The Long and Short of Big Band Drumming

By Stockton Helbing

THE LONG

From its very beginnings, jazz music is an aural tradition. Jazz is a music that uses sounds to tell a story. Any written form of jazz is incomplete without sound to supplement it; therefore, it is ridiculous to depend solely on reading and interpreting jazz music from sight alone. Any written form of jazz is an attempt to transfer the "general idea" of sounds so as to provide musicians with as detailed of a starting point as possible when learning a new piece of music. Time signature, key signature, tempo, style, dynamics, chord symbols, and articulation markings are all helpful tangibles that written music identifies for musicians, but these are still only pieces of the puzzle. Yet typically drummers focus only on those small pieces when desiring to hone their sight-reading skills, rather than taking a good "look" at the puzzle fully constructed: the recorded history of jazz.

Any drummer that wants to become a better sight-reader in a large ensemble jazz setting must first have a thorough, varied, detailed, and vast mental database of what the history of large ensemble jazz sounds like. The history of the drum set parallels the birth of large ensemble jazz from the smaller instrumentations of ensembles born in New Orleans at the turn of the 19th Century. As groups grew in size, the arrangements of the songs they played grew in musical intricacies. For instance, saxophone sections grew from being only one or two musicians playing primarily in unison or separate improvised parts to three, four, and, eventually, five saxophones playing thickly harmonized unison parts. This necessitated these parts be written down to ensure inner harmonized parts were accurately played from concert to concert. Dynamics, articulations, and other helpful musical tips were committed to ink and paper to help each part in the saxophone section be consistent in their musical executions.

As jazz ensembles increased in size and musical detail, the role of the drum set player evolved from that of simple provider of consistent tempo to that of a conductor. Drum set players were asked to foreshadow extreme dynamic moments, create sonic contrasts for various sections of a song, diversify instrument sections when they were featured, and constantly, perhaps above all, to provide forward musical momentum.

The evolution of drum set players in large ensemble jazz settings has continued to this very day. Modern large ensemble jazz may now contain nearly any style of music found on the planet, requiring drummers to constantly update their mental library if they wish to be successful. But is that even possible? Perhaps not, but what is possible is for a drummer to be armed with some clear strategies to allow for a base level of success when playing a piece of music that they have never heard before. These sight-reading strategies will allow a drummer to develop a strong musical intuition whenever they find themselves in a sight-reading situation.

THE SHORT

Breaking down a good sight-reading intuition.

STEP 1 – Listen to big band jazz.

- Start with a band that you like, and then work forwards and/or backwards chronologically from there.
- There are nearly 100 years of big band music to listen to, so there is no excuse when trying to find something that you initially enjoy.
- PLAY ALONG WITH BIG BAND JAZZ. You do NOT need a chart to have a good, and educational time, playing big band music. If you wish to have a chart, make your own!

STEP 2 – Identify the figures that the ensemble will play.

- Are they background figures, melody cues, or *tutti* ensemble figures?
- What is the rhythm of the figures? Can you count it out loud with a consistent time feel?

STEP 3 – Identify the articulations of the figures that the ensemble will play.

- Can you label each note in the ensemble's figures as long or short?
- Other than note duration, what articulation markings are being used that affect note durations?

STEP 4 – Identify the best sound sources on the drum set for the ensemble's figures.

- The snare drum is always a good choice for long or short figures. It sounds especially nice for short figures.
- The bass drum is good for long articulations, but not for short articulations. The bass drum gets tiresome sounding when used too often, leading to a muddy, plodding sound and feel.
- Toms do not sound good for long or short articulations. DO NOT PLAY BAND FIGURES ON TOMS. Toms are good for use in fills, solos, and setups.

STEP 5 – Identify the PRIMARY RHYTHMIC SETUP for the ensemble's figures.

- The Primary Rhythmic Setup is the setup note you play on the downbeat immediately before the ensemble's figure.
- Choose a sound source for the Primary Rhythmic Setup that is the opposite sound from the first note in the ensemble figure that you are setting up; i.e. if the band is beginning their phrase with a long articulation, play a snare drum note as your Primary Rhythmic Setup. Or, if the band is beginning their phrase with a short articulation, play a bass drum note as your Primary Rhythmic Setup.

STEP 6 – Ornament, embellish, and/or adorn foreshowing setups for the ensemble's figures.

- Once you have identified the Primary Rhythmic Setup and its appropriate sound source, you may then add additional setup material before it.
- K.I.S.S – Keep It Simple Stupid! Choose rhythmic material for your setup fills that is related to the musical surroundings of the chart you are playing. A good musical drummer is a good musical recycler.

Important Big Bands and Their Important Drummers

THE FLETCHER HENDERSON ORCHESTRA
Joseph "Kaiser" Marshall

LOUIS ARMSTRONG
Warren "Baby" Dodds
Zutty Singelton
Big Sid Catlett

THE DUKE ELLINGTON
Sonny Greer
Sam Woodyard
Louie Bellson
Rufus "Speedy" Jones

THE CHICK WEBB ORCHESTRA
William "Chick" Webb

THE COUNT BASIE ORCHESTRA
Jonathan "Jo" "Papa" "Papa Jo" Jones
Shadow Wilson
Kenny "Klook" Clarke
Gus Johnson
Sonny Payne
Harold Jones
Butch Miles
Dennis Mackrel
Dave Gibson

THE BENNY GOODMAN ORCHESTRA
Gene Krupa
Sidney "Big Sid" Catlett

THE GLENN MILLER ORCHESTRA
Maurice "Moe" Purtill
Ray McKinley

THE STAN KENTON ORCHESTRA
Shelley Man
Stan Levy
Mel "Lewis" Sokoloff
John Von Ohlen
Peter Erskine

THE BUDDY RICH ORCHESTRA
Buddy Rich

THE WOODY HERMAN ORCHESTRA
Davey Tough
Don Lamond
Ed Soph
Danny D'Imperio
Steve Houghton
Jeff Hamilton

THE MAYNARD FERGUSON BAND
Mel "Lewis" Sokoloff
Frankie Dunlop
Rufus "Speedy" Jones
Randy Jones
Danny D'Imperio
Peter Erskine
Gregg Bisonette
Jim White

THE THAD JONES MEL LEWIS ORCHESTRA
Mel "Lewis" Sokoloff
Dennis Mackrel
John Riley

DOC SEVERSINSEN AND THE TONIGHT SHOW BAND
Ed Shaughnessy

THE GRP ALL-STAR BIG BAND
Dave Weckl

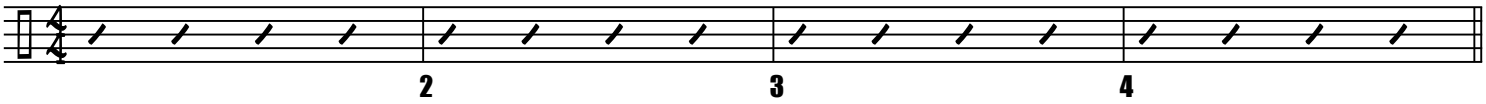
THE BOB MINTZER BIG BAND
Peter Erskine
John Riley

THE CLAYTON HAMILTON ORCHESTRA
Jeff Hamilton

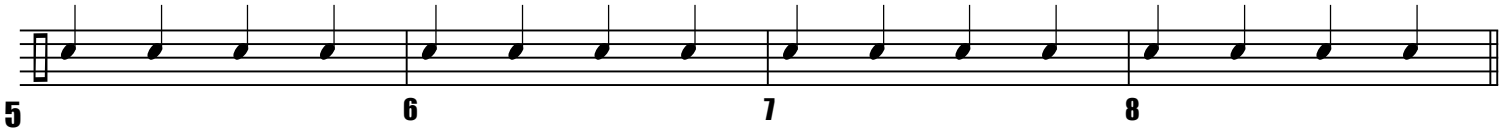
THE JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER ORCHESTRA
Lewis Nash
Herlin Riley
Ali Jackson

Variations of notation styles that are all intended to indicate that the drummer should play a groove, or time feel, that is appropriate for the style, tempo, dynamic, instrumentation, and band.

