



# Rhythmic Independence & Musicality on the Drum Set

It is hard to imagine a pattern played on the drum set that does not require a certain level of rhythmic independence. However, there are other styles of drumming that are pretty much linear, and do not require much more than basic coordination to execute them.

There are many styles and different levels of drumming. There are different approaches and understandings about the functionality (role) of a drummer within the different styles of music, including the most personal styles of playing, which add an even wider spectrum of drumming possibilities and rhythmic innovation.

This article is going to focus on rhythmic independence and how to gain control while playing independent patterns—synchronizing them all together in order to make music with them, which is the optimum goal. Call it “playing rhythmic independence in a musical way.”

All of the examples that I have included are excerpts from my book *A World of Rhythmic Possibilities*, available at Dafnison Music ([dafnisonmusic.com](http://dafnisonmusic.com)).

Let me start by presenting the rhythm of the rumba clave, which

is the main pattern we are going to use throughout these examples. I’m going to notate the pattern in one bar, with four fundamental pulses (beats), so its basic subdivision is going to be in 16th notes. This rhythm has mostly been played starting in two different places: either on the “3” side, or the “2” side. It is important to understand that these two ways of starting the pattern do not make two different patterns, but the same pattern starting in two different places, if we simply divide the pattern in half.

Examples 1 and 2 show the rumba clave pattern in 4/4 (16th-note subdivision), and the two fundamental ways of starting this pattern.

Example 1 starts on the “3” side, and Example 2 starts on the “2” side.

The next step is to add another pattern to play simultaneously with this clave pattern. I’m going to choose the rhythm of the *cáscara*, which is a pattern that has been walking side by side with the clave for many years. This pattern is rhythmically related to the clave, to the point that we can see that the *cáscara* pattern as an extension of the clave pattern, or the clave pattern as a rhythmic simplification

of the cáscara. Let's play the two patterns simultaneously, as shown in Example 3.

As you can see, I have included accents in the cáscara pattern. These accents are fundamental to the pattern, and should be played in order to bring out the subtle character of this pattern.

A very good practice of rhythmic independence between these two patterns can also be achieved by displacing one of the patterns. This time, let's displace the cáscara pattern by a quarter note. This

means that we are going to start the clave pattern in the first beat, and the cáscara pattern on the second beat. See Example 4. You can also feel free to experiment displacing the cáscara to the third and fourth beats of the bar.

It is important to understand that all of these patterns are anchored in a strong and clear subdivision. The more control we have manipulating these subdivisions, the stronger the sense of groove we can bring to these patterns. These examples can be challenging to

**Example 1**

**Example 2**

**Example 3**

**Example 4**

**Example 5**

**Example 6**

**Example 7**

**Example 8**

**Example 9**

**Example 10**

**Example 11**

**Example 12**

**Example 13**

**Example 14**

**Example 15**

**Example 16**

**Example 17**

**Example 18**

anyone, and the only way to step forward with them is by approaching the learning process with discipline and patience.

A good tip to quicken this process is to play the clave to the point where you don't have to think about it, therefore you will be playing the pattern without paying that much attention to it. It is also very important to realize that "independence" happens in the brain, and that's why we don't need to be seated in front of the drum set to practice any of these patterns—you can practice them tapping your lap, or by simply moving the tip of your fingers.

What we are really doing is training the brain to organize and synchronize these patterns first, so that we can perform them accurately in our limbs. Our limbs are just following the signal from the brain.

Now that we have been able to play these two patterns simultaneously while changing their starting points, let's move to our next step, which is playing other patterns with the clave. This step brings more rhythmic complexity, because we are going to use the snare, the bass drum and the hi-hat, while playing the clave pattern with our right hand.

