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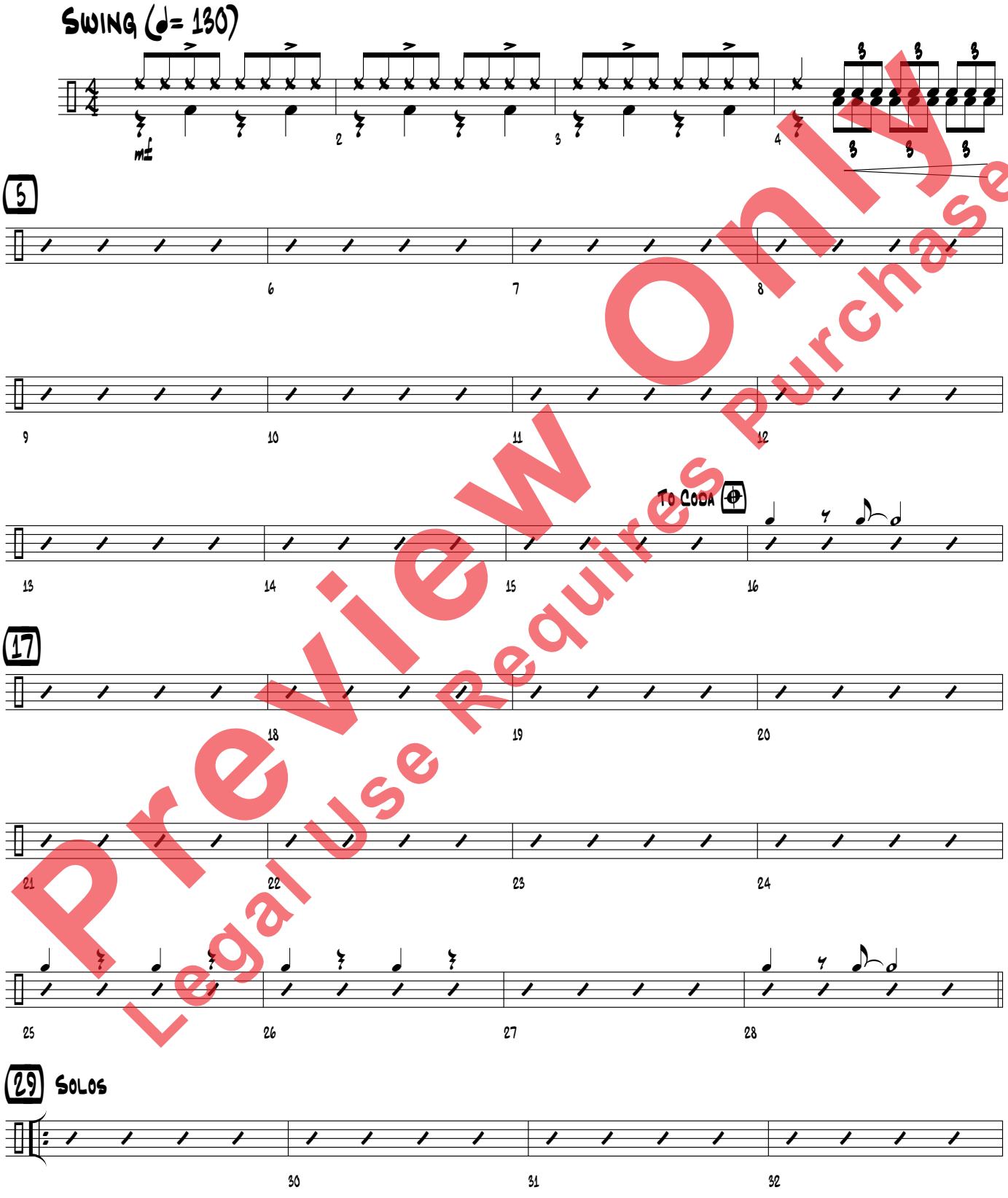
BLUES & OTHER HUES

Ryan Fraley
(ASCAP)



