nate Smith to the audiences of Instagram and Facebook, with multiple videos going viral and accumulating millions of views. While Smith was already well-known

among jazz fans, these videos catapulted him into the view of drummers and music fans at large, just in time for the release of his band's debut record, *Kinfolk.* Following the success of this record, Smith achieved several impressive accomplishments. He was nominated for two Grammy awards, invited to become a founding member of The Fearless Flyers (a successful side project of Vulfpeck, a modern funk band with a notable cult following), he landed his first cover feature in *Modern Drummer* in September of 2018, and most recently he has recorded and toured with Brittany Howard of The Alabama Shakes on her Grammy-nominated solo project, *Jaime*. Smith's sixteenth-note-based pocket has become a signature, with his touch described in *Modern Drummer* as "light, swift, and propulsive… his tone: dark and pungent. His ghost-note-encrusted signature: instantly recognizable" (Micallef 2018, 30). The following collection of songs displays some of Smith's best work in recent years and foreshadows an idea of what he may be capable of in the future.

"History Repeats" by Brittany Howard

Brittany Howard is best known for her role as the frontwoman of the Grammy-winning blues-rock band Alabama Shakes. In 2018, Howard called a meeting with her bandmates and broke the news that while she did not intend for the band to break up, she had decided to put their work on hold to focus on writing a solo album. When asked for a reason for the initiation of this new project, she cited a desire for more creative control and a creeping fear of never taking this leap if she put it off any longer. Howard invited Zac Cockrell (bassist of Alabama Shakes) and Shawn Everett (engineer and co-producer of the Shakes' 2015 album *Sound & Color*) to join her in the venture. She also recruited

Robert Glasper and Nate Smith to play keyboards and drums on the album, respectively. Both Glasper and Smith have been active mostly at the intersection of jazz and hip-hop, a much different sound than the blues and soul music typically associated with Alabama Shakes. This new collaboration led to 2019's *Jaime*, an album that was praised by critics for its "kaleidoscopic mix of decades' worth of R&B, hip-hop, blues, and gospel, steeped in trippy laptop sonics and deeply personal political urgency" (Dolan 2019).

While the album features a highly diverse collection of songs, the lead single "History Repeats" stood out to both music critics and the Recording Academy and was nominated for two awards at the 62nd Annual Grammy Awards (Best Rock Song and Best Rock Performance). As described by *Rolling Stone* critic Jon Dolan, the song "opens [the album] by establishing what will become a theme, sounding at once ancient and modern as it suggests a natural bridge between James Brown good-footin', 'Kiss'-era Prince, and Janelle Monáe's sci-fi futurism" (Dolan 2019). The song opens with several layers of Nate Smith's drumming, including a snare roll, a booming concert bass drum overdub that leads into and accents the downbeats of alternating measures, and the primary drum groove that remains throughout the entire arrangement.