Let's pick a basic example from the book *Stick Control for the Snare Drummer* by George Lawrence Stone and translate its sticking to the drum set. We are going to play the basic pattern called a "paradiddle" (which I'm sure many of you already know). We are going to apply what the right hand plays on the bass drum, then the left hand will stay as is (playing on the snare with the left hand). The hi-hat will be playing on every downbeat as quarter notes (the hi-hat part isn't notated on the following examples), and then we will play the clave pattern in the right hand. See Example 5.

Let's include the use of syncopation within these independence exercise. It is important to understand that the ability to establish a

good feel or groove in a rhythm depends on how well we are able to manipulate its subdivisions (downbeats and upbeats). This happens whether we are playing a fast tempo or a ballad, and it will certainly help to make a more musical, relaxed and fluid performance on these or any other patterns.

For Example 6, we are going to simply displace the same paradiddle pattern by a 16th note, as notated.

Next, let's play the same syncopation exercises, but this time with the *cáscara* pattern on the right hand. See Example 7.

After playing the examples above, you should be ready to make any combination as desired. For example, let's play a combination of eighth notes and upbeats (syncopation) with the clave pattern starting on the "2" side, as shown in Example 8.

I consider these examples to be much more than just combinations of sticking patterns adapted to the drum set. They are compositional rhythmic phrases that can bring beauty and elegance to your playing.

In fact, these are not mere exercises, but rather a key to opening the door to an infinite amount of rhythmic possibilities that each drummer can use as a source for creativity, while accomplishing the technical ability to execute them.

These are just a few examples, but any drummer can adapt these examples to other rhythms they like and use most frequently, like swing, shuffle, funk, rock, etc.

Being musical is not only a natural condition someone possesses, but a quality that can be practiced and enhanced at all times. This is a subject that refers to the quality and the control with which something is played, but it also refers to how we listen while playing, our perception and awareness of rhythms, and how well we fulfill the intention behind what we play.

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For example, if we play a rhythm, we should also try to bring a character to that rhythm, a certain attitude that will reflect a specific rhythmic intention. This intention can be roughly described in two ways: the feel of the pattern (for example, being in swing feel, straight feel, half time, etc.) and the actual rhythmic content of the pattern. It also relates to the use of specific musical techniques that will enhance the performance and interpretation, such as dynamics, textures, touch, accents, embellishments, rhythmic fluidity, lengths of rhythmic phrases, etc.

All of these different techniques and qualities can and should be added to the examples mentioned in this article. The optimum

approach to these examples is to play with rhythmic fluidity and a strong sense of groove, and listening to the dynamic balance between all of the parts—while giving yourself the freedom of changing back and forth from one example to another.

Be interactive—add embellishments and improvisation—as if you are in fact creating music. The key point to this approach is very simple: Listen openly to everything that you play from the beginning so that you get used to making music at all times, even while practicing.

Another suggestion that comes to mind is vocalizing these patterns: replicating the sounds of the drums in your head (or out loud)