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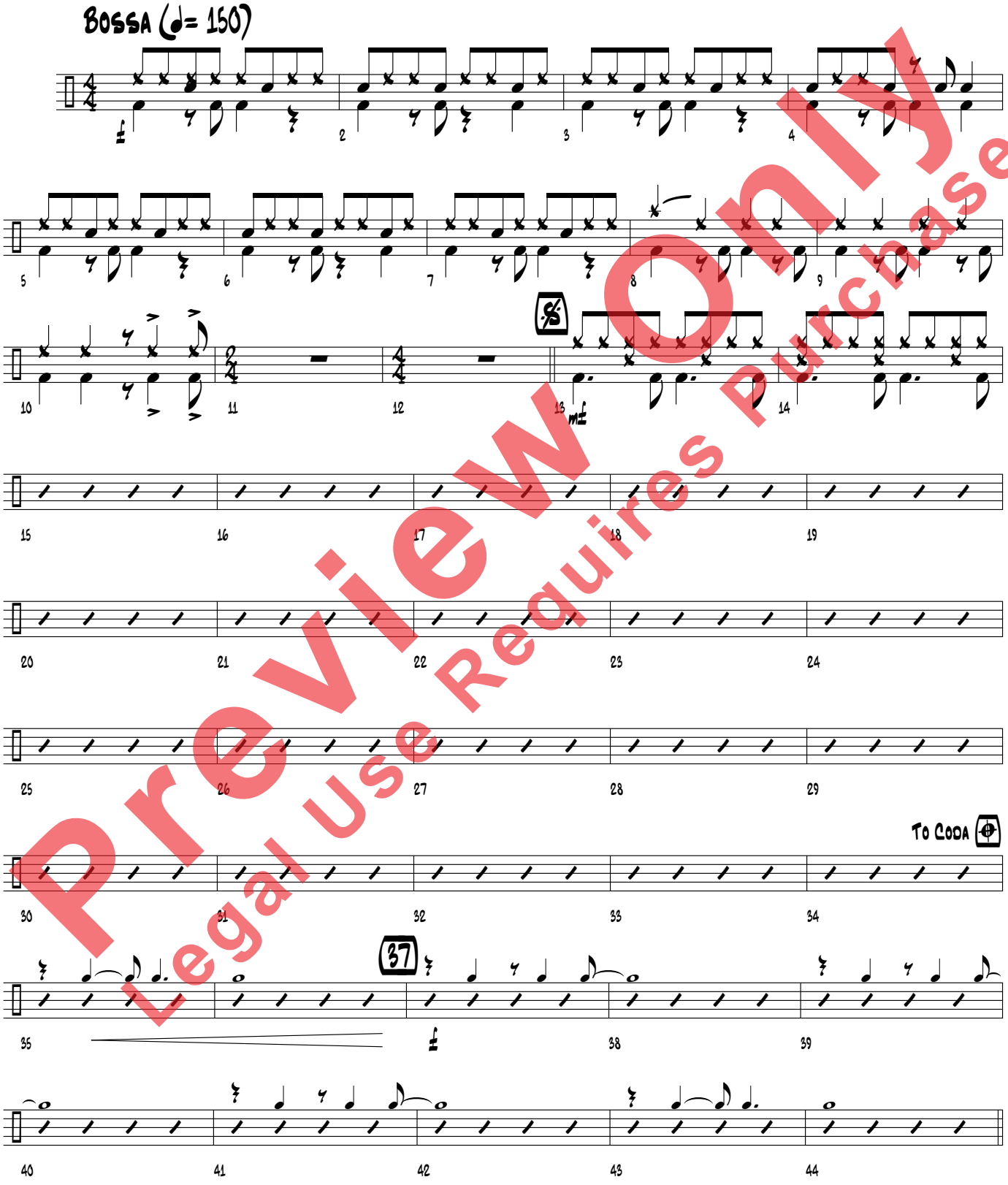

