

## Tony Williams—Style & Analysis, Part Two

### Metric Modulation

by Jeremy Brown

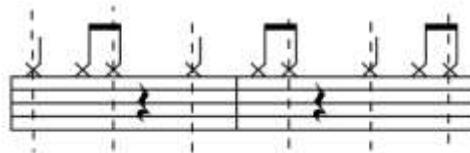
With the Miles Davis Quintet, Tony Williams developed an entirely new approach to rhythm. Tony, supported by bassist Ron Carter and pianist Herbie Hancock, constantly experimented with rhythm by changing the time feel. During any tune, he might lead the band from a medium swing feel into a straight-eighths rock-like groove (listen to “All of You” from Miles Davis’ *Four and More*), or he might stretch a rhythm of three or five beats over several measures of four. On many occasions, his polyrhythmic concept went so far that he led the band into a totally new tempo—a phenomenon called metric modulation.

#### Joshua

Metric modulation occurs when the original pulse changes to a different pulse. The subdivisions of the two pulses are somehow related. Tony played a subtle version of metric modulation on “Joshua” from *Miles Davis in Europe*, one of his first concert performances with the Quintet (at 2:25 on the CD).



This pattern is noteworthy because it is one of the earliest recordings of Tony spreading a basic ride pattern over a polyrhythm. Since the pattern implies a

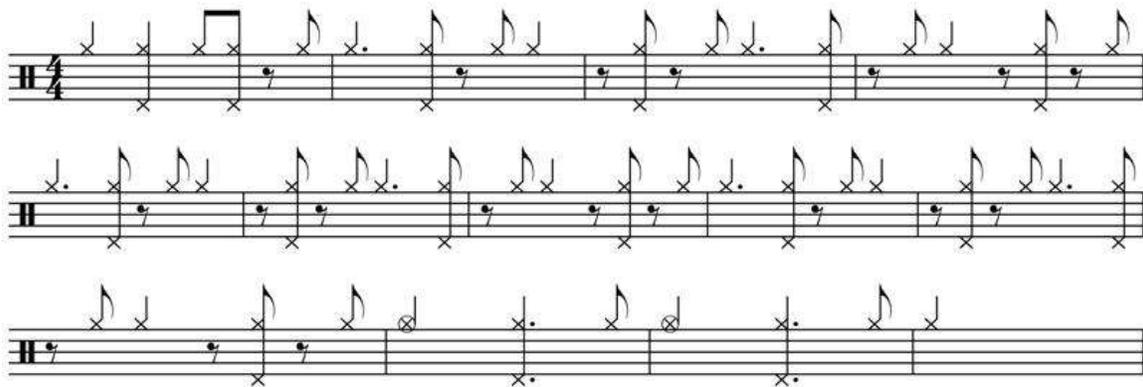


pulse at every third eighth note, the notes that Tony played on the ride cymbal resemble a typical ride pattern, using a dotted quarter note as the pulse. The underlying pulse here (the dotted line in the figure above) uses three eighth notes per beat—instead of three eighth note triplets—and crosses the established bar lines. The eighth note seems to

become the triplet. The next examples show true instances of metric modulation because the other members of the Quintet follow Tony into the new tempo.

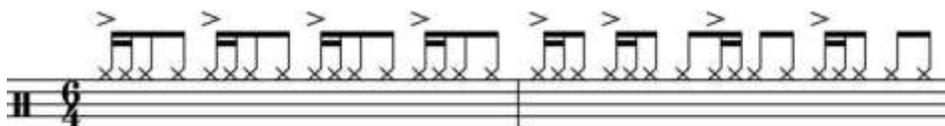
### If I Were a Bell

The Quintet’s 1965 recordings at the Plugged Nickel in Chicago capture the rhythm section experimenting with metric modulation more than on any other performances. On the second recorded performance of “If I Were a Bell,” Tony began metric modulation by stretching the triplet subdivision of the conventional ride pattern over three eighth notes (like on “Joshua”). After ten measures he stretched the ride patter further, over four eighth notes, which brought the tempo to half the original tempo (at 11:58 on the CD).



### Footprints

The Quintet recorded *Miles Smiles* less than one year after their 1965 Plugged Nickel engagement. The classic track “Footprints,” by Wayne Shorter, showcases Tony’s adventurous experiments in metric modulation. The composition is based on a bass line of six beats. Tony combined a slightly swinging eighth-note oriented groove on the ride cymbal with a tom-tom pattern reminiscent of Art Blakey’s Latin beats on several recordings from the 1950s and early 1960s—for example “Nica’s Dream,” from Blakey’s album *The Jazz Messengers*. In the third bar of the melody (at 0:24 on the CD), Tony began playing doubled rhythms on the ride cymbal, hinting at a double-time swing feel in six.



At 0:49 on the CD, he moved some of the floating ride rhythm to the hi-hat with interesting open/closed articulation.

The metric modulation, only implied before, truly began during the second chorus of the melody. In the ninth and tenth measures of the form (at 1:01 on the CD), Tony and Ron Carter launched into double-time, playing twelve pulses in each measure. Every time the ninth and tenth measures arrived in the form from this point, Tony and Ron treated them as a pivot point to modulate to a new time feel. At the pivot point of the second chorus of trumpet solo (at 1:51 on the CD), Ron led Tony into a brief change to 4/4 (dotted quarter note=quarter note).



In the next chorus, Tony modulated the pulse to double-time over the original dotted quarter note (at 2:19 on the CD).



At that point, he had superimposed eight beats over the original measure of six beats. Ron emphasized the eight versus six polyrhythm by deliberately playing the bass line in the original feel of six (shown above in half note triplets). Also, the Art Blakey-like tom-tom beat returned over the rapid pulse. Tony continued the fast eight feel throughout the performance, but the ninth and tenth measures

remained a pivot point for Tony and Ron to either drop to half-time or continue the fast pulse when they reached that point in the form.

The Quintet's rhythmic experiments in "Footprints," as well as several choice moments in *The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel* and other recordings, provide an audio textbook for metric modulation. Tony's feats of rhythmic theory would not have been effective without the creative minds and solid sense of time held by the other Quintet members. His rhythmic concepts later influenced great jazz drummers like Jeff "Tain" Watts (listen to Wynton Marsalis' *Standard Time, Volume 1*) and Billy Kilson (on the Dave Holland Quintet's *Extended Play: Live at Birdland*). Today, Tony's metric modulation gives listeners exciting musical moments that cause them to expect the unexpected. In the next part of this series, we will look at another aspect of Tony's drumming that defies expectations—dynamics.