

Tony Williams—Style & Analysis

Rudiments

by Jeremy Brown

Tony Williams had an incredible impact on jazz drumming and, in fact, most modern drumming of all genres. It was Tony's association with Miles Davis from 1963-1969 that led to his prominence in drumming history. Taking a starring role with the Miles Davis Quintet, Tony stunned the jazz world with innovative technique and creative musicianship. He developed an entirely new approach to accompanying soloists by interjecting his own soloistic ideas instead of conventional comping rhythms. This changed the role of the jazz drummer, becoming an integral part of a group's improvisational scheme. It also made the overall sound of the drum set more prominent in the mix of the band. He prolonged the resolution of tension by avoiding conventional points of rhythmic release (typically beat "and" of 4 or beat 1) and favored less settling beats ("and" of 3, 4, or others) for his phrase endings. This approach complemented the Quintet's front men, Miles and Wayne Shorter, who constantly searched for new sounds in their improvisation, compositions, and arrangements. The rhythm section, rounded out by Ron Carter and Herbie Hancock, had an uncanny mental connection that resulted in a high level of communication. They could collectively adjust any aspect of the music—dynamics, groove, or tempo—at any point of a performance.

The Quintet's recordings are important landmarks in jazz. They represent the striking characteristics of one of the most important groups in jazz history and document the development of Tony's unique approach to jazz drumming that has so strongly affected the drumming community of today. The articles in this series will use examples from those recordings to explain a few of Tony's most fascinating features—his use of rudiments, metric modulation, and dynamics. Part One will focus on his rudimental drumming.

The standard drumming rudiments had been an important tool for Tony's drumming idols—"Philly" Joe Jones, Max Roach, Art Blakey, and others—

particularly during drum solos. Tony took rudimental ideas on the drum set far beyond his predecessors. The examples shown here are only a few of the many innovative rudimental ideas that became his ammunition for expression. On most of the following examples, Tony split each rudiment between the snare drum and other surfaces.

Paradiddle-Diddle



The paradiddle-diddle was one of Tony's most common rudimental choices. On "Milestones," from the album *Miles in Berlin*, Williams played one half of the paradiddle-diddle in unison on his snare drum and ride cymbal, and the other half on his bass drum (at 2:11 on the CD).



He played the same figure on the closing repetition of the melody of "Side Car II," from *Circle in the Round* (at 2:38 on the CD), this time in sextuplets.



The next examples show Tony's other variations of the paradiddle-diddle played between the hands. He sometimes accented the first one or two notes of the pattern, buzzed the double strokes, and moved between the snare drum and cymbals. He used this sound on "Nefertiti," from the album *Nefertiti* (at 6:43 and 7:05 on the CD).



and



He played a similar idea on "Side Car I," from *Circle in the Round* (at 0:16 on the CD).

33:18 on the CD), he moved the second of every three grace notes to the ride cymbal.



Flam 5-Stroke Roll



The flam 5-stroke roll was another rudiment that Tony exploited on “Circle in the Round.” He placed the grace note on the cymbal and finished on the snare drum (at 9:59 on the CD).



Gingerbread Boy

During “Gingerbread Boy” from *Miles Smiles*, Tony plays a culmination of his rudimental ideas. This excerpt, from the repeated opening melody of the tune, shows Tony’s ability to play around the melody of a tune using flams, paradiddle-diddle variations, and rolls of every kind (at 0:00 on the CD).

The image displays a musical score for a drum set, consisting of six staves of notation. The music is written in 4/4 time. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, accents, and triplets, illustrating Tony Williams' re-voicing of drum rudiments. The score is complex, with many notes and rests, and includes dynamic markings such as accents and slurs. The notation is arranged in a vertical column, with each staff representing a different drum or cymbal part.

Tony's re-voicing of drum rudiments was an unprecedented technique that required exemplary strength and quickness. His rudimental drumming concept impressed and influenced jazz drummers who followed, including Jack DeJohnette, Billy Cobham, and Billy Kilson. The next part of this series will focus another aspect of Tony's influential playing with Miles—metric modulation.