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Songwriting For Drummers & All That Jazz

Bill Bruford

Drummer and writer Bill Bruford was a guiding light in the so-called British "Art Rock" movement of the early seventies, touring internationally with Yes and King Crimson. Bill has also worked for bands such as Gong, National Health, Genesis and U.K. He performed and wrote his own music as the band Bruford, recording four albums from 1977-80. It was, however, the reconstituted King Crimson of 1980-84 that provided the vehicle for his revolutionary use of electronics in developing the melodic side of percussion. In 1986, Bruford formed his electro-acoustic jazz group, Earthworks, specifically to continue this work on melody from the drum set, but now in a jazz context. *Earthworks*, the group's first of nine albums, was named the "third best jazz album of the year" by America's USA Today. Bill continued to tour with both King Crimson and Earthworks throughout the nineties, experimenting further with his fresh and innovative use, in King Crimson, of two drummers, and Earthworks, of electronics.. In between all this, Bill has recorded and/or toured with Kazumi Watanabe, David Torn, The New Percussion Group of Amsterdam, Jamaaladeen Tacuma, Akira Inoue, Al Di Meola, Anderson Bruford Wakeman and Howe, the Buddy Rich Orchestra, Tony Levin, Pete Lockett and his old firm Yes. In 1990, the readers of Modern Drummer Magazine voted him into the magazine's Hall of Fame. Bill continues to tour internationally and record with his band, Earthworks, for his own Summerfold and Winterfold Records.

The "four musicians and a drummer" culture that drummers grow up in tends to militate against their developing as effective music creators. The "real music" tends to be someone else's business. But I would encourage all those who handle indefinitely pitched instruments to be every bit as involved with, and take equal responsibility for, the harmony and melody going on around them. As a beginner I was encouraged to get stuck into harmony and pitch with piano as my second instrument, and it has given me just enough

courage to look the saxophonist in the eye and say, "I'm pretty sure its an A natural!"

In a rhythm heavy world, the beat is becoming ever more important to the success of a song. A great groove, like a classic melody, has an undefineable quality. It may lie in its relationship to the top line, or in its pacing, or where the accents lie, or the secret may be in its texture, or fabric .Get the groove right, though, and the song is halfway there - Steve Gadd's drumming on '50 Ways To Leave Your Lover', for instance, is the archetypal example of a drummer halfway selling a song before the singer has even started; or Stevie Wonder's beat to 'Superstition'; or Queen's bombastic rhythm in 'We Will Rock You' which is solely drums and a vocal for most of the track. Despite the crucial nature of the rhythmic feel to a song, Tin Pan Alley has standardised the idea that a song, when stripped to its essence, is defined as a piece of music with lyrics that can be sung and played by one or two people. In my day, the first a drummer knew about publishing was that the singer had a Rolls Royce and he didn't.

The simplest possible approach for the beginner in a band in rehearsal is to assign some of the rhythm he's playing on the kit to the bass player. Try telling him to pick a couple of notes of his choice and to play when the bass drum plays. Typically within a band context, the drummer may have a great idea for a song, but the only way he is going to hear it played is by having another member on his side, and its often the bass player. Wait for the rest of the band to leave the room, get the bass player to play some notes over the bass drum pattern and the next thing you know, the guitar player and the singer come back from coffee and think the tune is half written and take it from there. And indeed, the tune is half written since there is an atmosphere, a direction and, most importantly, a groove!

In the progressive rock bands in which I grew up, there was so much instrumental music written around the vocal parts that it was all but impossible to deliver the vocal Tin Pan Alley one-man-at-a-piano style, so those involved in the orchestration, usually including the drummer to some degree,

were typically included in the publishing . King Crimson was even more enlightened in its workings, and split the songwriting equally between all four members. The assumption was that any one musician's contribution to the music would be so radical that without it the music could not occur. And this attitude made me work hard, too, if only by peer pressure to come up with ideas.

I started writing alongside the team of Jon Anderson and Chris Squire, with whom I had helped form the multi-million selling band, Yes. Jon was my first big influence – his attitude was that the songwriter was really the main man, and instrumentalists were subsidiary to that role. It's the classical conception of the composer's wishes being communicated to the functionaries through a conductor, with the composer always remaining the key to it all. Jon would say 'It is OK playing those drums, Bill, but the real deal here is the music that I'm about to write and, even more important, the words I am about to sing.' Having said that, his method of songwriting then largely consisted of playing something highly questionable, with absurd lyrics, while defying anybody else in the room to do better. At which point the guitar player would probably suggest an alternative chord or sequence, and then somebody might propose a different lyric. By sheer abrasiveness, the so-called composition that had started life as a dismal , ugly thing, began to turn into something that sounded pretty good, largely through the skill of the functionaries in the room, the musicians. I can think of more agreeable methods of collaborative songwriting, but at least the job got done. As the drummer, I started by contributing the odd bass line, often stemming from an idea that I wanted to play on the drum kit. I built my knowledge up from that point simply by figuring out the actual bass lines, then by applying a touch of harmony, and always, always keeping my ears open.

