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Playing Ahead or Behind the Beat

Part 3 - Examples



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Playing Ahead or Behind the Beat Part 3: Examples

Confident Drummer Series

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Playing Ahead or Behind the Beat

Part 3: Examples

After having discovered the theory behind playing ahead or behind the beat in PART 1 of this series, and having practiced the exercises from PART 2 to develop the skills needed, in this final chapter we are going to listen to records that feature this approach to timing.

The contemporary music scene is full of great examples of drummers, bands and songs where beat placement is used to achieve a specific feel, sensation, mood or effect.

Since our priority, as usual, is to use what we learn to expand the possibility of expressing ourselves with music, I thought it would be useful to include a list of cases that directly illustrate the results we get when applying this kind of techniques.

We are going to discuss a number of different scenarios: listening to actual music examples is really exciting and enlightening, and at the same time is one of the most effective ways to train our ears to recognize each variation and the associated sensations.

We'll check out songs where the drummers are:

- Exactly on the beat.
- Ahead.
- Behind.
- Ahead or behind with just one part.

I recommend using the following pages as a starting point and then looking for more examples in our playlists.

DRUMMER EXACTLY ON THE BEAT:

- 50 Ways To Leave Your Lover (Paul Simon) - Steve Gadd

Steve Gadd is the perfect example of drummer who plays right on the beat, always dead center, always flawless and providing a solid, stable, reliable pulse.

It's not an accident that he has been involved in countless gigs with bands that have a center of the beat approach to timing, like Steely Dan for instance.

- Colibrì (Incognito) - Gavin Harrison

Here we have a fantastic example of exactly on the beat approach to timing, combined with amazing feel and intensity.

Gavin Harrison is an incredible drummer, who throughout his career has shown a remarkable consistency in playing in the center of the beat, regardless of the musical genre, style and tempo of the music performed.

- Disappearing One (Chris Cornell) - Josh Freese

Another great drummer who plays always precisely on the beat. We can hear his playing in this Chris Cornell album, as well as in his A Perfect Circle recordings.

Like Gavin, he reliably provides flawless timing, effortlessly laying down grooves that perfectly serve the song.

- Kind Of Blue (Miles Davis) - Jimmy Cobb

Switching to a different music genre, here we have an example of well balanced Jazz drumming, with Jimmy Cobb producing a solid pulse in the center of the beat, without the typical on top of the beat approach to Ride cymbal playing, which in this style is often used to add drive to the piece.

DRUMMER AHEAD OF THE BEAT:

- So Lonely (The Police) - Stewart Copeland

Stewart Copeland is one of the best examples if we want to hear first-hand the exciting drive and tension that playing ahead to the beat generates. For instance, in the choruses of So Lonely (and especially in the last one), we can listen to the drums pushing the beat forward, while the other instruments remain where they are.

That creates tons of energy and largely contributes to the propulsive drive of most of the music by The Police.

- Please Forgive Me (David Gray) - Craig McClune

This beautiful song by David Gray perfectly illustrates how beat placement has the power to strongly influence the meaning of a piece.

Craig McClune is masterful in emphasizing the intensity and emotion of the lyrics by playing right on the edge of the beat, yet never overdoing it. The result is mind blowing.

- Eight Easy Steps (Alanis Morissette) - Kenny Aronoff

Here we have another great example which shows how a frenetic groove that pushes the feel has a huge impact on what the song conveys to the listener.

It's probably no coincidence that the drums are positioned a little more in front of the beat especially in the verses, where both the arrangement and the lyrics are more aggressive.

- Spain (Chick Corea) - Airto Moreira

In this masterpiece by Chick Corea the drums are relentlessly pushing the beat forward, generating an energizing tension and an infectious groove, which are perfect to emphasize the mood created by Chick's melodies and sonic landscapes.

DRUMMER BEHIND THE BEAT:

- Back In Black (AC/DC) - Phil Rudd

Have you ever wondered why it's so hard to play AC/DC songs? You guessed it: it's because of the way Phil Rudd interprets the beat, always laid back and quite behind, but not so far back that it weakens the groove.

Such approach adds a lot weight to the conceptually simple things he plays, and AC/DC, which are all masters of this technique, owe a lot to this drummer.

For instance, on the occasions when he wasn't behind the drums, AC/DC sounded like a whole different band.

Let's practice listening to just the drums and let's notice how in this piece the snares seem to never arrive, they are always just that tiny bit late... but then they land, and they are in the perfect place to produce this song's deep pocket.

- When The Levee Breaks (Led Zeppelin) - John Bonham

Apart from the masterful Kashmir, here we have another example of the way Bonham contributes with his uniqueness to determine the feel of the song, adding weight to it and making it more dramatic by staying slightly behind the beat.