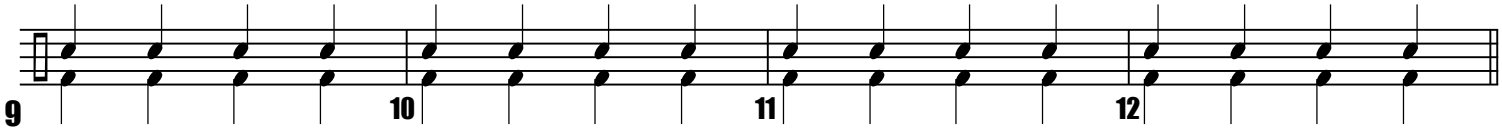
Example 1: Slash notation



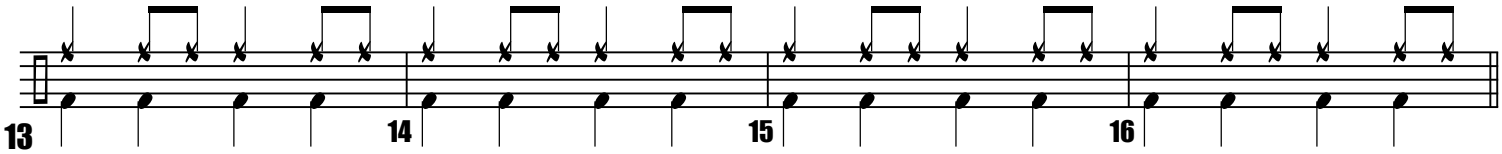
Example 2: Snare drum quarter notes



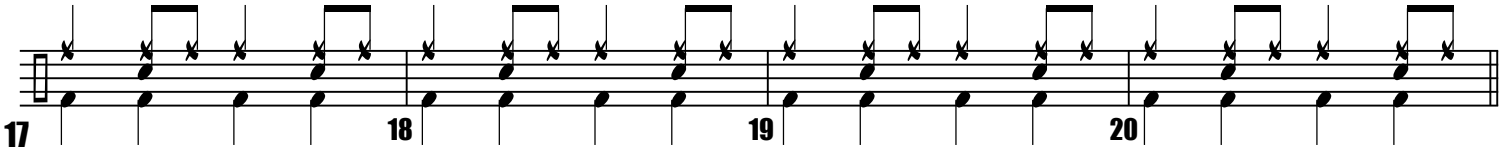
Example 3: Snare drum and bass drum quarter notes



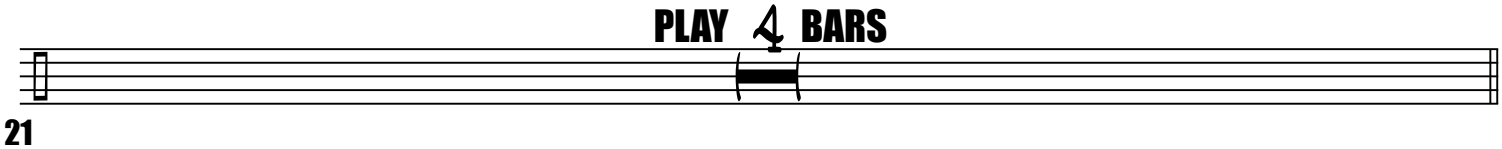
Example 4: Ride cymbal jazz pattern with bass drum quarter notes



Example 5: Ride cymbal jazz pattern with bass drum quarter notes and snare drum on beats 2 & 4

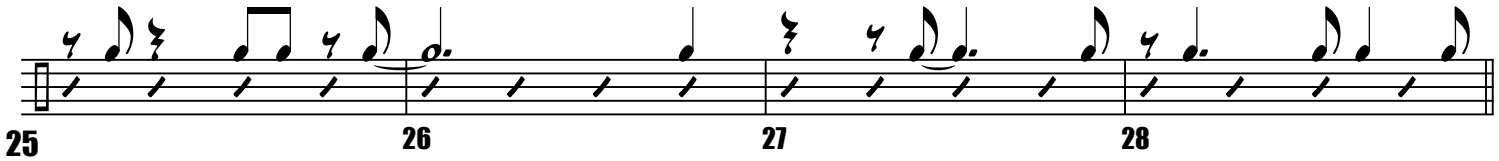


Example 5: "Play time"

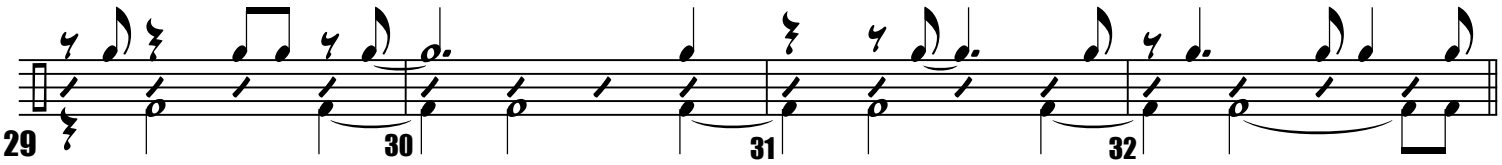


Variations of notation styles that are all intended to indicate that the drummer should maintain a groove, or time feel, while acknowledging background figures that select instruments of the ensemble are playing. These notation styles may also be used to indicate melody cues.

Example 6: Background band figures notated above slash notation.

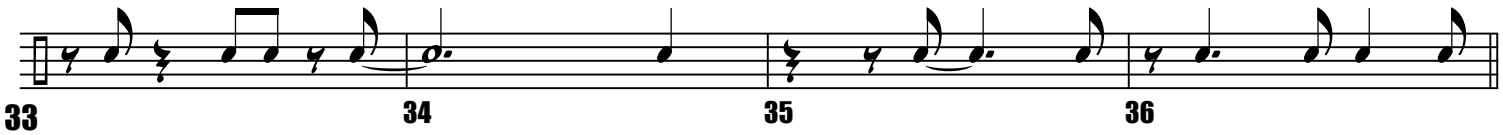


Example 7: Background band figures notated above slash notation. Rhythms appearing above the staff represent higher sounding voices in the ensemble while rhytms appearing at the bottom of the staff represent lower sounding voices that are playing a different part.

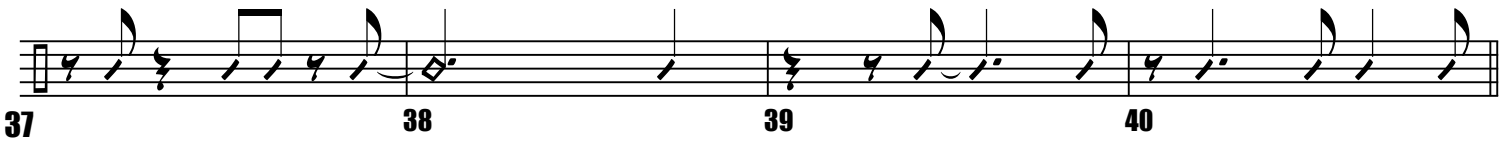


Variations of notation styles that are all intended to indicate *tutti,* or ensemble figures, that the drummer must acknowledge in their playing by foreshadowing the beginning of a musical phrase, connecting the ensemble's rhythms inside a musical phrase, and clearly aiding the ensemble in ending a musical phrase together with rhythmic and dynamic excellence.

