

Composing From A Drummer's Perspective

There have been many great drummer/composers in jazz: Denzil Best, Joe Chambers and Tony Williams, to name just a few. I am sure it took arduous study of the principles of pitch-based music, composition and theory to get to their level of excellence. There is a tremendous amount of study that composition requires, yet I encourage any drummer at any level to at least try to start composing immediately—if only because you will undoubtedly learn a lot during the process that will make you a better musician.

Composing makes you think about all aspects of music, which in turn can help you in your role as a drummer. A great drummer is one who can shape and instantly transform the music as it's played in the same way a composer shapes and transforms a piece as it's being written. The difference is the amount of time you have to do it: The composer works in slow motion and has a lot of time to process and develop ideas, while the drummer has to make quick decisions based on what is occurring in the moment. The drummer who practices the slower process of composition will cultivate new skills that enable one to make quick and effective “compositional” choices during live performances.

I know from experience how intimidating it can be for a drummer to compose for musicians who have an advanced harmonic understanding. Most drummers simply don't feel familiar with the world of pitches because they are not dealing with them like their friends who play a horn, piano, guitar, etc. “Pitch content” is a topic young drummers who are interested in composing often ask me about. I recommend that all drummers study music theory and piano at the very least, as it can only add depth to their playing.

Despite my own trepidation at the beginning, I knew I just had to go for it—even with my limited knowledge, I just decided to compose to see what would happen. One helpful technique I used was to think of each compositional attempt simply as an experiment. In this way I wasn't attached to composing a great piece and could see that even my “failures” were successes in that I could learn more from a failure than from a success. Learning what doesn't work can be more helpful and give one more options than learning what does work. Once I found something that did work, I did not want to reuse or rehash it, so that idea had a limited life, whereas all the ideas that did not work led me again and again to explore different options. So all of those failures ultimately challenged me to find something that was new and different to me.

I am most likely biased on this point, but I

believe rhythm is the most universal and accessible element in music, so it can be an advantage to approach composing from a drummer's perspective. I can use my working knowledge of rhythm, form and “the big picture” (i.e. what a composition is about, what emotion or message is being conveyed) to develop a piece. In my experience, non-drummers often think of pitches first, and therefore the rhythmic element and “the big picture” are secondary. It does take me longer to write a piece than a non-drummer because I can't fall back on scales or licks as some who have practiced pitch-based exercises extensively do. I find, though, that this can be an advantage because I may have a better chance of coming up with pitch material that is in some way fresher in that I don't have those familiar pitch-based practices to fall back on or rely on.

Earlier on in my studies, I tried two experiments to explore my theory about the importance of rhythm. I wrote a piece with only rhythm, making sure it had a good structure and form without any pitches. Then I added pitches to it. (I used this technique again recently with the piece “Praya Dance” on the ONJ *Shut Up And Dance* album.) I also transcribed a great Max Roach solo, “Conversation,” and orchestrated it for ensemble.

Structurally and rhythmically, I knew that Roach's solo worked, and I kept at my own piece until I was happy with it. (There is no substitute for experience, which is how you learn when something “works”—every time you hear something that works, you are building an experiential catalog for future use). When I added pitches to these rhythmic pieces, it only increased the effectiveness and color of the overall composition.

Aside from dealing with “pitch content,” I am often asked the following questions by young musicians who are thinking about composing: How do I start composing? And what do I do once I have something that seems like it could be the beginning of a piece?

I have heard two of my favorite composers, Bob Brookmeyer and Muhal Richard Abrams, say that you only need one short entity, a cell or seed, to start a piece. It could be a chord, a pitch series, a melody or a non-musical cell like a phone number. (My new phone number was the seed of The Claudia Quintet piece “Be Happy.”) I've come to realize that I can prepare for future pieces by brainstorming and creating ongoing lists of idea seeds that help me in times of creative dryness and keep numerous possibilities floating somewhere in my consciousness.

Before I used this approach, the main method I used (and I think many others use) was to go



to the piano and improvise until the gods of creativity threw me a little nugget that I could identify as “something” and a possible beginning of a piece. This method works, but I quickly realized that my pieces were destined to sound like other pieces of mine, and perhaps pieces of others that I liked and could play on the piano. Also, my hands seemed to be the chief decision-makers, as opposed to my ears or heart. For this reason, I put that method away knowing I could always go back to it and decided to use alternatives instead.

