

Feature: Drum Set

Melodic Transcription for the Drum Set

by

Jack Mouse

In this article, I would like to suggest a different approach to solo transcription. Rather than transcribing another drummer's solo, transcribe a solo by a horn player, a pianist, or any other pitched instrument. The exact pitches need not be written out, only the

rhythmic patterns used by the soloist. For example, here is a four-bar excerpt from tenor saxophonist John Coltrane's solo in "Moment's Notice":



Rhythmically transcribed, it would look like this:



By rhythmically transcribing a melodic solo, the drummer gains an awareness of the rhythmic language of the idiom, be it jazz, rock, Latin, or other. Many younger drummers sound too rudimental or "marchy" at the drum set. This characteristic comes from the natural tendency to use rhythms which are most familiar. Beginning drummers often acquire rudimental drum training prior to playing the set. The progression from one to the other is all well and good, but rudimental snare drum rhythms – i.e., march rhythms – only enhance the *technical execution* of the rhythmic styles required for playing the drum set. What is needed, instead, is for drummers to use the same stylistic rhythms as other improvising instrumentalists. By transcribing melodic solos, we become more aware of the rhythms used by the soloists and we begin thinking more musically and less "drumistically." We also become more melodic and lyrical in our approach by applying these rhythms to our own playing.

Let's look again at the transcription. First, play the rhythmic transcription several times on the snare drum for rhythmic accuracy. Note how it feels to play the rhythms. Sing the rhythms. Next, on the drum set, treat the transcription like a "lead sheet" or a written melody rather than as an improvised solo. How will you accompany that melody? Which rhythmic figures will you "catch" and how will you set them up?

Great improvisers possess unique rhythmic, melodic, harmonic and textural characteristics which continually appear in their solos like musical signatures. For this reason, it is advisable to rhythmically

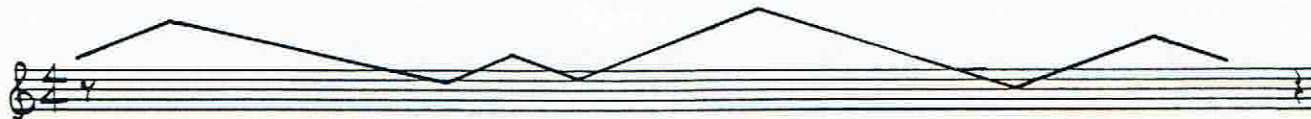
transcribe several solos by the same artist. The artist influences other players who may assimilate some of his distinctive characteristics. For instance, many jazz musicians have been influenced by the style of John Coltrane; that is, along with their own signature characteristics, they also use many of his. By studying Coltrane's rhythmic style and learning to play transcriptions of his solos as lead sheets, you will be able to accompany in a more effective and sensitive manner. Remember that the drum set is essentially an accompanying instrument; that is, most of our time is spent as accompanists rather than as soloists.

Now take the rhythmic transcription again and play it as a drum solo. Use various combinations of drums and cymbals. It is important to achieve the same feeling as the recorded soloist. Listen for dynamic contrasts, and for agogic, tonic, and dynamic accents. Be aware of the note values and their durations. For instance, in the first bar of the transcription, the "& of 1" is a long sound, as is the & of 1 in the third bar. Remember that on the drum set we have *long* sounds (cymbals) and *short* sounds (drums).

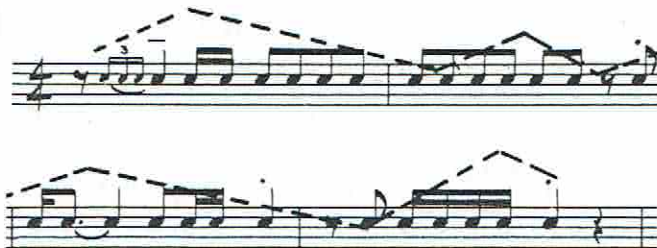
Also keep in mind that we have *high* sounds and *low* sounds, and that by using these correctly we can emulate the melodic curve of the solo – i.e., whether the line is ascending or descending, whether the melodic curve is smooth or angular, etc. You might even want to illustrate or sketch the melodic curve. Listen again to the recorded solo. Let's look once again at our four-bar example:



A graphic illustration of the melodic curve would look like this:



Now, superimpose your graphic illustration over your rhythmic transcription, using a dotted line. This will further assist you in combining all rhythmic and melodic elements of the solo.



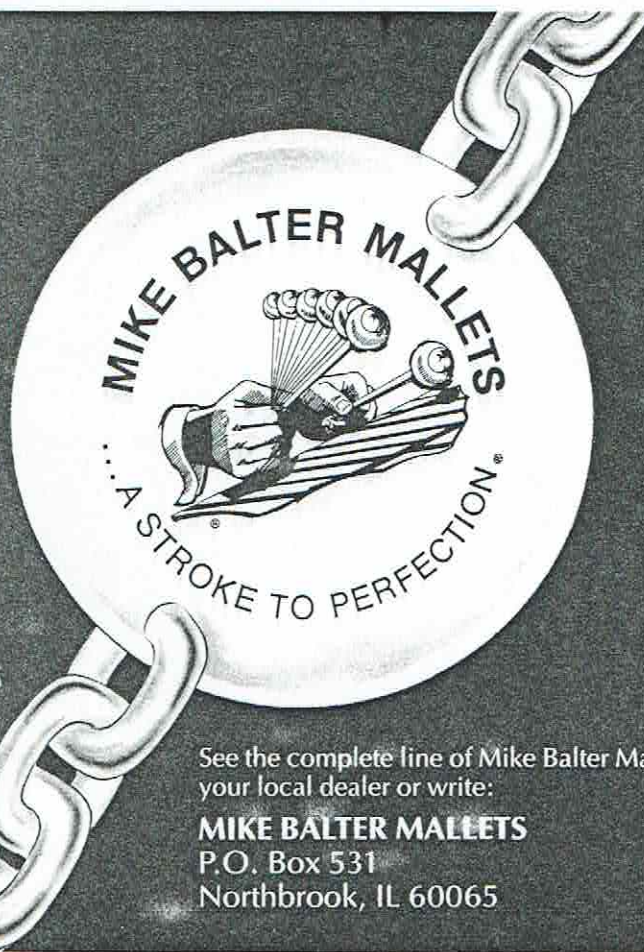
It has been my experience that by applying the approach to melodic transcription outlined here a drummer can become a melodically, rhythmically, and texturally more interesting player. Beyond this, I have also found that the approach aids a drummer in becoming a more sensitive musician, both as an accompanist and as a soloist.

Jack Mouse is the author of Building Drum Set Independence: A Stylistic Approach to an Advanced Level of Performance, published by C. L. Barnhouse and Company. He is a staff clinician for Yamaha Drums and is in the jazz and commercial music department of the American Conservatory of Music. Mouse plays with the Bunky Green Quartet, the Chicago Jazz Quintet, and the Janice Borla Group, and is also on the faculties of the Clark Terry Great Plains Jazz Camp, the Kistner Jazz Clinics, and the Saskatchewan School of the Arts Summer Jazz Camp.

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