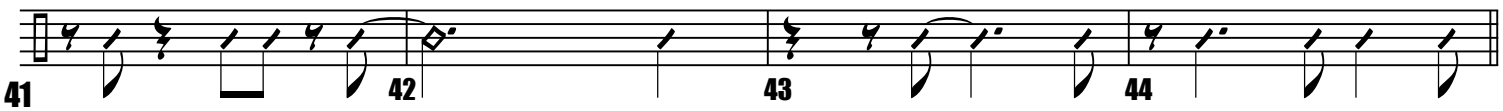
Example 8: Tutti/Ensemble Figures in a normal notation style



Example 9: Tutti/Ensemble Figures in a rhytmic notation style (with stems up)

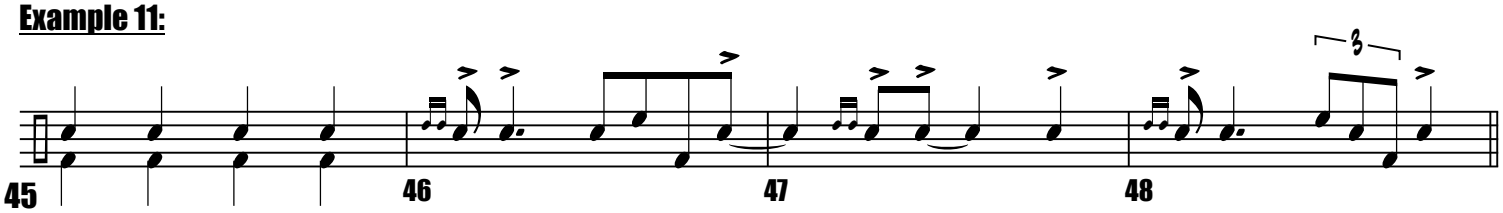


Example 10: Tutti/Ensemble Figures in a rhytmic notation style (with stems down)

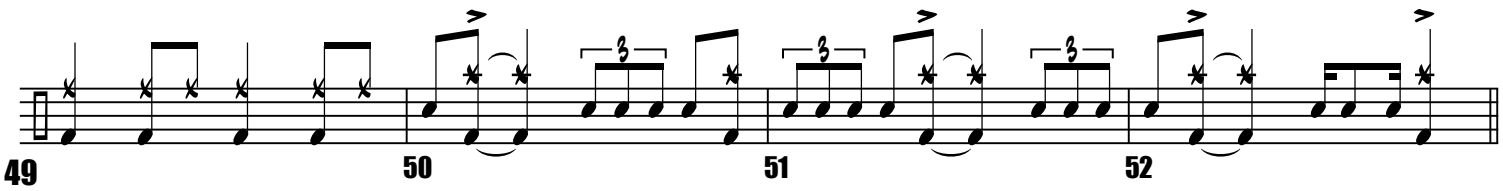


Variations of notation styles that are all confusing hybrids of all previous notation styles, but with the addition of inserted "suggested" drum fills, set up fills, and drum solos. This confusing notation style to big band drumming charts in becoming more and more common in the digital age as composers and arrangers program i semi-accurate drum ideas to make their audio playbacks from their notation program sound more authentic. This is the number one most confusing, and discouraging, notation style for novice big band drummers.

Example 11:



Example 12:



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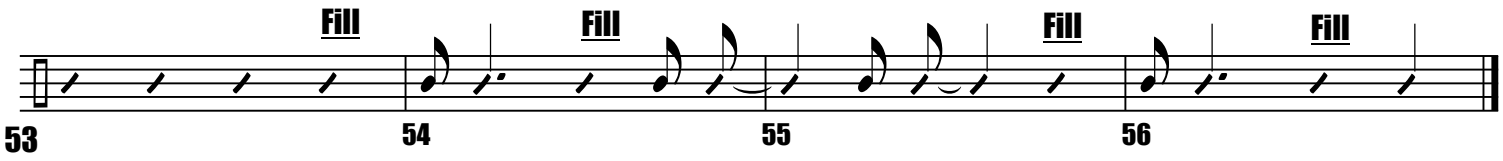
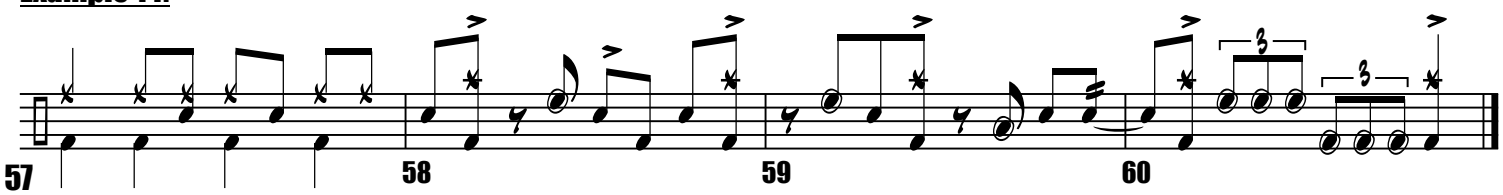
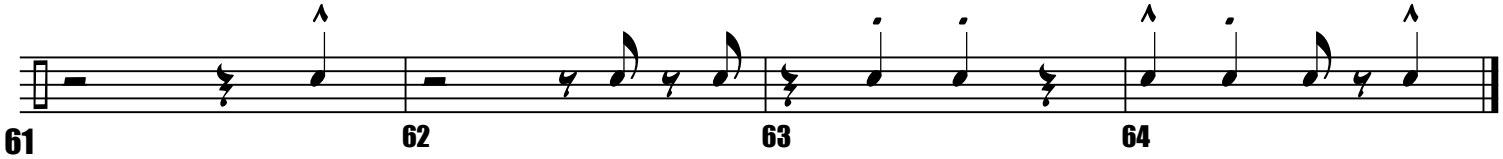


Example 14:

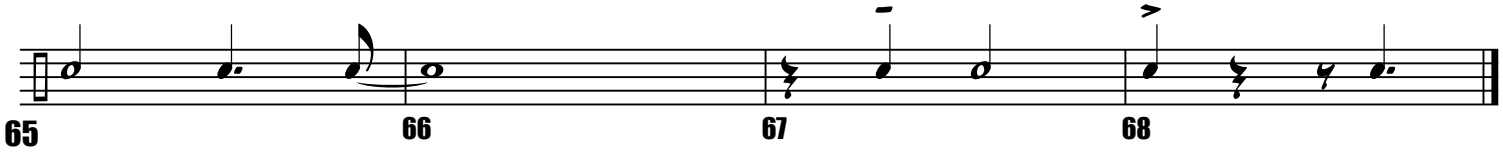


Common Articulation Markings

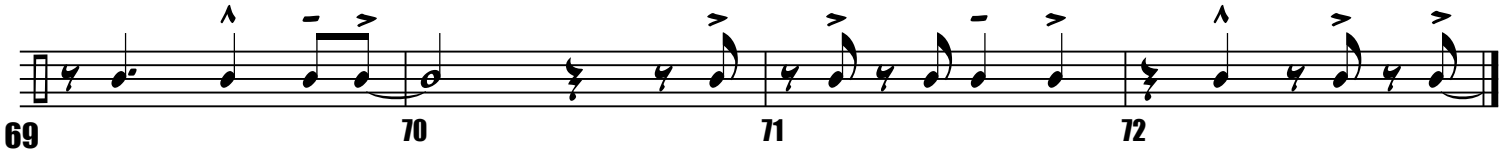
Example 15: Short Articulations and Sounds