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RHYTHM BEE

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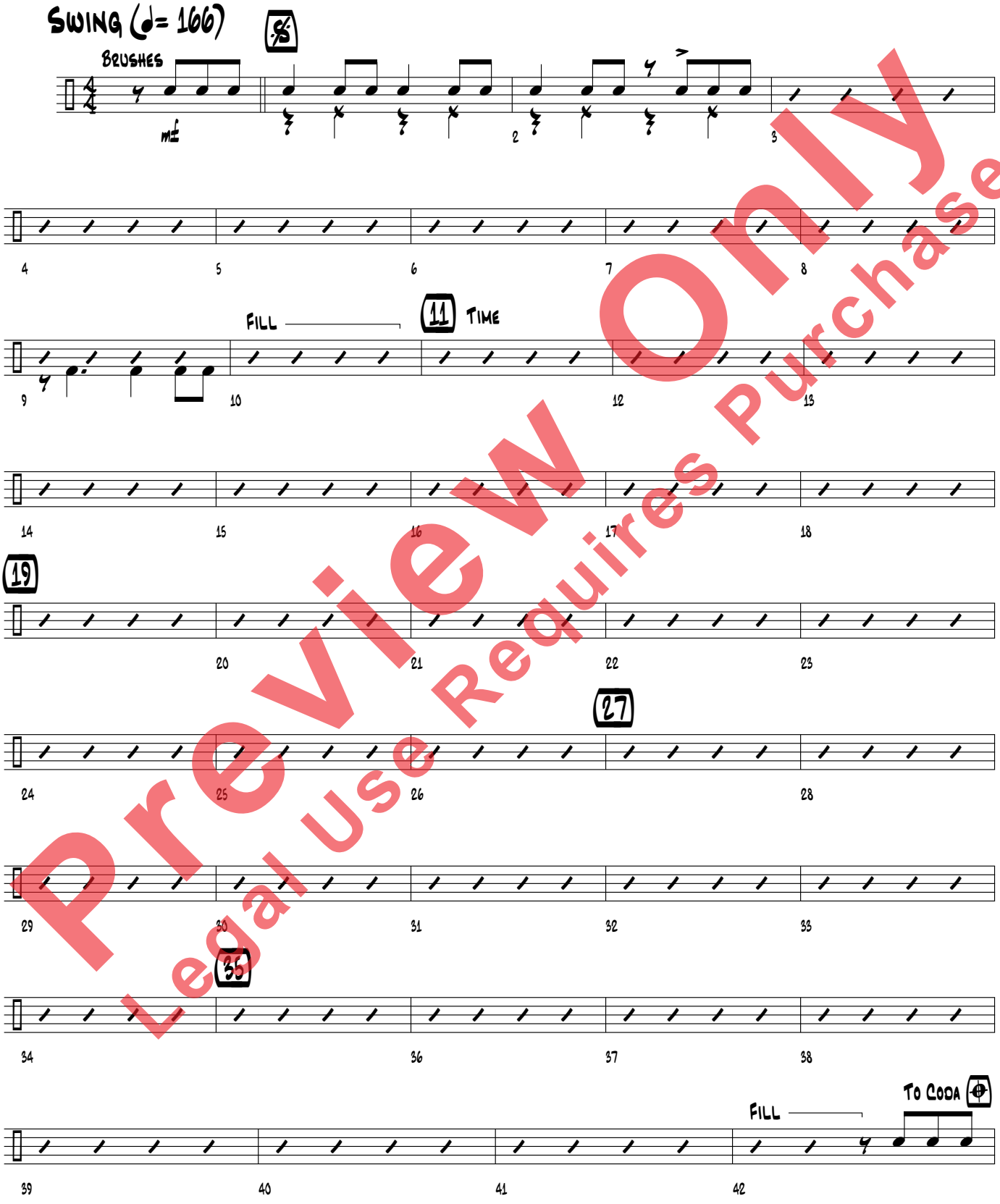