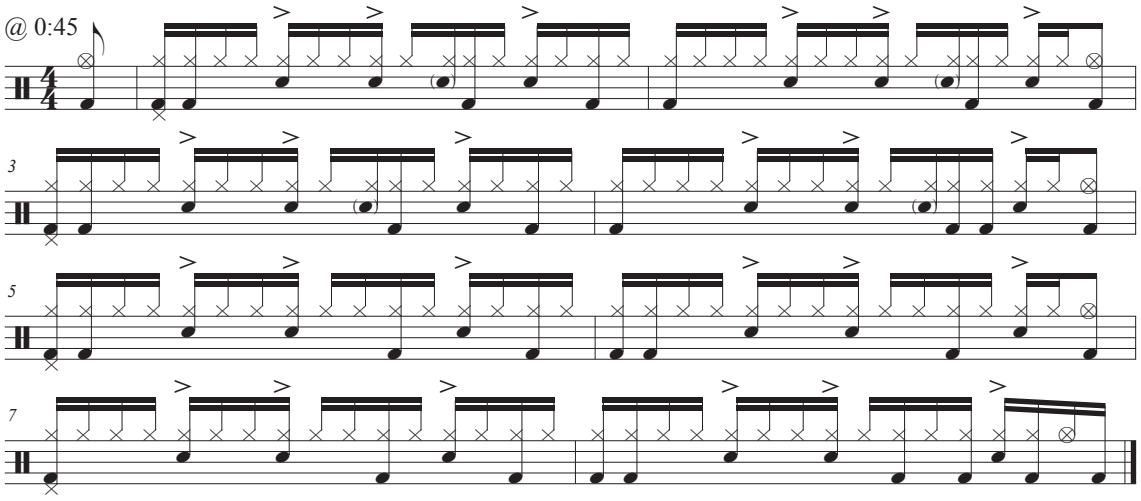

Figure 5.1. “History Repeats” transcription, part 1. Verse one (0:45).

After a lengthy introduction, Howard’s vocals enter at 0:45, and verse one begins. Smith moves his right hand from the ride cymbal to the hi-hat, which tightens the sound of his driving sixteenth-note groove. The juxtaposition of ancient and modern, as described by Dolan, is strongly present in this drum groove; Smith’s funky up-tempo performance is paired with compressed and distorted drum tones while the aforementioned bass drum overdub continues. The consistency of Smith’s sixteenth-note hi-hat and snare accents give the drum track a looped or programmed feeling, perhaps stemming from Smith’s encyclopedic knowledge of programmed hip-hop beats. However, the variation in Smith’s bass drum and light use of ghost-notes signals to the listener that they are listening to a performance from a real drummer in this recording. From time to time, Smith embellishes the groove with more extended drum fills, such as the syncopated two-beat fill in measure eight of figure 5.1. This syncopated bass drum variation references the funk drumming of Clyde Stubblefield (James Brown), David Garibaldi (Tower of Power), Mike Clark (The Headhunters), and many others from the

era of early funk music. Another excellent example of this syncopated fill is used to transition the band into the song's first chorus, at 1:42.

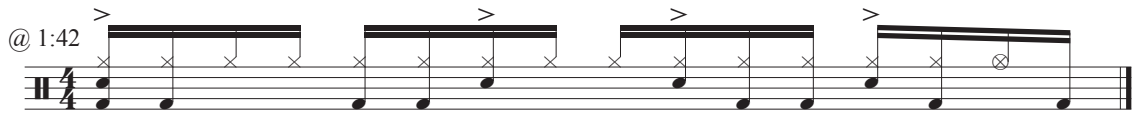

Figure 5.2. "History Repeats" transcription, part 2. Syncopated drum fill example (1:42).

In this four-beat example, Smith temporarily "flips" the backbeat of the groove by delaying the snare accent that would be expected on the downbeat of beat two by an extra eighth note, to the "and" of two. He then phrases the next two snare accents as dotted-eighth-note length extensions, which brings the backbeat back to its expected place on the downbeat of four. Additionally, doubled kick drum strokes add additional excitement and syncopation to this transitional moment.

In this recording, Smith displays his ability to blend a repetitive or looped drum groove idea with syncopated improvisations, adding a human element to the song's rhythmic base. It is also worth noting that the live arrangement of "History Repeats," as seen in several live performance videos available on YouTube, features a very different take on the song. The following transcription is taken from Howard's performance on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live* in November of 2019.

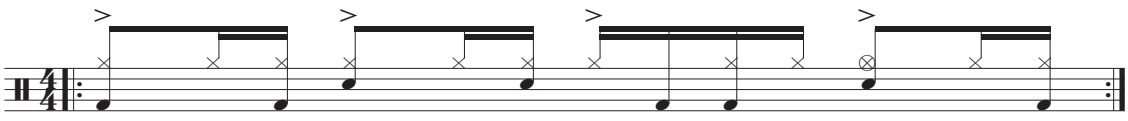

Figure 5.3. "History Repeats" transcription, part 3. Live arrangement drum pattern.

