

## READING AND INTERPRETING BIG BAND DRUM CHARTS

### SOME RANDOM THOUGHTS LEARNED OVER TIME

1. *Playing “pulse” with a bass player* is always a fun experience, or my “nemesis”! There has always been heated discussions as to whether certain bass players or drummers play “on top” (meaning a bit ahead) of the beat, in the center of the beat, or behind the beat. Others believe that good combinations of players happen when a drummer plays “on top” while the bassist plays slightly behind, or vice-versa. I’ve always found music to be at its best when the drummer and bassist interpret the pulse in the same manner, whether both on top or both in the center, or in rare instances both on the lazy side of the pulse. Young students must realize that these “top”, “center”, and “backside” of the beat interpretations are more a musical feeling related to the overall energy that a drummer and bass player produce, not the feeling produced by rhythm sections that actually “rush” or “drag” the original tempo. Playing steady time while creating a great “feel” is generally the expected goal of all great rhythm section players regardless of the style of music.

2. *Playing great music takes intelligence and passion.* I heard a great saying once by the respected composer and bandleader George Russell. In talking about emotion and skill he said, “I’ve heard really good players play with a lot of heart and emotion but not much intellect. And, I’ve heard many good players who perform with loads of intellect, but not much passion. But, the great players learn to channel their intellect through their heart, using both to connect with music and their audience.”

3. *Learn to “orchestrate” your fills and set ups.* Jeff Hamilton gave a drum set clinic at the Percussive Arts Society International Conference in 2002. Jeff, a great big band drummer and huge Mel Lewis fan, talked about his “pet peeve” of drummers who use every limb to punctuate a big band horn figure. In essence, he discussed the process of “orchestrating” fills and set ups as they pertained to dynamics and form in a big band chart. Jeff said, “Many drummers think if the dynamic is “FF”, they have to punctuate the note with all four limbs.” Try using different combinations, i. e.: snare/cymbal or bass drum/cymbal, etc. so that you don’t obliterate the horns dynamically and sonically, by using everything in your drumming arsenal at once.

4. *“Play for the other musicians first!” (Mel Lewis).* What a great treatise on the art of accompaniment! Drums and drummers have been marketed into being drum soloists more than ever in the last 20 years. I hear many students who play great drum solos but have little or no clue about “set ups” and accompaniment. Luckily, there are many more opportunities in terms of videos, books, and camps where young drummers are learning how to set up figures, play behind soloists, and interact with musicians in improvised settings.

5. *“All of the swing really comes from your feet!” (Mel Lewis talking about the organic quality of using your feet to reinforce the quarter note on the bass drum, and two and four back beat feeling with the hi-hat, which is often missing in certain forms of swing music/drumming).* Young drummers shouldn’t be afraid to “feather” (play very soft) their bass drum. Learn the art of playing a steady pulse on the bass drum with your hi-hat on 2 and 4.

Investigate different beaters for the bass drum pedal: i.e., a lamb’s wool beater verses a harder felt beater. Investigate different hi-hat sizes for a “chic” sound that works for the band and still sounds good when you “ride” on the hi-hats. (Mel used 13” hi-hat cymbals at times. Harold Jones also used 13” hi-hat cymbals with the Basie Band.)

## DO'S AND DON'TS OF BIG BAND DRUMMING

This is a short, simple list of what to do and what to possibly avoid when approaching big band reading, performing, and development. Many drummers are taught to read with their eyes first and use their ears only in cases of extreme emergency. I found, later than sooner, that the drummers I most enjoyed listening to in the big band setting were ones that were not necessarily the strongest readers.

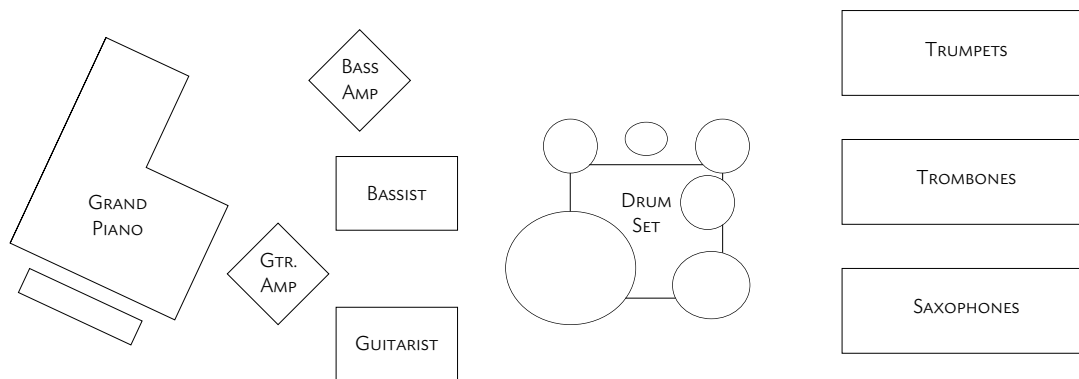
These extremely talented individuals possess a "sixth sense" inherent in all avid improvisers. Their innate ability to sound as if they were not only reading the chart but that they wrote it was mind-boggling. This visceral sense of when to do something "flashy" or technical, or when not to do it, is a learned skill requiring acute editing. As you gain more and more knowledge of big band drumming and meet more drummers, you will learn that musicianship always "trumps" the technician who plays licks which draw attention to himself/herself.