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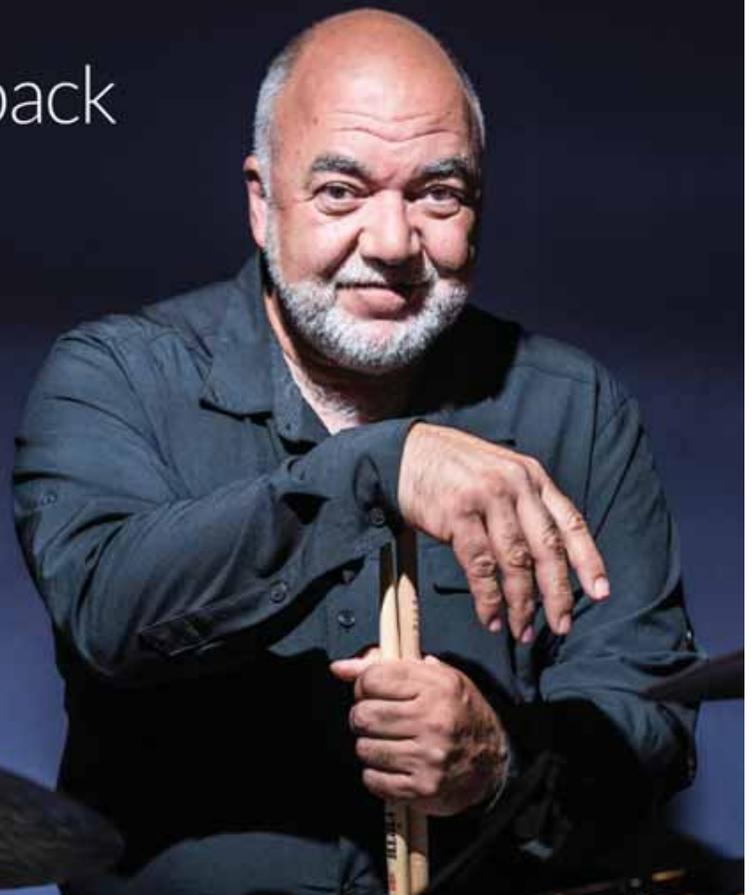
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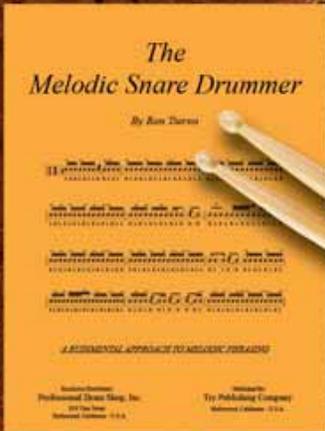


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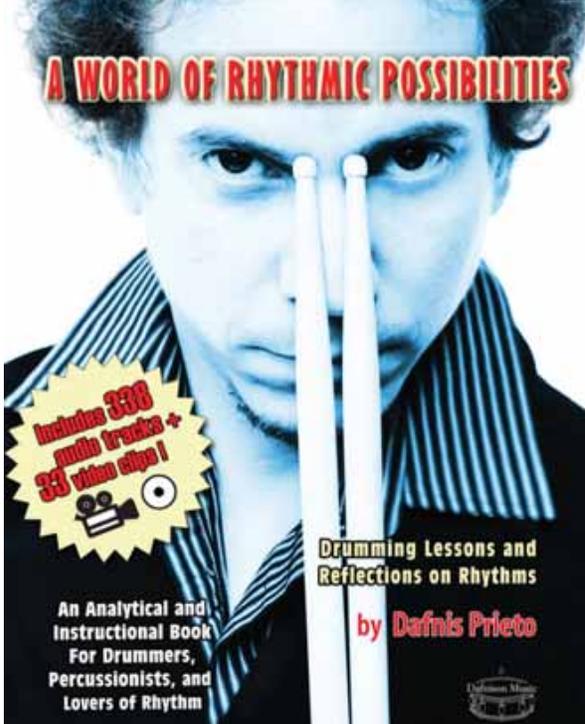
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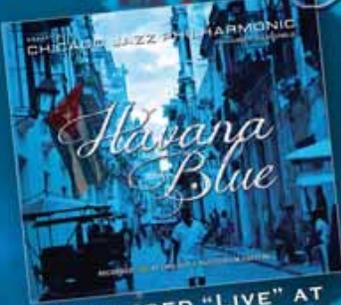
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*I consider these examples to be much more than just combinations of sticking patterns adapted to the drum set. They are compositional rhythmic phrases that can bring beauty and elegance to your playing.*

while clapping the clave, the cáscara or any other pattern. This rhythmic vocalization will greatly help to internalize (rhythmically and sonically) these or any other rhythmic independence patterns.

Next, I would like to present some more examples from my book, this time from the chapter titled "Max in Clave."

