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I. The History of the Drum

In the early 1990s, I was commissioned to write a piece of music titled “The History of the Drum” for the Kokuma Afro-Caribbean Dance Ensemble of Birmingham, England. I proposed a composition that would describe the story of the drum, and, once this was agreed upon by the sponsoring arts council, I realized that a libretto would help me to visualize the rhythmic and tonal construct of the project. I asked my good friend Jack Fletcher, a noted director in theatre and animation, to supply me with a fable of sorts. This is what I got, and I think it describes the first music as well as anything else I’ve come across:

History of the Drum



Once a long, long time ago — so long it did not be what long is now. You know. Was a little boy. Did not know there a little girl too.

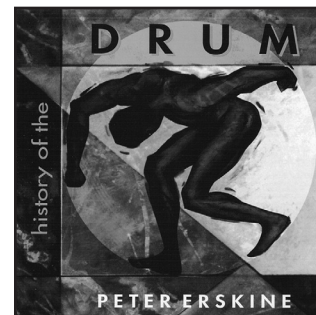
Somewhere. Probably now we know he looked there for somewhere but we know he asked because he felt that lone. That lone, we know, can feel on globe. Alone. He used to sit and tilt back and lean forth, we know is rocking now and walking then. Boy did he cause he ache and thought the only was he — a bug on a big animal that moved with no of him and so...

He picked up a tiny rock and he threw rock in a lake to make him feel the plunk he heard back from the throwing was nice — he threw another just to hear and see the ripples. Picking up third stone he asked, “so are you part of the animal I live on?”

Stone sat in his hand — he looked and it sat and he stared and so sudden it spoke, “So... you throw me or teeth clicking jaw up and down sound? Why not you just walk now your feet make some ground and you listen cause will they you round.” The stone it stop talking the boy start to walk and he walking with step, step, step to this wave, wave, wave to the big water ocean that in and out in a rhythm he loved and he saw on its sand there a girl. There she was rocking self to the wave’s voice she loved too.

The waves held their feet and then would let go. The bump found their ears and they sit or could stand. They find that they moved to the come here and go which could sound like slow bird wings or tree crackle winds. Now it would not soon long be they finding their hearts which beat in each two beat and beating in one.

Of course you and me know that this was the start. This was the feet that slammed, and the hands that went to the chest, and the knee, and the wood had the sound that the sticks liked on. Hollow logs told the story strong that logs talked. So did skins that beating spoke like hearts. And men and women and birth and life and feet beating and rocks hitting water meant this life could not end. The stars laugh the shore sigh the heart of globe drum of why.



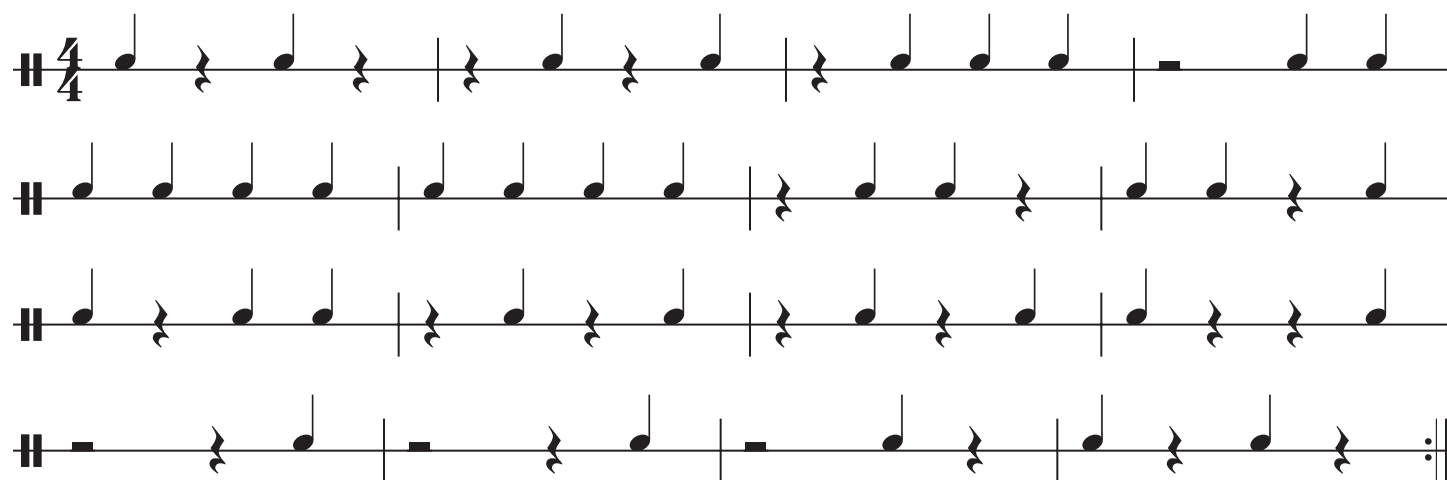
EXERCISE #3

Play the following rhythms by tapping them on a desk or table top, or by using your thigh as a drum.

