

Extract, Transform, Transfer: Bebop Language in Contemporary Drumset Practice

Turning Philly Joe Jones-derived cells into groove, phrasing, and ensemble response

By Dr. Eugene Seow and Wang Peng

Many drummers first encounter bebop vocabulary as licks to copy from recordings. That is still one of the best ways to enter the language. Recordings give us touch, placement, sound, interaction, and attitude that notation alone cannot provide. But a phrase from Philly Joe Jones need not remain only a historical lick. If we listen closely, a short phrase can also become a practical engine for contemporary playing.

The key is to ask what makes the phrase work. Is it the swing feel? The ride-cymbal pattern? The orchestration? Or is there a smaller rhythmic shape inside it: an accent pattern, a direction of motion, a conversational answer, or a way of turning the time around?

This article grows out of transcription-based work on bebop drum solo vocabulary, especially associated with Philly Joe Jones, with broader motivic reference to Max Roach. Rather than treating transcription as a museum exercise, we use it as a practice tool. The aim is not to make every groove sound like bebop. The aim is to extract useful rhythmic behavior from the bebop vocabulary, transform it, and apply it to contemporary drumset practice.

1: EXTRACT THE CELL

The first step is to reduce the material to a small cell. A cell is not simply a lick; it is a short musical idea with a recognizable shape. It may be only a few notes, but it has enough identity to be heard, repeated, displaced, and developed.

Example 1 presents three bebop-derived cells. The first is a triplet-based linear cell. The second is built around displaced accents. The third is a short conversational gesture. Each one can be practiced as a complete vocabulary item, but the more useful question is: What must remain intact for the idea still to sound like itself?

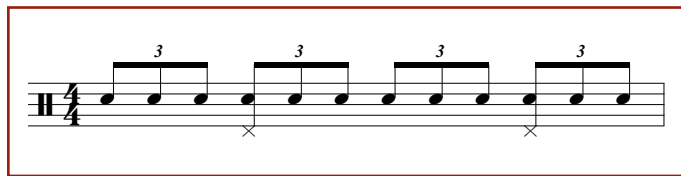
Before moving the phrase around the kit, identify three things: the main accents, the direction of the phrase, and the point of arrival. Then remove the original orchestration. Clap it. Sing it. Tap it on one surface. If the idea disappears when the drums disappear, you may have learned the sticking but not the phrase. If the idea still has shape, you have something you can work with.

A useful test is to ask whether the cell still makes sense at three levels. First, does it make sense as a hand pattern? Second, does it make sense as an accent pattern? Third, does it make sense as a musical response? The third question is often the most important. Bebop vocabulary is not only a collection of technical figures; it is also a language of replies, setups, interruptions, and releases.

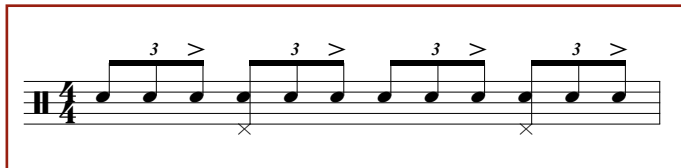
2: KEEP THE ACCENT SHAPE, CHANGE THE SURFACE

Once the cell is clear, the next step is to change the surface while keeping the accent shape. This is where many players move too quickly. They try to make the phrase sound modern by adding more notes, changing the subdivision, or spreading it

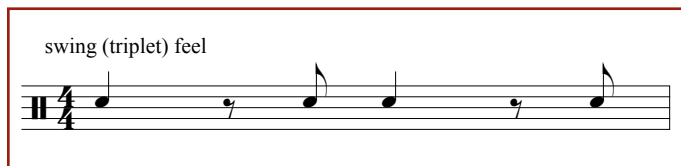
Example 1. Three bebop-derived cells: a triplet-based linear cell, a displaced-accent cell, and a short conversational gesture.
Triplet-based linear cell



Displaced accent cell



Short conversational gesture



around the kit before they can clearly hear what the phrase is doing.

A safer approach is to preserve the accent logic first. In Example 2, the surface rhythm changes, but the accented points remain the organizing feature. This trains the drummer to hear the difference between the outside of the phrase and the engine inside it.