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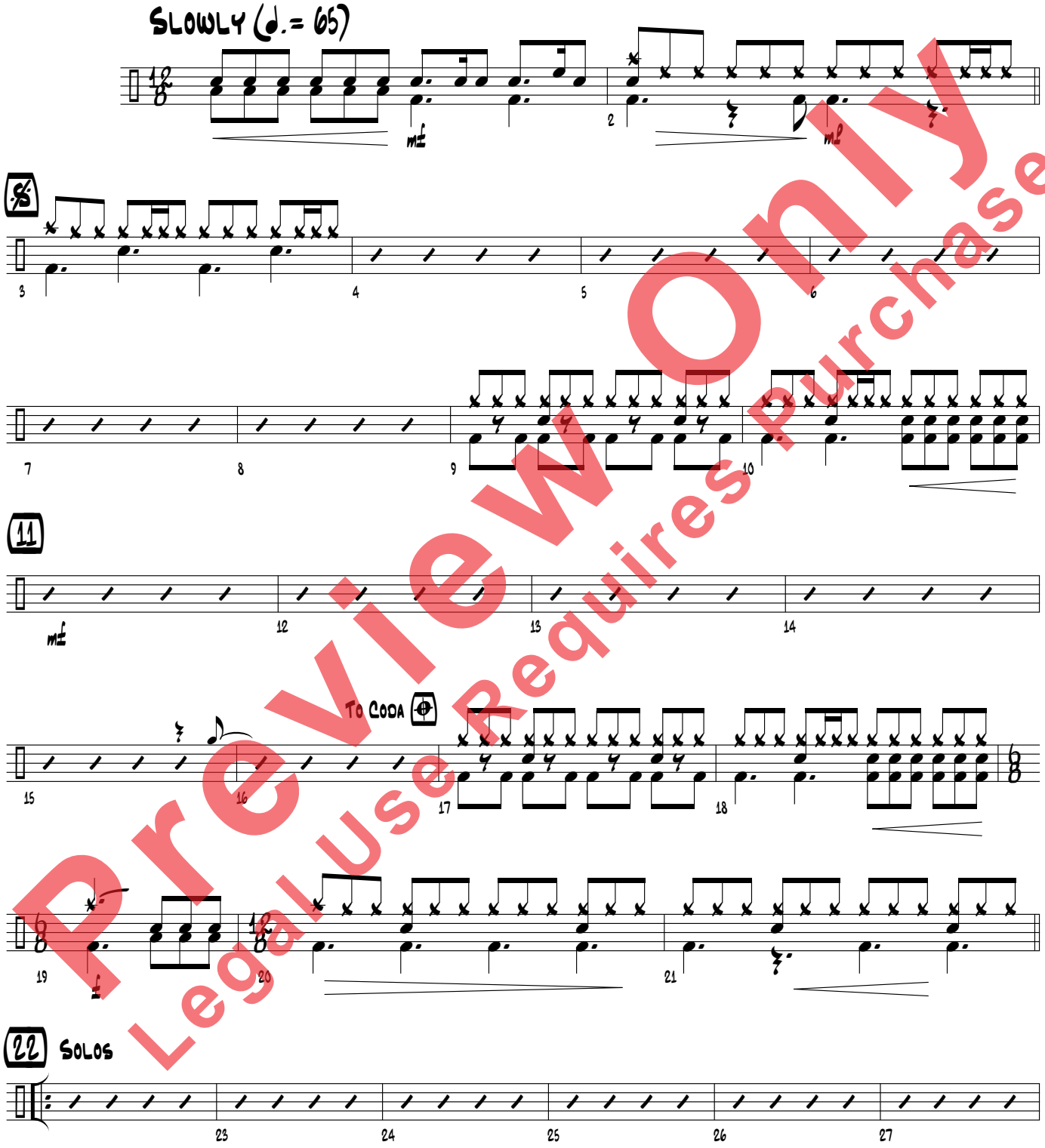

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PROG PACIFIC

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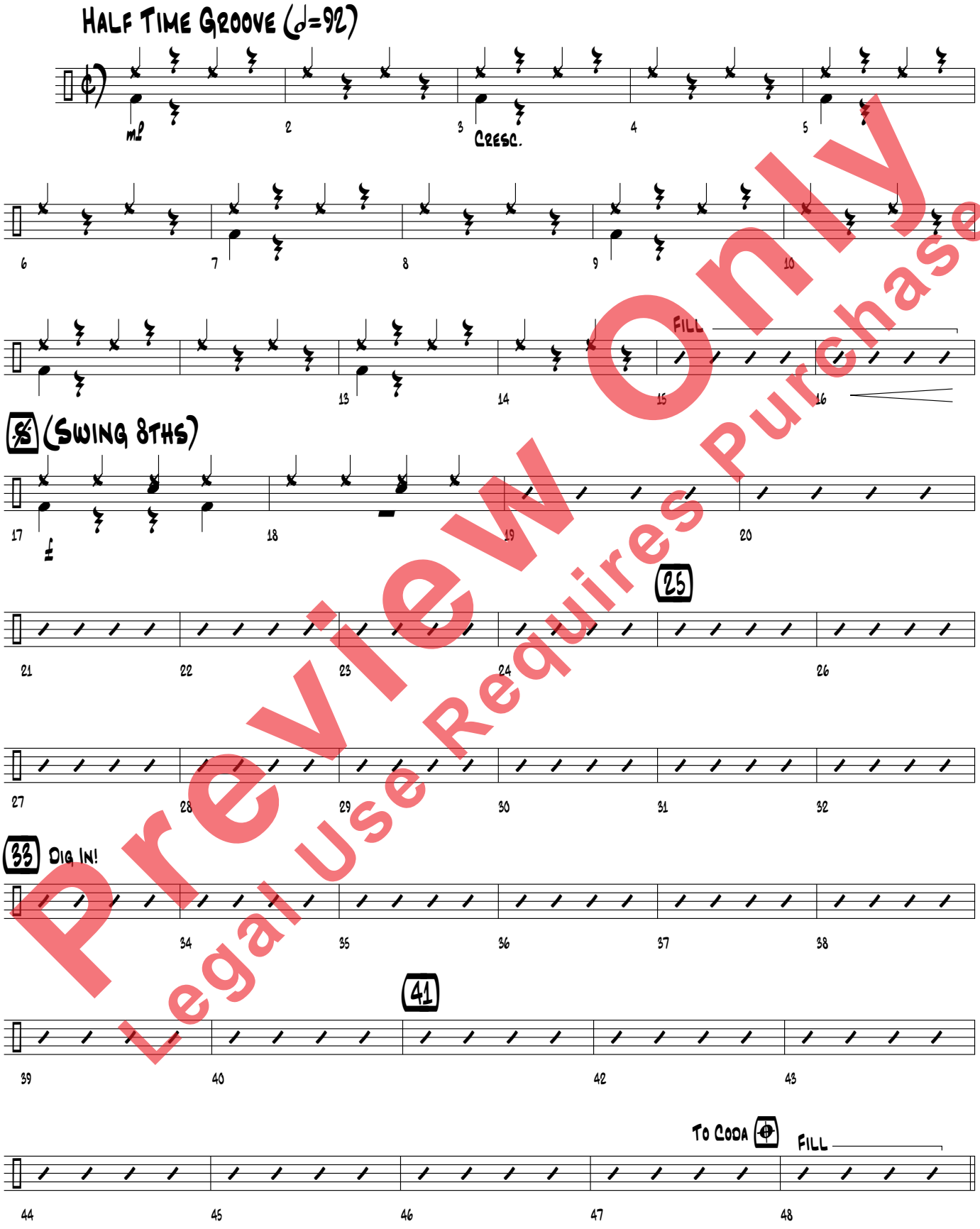

