

TO THE ROADSIDE

Tom Pierard

In providing contextual framework for this piece, the function of drums in popular western music needed to be explored - particularly as the last 20 years has seen significant change in the way drum parts are created along with how they contribute musically in both a performed and recorded setting. Popular music has been transformed over the years by the advent of the MIDI Production Centre (MPC) —which allows the storing and performance audio samples— in the late 80s, and Digital Audio Workstation software such as Ableton Live or Protools. Essentially, this liberates drum part creation from solely the hands of performers, and into the hands of bedroom producers and other non-drummers who previously lacked the capability. As a result, the function of drumset elements in pop music has become highly divergent to the point that a general model no longer exists (Krebs et al, 2013); for example - where the role of the hihat has been to provide regular subdivision, it has now become a means of providing ‘organic’ characteristics within a highly quantised musical environment, and is often played in manually via an MPC or MIDI controller (as opposed to the kick and snare which are sequenced) to achieve this aesthetic. What was once mostly just regular 8th note patterns is often now a flurry of triplets and 16th note bursts (as can be heard in tracks like Rockstar (Malone et al., 2017), and In My Feelings (Graham, 2019). Bearing this in mind, there are still metric ‘waypoints’ within the bar which, when ignored, do little to fortify the rhythmic foundation of the piece. This work aims to challenge the rigour with which a produced track should adhere to these metric rules, as well as exploring tone and prominence (mix-wise) in a similar musical setting.

An important characteristic which separates Pop music from other genres it's a lack of superfluous rhythm, with 'overbearing' complexity being generally regarded as less accessible in the wider listener populace (Madison et al. 2011). If the adage 'less is more' was ever relevant, then it's with Western popular music, which has from the get-go endeavoured to provide mass appeal through the deliberate avoidance of alienating even the most disengaged listener. Rather than using an entirely contrary approach of an improvised style (such as free-form jazz) for this work I've attempted to 'split the difference'; the improvisation happens at the bar-level rather than a form-level, and is looped. This is largely because I felt that a more improvised drum part would distract from the other song elements, and though some parts are obviously not adhering to normal subdivisions within the bar, I wanted to use repetition to retain some sense of standard form, with another aim being that of retaining the same holistic function of drumming in pop; to support rather than to be musically conversational.



While function of individual percussive elements can be highly diverse, for the purpose of this writing I've isolated three to discuss; the backbeat, tending to give emphasis on either beat 3 or beats 2&4, the downbeat, which tends to give emphasis on beats 1 or beat 1 and 3 consecutively, and the subdivider, which usually provides metric reference by way of outlining regular 8th or 16th note denominations. Perhaps the most well-known example of performed pop drumming that simultaneously demonstrates all of these these is the 1982 chart-topper Billie Jean (Jackson,1982). Though drummer Ndugu Chancler plays what is possibly the most standard drumset pattern, the part functions so well and is performed so musically that it became synonymous with pop music, and has—in this author's opinion—been a major progenitor of the majority of pop drumming principles since. Furthermore, these principles have been developed rather than opposed through modern drumset performance by players such as Chris Dave (D'angelo, Angie Stone), Mark Giullina



(David Bowie, *Beat Music*) and KJ Sawka (*Pendulum*, *Destroid*) to incorporate techniques to meet the demands of both MIDI sequenced and sample-based music. While these developments involve changes in both hardware, timbre and beat placement, the aforementioned percussive elements are fundamentally adhered to. This can be heard in tracks such as *Move Love* (Glasper, 2013), in which Chris Dave incorporates a septuplet hi-hat subdivision, or *Blackstar* (Bowie, 2016), where Mark Guiliana essentially improvises around a standard pop feel using jazz vocabulary to imitate a feel otherwise created through the manual 'cutting up' of pre-recorded drum samples.

As to why these parts have become the norm in western pop music, one can assume that providing metric reference and forward momentum while outlining form (which these elements concertedly do) is paramount in the drum part. Part of the challenge in composing this piece was how to compensate for the loss of some of these qualities which occur unintentionally as a result of the irregularities (particularly in the subdivider part). One way this was dealt with was by using a large amount of pad synths to provide harmony which, being generally less sonically aggressive than other conventional pop instrumentation, gave the track a more ambient feel, thus negating the need for more overtly consistent subdivision. Syncopation played an important role, as the percussion parts needed to circumvent the quarter note beats without being overly complicated - an imbalance could risk making the track less appealing from a casual listener's point of view. (Witek et al. 2014)

Below is how each category is approached in the composition of *To The Roadside*:

The Subdivider

This role is performed by a manually-recorded shaker and a heavily-affected looped tabla sample. The two instruments are respectively hard-panned, and are placed in the mix to be as unobtrusive as possible while still providing, when combined, a consistent rhythmic 'bed'. The two parts were created first by sequencing, and then 'nudged' to provide some rhythmic lilt. The tabla part is largely ignoring the 4/4 subdivision (especially in the solo section at 2:32), while the shaker part is actually regular albeit delayed by a fraction, which gives the feel of being back on the beat slightly. The tabla part is primarily used to denote rhythmic obscurity in the verse sections followed by a more consistent pulse in the choruses (despite being played on every 2nd and 4th 16th note). The shaker, on the other hand, is more regular throughout the track and is less prominent in the mix. The intention here was to create an omnipresent timbre which can create contrasting passages when muted (such as at 1:30).

The Backbeat

While the subdivider part is metrically untethered within each bar, the backbeat part is consistently in-time, however differences occur in both beat placement and tone. The placement varies between being either on beats 2 & 4 (1:19) or beat 4 (3:05) in the middle of the chorus section. This effectively breaks up the groove in a fashion which isn't too jarring for the listener while subtly outlining significant variation through the form. Rather than using a standard snare, clap or 'click' sound, I recorded, and then transposed myself slapping a table-top. Reverb was added to create spatial congruence between the backbeat and the synth parts, and the synths were sidechained to the backbeat, producing a more coherent mix between the parts. While following the traditional mode of the backbeat element comprising of higher frequencies than the downbeat, the heavily-filtered tone of the backbeat sample is a departure from a normal snare sound. A byproduct of having a sound

that atypical providing such a fundamental function is that the piece sounds more unique, and despite finding it quite jarring during the creative process, this particular ‘snare’ sound is not only now deeply ingrained in the overarching sonic of the work, but is an integral feature.

The Downbeat

Earlier renditions of the work actually reflect my intention to forgo a ‘bass drum’ tone or downbeat completely, however I felt that some low frequency was necessary in providing a clearer delineation between sections. Like the backbeat part, this part is sequenced squarely on the beat, however in this case, the kick drum pattern avoids beat 1—being the standard placement in most pop music— and only plays on beats 3 and the final 16th note of beat 4. On listening, I interpret this ambiguous placement of beat one as creating a displacement of sorts, which creates a more linear direction in the chorus rather than having the rhythmic resolution which is produced by having a kick drum consistently on beat 1 of each 1 or 2 bars.

Some of the rhythmic functionality which was negated due to exploration in the drum part has been instead borne by other instruments, such as the 16th note guitar ostinato at 2:45 and the ‘high bass’ synth part at 2:25 which clearly indicates beat 1 of each bar. This metric outlining was used in order to provide resolution through the introduction of groove-based elements following the more ambiguously sub-divided first half of the song - as a listener with a short attention span, I tend to try and incorporate a wide range of (what I consider) subtle development devices. This, along with my attempting to adhere to something resembling a strophic form, has resulted in a kind of ‘all in’ final section from 2:50 onwards. Certain allowances had to be made in the other instrumental parts - the main one being the need to increase the attack on all the synth parts. In their initial, generic form, the synths clashed too heavily with the off-kilter rhythms, and so I

found that the more space I could leave for them (at least until the outro) the less disconcerting they sounded - resulting in a happy medium of standard harmonic movement and highly anomalous rhythmic patterns.

In conclusion, I feel that this style of utilising explicit rhythmic foundation comprised of ambiguous subdivision is well suited to this particular style of music, and though ambiguous, it outlines the heavy reliance on rhythmic consistency which coincides with current trends in Pop drumming. While there is a clear demarcation in the tone and micro-subdivision, one can observe that the departure from standard Pop beat placement can have the effect of sounding more complex potentially resulting in a less satisfying listening experience (Heyduk, 1975). Despite this, the drum parts—being comprised of short, looped phrases—did not increase in complexity over the song's duration, and were intentionally written to be more listenable by incorporating a level of syncopation which averts salient beats without obfuscating the meter.

Tom Pierard is a commercial composer and music technology lecturer currently living in Hawkes Bay, NZ. He is presently completing his PhD in the field of pedagogical applications of DAW use, and has recently produced research papers around new systems of graphic scoring, extended polyrhythm function, and the influence of jazz drumming concepts in western popular music.

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This original composition (hosted on Soundcloud) can be heard here:



<https://soundcloud.com/tom-pierard-94108869/to-the-roadside>