Try this on the kit: Play the original cell in a swing feel. Then clap only the accents. Next, place those accents inside a straight or lightly swung sixteenth-note grid. Keep the accents strong and the unaccented notes light. Finally, move the unaccented notes into ghost notes. The result may begin to feel less like a bebop solo fragment and more like a contemporary groove texture, but the original phrase is still guiding the motion.

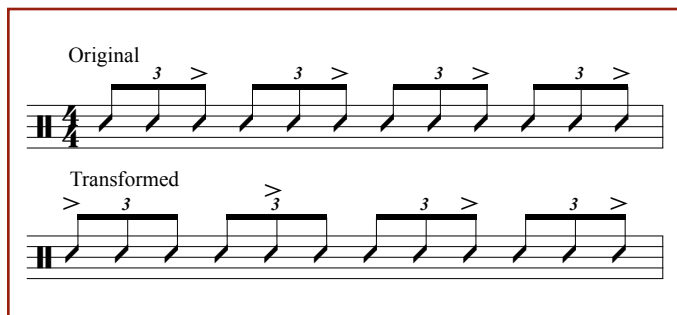
This kind of transformation works best when only one element changes at a time. First, keep the right hand on the ride cymbal or hi-hat and let the left hand carry the accent shape on the snare. Then reverse the problem: keep the accent shape in the bass drum and use the snare as a lighter response. Finally, distribute the accents between snare, bass drum, and cymbal while keeping the original direction of the phrase intact.

The test is simple: after the surface changes, can the listener still feel the phrase's direction? If yes, the cell has started to travel. If no, return to the accents before adding more notes.

3: TRANSFER THE FUNCTION

Transfer is more than moving a lick from one style to another. A phrase transfers well when its function remains clear. Does it create forward motion? Does it answer a previous idea?

Example 2. Accent remapping: the surface rhythm changes, but the accent shape remains recognizable.



Does it set up a crash, cue, or ensemble hit? Does it open space for another player?

One way to begin is to turn a triplet-based cell into a ghost-note texture. Keep the accents clear and allow the unaccented notes to become softer filler. Add a simple bass drum foundation, then experiment with bass drum placements that do not crowd the snare accents. The result should not feel like a bebop lick pasted into a modern groove. It should feel like a groove whose internal motion has been shaped by bebop vocabulary.

A second option is to move the phrase between the hi-hat and the snare. Put the leading voice on the hi-hat or ride cymbal and let the snare carry the accent shape. This can create a groove that retains bebop-derived phrasing while sitting naturally in funk, fusion, contemporary jazz, or straight-eighth settings.

A third option is to redistribute the cell between the snare and the bass drum. This is especially useful for drummers who want vocabulary that affects groove construction rather than only soloing. Keep the contour of the phrase, but allow the bass drum to answer the snare. Listen for whether the phrase still speaks as one idea.

Finally, use the cell as a short cue. Bebop drumming is full of conversational gestures: short answers, setups, interruptions, and releases. A cell does not have to become a full fill. It may become a way to answer a bass line, support a horn figure, cue an ensemble entrance, or shape the last bar of a phrase.

Not every bebop idea transfers equally. Some materials depend strongly on swing articulation, ride-cymbal continuity, brush texture, or ensemble interaction. Others travel more easily because their accent shape and phrase direction remain clear. The point is to test what survives when the surface changes.

4: BUILD A SHORT PRACTICE ROUTINE

A useful way to practice this material is to move from imitation to transformation in stages. Example 3 shows one possible timeline: state the idea, develop it, shift its placement, and then return to the original material. The point is not to create a fixed solo form, but to give the drummer a simple path for developing vocabulary without losing the original phrase identity.

Start by playing the original cell slowly. Keep the dynamic

shape clear and resist the temptation to make it busier. At this stage, the goal is not speed; the goal is to hear the shape of the phrase.

Next, sing or clap the accents. If you cannot vocalize the accents, the phrase is probably not internalized yet. Use simple syllables if needed. The exact syllable does not matter; what matters is whether you can feel where the phrase leans and where it arrives.