Without many of the production techniques present in the studio version, Howard instead opted to frame the song in a more traditional funk context, reminiscent of a James Brown performance. Smith keeps the same snare accents but changes his hi-hat pattern from a constant driving sixteenth-note to a group of three (one, and-a-two, and-a-three, etc.) that strongly emphasizes downbeats. The bass drum pattern also varies slightly from the recorded version of the song. Along with alterations in the guitar and keyboard parts, as well as the addition of background vocals, Howard brings a new feel to this song that is certainly worth a listen.

"Introducing the Fearless Flyers" by The Fearless Flyers

Vulfpeck is an American funk band that was founded in 2011 after the members met at the University of Michigan's School of Music. The band was conceived with the idea of channeling the style of 1960s American session musicians such as the Funk Brothers, Wrecking Crew, and Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section. Since 2011, Vulfpeck has utilized the internet to build an impressive cult following, creating content for platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Reddit to fuel their growth. The band's leader, Jack Stratton, is a talented marketer, who has invented several creative ideas to fund the band's music career. For example, Vulfpeck has crowd-funded a limited one-time vinyl release of every album in their catalogue (some of which are now worth nearly six times their original price on resale markets) using a similar technique to footwear companies like Nike and Adidas who release sneakers in highly limited quantities in order to create prompt consumer desire and raise the perceived value of their products.

Perhaps most infamously, the band released an album in March of 2014 exclusively on Spotify, entitled *Sleepify.* The release consisted of ten tracks, each consisting of roughly thirty seconds of silence, and fans were encouraged to stream the album on repeat while they slept. The album remained on the streaming platform for seven weeks before being removed, in which time Vulfpeck earned a reported $19,655.56 that was used to fund their first national tour with no admission charge for fans (Bonanos 2014).

In September of 2019, the band became the first to ever headline a sold-out concert at Madison Square Garden with no record label or manager. Their successful side project opened this concert, The Fearless Flyers, who are produced by Stratton, and include Vulfpeck member Joe Dart on electric bass, touring member Cory Wong on electric guitar, Mark Lettieri (of the Grammy Award-winning fusion band Snarky Puppy) on electric guitar, and Nate Smith on drums. The Fearless Flyers have released two EPs of instrumental funk, the first of which was released in March of 2018 and included "Introducing the Fearless Flyers" as the third of six tracks. In an interview with *Modern Drummer*, Nate Smith explains that:

> Every song is recorded in real time and every song gets a video. The videos make you feel like you're in the room with the band… The first video got five million views. It's crazy. Everything was based around what's cool about each individual's playing. They saw me playing the sixteenth-note grooves and wanted to focus on that for many of the tracks… I like that the guys are plugged in to a history and a lineage. We checked out old videos of Al Jackson [Jr., of Booker T. & the M.G.'s], and Steve Gadd with Grover Washington. There's a connection to history (Micallef 2018, 34).

As Smith explained, a desire to feature the individual strengths of each member was necessary for the group, and many of the performances feature up-tempo riffs that heavily feature Smith's sixteenth-note funk grooves. "Introducing the Fearless Flyers" is an

excellent example of the band's style and displays Smith's virtuosic facility and control on the drum set, while maintaining an excellent time feel throughout.