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A MINI DRUM CLINIC

by Ralph Johnson
Drummer, Wave Mechanics Union

Working with young drummers in a jazz context can be frustrating. Even the most skilled wind instrument players with fairly extensive experience can find it difficult to give any meaningful guidance to the young drummer – and when you consider the critical nature of that instrument in defining the style, phrasing and dynamic level of the group, the drummer is often the player most in need of help.

With that in mind, here are few checklist items which might help to give a general sense of what to do:

1. Instrumentation
In today's high-school or middle-school level jazz band, the focus is a little different from the professional big band or dance band from "back in the day." For one thing, most young jazz bands start out playing charts that are more straight-8th oriented, like simple rock or funk styles. The drum sounds which are optimal for these styles are different from those typically used by swing drummers, yet in the school context, the drummer must often shift gears between the rock and funk styles common in beginning charts to swing or be-bop styles. To be sure, this is a dilemma faced by modern professional drummers as well, but with a little care and attention, a compromise can be reached which will serve to cover pretty much all of the styles involved. Some of these require attention to tuning, but we'll get to that later. The most critical elements of a jazz drum kit are:

- A good ride cymbal – optimally, 2 different ride cymbals so that the sound can change on different choruses and the one sound doesn't get so monotonous.
- A good quality, well-maintained hi-hat stand, with a set of medium-weight cymbals (typically 14" diameter) that are not too "dry."
- A quality snare drum with a good, solid stand.
- A bass drum (I wouldn't use one larger than a 22", and tend to prefer a 20" or even an 18," though the latter is rarer and usually somewhat expensive by comparison due to its special-order nature), with a good quality pedal, usually employing a felt beater as opposed to a hard wood or plastic beater.
- At least one crash cymbal (these are thinner than ride cymbals, and are designed to react quickly and die away quickly).
- A small tom-tom, usually mounted on the bass drum – typically this is an 8"x12" or 9"x13", the smaller of which is more commonly used on jazz kits.
- A floor tom, typically either 14"x14" or 16"x16." Given the choice, most jazz drummers would opt for the smaller.

The idea here is to provide those elements which are necessary to the vast majority of charts. Though many young drummers are wild about a wrap-around artillery of tom shells and sometimes even double bass drums (or double pedals), these extra items are unnecessary (in a jazz context, anyway) and often cause difficulties for the young player because the more drums he has to deal with, the more he has to swivel from side-to-side while playing, and the easier it is to lose his balance. In addition, having all these items in front of you makes you feel obligated to use them at least once during a performance. (hey, you carried it there and set it up, so you should at least hit it once, don't you think?) And the massive walls of toms and other low sounds, while they have a purpose in certain kinds of show-biz settings, often serve more as a distraction from the task at hand, and can hamper the young drummer's ability to learn the more important functional skills necessary to jazz performance.

As much as possible, these instruments should be arranged so that all surfaces are easily reached from one position (without swiveling in the seat) and with the drums as close together as possible, so that reaching from the snare to the mounted tom to the floor tom is not a big strain.

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