I once had the opportunity to ask Mel Lewis how he approached a new big band chart. I asked him if he tried to catch all the horn figures on the first reading, etc., etc... He said, "I never catch all the figures the first, second, or even third time through a new chart. The first time through, I play the time and the feel of the chart as I watch the horn figures go by. I gradually decide which figures are the most important and which ones need a bass drum or a snare/rim shot, etc. I'm fortunate in having my own big band. I've always taken the stance that less is more."

## RHYTHM SECTION SET UPS

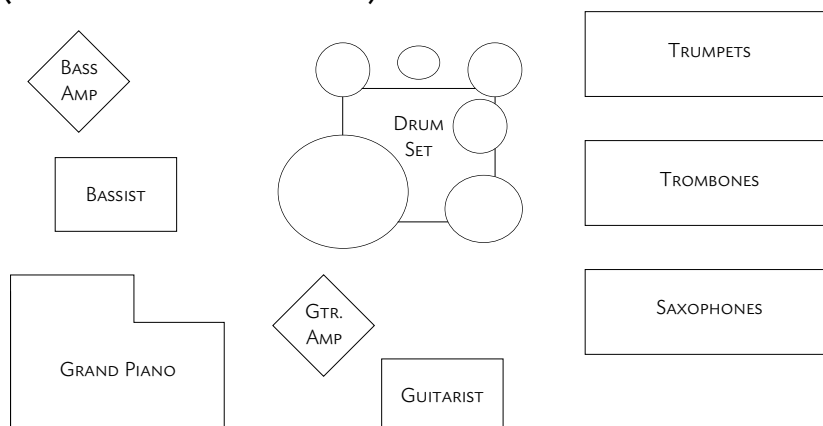
In a traditional rhythm section set up like the one pictured in example 1, the drum set's hi-hat is placed beside the 2nd trombonist. The second trombonist is the first in the row of trombonists. The drummer's music stand is the only thing separating the drummer's hi-hat from the line of trombones. With the music stand placed on the outside edge of the hi-hat, the drummer will have a direct line of site to the director while reading any big band chart. As a young drummer learns the technique of looking ahead, as opposed to reading one beat/measure at a time, he/she will begin to spend more time with his/her "head out of the music." Having your head out of the music leads to a more visceral performance. And, it's more fun for everyone when the drummer pays attention to the nuances of the arrangement, such as time feel, dynamics, phrasing and such. This ability to give the chart your full attention also comes from knowing the chart: i.e. melody location, "shout" section location, soli sections, and so forth.

### EXAMPLE 1 (TRADITIONAL RHYTHM SECTION SET-UP)



This second set up comes from the time I spent on the road with the Count Basie Orchestra. This is the exact set up that they had in the band's "rider" and, the rhythm section emulated this whenever possible. There are always exceptions to the rule which are dictated by the performance space, the size of the stage, or the acoustics of a given performance space. In the Basie Orchestra, the lid of the piano taken off when the band was able to use this "set up". Basie's piano intros and endings are classic and had to be heard by everyone in the band as well as the listeners in the audience. Notice that like set up #1, the drummer is still set up in line with the trombones. There is a "clear sight line" for the entire rhythm section to see the band and the director/leader. These two set ups are favorites from a drummer perspective. Experiment with some of your own if possible.

### EXAMPLE 2 (BASIE RHYTHM SECTION SET-UP)



## BASIE'S BLUES

Trying to perfectly capturing the spirit of the Count Basie Orchestra is something I have first hand knowledge of and in this instance, Russell Schmidt has done it! This arrangement is complete with quarter note Freddie Green style rhythm guitar "comping". Basie was a master of understated intros, comping, and soloing. His band worked in concert to produce a quiet, dry pulsating quarter note groove contrasted by explosive volume shifts that often made the listeners literally jump out of their seats.

"Basie's Blues" is a traditional 12 bar blues tune in the key of E $\flat$ . The chart opens with a full big band "shout" that lasts for only 10 bars. I used something called a "riverboat shuffle" (example 1). I first heard this groove listening to Clark Terry's large and small groups in the 1970's. When Clark conducted clinics with college rhythm sections, he would sing this riverboat shuffle rhythm to the drummer and bassist, gesturing until the students obtained his desired effect.

### EXAMPLE 1

Cue 1 "Sonny Payne" style ♩ = 108

Riverboat Shuffle a la Clark Terry

5

9

*pp* *mp*

H.H./L.H.