Example 16: Long Articulations and Sounds



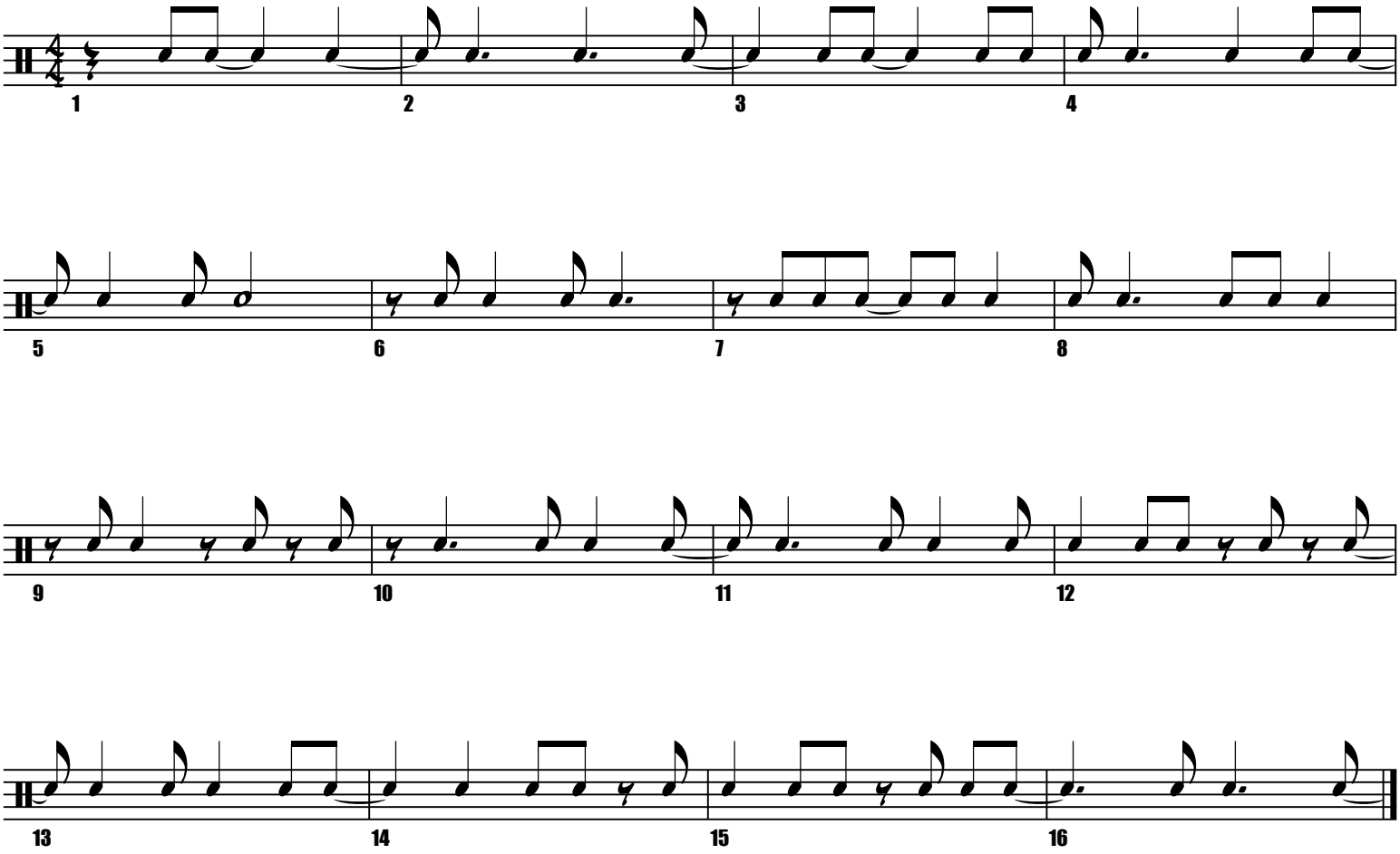
Example 17: A Mixture of Articulations



Syncopated Rhythm Examples

Etude #8 : 4|4 Quarter notes and Eighth notes

Excerpt taken from the book *Studies in Syncopation* by Stockton Helbing



Medium Swing
♩ = 60 - 160 bpm

Big Band Tutti Figures: Warm up #1

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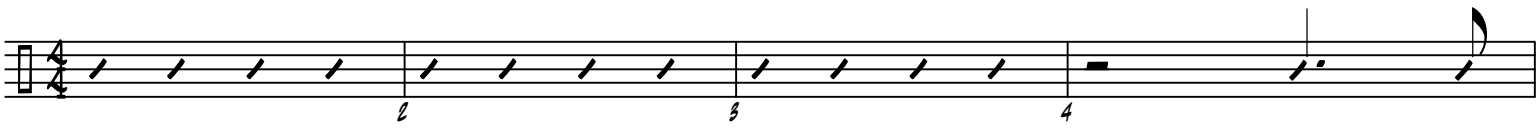

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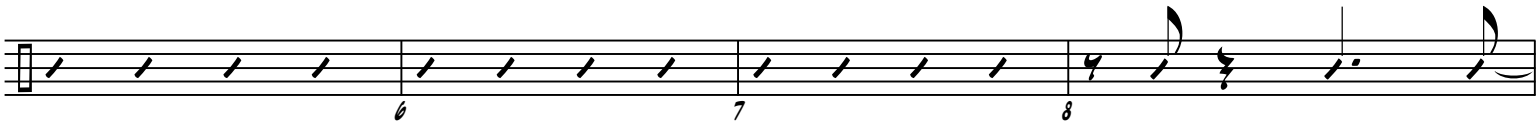

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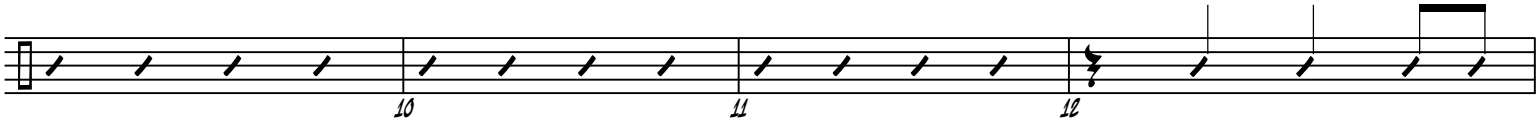

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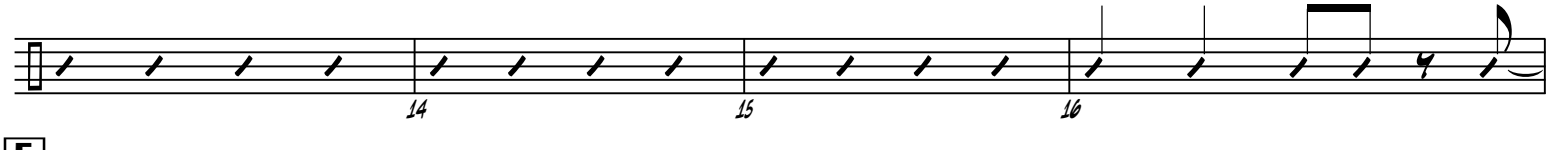

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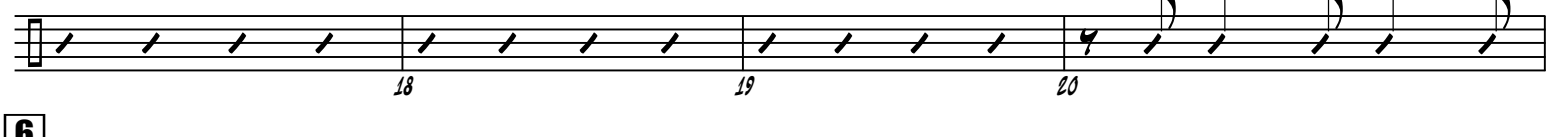

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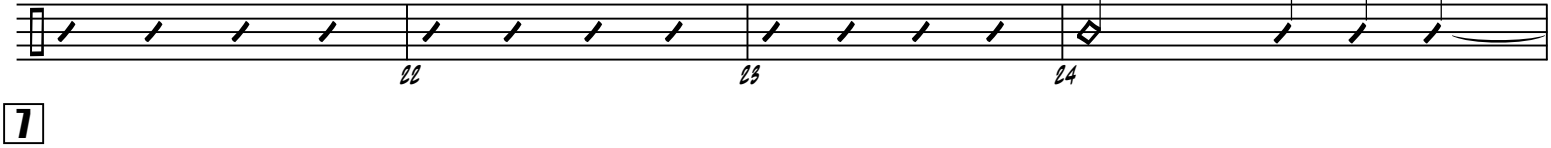

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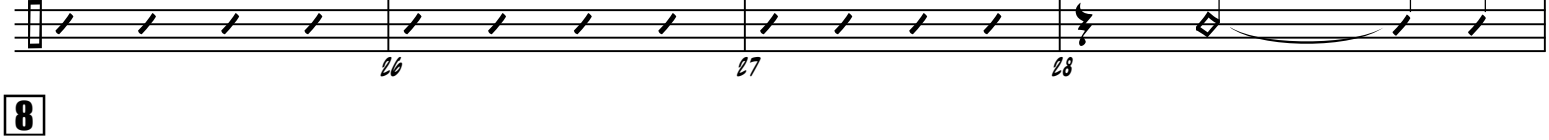

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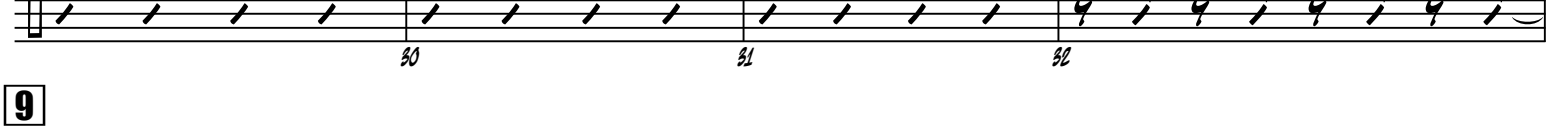