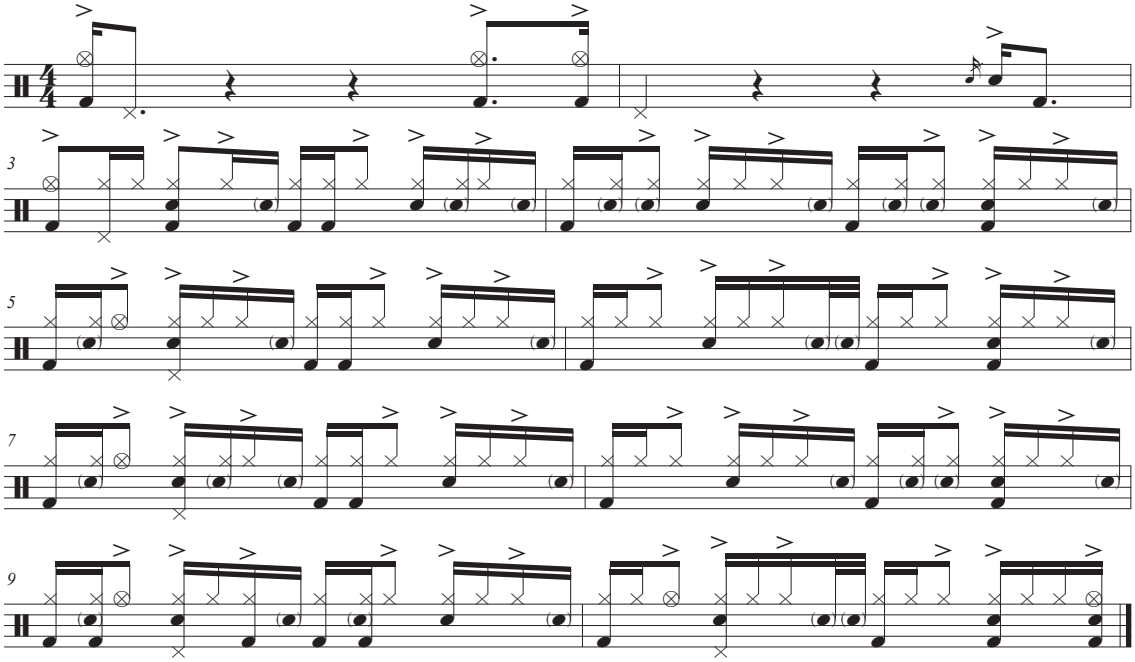

Figure 5.4. "Introducing the Fearless Flyers" transcription, part 1. A section (0:00).

Figure 5.4 transcribes Smith's playing through the first A section of the song, which primarily features a hi-hat grouping of three, permutated from his pattern on the live arrangement of Brittany Howard's "History Repeats." This time, Smith plays one-e-and, two-e-and, three-e-and, etc. His right-hand motion accents the third stroke in each beat, which helps the listener perceive a consistent eighth-note pulse in the song and creates a "groovy" or "funky" feeling. Pairing this hi-hat pattern with a confident snare drum backbeat on two and four, left-hand ghost notes filling in between, and a strong kick drum pattern that features some improvisation, Smith provides a rock-solid groove for the other members of The Fearless Flyers to follow. At roughly 131 beats per minute, the sixteenth-note subdivision of the song moves very quickly. Many drummers would

struggle to perform at this tempo, specifically in the right-hand hi-hat motion, but Smith displays his superior speed and endurance on the instrument throughout the entire recording. This impressive physical performance only increases as the song develops, and is capped off with an exciting drum solo, beginning at 1:50 (shown in figure 5.5).