Drummers tend naturally to hear music from the bottom up, often paying attention to the lyric as a final afterthought, and as a writer I still sometimes start by working from the rhythm up . I may find something on the drum set that gets me going, and my imagination immediately begins to deploy other

instruments in what I imagine to be an effective way around that idea. I have not considered a top-line melody at this point, although there may be a shape forming in my mind. The rhythm then goes into a sequencer (blender ?) and I add a basic bass line or a chord or two. It doesn't matter much what it is at this stage, because my writing method is one of replacement. I will put in any idea to start with, even if it is a nursery rhyme , and replace those parts that either uninspiring or clichéd or both. Like a sculptor with a bunch of clay, I start to mould it, hack away at it and replace bits via a process of elimination until I am left with the parts I like. Again, like a sculpture, it may take a while for the piece to reveal its essence (“Oh, it's a Bolero--perfect for Julio Iglesias”, or “Oh, it's a factory rotting in a post-industrial wasteland—perfect for King Crimson”); at which point the going should get easier.

Often the material ends up in an odd time signature, so I understand mass popularity may not be around the next corner! I have just found it a little easier to inhabit odd time signatures than the conventional 4/4 . To me, a time signature is as catchy as a melody is to a traditional songwriter. If there is a little kink in the rhythm somewhere - the beat going backwards, or some slippage, or a push - then I can respond to that. I feel enervated, and excited, and inspired to find the right chords to get the idea off the ground. The melody will come last in most cases.

Any distance I've come since my earliest efforts has been achieved principally by common sense and learning from other writers. I have come to understand that there are as many different ways to write a song through collaboration as there are hot dinners. I have been through them all, from one extreme of the singer / songwriter, such as Roy Harper, who strums his guitar and says 'This is the song, now play it', to King Crimson which did exactly opposite - there was no music until somebody played something sufficiently interesting to motivate the others in the band. This is one of the reasons why I became heavily involved in new forms of percussive instrumentation. For fifteen years I had a particularly extreme electronic drum set that was capable of playing the most remarkable quasi-melodic confections of rhythm

comprising pitch, harmony, samples and noises in one configuration or another. Once a drummer can deliver pitch, through any medium, then melody and harmony are within reach, and, skilfully deployed, he should be able to claim his rightful place alongside the guitarist as co-creator of the music.

All That Jazz

My approach to jazz composition is that I'm really only looking for an excuse to allow the musicians to play. Improvised music, or "instant composition", tends to require only a very light framework from which the musicians can extrapolate, and upon which they may express themselves and their musical personalities. They'll do most of the composing, instantly. Interpretation is everything, so the trick to jazz writing is not to write too much. Many of the great jazz tunes could be, and indeed were, written on the back of an envelope. You don't have to write much more than that because the musicians will do the rest.

Coming from a big-scale rock background, my first mistake was to underestimate the amount of room a jazz soloist needs to manoeuvre in, and my early efforts were over-written pieces of progressive rock for jazz musicians. Melodies were too involved, structures and meters too complex, and overtly so. With experience I've managed to find a more satisfactory balance between structure and space, architecture and chaos, looseness and precision, but it is something that I continually need to refine. The best jazz needs little more than an atmosphere, a bare impression of a framework, three or four magic chords in the correct order and a key melodic or vocal motif. With those, the band will play for ever.

More serious music writing has everything to do with the composer's imagined future for the style or genre in which he is working. To a degree the mechanics of the music, the actual notes on the staff, the chords and the

bass parts, are only a means to a stylistic end. Without a defineable approach, which, over time, can coalesce into a style, the writer's efforts, chameleon-like, will just blend into the landscape of the era, rather than stand out as a beacon or lighthouse for others. When Miles Davis' music became the backbone of the 'Birth Of The Cool' movement for instance, it was conceived as a reaction to all the fast bebop playing that had largely alienated an audience. He slowed it all down. Miles had a definite plan. With pop, the plan is the universal song - the great lyrical or musical hook. Jazz, on the other hand, is perhaps more to do with an approach, or a new angle on things. Until I'd figured out what I was about as a musician, where I stood in the scheme of things, and what it was that I was trying to offer are the listening community in general, I didn't have much hope of writing an effective, pop, rock, or jazz album. Once you have a plan, though, the notes are relatively easy.