I remember Abrams teaching that a cell could be absolutely anything. Realizing that it could be musical but also non-musical was a freeing experience for me. After thinking for some time about musical cells, such as a melody, pitch series, chord progression, vamp and rhythm, I then started my list of non-musical cells, such as words, numbers, poems, movies, paintings and experiences. Of course, you then have to translate these items into music at some point, but this can be an incredibly fun and creative way to integrate extra meaning into your pieces. Luckily the first seven or eight (depending upon what language you use) letters of the alphabet also correspond to pitches, so that is one place to start. The numbers 1–12 (or 0–11) are all the chromatic pitches in an octave, so you can play with arranging numbers that are personally meaningful to you in a composition and see if you like the translated pitches.

My next step in the process is to think about other tools that I can use to compose. In my list of tools there is the piano, the drums, my voice, various keyboard percussion instruments, melodica, the computer (and all the associated programs on the computer), a recording device and paper (musical staff paper or just regular paper). How you use these tools and in what order can greatly affect the content of your pieces. I often use combinations of these tools during the process to create a balanced piece.

Once I have “something,” I make a concerted effort to listen to the material and let the material tell me what it is and what it wants to be. I know that might sound esoteric, but give it a try—allowing yourself to be open to this may be the key to hearing the composition’s needs. In addition, for me it is helpful to think about “composition” versus “song.” Some material has in it something that can be developed into a multilayered, complex composition. Other material simply wants to be presented as a song. And some material can be both.

At this point in the process, it is important to remind myself to not get attached to the material and to let go of its label (e.g., melody, bass line, chord progression, etc.). This way I can play with the material in a very slow type of improvisation (also known as “composing”). If I find something that works well as a bass line, I say, “This could be a nice bass line, but let’s play with it and see what else it could be.” I like to think of the material I have as liquid and pliable, and I do not want it ever to truly solidify. Playing with the material is how I develop what I have, how I allow it to be what it naturally wants to be.

Early on, knowing just a little bit of theory was really helpful to me in this process. Basic techniques such as transposition, inversion, retrograde and augmentation can be used on any material. What is really interesting to me is that by using these techniques on the material, I immediately see the structural integrity of it. If, for instance, I play it backwards (retrograde), and it still sounds good to me or even better than the original, I take it as a good indicator that the material has the right quality to be developed. Experience (from your own attempts and from studying other pieces) can help you build your intuition, which helps you choose which processes to use and how.

Sometimes I’m lucky and a composition just comes out quickly and naturally, but more and more I use the lists of idea seeds and tools to help me get through that “staring at blank music paper” moment. This method also helps make each piece sound independent of past and future pieces because each one comes from a different type of seed and with a different sequence of tools utilized. The process I’m writing about would take pages and pages to fully describe, but I hope this article can give you, if you need it, the inspiration and motivation to begin experimenting with composing.

DB

GRAMMY-NOMINATED DRUMMER, COMPOSER AND BANDLEADER JOHN HOLLNBECK IS A PLAYFUL VIRTUOSO FOREVER SEEKING TO SURPRISE HIMSELF AND HIS AUDIENCE. HOLLNBECK HAS RELEASED 11 CDS AS A LEADER AND HAS RECEIVED NUMEROUS AWARDS FOR HIS MUSIC, INCLUDING A GUGGENHEIM FELLOWSHIP. HOLLNBECK SERVES AS A PROFESSOR OF JAZZ DRUMS AND IMPROVISATION AT THE JAZZ INSTITUTE BERLIN. VISIT HIM ONLINE AT JOHNHOLLNBECK.COM.