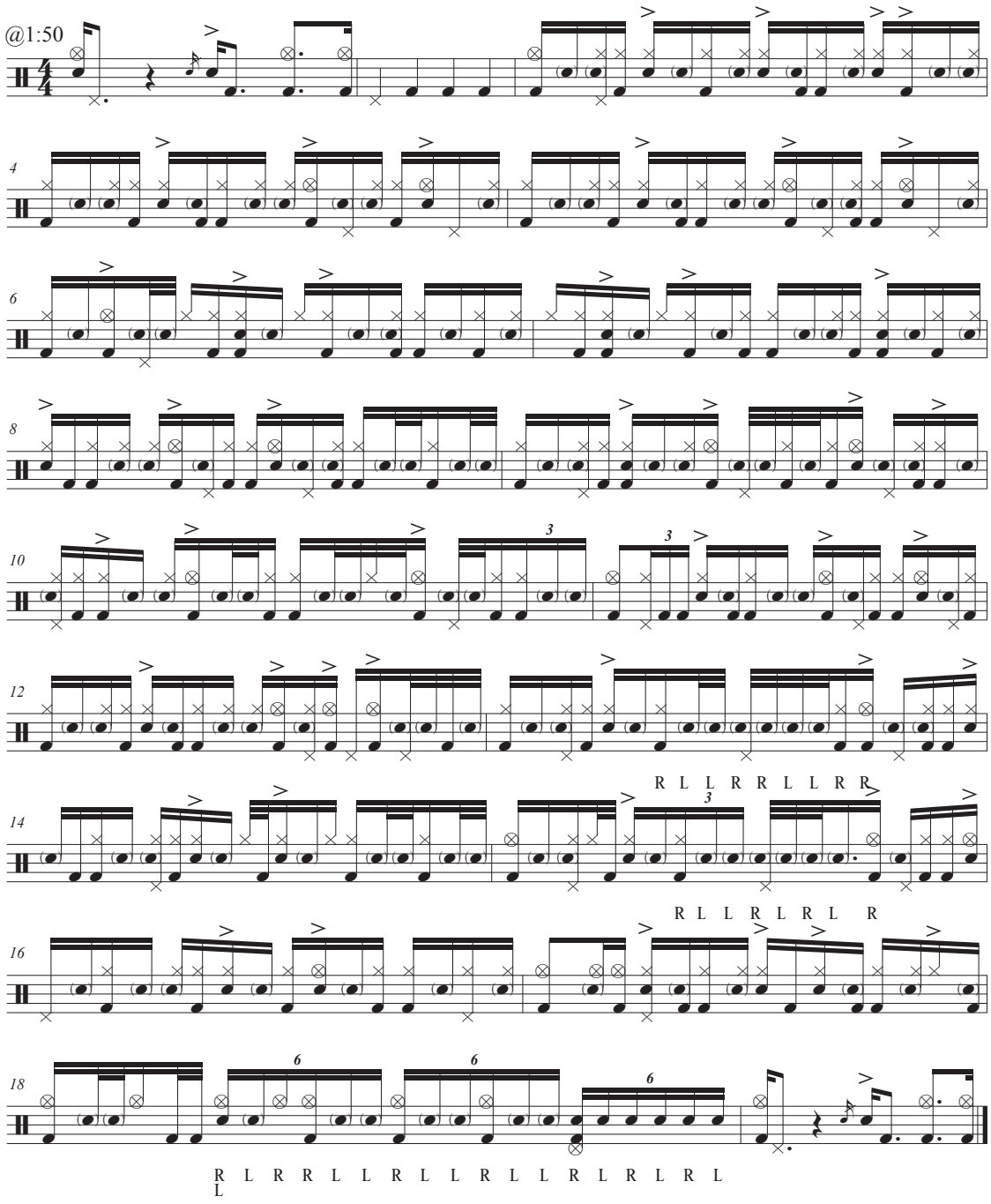

Figure 5.5. “Introducing the Fearless Flyers” transcription, part 2. Drum solo (1:50).

Smith is performing on a simple drum set, limited to only a bass drum, snare drum, and hi-hats. With a limited number of sound sources for orchestration, he relies on

varying subdivisions, varying accent patterns, and the sheer excitement of his blistering speed on the instrument to create an outstanding solo. The manipulation of accent patterns to create a disorienting pulse is especially notable in this performance. In figure 5.4, notice that Smith places snare accents on every second and fourth beat of the measure, which clearly outlines the pulse of the song. However, once he begins his solo (figure 5.5), snare accents are placed with much less order and can be found on all four downbeats of the measure, as well as on the e's, ands, and a's. While the rest of the band continues to play simple, repeating sixteenth-note ideas, Smith's irregular accent patterns conceal the pulse and make it difficult for listeners to keep track of where one measure ends and the next begins.