Then remove the original surface. Play the cell on one drum, on a practice pad, or as a simple hand pattern away from the kit. This step reveals whether the phrase depends on its original orchestration or whether its accent shape is strong enough to travel.

After that, rebuild it in a new groove. Place the accents inside a sixteenth-note groove, a half-time pocket, a straight-eighth context, or a contemporary swing/funk setting. Change only one element at a time: subdivision, orchestration, placement, or dynamic level.

Finally, record and listen. Ask one question: Does the phrase still have direction? If it only sounds like random notes, return to the accent shape. If it still moves, try it in another musical situation.

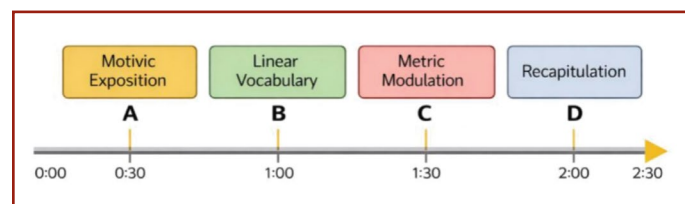
5: TEACHING THE PROCESS

For teachers, this approach helps students move beyond two common habits: copying licks without understanding them, and rejecting older vocabulary because it sounds too distant from the music they currently play. Both habits limit musical growth. A student who only copies the lick may miss the phrase's deeper rhythmic behavior. A student who rejects the vocabulary too quickly may miss a useful source of motion, phrasing, and ensemble response.

A simple teaching sequence is: isolate, transform, relocate, contextualize, and evaluate. First, isolate the phrase. Then transform one element at a time: subdivision, surface, orchestration, or placement. Next, relocate the phrase into a groove or ensemble situation. Finally, evaluate it musically. Does it support the time? Does it speak clearly? Does it help the drummer make better decisions?

This last stage matters. Vocabulary transfer is not just a coordination exercise. It is also a listening exercise. The student must decide whether the phrase still conveys motion, intention, and ensemble function after the change. In this sense, bebop-derived

Example 3. A possible practice timeline: introduce the motif, develop the linear vocabulary, shift the metric placement, and return to the original idea.



vocabulary can become a way to develop musical judgment, not only technical fluency.

Teachers can also use this process in group settings. One student states the original cell. Another student claps only the accents. A third student places those accents into a groove. A fourth student responds with a contrasting phrase. In a few minutes, the class moves from transcription to listening, from listening to transformation, and from transformation to ensemble interaction.

This way of working aligns with rhythm pedagogy approaches that treat groove vocabulary as a transferable resource for listening, embodied timing, ensemble response, and musical judgment.

CONCLUSION: FUNCTION OVER SURFACE

Bebop drum vocabulary does not have to remain locked to a single historical surface. At the same time, not every bebop idea transfers equally well. Some materials depend strongly on swing feel, ride-cymbal continuity, brush texture, or ensemble interaction. Others travel more easily because their accent shape and phrase direction remain clear even when the surface changes.

The goal, then, is not to make every drummer sound like a bebop drummer. The goal is to hear how bebop language carries motion, intention, and ensemble function. When drummers extract the cell, transform the surface, and transfer the function, historical vocabulary becomes more than something to reproduce. It becomes a source of phrasing, groove, articulation, and ensemble response for contemporary drumset practice.

SELECTED SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Listening/source materials

- Davis, Miles. *Milestones*. Columbia, 1958. Selected reference: "Billy Boy," featuring Philly Joe Jones on drums.
- Jones, Philly Joe. *Philly Joe's Beat*. Atlantic, 1960. Selected reference: "Salt Peanuts."
- Roach, Max. *Drums Unlimited*. Atlantic, 1966. Selected reference: "The Drum Also Waltzes."
- Roach, Max. *Drums Unlimited*. Atlantic, 1966. Selected reference: "Blues for Big Sid."

Related rhythm-pedagogy work

- Seow, Eugene. "Decolonising the Rhythm Curriculum: Integrating Global Groove Practices in Undergraduate Aural Skills." *Music Education Research* 27, no. 5 (2025): 593–603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2025.2565148>.
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