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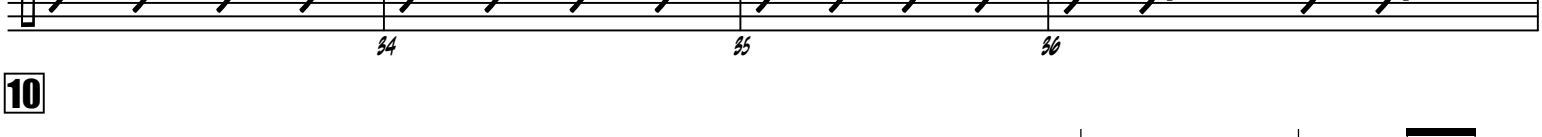

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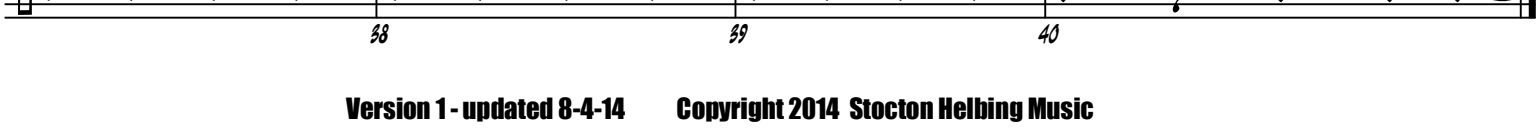

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Medium Swing

♩ = 60 - 160 bpm

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Big Band Background Figures: Warm up #1

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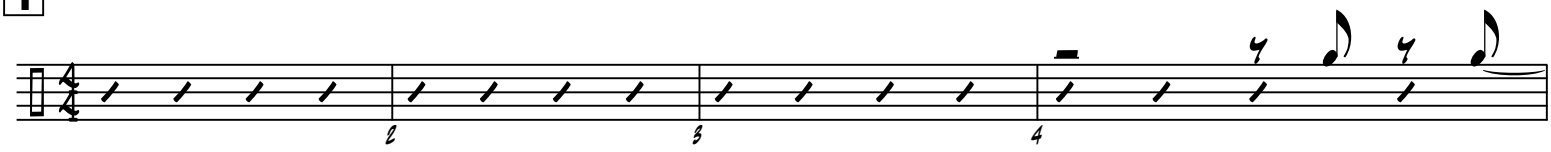

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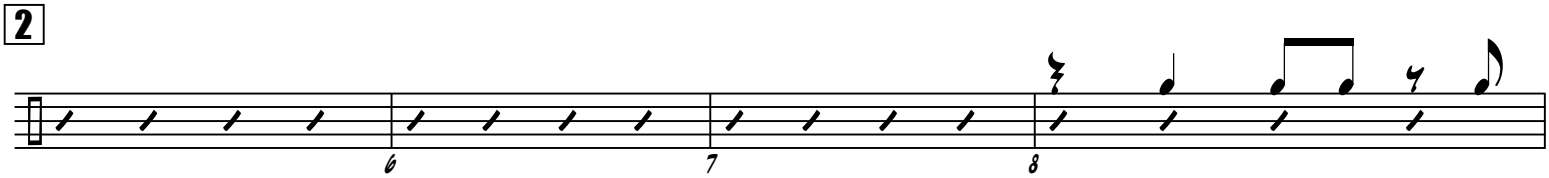

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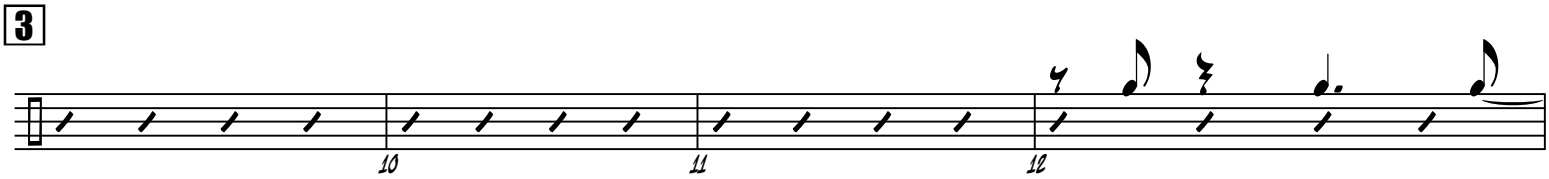

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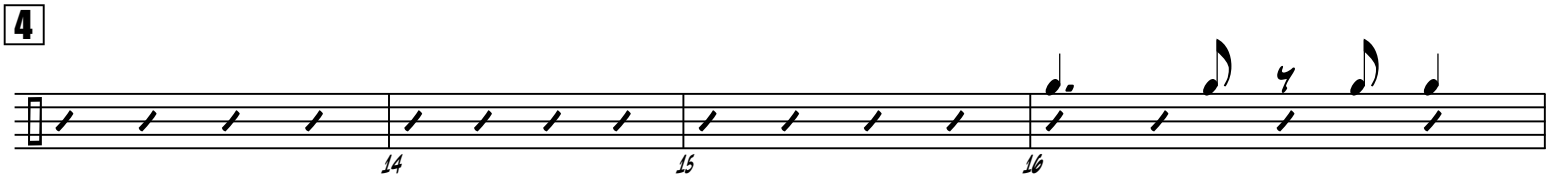

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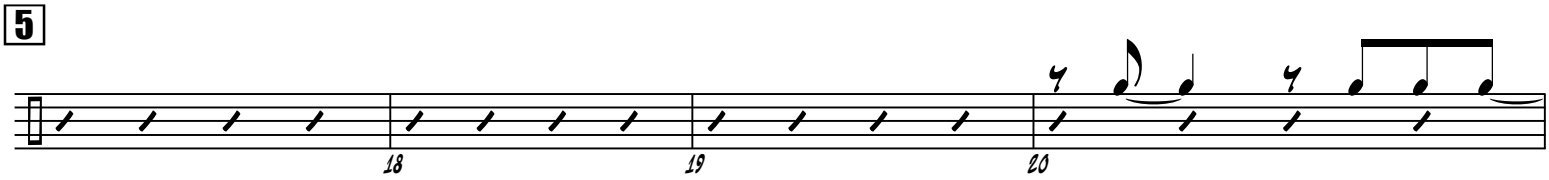

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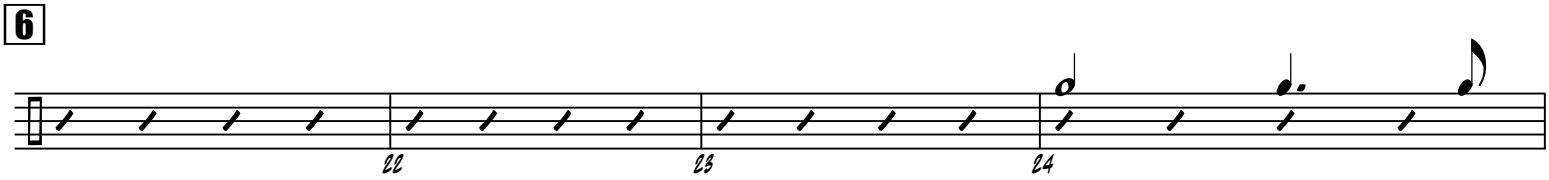

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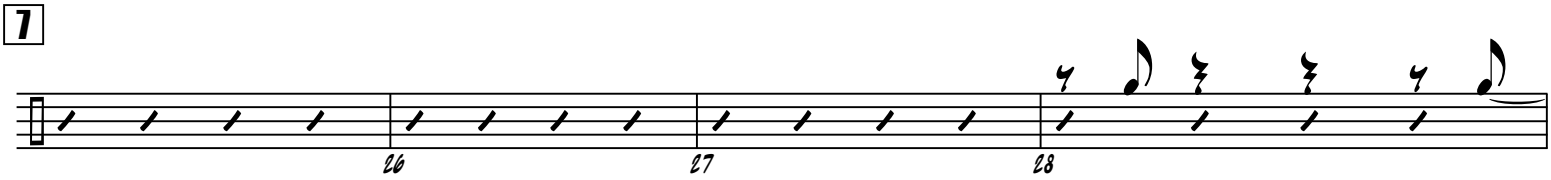

