

Billy Drummond – Rhythm in Every Guise

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A young veteran with playing experience in the bands of leaders ranging from Sonny Rollins to Pat Metheny to Andrew Hill, as well as dozens of recordings, Billy Drummond traverses the modern mainstream of jazz with an approach to drumming that encompasses established practices and highly personalized qualities. Influenced by (among others) Philly Joe Jones, Tony Williams, Jack DeJohnette and Elvin Jones, Drummond plays on an equal footing with other instruments as he complements and encourages everyone in the bandstand. Drawing from an unusually large vocabulary of rhythms, he adapts to different sizes and kinds of ensembles, yet inevitably retains a distinct sound and identity. Drummond's style is, in essence, a finely honed dialectic of somewhat methodical, linear movement and fleeting elements that momentarily break up the music's overall flow. Even at its most assertive, his drumming never clamors for the listener's attention. He seldom plays loudly, and is adept at going along with or initiating changes in dynamics, always influencing the course of the music without becoming domineering.

The consistent interplay of continuity and quasi-disruption that characterizes Drummond's drumming is enhanced by the variety of textures he elicits from the drums and cymbals. His sticking, brushes, and footwork are all precise but not fastidious. Drummond's drum set sounds like a complete musical instrument of complementary components. The snare drum snaps with a somewhat thick timbre that never turns bloated or mushy. At times he makes it stand out from the rest of the kit, but on tracks such as "Wonderful" (John Campbell's *Workin' Out*, Criss Cross), the snare blends in with the ride cymbal so that they sound like an extension of each other. Both the mounted and the floor tom toms slightly ring with overtones, and he consistently uses them in novel ways during both ensemble and solo passages. One of his signature figures consists of two or three rapid strokes to one or both tom toms. These brief flurries are usually artfully placed in the middle of other patterns and executed with a precision that would make a rudimentary-minded drum teacher beam with pleasure. A few prime of examples of this facet of his playing can be found on "2286 Seventh Avenue" (Andy Fusco, *Out of the Dark*, Criss Cross), "Confirmation" (Steve Kuhn, *The Best Things*, Reservoir) and during "Blues Connotation" (Renee Rosnes, *Art & Soul*, Blue Note), in which he integrates the figures into his solo. Drummond uses the bass drum sparingly. Sometimes his brief jabs to the foot pedal put things in order – think of a sentence perfectly

punctuated ... or, in conjunction with the snare and cymbals they give the sensation of something being temporarily upended.

Not unlike his approach to the drums, Drummond consistently exhibits a healthy respect for cymbals as instruments to be mined for every possible effect. During the solo interludes on "Separation" (Walt Weiskopf, Siren, Criss Cross) he displays different ways of playing the ride cymbal. A bright metallic ping animates pianist Joel Weiskopf's turn, making precise, evenly spaced leaps. For trumpeter Joe Magnarelli's solo, the cymbal sound is less brilliant, and even though the strokes continue to be distinct, each one also resounds with a nice broad hiss. On Walt Weiskopf's tenor saxophone solo, Drummond augments this approach by adding carefully controlled cymbal crashes in unison with snare drum accents. They have the impact of mini explosions, jarring the music without affecting the continuity of the beat. In an impressive display of restrained musicality, for the entirety of Joel Weiskopf's "Song For the Lost" (Joel Weiskopf, The Search, Criss Cross) Drummond eschews the drums and plays only the cymbals. Before Weiskopf enters, he starts with rhythms of varying lengths, none of which imply a steady pulse. Drummond strikes different parts of the cymbals with a light yet sure touch, letting them ring before moving on to the next brief segment. Then, using Peter Washington's bass as anchor, he continues in this vein, sensitively commenting on Weiskopf's composition and improvisation.

Any discussion of Drummond's overall treatment of the drum set is incomplete without a mention of some of the ways in which he utilizes brushes. During the course of "Daydream" (Billy Drummond, Dubai, Criss Cross) they are more felt than heard, emitting a long sweeping sound that doesn't crowd Walt Weiskopf's restrained reading of the melody. In place of the snap of individual brush strokes he uses the foot pedal of the hi-hat cymbal for effects ranging from a click to a whooshing timbre not unlike the release of an air brake. On the track "Wonderful" (John Campbell, Workin' Out, Criss Cross) Drummond's brushwork is more aggressive. The decisive slap of wire on the snare drum in shifting, irregular rhythms both supports and defies Campbell's suave piano, giving the music a restive, unsettled quality.

Although it is difficult to choose a "best of" Drummond's recorded output, any list of highlights must include some of his performances of the music of Thelonious Monk. "San Francisco Holiday - Worry Later" (Billy Drummond, Native Colours, Criss Cross), the first of three dates as a leader for Criss Cross, finds him in superb form. He alternates between holding the band in place with sticking on the high hat while the melody sprints forward, and a clipped Latin rhythm on the tune's bridge that gives the illusion of speeding up the tempo. During a portion of Rosnes' solo, Drummond simultaneously keeps time on a ride cymbal and persistently skates

across the beat with a series of quarter note triplets on the snare and mounted tom tom without disturbing the pianist's narrative flow. Over the barely audible prodding of bassist Ray Drummond (no relation) he plays a solo in which each theme is developed until it is ripe, then adroitly begins another one. All the while he runs the gamut from seemingly simple, in-the-groove rhythms to convoluted elongated lines.

Another exceptional performance in a Monk composition occurs in conjunction with Joel Weiskopf and Peter Washington on "Criss Cross" (Joel Weiskopf, *The Search*, Criss Cross). Weiskopf and Drummond state and repeat the A section together, sans a steady underlying pulse. Using only drums, Drummond skillfully imitates the abrupt, jagged shifts of the tune, usually staying silent after a phrase, or suddenly adding a brief fill. With the exception of a couple of cymbal crashes at the very end, his solo also solely relies on the drums. Without becoming obvious, Drummond evokes portions of the melody (particularly the bridge) and weaves them into the mix. On the one hand, his rhythms are crisp, decisive, and fairly easy to follow; on the other, in the spirit of Monk's music, there's a free-floating quality to his playing that keeps things from becoming rigid and adds an element of unpredictability.