Example 9 shows a drum break that Max Roach played in the song "Klact-Oveeseds-Tene" (Take B alternate) from the collection

*Charlie Parker: The Dial Masters—Original Choice Takes* (Spotlite). The tune starts off with an eight-bar intro followed by a drum break. This break repeats twice and is originally played by Roach on the snare and bass drums. He also plays some kind of double rim-shot flam on the snare.

Let's look at the same rhythmic structure, but now written in 16th-note subdivisions and without the flams, in a two-bar phrasing pattern. See Example 10.

Now, let's play the same rhythmic phrase simultaneously with the clave pattern. See Example 11.

This example has great compositional potential because it can be divided into two fundamental themes. Theme #1 is shown in Example 12; theme #2 is illustrated in Example 13.

Example 14 shows the break with the two themes as they appear in their original form.

Moving further, we can change the order of these two themes, while keeping the same two-bar phrasing pattern.

The original Roach break was in the following order: 1-2-2-1. But we are now going to change the order to 1-1-2-2, 2-2-1-1 and 2-1-1-2, as shown in Example 15, Example 16 and Example 17, respectively. (The note in parentheses represents the beginning of each theme.)

As you can see, we are indeed experiencing astonishing rhythmic independence combinations by simply changing the order in which we play the two themes.

If you are able to play these examples, it means that you already have the ability to take this information to the next level, which is being interactive (using improvisation), musical (using dynamics, accents, etc.) or creating any other kind of variations.

I would like to close by presenting a well-known theme that was also played by Roach, titled "For Big Sid," in clave.

The "Big Sid" theme is a beautiful rhythmic phrase adapted to the drum set by Roach from the song "Boff Boff (Mop Mop)," composed by saxophonist Coleman Hawkins. While playing this theme, Roach would improvise with endless variations, creating a form similar to call-and-response, most of the time keeping the hi-hat on the second and the fourth beats as in the swing feel.

Example 18 is a variation of the "Big Sid" theme that I recreated, this time playing on the snare and the bass drum, the hi-hat on all quarter notes, and the clave (2-3) with the right hand.

The very core of this lesson is based on the belief that rhythmic independence is just a means to an end, by which I mean you should try to make music out of these rhythmic examples and not just treat them as exercises.

Practicing these examples with a focused intention will not only lead to many other rhythmic possibilities, but also to a very enjoyable musical performance on the drum set.

DB

Cuban-born drummer Dafnis Prieto's revolutionary techniques and compositions have had a powerful impact on the Latin and jazz music scenes, nationally and internationally. Since his arrival in New York in 1999, Prieto has worked in bands led by Henry Threadgill, Steve Coleman, Eddie Palmieri, Chico and Arturo O'Farrill, Dave Samuels & The Caribbean Jazz Project, Jane Bunnett, D.D. Jackson, Edward Simon, Michel Camilo, Chucho Valdez, Bebo Valdez, Roy Hargrove, Don Byron and Andrew Hill, among others. He has also led his own ensembles—

including various duet, trio, quartet, quintet and sextet configurations, plus a small big band—and has released six albums as a leader, including his most recent album, *Triangles And Circles* (Dafnison Music, 2015). As an educator, Prieto has conducted numerous master classes, clinics and workshops throughout the world. He served on the jazz studies faculty at New York University from 2005 to 2014, and in 2015 he joined the faculty of University of Miami's Frost School of Music. Prieto has received numerous commissions, grants and fellowships from such institutions as the MacArthur Foundation, Chamber Music America, Jazz at Lincoln Center, East Carolina University, Meet the Composer and the Doris Duke Foundation. He is founder of the independent music company Dafnison Music, which this year published his analytical/instructional book *A World of Rhythmic Possibilities: Drumming Lessons and Reflections on Rhythms*. Prieto's lessons offer substantial detail on technique, while adding insight into the spiritual and emotional aspects of drumming. The book references online audio and video clips that can be accessed as supplemental material. Visit Prieto online at [dafnisonmusic.com](http://dafnisonmusic.com).



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