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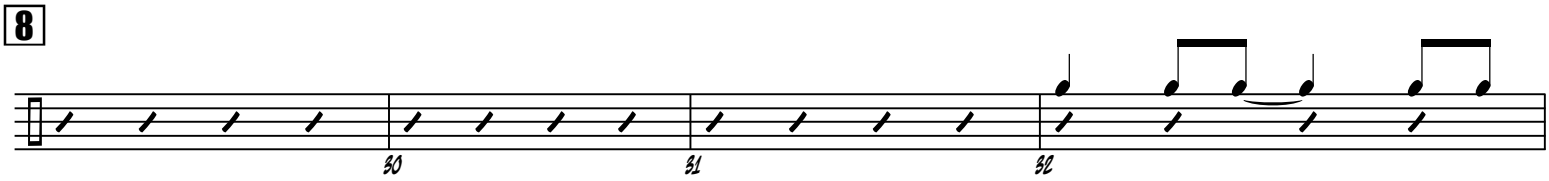

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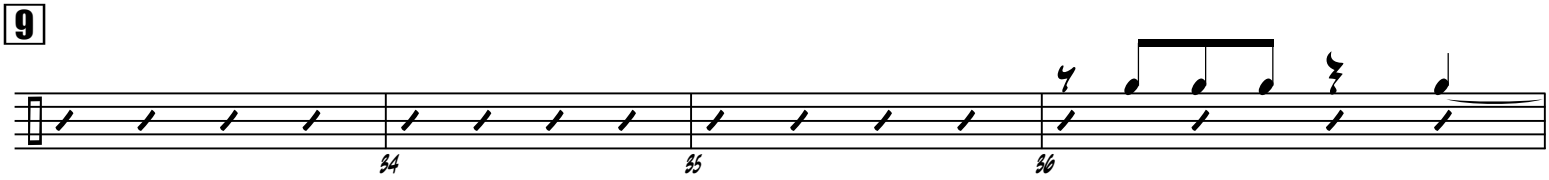

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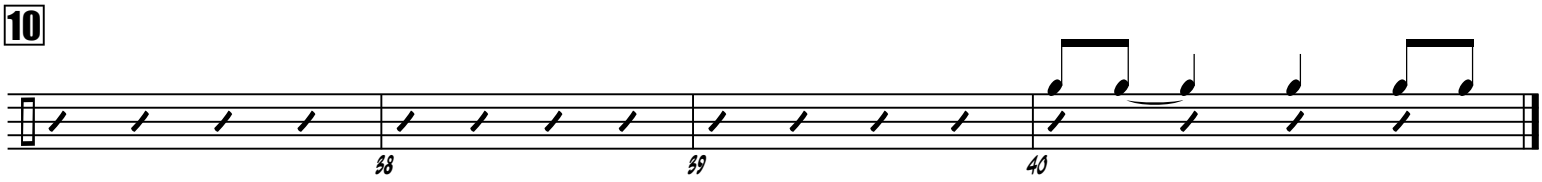

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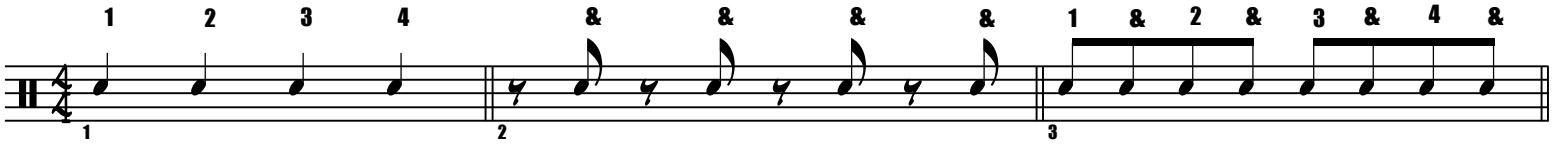
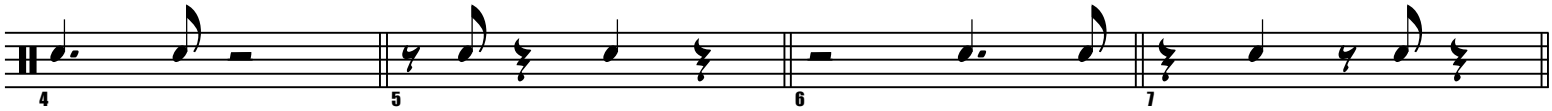
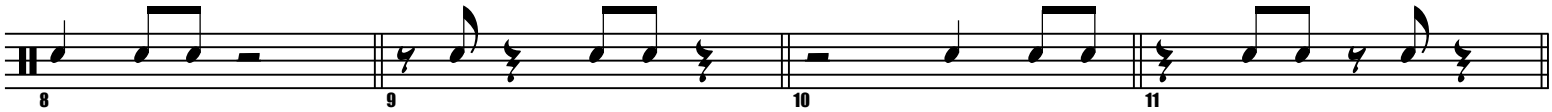
Common 4/4, 1 Measure, Swing Rhythms