Smith's performance on "Introducing the Fearless Flyers" provides an excellent example of his playing in a modern funk setting, but also serves a larger purpose in his career. It is unlikely that the timing of Smith's invitation to join the Vulfpeck side-project was coincidental, as the group has proven to be very strategic in their marketing decisions. Smith has brought fresh excitement to any project he has participated in since his viral rise to stardom among musicians and music fans in 2017. Teaming up with a band like Vulfpeck that has a highly committed fan base is an advantageous career move for Smith, as it exposes him to a new audience of music fans. This relationship is also mutually beneficial, as the band will likely gain new fans from those familiar with Smith's work as well. Between his collaborations with popular artists like Vulfpeck and Brittany Howard, his active social media presence, and involvement with several notable jazz musicians, Smith has created a broad market of intersecting interests among his followers, which adds to his draw in future projects he may be invited to join.

"Bounce: pts I + II" by Nate Smith & Kinfolk

In February of 2017, Nate Smith released *Kinfolk: Postcards from Everywhere,* his first album as a true bandleader—he released three albums prior (*Workday* in 2008, *Scrapbook* in 2011, and *FORTY: the lo-fi beat tape* in 2014) but each of his previous albums were R&B production side-projects. One song on *Kinfolk*, a ballad titled "Home Free (for Peter Joe)," received two Grammy nominations: one for Best Instrumental Composition and another for Best Instrumental Arrangement. As Smith explained in an interview with WVTF Radio, "this [album] was the first bandleader effort, and this is certainly the biggest project I've ever done, because there are a lot of people on this record, a lot of folks" (Jackson 2017). Smith brought on Kris Bowers to play pianos, Fima Ephron on electric bass, Jeremy Most on guitars, and Jaleel Shaw on saxophones. There were also several featured guests on the album, including Dave Holland, Gretchen Parlato, and Chris Potter. Potter played tenor saxophone on "Bounce: pts I + II," a track that, according to Smith, is the oldest on the record.

> I'd been playing that song with Chris Potter's Underground band for many years before I recorded it… It is basically a song that has this one little instrumental riff that repeats a few times with some open jamming in between it, and then there's an open sort of solo section at the end, which features Chris Potter on the album (Jackson 2017).

The song opens with an improvisational back-and-forth between Potter and Shaw, backed by a light groove from Smith. After Most enters with the leading guitar hook of "Part I," Smith brings in a strong backbeat and the song begins in earnest.

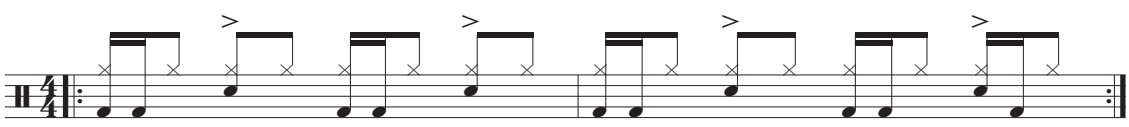

Figure 5.6. "Bounce" transcription, part 1. First section drum pattern.

Figure 5.6 transcribes the central drum groove that Smith plays throughout “Part I” of the song. It features a simple eighth-note hi-hat pulse, a steady snare drum backbeat on beats two and four, and a consistent sixteenth-note bass drum pattern, including some syncopation on the “e” of four in each measure. There is some slight improvisation, as well as fills in critical sections, but overall this groove stays remarkably consistent throughout “Part 1.” Ephron’s electric bass rhythm follows Smith’s bass drum pattern and the two musicians play precisely together. Another critical element of this groove is Smith’s ability to play “in the cracks” between a swung and straight feel. This feel, which originated in the hip-hop and R&B music which influenced Smith, brings a modern twist to Smith’s improvisatory jazz music that separates it from more classic styles of jazz such as bebop.