- Fell On Black Days (Soundgarden) - Matt Cameron

Textbook example of how to add weight and create a deep pocket by laying it back and staying consistently on the backside of the beat.

Throughout Soundgarden's Superunknown Matt Cameron displays a great understanding and control of these concepts, and the music benefits tremendously from it.

- Labour Of Love (Incognito) - Richard Bailey

This piece perfectly illustrates the way in which laying behind the beat a touch creates a really relaxed feel that enhances the song.

There's a light and airy feel, with lots of space between the notes, and the pocket is amazing.

- Woman In Chains (Tears For Fears) - Phil Collins

In this dramatic and beautiful song by Tears For Fears we have one more example of slightly behind the beat drumming.

In situations where the music is really moving this is the go-to approach, to emphasize and intensify the emotions created by the rest of the band.

Phil Collins delivers an outstanding performance, especially in the second half of the song.

- Angel (Massive Attack) - Andy Gangadeen/Programmed

Even here, once again, placing the notes a little behind the beat is the method used to generate a subtle tension and add weight to every note, with a deep groove created by delaying everything a few milliseconds.

As already mentioned, many producers use this technique, which is simply based on shifting the entire programmed drum part by a few milliseconds.

The great thing is that in cases like this it's possible to experiment and move things around in little increments until we like what we hear.

If we import the audio file of this song in a DAW like Pro Tools, and, setting the exact tempo (which is 107.34 bpm), we align it to the grid, we can visually verify that during the verses the Cross Stick backbeat is precisely on the beat, while in the choruses the Snare is delayed by 5 milliseconds.

Being it programmed, this is a great listening reference to illustrate how the perfect amount of behind the beat sounds.

- Pick Up The Pieces (Burning For Buddy version) - Steve Ferrone

In this powerful piece we can listen to the way sitting slightly behind the beat expands the groove.

It's a live in the studio performance, of which there's a You Tube video online, and in it we can hear Steve Ferrone masterfully fine tuning the perfect amount of behind the beat, by using just a little and keeping everything together with great confidence and a deep pocket, while making the listener crave every single note.

DRUMMER AHEAD OR BEHIND WITH JUST ONE PART:

SNARE DRUM AHEAD:

- That's Right (George Benson) - Michael Bland

In this song we can hear a very personal approach to groove, with the Snare Drum placed way ahead of the beat relative to the rest of the drum set and the band.

In theory this sounds like a risky formula, but in reality the consistency and certainty with which Michael Bland holds it down create a unique and powerful feel, full of energy that makes you move and is gritty, yet never over the top.

HI-HAT AHEAD:

- Fast As You (Dwight Yoakam) - Jeff Donovan

This is a rare example of Hi-Hat played slightly ahead while Bass Drum and Snare are right on the beat.

The high energy feel and drive generated by this solution are incredible.

RIDE AHEAD:

- E.S.P. (Miles Davis) - Tony Williams

As it's typical in Jazz drumming, the Ride cymbal, which in this style of music is king, is placed in front of the beat, usually along with the bass (as we can hear in this example).

Tony Williams, among other things, was an absolute master of this technique, always driving the beat and pushing the feel with his cymbal playing.

SNARE DRUM BEHIND:

- Pamela/Till The End (Toto) - Jeff Porcaro
- Belief (John Mayer) - Steve Jordan
- Rock With You (Michael Jackson) - John JR Robinson
- Try (Pink) - Mark Schulman

Fantastic groove in each of these songs. And what do they have in common? All these drummers play exactly on the beat, except for the Snare Drum which is slightly delayed.

Is it a coincidence that these names are exactly the ones we consider synonymous with great groove, and the ones that have played on hundreds of records?

Let's keep this in mind, because this is the main formula we have to master if we want to make our beats groove hard.

BASS DRUM AHEAD AND SNARE DRUM BEHIND:

- Take Me To The River (Talking Heads) - Chris Frantz

Here we have a very interesting case. Brian Eno, who co-produced this

record and is known for his experimental approach, takes the idea of delaying the Snare to an extreme, and emphasizes the result by simultaneously anticipating the Bass Drum.

It certainly grooves, but there's so much tension that it sounds like it's about to fall apart ;)... definitely something to check out.

This example shows us how important it is to use these techniques in moderation, precisely because they are so powerful in changing the meaning of what we are playing.

That's all. I hope with this 3 part series I contributed to provide some clarity to this complex aspect of drumming. Feel free to come back to these pages as many times as you need. You may soon realize that you are using these concepts to add depth to your music and playing.

Related resources:

[PART 1 - Theory](#)

[PART 2 - Exercises](#)

['Groove Mastery & Formulas' - Altitude Drumming - Volume 8](#)

['Click & Timing' - Altitude Drumming - Volume 6](#)

['Theory & Concepts' - Altitude Drumming - Volume 1](#)