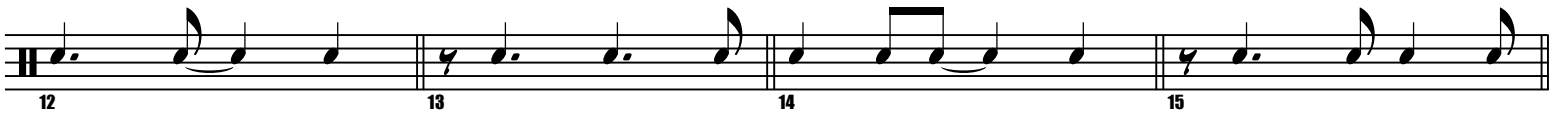


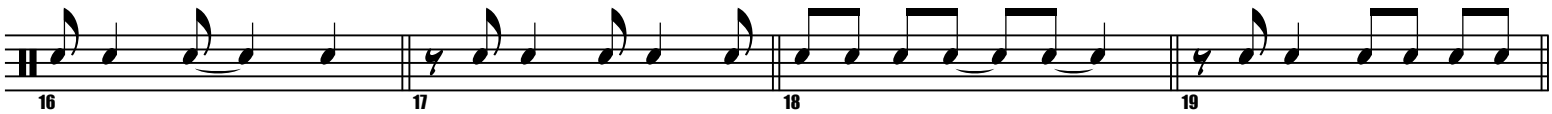
1 ***The Charleston***



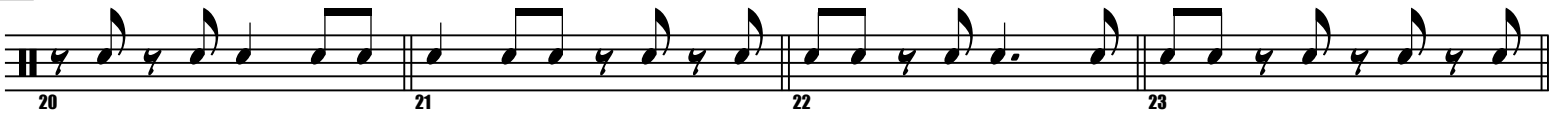


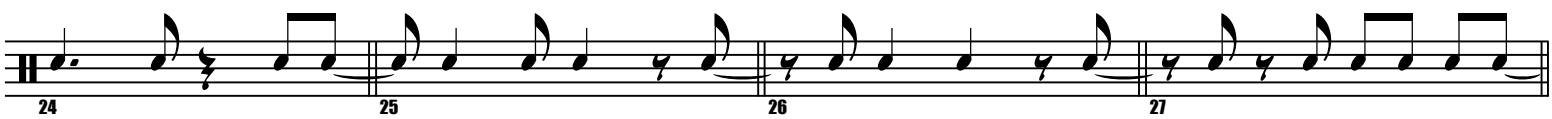
2 ***Three Over Four***



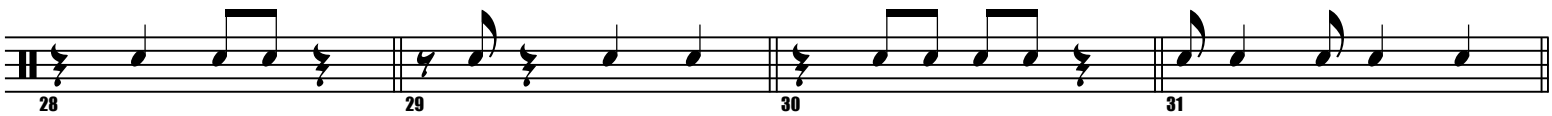


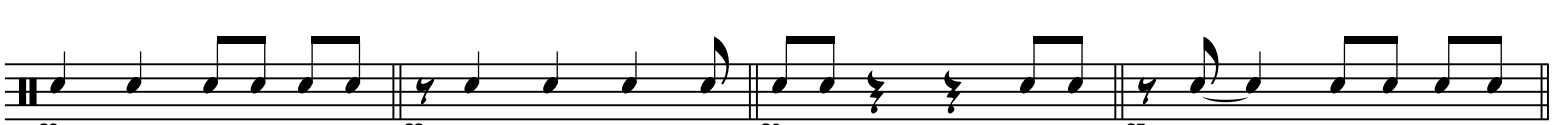
3 ***Ending on the "& of 4"***





4 ***Common Miscellaneous***





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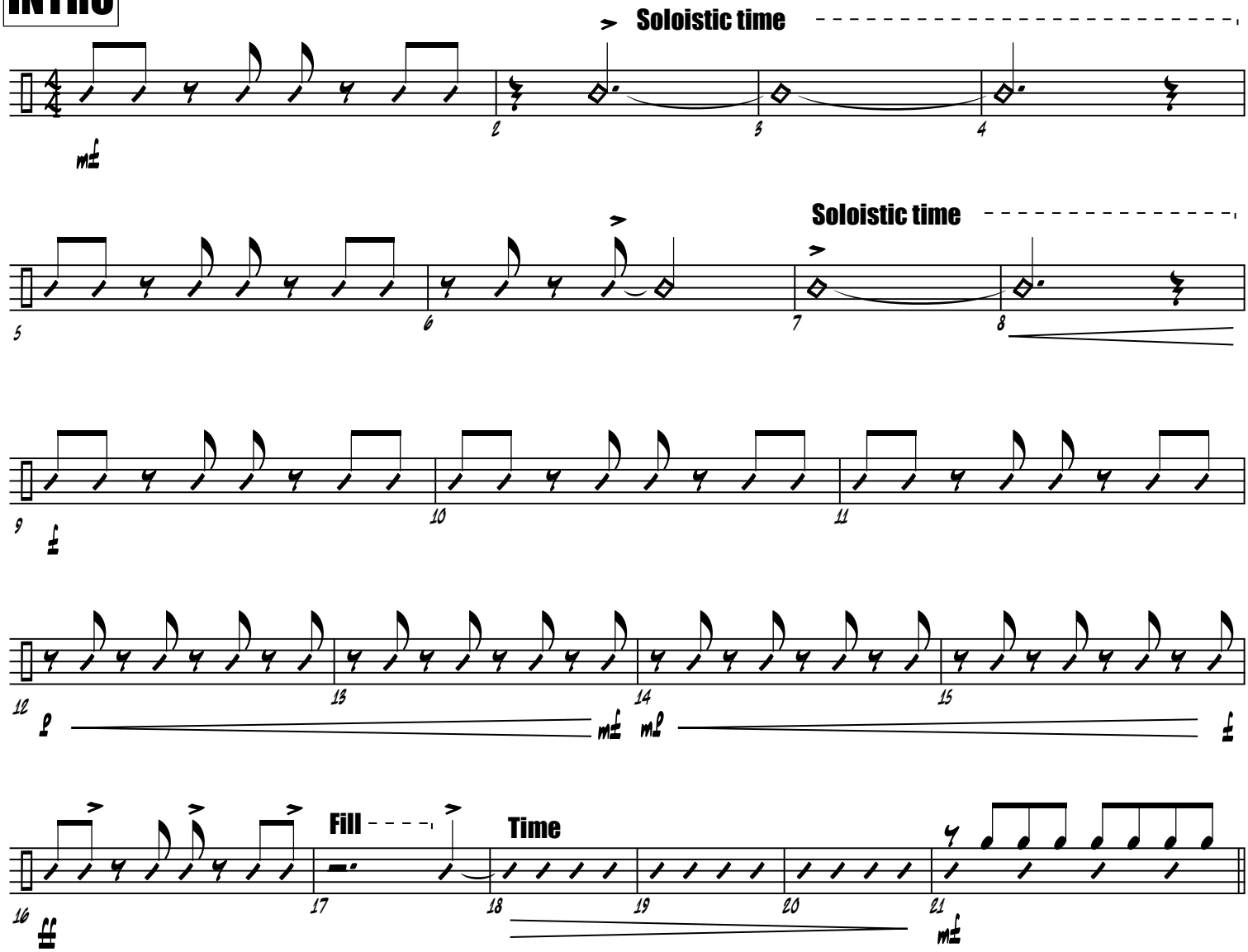
Medium - Up Swing
♩ = 206 bpm