Use a metronome.

First, try to think only of the quarter-note pulse as dictated by the metronome. How easy is it to play in unison with the metronome?

Example A



Good ... now let's play those same rhythms with the metronome again, only this time sing offbeat subdivisions to yourself, starting with (straight up-and-down, or "vertical") eighth notes.

Now, "double-up" the metronome tempo (i.e., from quarter note clx to eighth-note clx), and play the same written example. You should find it "easier" to play the rhythms more accurately with this double-time click.

Do the same sequence of events for the following rhythms: first, think of only the quarter-note pulse (i.e., what the metronome is playing), and then play the same rhythms while "doubling-up" the pulse in your head. Follow that with the metronome actually clicking away at twice the speed (i.e., the eighth-note click), etc.

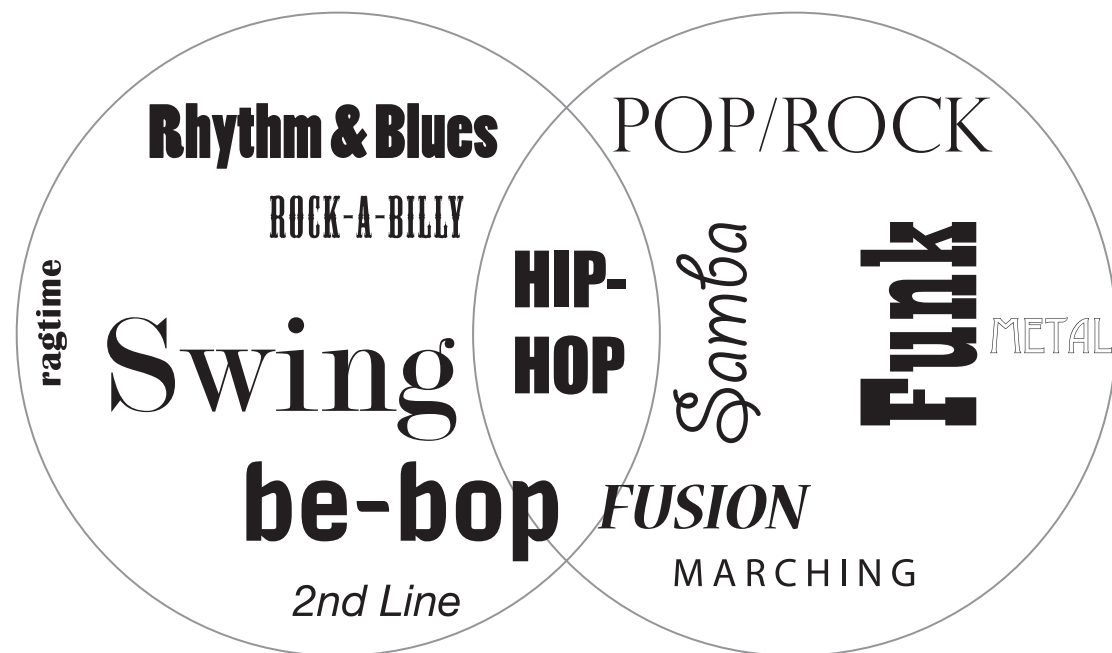
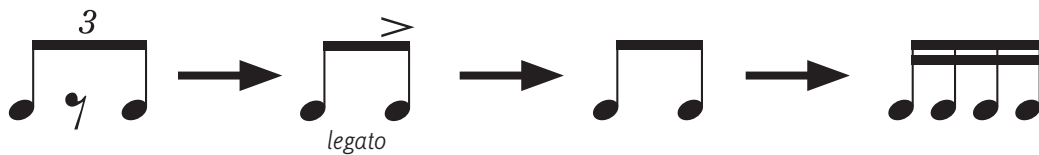
Example B



Chapter VI: Why do we dance to the rhythm of music?

Reminder: The subdivisions define the style and substance of the music.

Pop or Rock vs. Swing vs. Brazilian or Afro-Caribbean vs. the Viennese Waltz vs. the Concert or Marching Band vs. Hip-Hop or Rap ... the interesting thing is, if we chart the different styles of subdivisions, we can see that not only do many of these styles overlap; quite a few styles have come back around full-circle. And for every style of music which might seem “new,” there’s a good chance that its rhythmic origins are easy to trace by going back in time!



Play the following “Funk & Pop Rhythms” while thinking of, first, only the quarter-note pulse. Then repeat each example thinking of the eighth-note subdivision, the 16th-note subdivision, etc. Finally, play these rhythms while NOT thinking of anything! You should be able to clearly hear and feel the difference.