After the first 2:40 of the recording, the band makes a sudden syncopated stop on the “e” of three, and transitions into “Part II” of the song. Here, Smith brings in his signature sixteenth-note hi-hat rhythm and includes much more syncopation and improvisation in his playing. The tempo drops by approximately five beats per minute, and the time signature changes from 4/4 to 6/4.

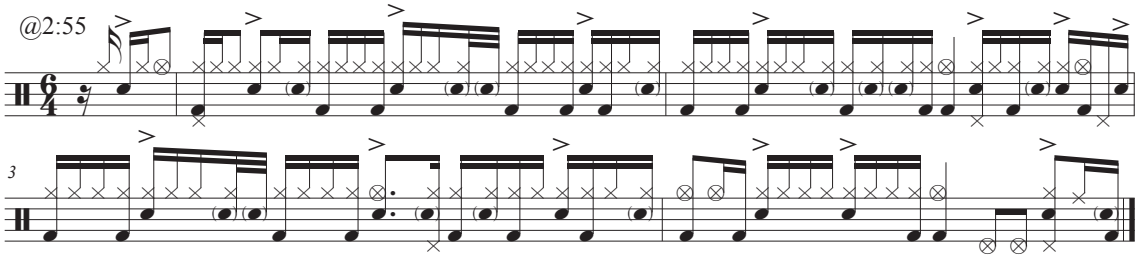

Figure 5.7. “Bounce” transcription, part 2. Second section drum pattern (2:55).

This second section of the song features open, improvisatory playing from both Smith and Potter. It is essentially an extended solo for Potter, with a harmonic vamp played underneath by Bowers, Ephron, and Most. Smith's drumming reflects the rhythms played in the harmonic vamp, yet at the same time, he is responding to the improvisational ideas presented by Potter. In this way, Smith is serving as the bridge between Potter and the rest of the band, translating Potter's ideas into something that still makes sense within the framework of the song. Smith freely moves between hi-hat and ride cymbal as the solo progresses and uses dynamics and dense fills to create contrast throughout Potter's solo. Similar to "Bounce: pt I," Smith's drumming is tight and precise throughout, and he continues to play "in the cracks." Though the introduction of sixteenth-note subdivisions does straighten out his right-hand patterns to some extent, his placement of kick and snare notes is not locked into a sixteenth-note grid, which when combined with his active improvisation gives his drumming an undeniably human sound.

Conclusion

Smith has referenced Miles Davis' record *Tutu* as an inspiration for the composition of "Bounce," describing the album by saying:

> You would have these tunes that were like just riffs that would repeat, with open improvised sections. Not really solo sections in between, but where the band would just groove in between these two sections. And I really like that idea you know, and then maybe featuring one musician as a soloist in the second part. But I just love the idea of that environment and treating the music like a piece of sculpture or something, where the parts are the parts and we kind of stick to playing the parts, and maybe we sprinkle a little bit of stuff (Jackson 2017).

This idea of improvisation within structure is central to Smith's style. While there are many examples of his playing in situations that require him to perform a live drum part

with little improvisation (for example, many tracks with Brittany Howard and José James, as well as his own R&B production work), Smith shines brightest when he has the freedom to improvise while providing a steady groove. This is evident in each recording I have analyzed in this chapter. Smith never abandons his role as the timekeeper of the group, and much of his improvisation is based around the hi-hat, snare drum, and bass drum. Nevertheless, his varied use of ghost notes, accent patterns, and subdivisions allow him to create much excitement with only a few elements of the drum kit.

