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## **The Unique Perspective of Drummers in the Art of Composition**

### **Culminating Experience Reflection Paper**

#### **Abstract**

The goal of my Culminating Experience was to study the music composed by drummers, and to use this study to inspire my own compositions. This project documents my personal journey into learning composition and developing my voice as a drummer composer. I studied the process, inspiration, and techniques used by drummers to write music because I believe that drummers have a unique perspective to share in their work; and as a drummer, I would be able to relate more closely to their process than that of another instrumentalist composer. I researched drummer composers by interviewing them, analyzing scores and lead sheets, and listening to many records. After figuring out what compositional devices I thought were particularly drummer-like, I used those techniques to help me compose four original pieces.

Although many current drummers are writing music, there is still a considerable disparity compared to other instrumentalists. There are many reasons for this, and although there are some practical and understandable reasons for that disparity, I believe the biggest factor holding drummers back from exploring their compositional process is fear. The intimidation of trying to write music that's as beautiful and complex as the jazz we listen to can be crippling for drummers, who

aren't constantly honing their melodic and harmonic skills when they play their primary instrument as another instrumentalist would. Studying drummers who compose music would help inspire and give insight into compositional techniques that may resonate better with other drummers like myself.

## **Research and Resources**

I utilized many resources for this project and conducted research in a variety of ways. Within the Global Jazz Institute, my advisor Chase Morrin was my biggest resource. Generally, Morrin's guidance helped direct my project into a more focused direction, but more specifically he gave me many tools to analyze music, compose, and think more freely. Prof. Bruno Raberg was another resource for me, as I attended regular 30-minute composition directed study lessons with him where I would bring in my music, ideas, and questions. He shared very specific compositional techniques with me to help me start and develop my ideas. In my compositions, I tried to incorporate some of the concepts that Danilo Perez taught us in his workshops; although Danilo is primarily considered a pianist, he really is a drummer as well.

To get a sense of what makes drummer's compositions unique, I listened to many drummer composers records, trying to find the things that I thought were more likely to be written by drummers than other musicians. A majority of the ideas that I found drummer-y that I enjoyed were based, somewhat obviously, on rhythm. The use of metric modulation to bridge multiple tempi within a piece, polyrhythms, hemiolas, odd time signatures, and unconventional phrasing were all centerpieces of

drummer tunes. However, there were other less obviously drummistic aspects like avoiding rhythm with the use of rubato, simple and singable melodies, and incorporating rhythms from other parts of the world that were also prominent in the compositions I listened to. I also used some formal analysis to help me unlock some ideas. I looked at John Hollenbeck scores, Ari Hoenig lead sheets, transcribed some Elvin Jones, Paul Motian's songbook, etc. I investigated the types of harmony they used, studied how they constructed and developed melodic lines, and dissected the forms of their music.

Another component of my research was interviewing drummer composers and asking them questions about their process and techniques. I interviewed John Hollenbeck, Rodney Green, and Terri Lyne Carrington. I filmed a one hour video interview with John Hollenbeck, and it proved to be some of the best insight I received and gave me inspiration to write. Hollenbeck is one of the preeminent jazz composers today, and is a drummer. He shared invaluable advice with me about how to get started writing, how to overcome fear, and how to compose without judgment. Hollenbeck had written an article for the November, 2011 issue of *DownBeat* entitled "Composing From a Drummer's Perspective" that really laid out the concept of what I was trying to do. This was an important article to find, because there aren't many on the subject of writing music from the perspective of a drummer- including the advantages and challenges that it entails. My interview with Rodney Green was interesting and insightful because he is on a similar journey as me, he's relatively new at writing music and is in the process of diving into composition. He just recorded an album of all original music and shared his process

as well as some personal interactions with Al Foster, Paul Motian, and others who had pushed him to start writing. My time with Terri Lyne Carrington was mostly spent talking about what makes drummers tunes special, and how there's something unique to drummers who write. Since the drums aren't a literal melodic/harmonic instrument, when it comes to writing melody and harmony a drummer must go to a secondary instrument, which means they can't allow their technique to do the work, they have to painstakingly work through each note. In addition to the three interviews that I personally conducted, I read many interviews in jazz and drum magazines and blogs.

