

Tony Williams—Style & Analysis Part Three

Dynamics

by Jeremy Brown

Dynamics are a fundamental aspect of any drummer's sound. Much of the energy that Tony Williams exuded came from both the wide dynamic range that he played within a single tune and subtle dynamic changes during short phrases. Tony's dynamic concept derived in part from Art Blakey's explosive drumming in the 1950s and early 1960s. Art used dynamics as an important element in the arrangement of a piece, for example "Moanin'" from the Jazz Messenger's album *Moanin'*, "Dat Dere" from *The Big Beat*, and "Chess Players" also from *The Big Beat*. Art constantly used press rolls and single-stroke rolls from extremely soft to extremely loud levels, ending on a loud cymbal crash and bass drum on beat one, to ignite the soloist or prepare for the next event in the music.

An important difference between Art's and Tony's use of dynamics is their level of predictability. While Art's dynamics moved from extremely low to extremely high with one snare drum roll, Tony was totally unpredictable in his dynamics. One of Tony's most characteristic statements derived from Art's snare drum rolls. At a medium swing tempo, Tony played consecutive sixteenth notes on the snare drum that changed dynamically. The sixteenth note figure had the same alternating strokes as Art's single-stroke roll and served a similar purpose of affecting the soloist, but with very different dynamics and direction of intensity. Tony explored more variation in his dynamic movement. He could hold the volume to the same level, let the intensity completely die, or create a floating sensation by subtly increasing and decreasing the volume.

Autumn Leaves

During the Quintet's recording of "Autumn Leaves" on Miles' *Seven Steps: The Complete Columbia Recordings: 1963-1964, Disc 4*, Tony played sixteenth notes at the end of the saxophone solo that rose slightly in dynamic level,

creating the expectation of a loud ending crash, then brought the volume down for the beginning of the piano solo. Since George Coleman extended his solo into the first few bars of the following chorus, Tony contrasted Art by beginning his sixteenths three measures after the beginning of the form and ended the sixteenth notes three measures later (at 5:32 on the CD).

All of You

On recordings of “All of You,” particular episodes in the Quintet’s arrangement prompted Tony to increase or decrease his dynamic level. During the extended tag that followed one or two choruses of each soloist, he completely stopped playing, broke up the swing feel, or played a driving swing feel with prodding drum fills, depending on the intensity of the soloist. Another of

these episodes was the simple figure that the rhythm section played together on the sixteenth measure of the form during melody and solo choruses. On *My Funny Valentine*, Tony approached this figure as a landmark that he could lead toward by changing the levels of his activity and dynamics. Most often the volume gradually decreased while Tony’s activity increased before or after the arrival of the figure. The following examples illustrate the three most interesting ways that he treated that figure:

(at 5:06 on the CD)

Musical score for the first section. The top staff shows a saxophone line with a series of triplet eighth notes. Dynamics include *mf*, *mp*, and a *slight decresc...* marking. The bottom staff shows a piano accompaniment with a few notes.

(at 8:22 on the CD)

Musical score for the second section. The top staff continues the saxophone line with triplets. Dynamics include *mp* and *mf*. The bottom staff shows a piano accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern.

(at 9:15 on the CD)

Musical score for the third section. The top staff features a saxophone line with triplets and dynamics *mf*, *mp*, and *p*. The bottom staff shows a piano accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern.

The Theme

Some of Tony's most interesting dynamic play occurred during a recording of "The Theme," from *The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel, Disc 3*. He opened Wayne Shorter's solo with a floating snare drum roll that dissolved into the ride pattern played on the cymbal (from 0:00 to 0:34 on the CD). Later in the solo, Tony played distinctive hi-hat ideas that dissolved into another snare drum

roll (at 2:52 on the CD). The roll again diminished into a standard ride pattern. Then, the ride cymbal began to decrescendo while a conga-like tom-tom beat began to “question/answer” with the ride. The cymbal gradually disappeared while the tom-tom took over as the sole time-keeping voice. A few measures later, Tony moved back to his ride cymbal for the remainder of the saxophone solo.

The musical score is written for a drum set in 4/4 time. It consists of five staves. The first staff shows a ride cymbal roll (marked *mp*) transitioning into a tom-tom pattern. The second staff shows a conga-like tom-tom beat (marked *mf*) and a ride cymbal pattern. The third staff shows a continuous tom-tom pattern. The fourth staff shows a ride cymbal pattern with dynamic markings *p*, *mf*, *mf*, *p*, *mf*. The fifth staff shows a conga-like tom-tom beat.

The examples presented here are only a short list of several surprising, sensitive, and sometimes confusing dynamic events in the Quintet’s library of recordings in the 1960s. The aspect of dynamics defines drummers of all types and affects the overall sound of every band. Tony’s unpredictable use of dynamics went hand-in-hand with his use of metric modulation and fresh rudimental vocabulary to make the Miles Davis Quintet of the 1960s a revolutionary jazz group. Tony brought mystery into the music and opened the doors to new possibilities of expression for drummers in all genres of music.