Pent-Up House

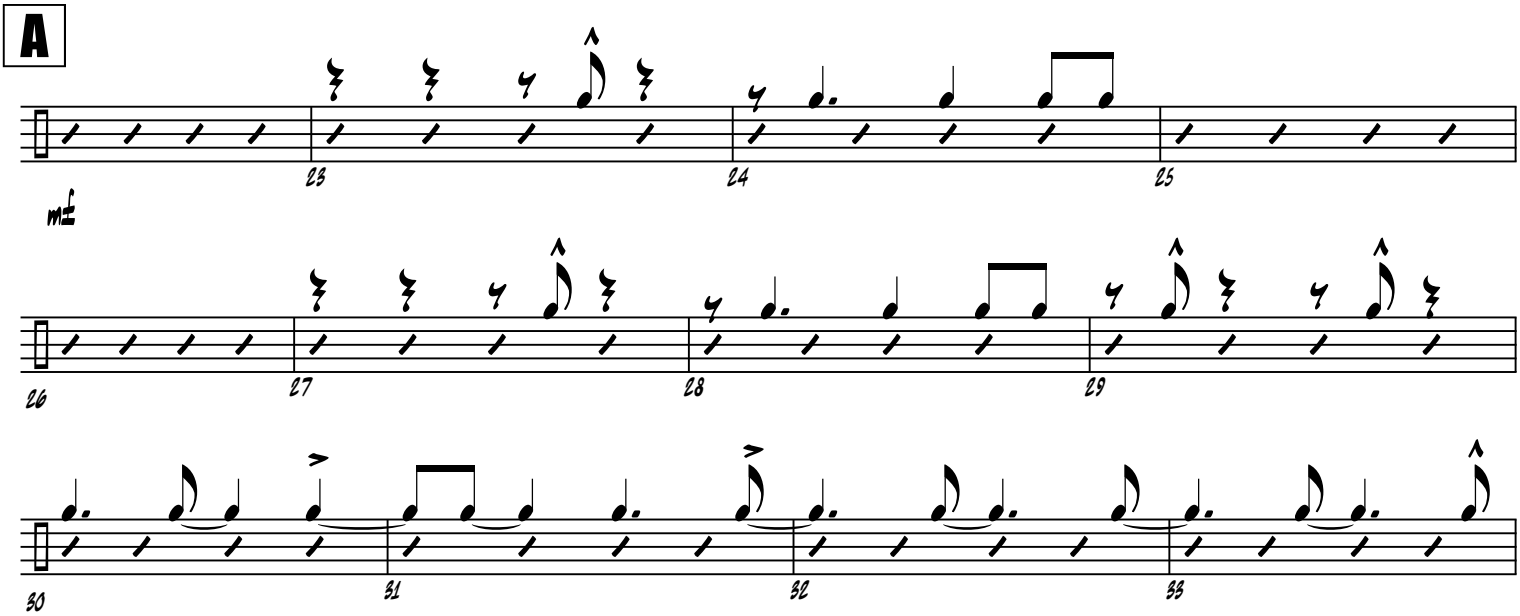
Big Band Etude

Comp: Sonny Rollins
Arr: Stockton Helbing

INTRO



A



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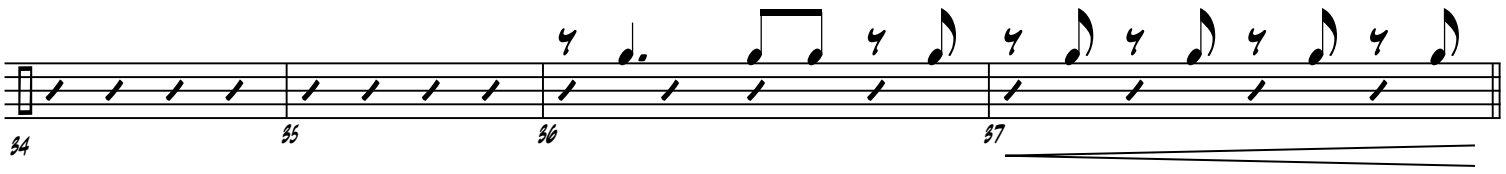
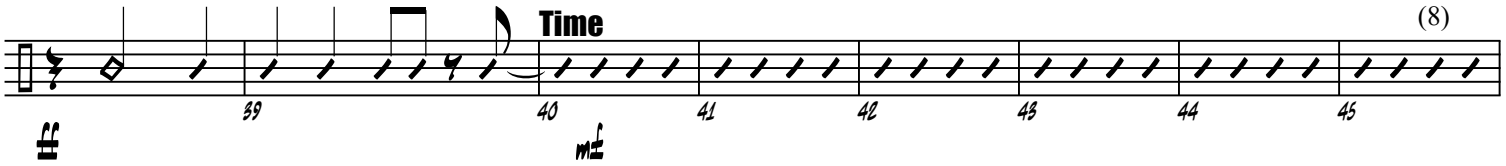
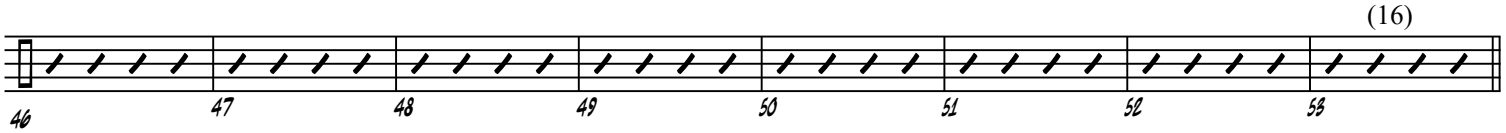


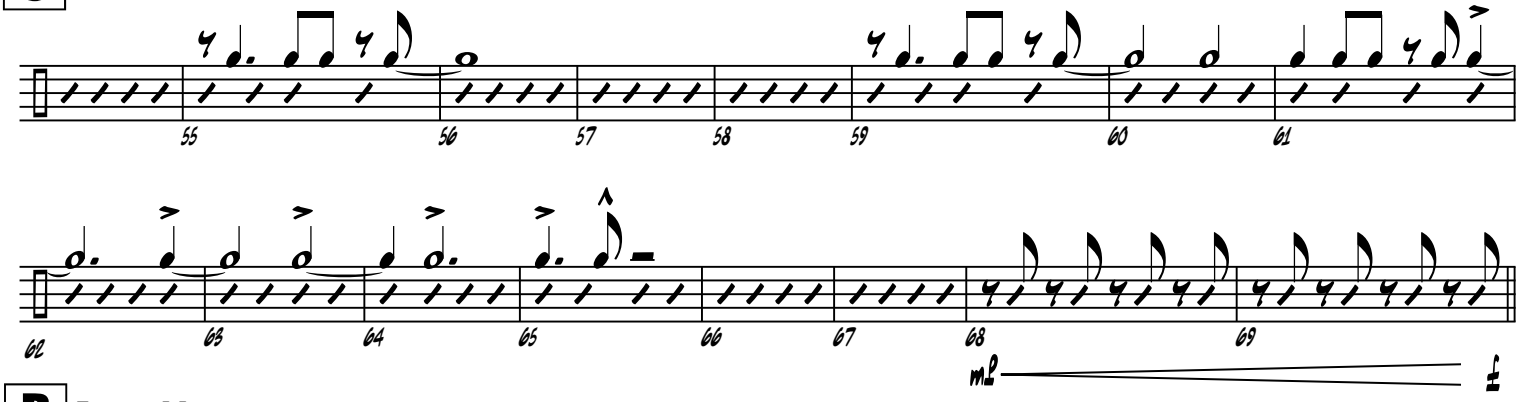
B Tenor Solo

Time

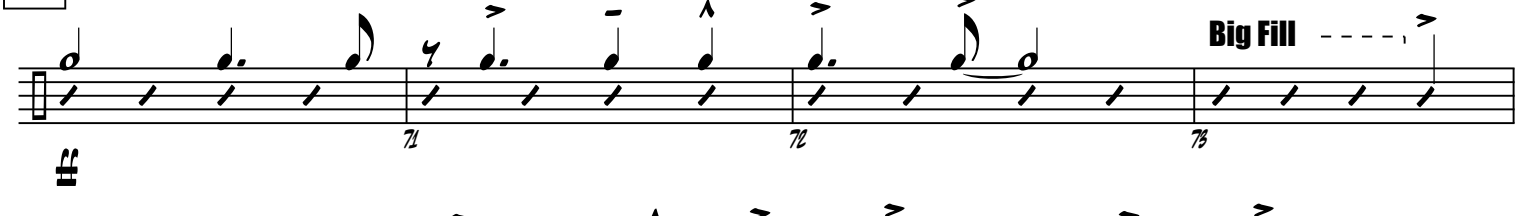


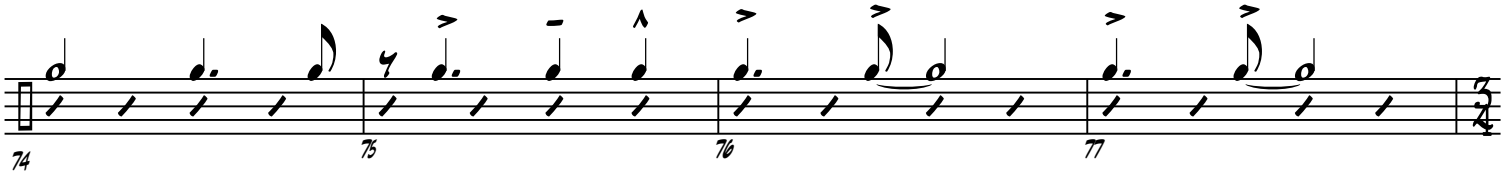


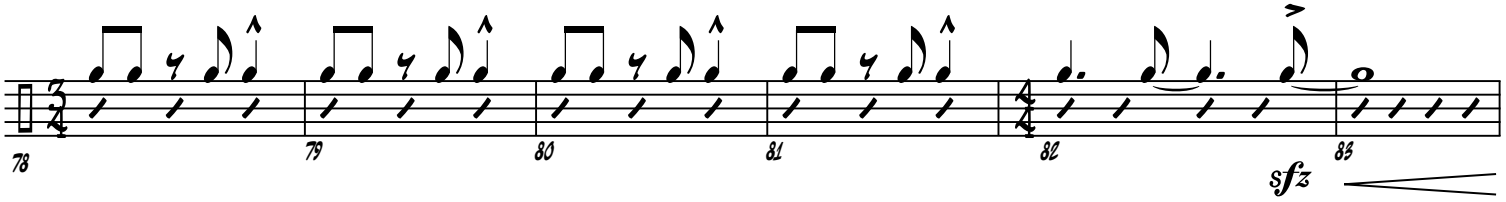
C Tenor Solo Cont...

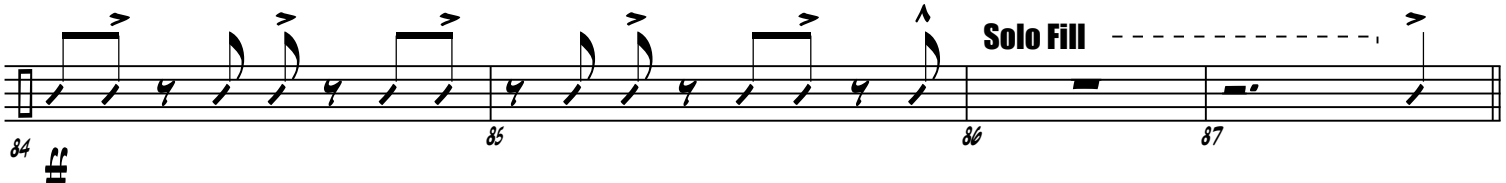


D Ensemble









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