### **Compositional Process**

The process of writing original material was still somewhat new and uncomfortable for me, so using case studies as models helped me solidify an approach and develop new writing practices. The first piece I began writing for this project is titled "20 Digits". I gave it this name because the two melodic themes were based on two different ten-digit cell phone numbers. Inspired by my interview with John Hollenbeck, I decided to create melodies by assigning pitches to a series of numbers. Hollenbeck shared with me that writing music in this manner is writing music with out judgment. I can't judge whether the melody is good or bad, it just is, and its exactly what I set out to do. This alleviates any pressure to write something "good" which often times leads to paralysis rather than anything "good". The concept of non-judgment is a core concept in the Berklee Global Jazz Institute, so I was happy to find a way to bring that into my compositional process. As a nod to

Paul Motian, I also included a rubato stating of the melodic themes as an intro to the piece.

The second piece I started to write was based off of a melody that I sang into a voice recorder on my phone. I never came up with a name so it remains “Untitled”. This piece utilizes metric modulations, odd time signatures, and odd phrases to keep it interesting. Drummers commonly write with groove in mind, and often seek out rhythms from around the world to incorporate into their music. I included a “Cachao Descarga” vamp, borrowed from the Afro-Cuban jazz tradition, which I manipulated in a few different ways.

As the recording session grew nearer, I realized I was under a time crunch, which is how I came to name this piece “Crunch” (also referencing the crunchy, dissonant interval it ends with). Rather than trying to start from scratch, I decided to take a common song form, the 12-bar blues, and mess it up a little bit. A common theme I’ve come across with composers, especially drummers, is the idea of “borrowing” and “collecting” sounds. In this piece I decided to borrow the harmonic textures and alterations of a blues.

During my interview with Hollenbeck, he spoke about how the cell of a composition could be inspired by anything, especially non-musical things. Just like the cell for “20 Digits” was writing a melody based off of a phone number, this piece, “5 Over 9”, was inspired by a polyrhythm and how I could make it into a groove. This composition prominently features “add2” and “add4” chords, which is a type of harmony that I had heard all the time in modern jazz but didn’t know what it was. I asked classmates to show me how to achieve the sounds I was hearing, and then

learned about it. I figured the best way to internalize this new type of harmony was to write a song using only that type of harmony. Unlike the other tunes, I also tried to incorporate the use of clusters and shifting pedal point. With each piece I wrote, I tried to push myself to learn things and use them.

### **How the Work Contributes to the Profession**

This Culminating Experience will contribute to the profession by bringing awareness to music written by drummers, putting out my own compositions based on those models, and using my interviews and experience to inspire more drummers to write music. This will help dispel the stereotype that drummers aren't as capable of musicians as other instrumentalists. Drummers have a unique role in an ensemble: they hear the bigger picture, orchestrate, and conduct. When a drummer composes music, they are writing from this point of view, either consciously or subconsciously, and we should recognize music written from that point of view. This project will also help non-drummers explore this point of view, and better understand the role of the drummer and how they compose- whether that be through a non-traditional, "drummer-y" approach, or through more traditional approaches from a drummers point of view. Some drummers like Denzil Best, grew up as an adept multi-instrumentalists that wrote music in a more traditional sense, but with a strong rhythmic foundation. On the other hand, Paul Motian didn't begin learning piano and writing until he was in his 40's (Woodard). Shedding light on the stories of how these drummers began writing, and what their

process was, will not only be inspiring to me, but could inspire a whole new generation of drummer/composers.

### **Plan of Action**

My plan of action consisted of three phases: first, immersion in the original music of the case-study drummers; second, interviews with drummer composers and analysis of selected pieces to define compositional styles and techniques; third, creation of my own compositions and arrangements.

Phase one: Immersion. During this phase, I tried to uncover as much original music written by selected drummers as I could, and research their careers and playing styles to become familiar with them. I had already done some preliminary research on which drummers I wanted to focus on, and some of the music they've written.

Phase two: Analysis. During this phase, I started to look deeper at the inner workings of the compositions and look for any defining elements and interviewed drum composers I admired to gain insight on their methods. After I discovered the certain defining elements or methods of each composer, I used them as a model to create my own compositions with. I used this phase to gather all the necessary tools I needed in order to write my own works.