• Aaron Spears • Abe Laboriel Jr. • Alex Acuna • Alex Gonzalez • Brandon Saller • Brooks Wackerman • Chad Wackerman • Chester Thompson • Dennis Chambers • Gil Sharone • Gregg Bissonette • Joe Morello • Joe Porcaro • Jordan Mancino • JR Robinson • Louie Belinfante • Nick D'Virgilio • Nisan Scharf • Ray Lurie • Sheila E. • Stephen Perkins • Taylor Hawkins • Tony Royster Jr. • Vinny Appice • Alex Acuna • Alex Gonzalez • Brooks Wackerman • Chester Thompson • Dennis Chambers • Gil Sharone • Gregg Bissonette • Joe Morello • Joe Porcaro • Jordan Mancino • JR Robinson • Louie Belinfante • Nick D'Virgilio • Nisan Scharf • Ray Lurie • Sheila E. • Stephen Perkins • Taylor Hawkins • Tony Royster Jr. • Vinny Appice

DRUM CHANNEL.COM

ORIGINAL CONTENT

INSTANTLY WATCH EVERYTHING INCLUDING

- OVER 150 LESSONS
- OVER 100 HOURS OF SHOWS
- NEW SHOWS WEEKLY
- SECRETS FROM THE PROS
- NEW SHOW WITH JIMMY COBB
- NEW LESSON WITH PETER ERSKINE

only \$4.99 a month

MEMBER'S ONLY CONTENT + FREE

WWW.DRUMCHANNEL.COM

SHOWS & LESSONS

ANNOUNCING THE AMAZING NEW HARMONIC APPROACH BY PIANIST/COMPOSER MIKE LONGO THAT WILL HAVE YOU IMPROVISING ON TUNES LIKE 'GIANT STEPS' AND 'COUNTDOWN' WITH EASE!!!

If you have had trouble mastering the skill of playing through the changes on tunes with difficult chord progressions, this is the book for you!

Since most jazz education has been centered around the scale and mode approach for the past 25 years, not much information is presently available on how to develop the skill of playing through changes.

Mr. Longo, known for his long association with the late Dizzy Gillespie, has completely solved this problem for you with **'The Technique of Creating Harmonic Melody for the Jazz Improviser'.**

Sax and flute master James Moody had this to say: *This is by far the most effective approach to this kind of playing I have ever encountered. Not only do I pass on this information to young students in the clinics I do, I have found it to be a tremendous learning experience for my own playing.*

Avoid the hardship of trying to play on the changes without really knowing how!

The uncomfortable feeling of fumbling through tunes with a lot of changes will be completely eliminated through the techniques outlined in this course and you will be amazed by how much time you will save by approaching it this way.

You will be playing through changes comfortably by the completion of this course with confidence in your ability to play through the most complex chord progressions. **'The Technique of Creating Harmonic Melody for the Jazz Improviser'** will provide you with the most up to date approach to this subject available.

Be the first in your circle of friends who has acquired this special skill!

Your ability to express yourself will increase dramatically within the first few weeks of applying this technique and you will wish you had found out about it much sooner. You get twice the results with half the work contained in other methods.

Don't take risks when you play!

Be sure of yourself with the benefits you will derive from learning the principles contained in this course while experiencing the beauty of lyrical definitive playing!

Ron Champion, professional jazz trumpeter from the south Florida area responded:
I had been looking for something like this for years. Mike Longo's course has exceeded my expectations a hundred times over! I haven't put it down since I got it a month ago!

IMPORTANT SIDE BENEFIT

'The Technique of Creating Harmonic Melody for the Jazz Improviser' comes with it an important side benefit for you. Once you have acquired the skills outlined in the course, you can earn extra income as a private teacher utilizing these techniques.

PRODUCT SPECIFICATIONS

'The Technique of Creating Harmonic Melody for the Jazz Improviser' contains over 300 notated examples and is printed with clear double-spaced print utilizing these techniques.

NOT JUST A BOOK!

You get a complete course of study with homework assignments, enabling you to practice in a manner which will produce the results you seek.

UNCONDITIONAL GUARANTEE

If for any reason you are not completely satisfied with the course, you may return it within 14 days for a full refund. You order without risk!

HOW TO ORDER*

Send a check or money order for \$28.97 plus \$1.50 postage to:

CONSOLIDATED ARTISTS PUBLISHING
 290 RIVERSIDE DR.
 SUITE 11-D, DEPT. S.
 NYC 10025

To order with credit card ... Call toll-free:
1-800-BE-BOP-YO (1-800-232-6796)

Online ordering: www.jazzbeat.com

* NY residents must include sales tax. Failure to do so will cause delay in shipment. Foreign orders must include extra postage to cover a two pound parcel.