Smith plays a fairly typical drum kit in almost every musical situation in which he participates. He is often seen playing a 5x14 Ludwig Supraphonic snare drum, which is often identified as the most recorded drum in history (Hansen 2017). Sometimes Smith will add a second snare to his left side, tuned low and muffled for an additional effect. This is typically paired with a 20-inch bass drum, 12 and 14-inch toms, and sometimes an additional 16-inch tom. He uses Zildjian cymbals, most typically 15" hi-hats, a 17" crash, and a 22" ride, sometimes adding a second 22" ride for additional colors. His drums typically have a tight, dead sound, as opposed to open and resonant. This sound harkens back to the sounds prevalent in the 1970s which were created by drummers like Steve Gadd. He also regularly utilizes rim shots on his snare drum, which contributes to the tight and precise nature of his sound. As discussed throughout this chapter, Smith is well-known for his sixteenth-note soul / R&B groove, which he just refers to as "pocket." Smith possesses incredible speed on the instrument and especially uses his right hand in quick combinations of strokes, sometimes playing as many as five or six strokes in a row in a floor tom fill with one hand. He has also deeply explored concepts like metric modulation and groove displacement and uses these ideas regularly in solos.

Although Smith has proven himself as highly capable of performing in a variety of genres, he never abandons the groove. When asked about the genre-defying nature of his hi-hat-based pocket, Smith says, “I’m as much a child of Jack DeJohnette and Art Blakey and Philly Joe [Jones] and Jimmy Cobb as I am of Clyde Stubblefield and Jabo Starks and [Bernard] Purdie and [Steve] Gadd. And the jazz drummers I really like are the funkiest guys” (Micallef 2018, 34). Smith, like every other drummer in this study, does not discriminate based on genre; he is excited to play any music that interests him.

When asked how he has become adept at playing such a variety of styles, Smith said, “Technically, I learned to play less. I learned to appreciate the quarter note, just playing quarter notes on the cymbal or hi-hat. There’s an environment the drummer can create just by playing less and really focusing on the total sound. In terms of skills, being able to play less is important” (Micallef 2012, 30). When considering Smith’s participation in groups with jazz figures like Dave Holland, Chris Potter, and Ravi Coltrane, his work as a producer and songwriter in R&B and hip-hop style music, his successful explorations as a composer and bandleader for Kinfolk, and recent collaborations with commercially successful artists like Brittany Howard and Vulfpeck, the variety of his affiliations is notable. It seems reasonable to assume that Smith will only continue building the momentum that he has already created in his career as an exciting chameleon with the ability to bring an infectious groove and his famous “pocket” to any musical situation to which he is invited to contribute.

Conclusion

Each of the drummers included in this research has immersed themselves in a variety of musical styles throughout both their formative and professional years as a musician and have rightfully earned their reputation as a chameleon of modern drumming. At the outset of this project, I expected to spend much more time in each chapter analyzing the differences in the drumming performances between recordings. I anticipated that this would reveal how the style of each song, as well as the contributions from other musicians involved in recording, can influence a drummer in making decisions about what to play. While this is true to an extent, I was amazed by how much easier it was to find similarities among recordings than differences. While the styles of each recording differed, I found that the core of each drummer's voice and personality was showcased in every situation. In other words, these musicians have cultivated successful careers not by building a reputation as someone who can blend into the musical scenario with no personality, but rather as someone who can blend into the musical scenario while simultaneously showcasing their distinct personality.

In each recording from Steve Gadd, his precise rudimental style can be heard. Vinnie Colaiuta is an expert at navigating complex rhythms, meters, and syncopations no matter what genre he is performing in. Matt Chamberlain's interest in electronics has led him to become the first-call drummer when an artist or producer desires a hybrid sound of man and machine on their record. Brian Blade brings his dynamic touch and deep

musicality to every gig he is called for, and Nate Smith's infectious "pocket" is always prevalent. While none of these musicians' artistry could be summed up in a single sentence, each of these statements says a great deal about their work. The identifiable traits of each of these drummers transcends genre, and this is perhaps the most important characteristic of all in any musician included in the conversation as a chameleon of modern drumming.

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