Whatever happens with your writing, you are going to make mistakes, and some pretty big ones, but that's fine as a learning process. Selected technical errors for the amateur include writing things outside the range of the instrument, incorrect transposition, writing things that are unsuitable for the instrument, or barely playable, forgetting to allow breathing spaces, and confusing humans with computers. I once lifted a demon 16th note, repetitive, bass line wholesale from my sequencer for a human bass player with the Buddy Rich Orchestra, for a session at the Power Station in New York . The take started well, until after a couple of minutes into it I looked up to see an unhappy bass player waving his wrist in the air with acute cramp! I'd given him a part with a big stretch in one hand position for about 5 minutes—OK for a sequencer, but essentially unplayable by a human.

The hardest thing is to get started, and the second hardest thing, as they say, is to keep going. Try to complete something, anything, rather than have bits lying around. Don't pre-judge the composition; it might turn out to be good for Kylie Minogue, or your first symphony, but it will be neither if you don't let it find its own way to a conclusion. Let it tell you what kind of composition it 's

trying to be. At all costs try to get it played by real musicians at least in rehearsal—there is a big difference between that nifty software programme you are using and five guys in a room trying to make your music live and breathe.

Currently , I would say I earn about half my income from the 200-odd compositions and co-compositions that bear my name. My writing partners have usually always been keyboard players—Dave Stewart, Django Bates, Steve Hamilton—who have, with endless patience, corrected my schoolboy errors and suggested more elegant ways to get from A to B. But the end result of many sleepless nights is that I have a body of written work which forms the backbone of my band’s live repertoire, that is essentially me, that allows me to call other musicians and say “ Let’s play! ”, and that also allows me to express myself completely as a performing instrumentalist. No bad thing to have, so sharpen that pencil, put the kettle on, imagine the future, and get it down whatever way you can!

Quotes to be used throughout book

“A cut on the publishing for a drummer is usually an acknowledgement between the songwriter and the drummer of the importance of the groove to the success of the song.” Bill Bruford, drummer-writer with King Crimson and Earthworks.

“Should the drummer be paid for his writing contribution? Frankly, I am not sure he should unless demonstrably the song would not exist, or would only exist in greatly diminished form, without his contribution.” Bill Bruford, drummer-writer with King Crimson and Earthworks.

“I have come to understand that there are as many different ways to write a song through collaboration as there are hot dinners. I’ve been through them all, from the singer / songwriter who strums his guitar and says ‘This is the

song, now play it', such as Roy Harper, to King Crimson, which did exactly opposite - there was no music until somebody played something sufficiently interesting to motivate the others in the band." Bill Bruford, drummer-writer with King Crimson and Earthworks.

"Modern pop song writing is to do with taking the particular and making it general. If a songwriter can sing about his life in such a way that it resonates in my life, then I am happy to pay him money and appreciate his song. I don't want to hear about how wretched his own divorce is, but I do want to hear "50 Ways To Leave Your Lover". Bill Bruford, drummer-writer with King Crimson and Earthworks.

"The sound of the voice is as important as the words, if not more so. The sound of what the singer is doing – the singer in Yes, for example was much reviled for his nonsense lyrics, but that never bothered me in the slightest, because his phrasing and the arc of the melody sounded great." Bill Bruford, drummer-writer with King Crimson and Earthworks.

"I am a believer in the two-man team - the Jagger/Richards, the Lennon/McCartney - one of whom is good at one thing and the other of whom is good at another . They push and shove until they come up with a song idea that gets them both going." Bill Bruford, drummer-writer with King Crimson and Earthworks.

"Jazz is one of those difficult words for which nobody can agree a meaning . Even if we could agree what it meant this week, advertising would probably change it next week.." Bill Bruford, drummer-writer with King Crimson and Earthworks.

"Songwriting is a considerable second string to any musician's bow. It is very hard to earn a living on a drum set, and the next best thing – aside from driving a cab—is writing some music." Bill Bruford, drummer-writer with King Crimson and Earthworks.

“It really is a challenging time and my heart goes out to anybody who is starting out as a drummer now. In my day, it was easier, there were only three drum rhythms you needed to know in Western commercial music-- the one that went ‘bum, bum, bish, bum, bum, bish’, the one that went ‘ting, ting, ti, ting, ting ti’, and if you could do a little Latin ‘ch, ch, buck, bum, bum’. That’s it, done.” Bill Bruford, drummer-writer with King Crimson and Earthworks.

“Interestingly, I don’t think drummers really acknowledge that the singer is singing in rhythm, often a very powerful, strong rhythm. The singer has a wonderfully flexible instrument that can smear over bar lines, allow for great phrasing and be tight or completely loose. Drummers need to understand that, and listen beyond their own instrument.” Bill Bruford, drummer-writer with King Crimson and Earthworks.