After the 10 bar intro, the dynamic level drops from fortissimo to mezzo piano for the carefully edited piano solo by Bill Dobbins. (As in the Basie tradition, over emphasis the dynamics a bit.) The piano solo lasts for 2 choruses and as always during a "Basie" style piano solo, I try to play very tastefully and sparse in nature. Watch my transcription to compare the contrasting style used "setting up" the ensemble figures in the beginning with the thinner texture of using just the hi-hat to "comp" for the piano solo at letter A.

The drummer's main function on the piano solo at letter A, besides bringing contrast to the opening, is to "lock in" with the bass and rhythm guitar to produce that quiet, but powerful quarter note groove which distinguished the Basie Band from all others. This style of playing to the quarter note has come to be known as "the Basie Quarter Note" style. Notice the subtle changes in the standard jazz cymbal pattern on the closed hi-hat. The bass drum is also used for occasional punctuation on the ands and upbeat of beat 3. This is effective in breaking up the quarter note and avoids monotony and/or a groove that sounds stagnant.

**BURUNGKAKA CHART DIAGRAM:**

intro-bass ostinato    muted br.    17. melody (tbne)    25.  
2nd X muted trpt./flutes  
||-----8-----||:-----8-----:||:-----8-----|-----8-----|

33. Bridge/breaks cont.    1st ending (4 meas.)    2nd ending  
|-----8-----|---4---|---2---| break 2 meas. :|| time 2 meas. :|| break 2 |

53. bone solo 61. (2 choruses) 69.    77.    1st/2nd    last x  
WW pads 2nd X thru bone solo  
||:---8---|---8---|---8---|---4---|---4---:||---2---| break 2 meas.

89. Trombone soli    97.    105.    113. figures/pedal  
|-----8-----|-----8-----|-----8-----|-----8-----|

121. pno solo (bkgrds 2nd X)    137.    145. 1st ending  
||:-----8-----|-----8-----|-----8-----|---4---||---4---:||

153. 2nd ending/ostinato extended  
Repeat this 12 bars 4 X's  
||:-----12-----:||

Recap-melody return tbne  
use the 8 bars to return to brushes  
165.    173. melody orchestrated    181. bridge  
|-----8-----|-----8-----|-----8-----|

189. bridge cont. ostinato return    simili repeat 8x's    201. ending  
ritard and hold  
|-----4-----|-----4-----||:-----4-----:||-----5-----||

# Burungkaka

SWING ♩ = 240

Traditional  
Arr.: Bill Dobbins

Tacet 1st time  
Brushes

mp

7 9

13 17 (Ens: 2nd X only)

19

25

31 33

38 41 (Ens: 2nd X only)

44 1. mf

(Bass)

**LA CURANDERA NEGRITA CHART DIAGRAM:**

Intro	5. Melody A sec. tbones	21. A sec. ww more active					
-----4-----  -----16----- -----16-----							
37. B sec. add trpts	Break	time	Break/lead in				
-----6----- -----2----- -----6----- -----2-----							
53. Melody 8ba trbns	69. interlude diminished bass mvt.	81. send off w/breaks					
-----16----- -----12----- -----8-----							
89. modulation/send off to tenor solo 9th bar	105. turnaround	117. solo cont. Backgrounds 2nd X					
-----16----- -----12-----  :-----16-----							
133. turnaround	1st. end	2nd end w/shout figures hemiola, etc.					
-----8----- -----4-----:  -----4----- -----12-----							
161. tacet/mallets	play mallets/interlude leading to the tromb. mallets embellish figures written on chart						
-----7----- -----1----- -----10-----							
179. interlude cont. trombone solo starts	sticks	189. bone solo form 3 min. 51 sec.					
:-----8-----:  -----2-----  -----8-----							
197. solo cont. "turnaround"	209. solo A sec.	225. turnaround dominant 7th	233. Transition back to original key/melody				
-----12----- -----16----- -----8----- -----12-----							
245. "Recap"	253. melody w/ original key, melody, etc. embellishment	269. Turnaround					
-----8----- -----16----- -----12-----							
<b>Negrita cont.</b>							
281. drum solo trading 27 meas. total!							
Band/hemiola	drums/conga	Band	Drum set	Band	Conga	Band	Drum Set/band
-----6----- -----4----- -----2----- -----2----- -----2----- -----4----- -----3----- -----4-----							
308. drum/band trading cont. band hemiola	drum set	Break! Dr. fill	321. bass line in orig.	329. recapw/dim. 22 very soft trbn.			
-----4----- -----2----- -----4----- -----3-----  -----8----- -----16-----							
345. soft cym. roll	Holds and rests						
-----2----- -----4-----							

# La Curandera Negrita

Comp.: Joey Sellers

Ride x HHH x  
SN MT  
BD FT

(SN = cross stick)  
Fill (Tacet if Conga)

3

7 Toca Siempre (play always)

2 2 sxs 2

15 2 2 21 mf

23 2 2 2 2

31 2 2 2 37

39

47 53 ff f

55 2 2 2 2