Phase 3: Creation. During this phase, I composed the pieces for the recording project. I used my rehearsal time to ask for suggestions from the other musicians, which turned out to be invaluable. I discovered that it was hard for me to focus on how the tunes sounded when I was playing because I was focused on playing, and

when I focused on hearing how to tune sounded, I couldn't really focus on my playing.

## **Challenges**

During the process of pursuing this culminating experience project, I did face some challenges. The main challenge, that isn't unique to my project, is time management. I changed my culminating experience multiple times, and kept searching for a project that I would be personally connected to and that would give me tangible growth. Once I settled on this project, I realized that since writing music was new for me, that it would take a lot of time to complete the music. I didn't have all the music completely written until the week before the recording sessions started. I finished four pieces and had started and stopped working on three to five other ideas that never came to fruition.

The only other real challenge with this project was trying to interview drummers. I had an ambitious list of drummer composers that I admired that I wanted to get video interviews with, but I simply didn't have the time or resources to make it happen. Scheduling time with busy musicians is already hard to do, but I also was driving back and forth to New York city to do interviews with NYC-based drummers which had financial ramifications as well. In the end I interviewed John Hollenbeck, Rodney Green, and Terri Lyne Carrington, but I had planned to do at least 5-10 more interviews. I scheduled an interview with Dan Weiss, but then his wife got sick so I couldn't come over to his apartment, then he went on tour and we never had another good time to meet up before the end of this program. I also



reached out to Ari Hoenig but he is extremely in demand and needed to get compensated for his time, which I couldn't afford to do. When meeting with Kendrick Scott after a gig at Reggatabar, we exchanged schedules and he also was on tour during the times I was available until the program was over.

I also want to point out something that I found interesting that wasn't necessarily a challenge, but something that I learned in this process. I discovered that it can be hard to rehearse and listen to your own compositions while you're also trying to play them. When I would rehearse the band, I realized that I never thought about what I would play because I was so focused on the other musician's parts. As I do this more often, I believe that I'll learn to rehearse my music in a more efficient and productive way.

### **Future Plans**

Moving forward with this project I plan on continuing to study drummer composers that I enjoy. I've barely touched the surface of studying the wide breadth of work written by drummer composers, and I will continue looking at their work alongside my study of composition in general. Drummers like Tony Williams and Max Roach were prolific composers and I'm very interested in diving deeper into their catalogues of work. Paul Motian is another musician who I've just started really checking out, and his story has given me plenty of inspiration.

Another aspect of this project that I plan to continue working on is interviewing more drummer composers and producing a series of short documentaries on "The Unique Perspective of Drummers in the Art of Composition".

I believe that making these resources available and putting this out into the world will inspire more drummers to write music and give them concrete tools to begin their journey into the world of composition. As I was researching this topic, I found a distinct lack of information on the topic of how drummers write music, so I hope to help fill that void.

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### **Appendix: Abbreviated List of Drummer Composers**

- John Hollenbeck
- Terri Lyne Carrington
- Dave King
- Jeff "Tain" Watts
- Matt Wilson
- Elvin Jones
- Max Roach
- Tony Williams
- Paul Motian
- Rodney Green
- Victor Lewis
- Lenny White
- James Black
- Jeff "Tain" Watts
- Brian Blade
- Ralph Peterson Jr.
- Nate Smith
- Ari Hoenig
- Kendrick Scott
- Billy Higgins
- Dan Weiss
- Eric Harland
- Denzil Best
- Tyshawn Sorey
- Rich DeRosa
- Philly Jo Jones
- Antonio Sanchez
- Dana Hall
- Jeff Hamilton
- Bill Stewart
- Peter Erskine
- Billy Drummond
- Dafnis Prieto
- Jeff Ballard
- Jason Marsalis
- Fransisco Mela
- Herlin Riley
- Marvin "Smitty" Smith
- Trilock Gurtu
- Jonathan Blake
- Willie Jones III
- Adam Cruz
- Mark Guiliana
- Jack DeJohnette
- Brice Wassy
- EJ Strickland