

The Art Of The Flowing Fill

Click on the  icon next to any exercise to hear the sound!

by Billy Ward

MUSIC KEY

H.H.	X	C.C.	X
T.T.	●		
S.D.	●		
T.T.	●		
B.D.	●		

● Add'l Toms

Each of us has our favorite drummers' performances. For me, these performances are attached to the songs they played. I always loved Nigel Olsson's rock-ballad fills—but how can I separate those fills from the great Elton John songs in which they appeared? To

love a drum fill without understanding why it works so well in that particular song is missing the lesson. Let me put it this way: Fills are to drummers what guitar solos can be to guitar players. How many times have you wished your guitar player would just *shut up* and play rhythm? We drummers can be just as hurtful.

At a session for an album that I played on by a wonderful songwriter named Marc Jordan (*Cow*, on RCA), producer Kim Bullard took me aside and told me he had a specific rule about drum fills as a result of years he'd spent programming drums: "Always flow out of the fill into the next section unless there's a specific musical reason not to."

I was totally not ready to listen to a keyboard-playing producer tell me what to play, but this made sense. I had always thought of fills as *my moment*, the time to prove that I'm a good drummer. ("This one'll kill 'em. Hah!") Obviously, I really had no clue. Since then, I've learned that fills are no different from anything else in music—just another moment in time (pun intended). No more, no less.

What does it mean to flow into the next section? To help explain what a "flowing fill" is, I need to first show a non-flowing fill. First the time pattern, and then the fill:

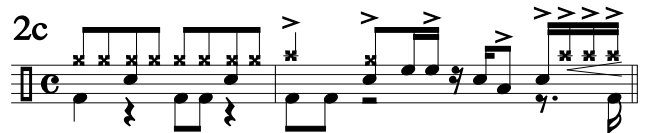
1 

This fill could work, and *does* work in certain situations. But it does create a sort of stopping point in the music. It's kind of like a diver jumping on a diving board on beat "4."

Now let's slightly change the fill and make it flow to the next section. Here are a few ideas:

2a 


2b 

2c 

In example 2c, the cymbals are playing the same rhythm that the drums played in 2b, with a little bass drum support added to help go to the next section. (Yes, we can use our cymbals in a fill just as we use the toms. The cymbals simply take up less space, but still move things along.)


The possibilities are endless in how we fill. I hope that the fills you choose to play have something to do with the vocal rhythm, the bass line, the melody—something that *already* exists in the song.

Is a fill's purpose to lift smoothly, even invisibly, into the next section of the song? If so, then sometimes just an *accent* will do the job perfectly.

3a 

Just adding that accent on the hat at the end can be all that's necessary. Can you say "Charlie Watts"?

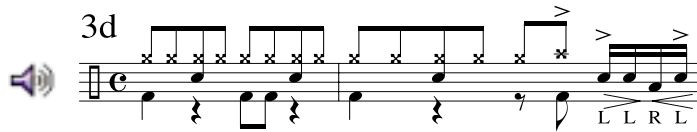
You can *remove* something—even from this simple beat—and it will serve as a fill. (Notice the omitted bass drum note on beat 3.) Ah, subtlety.

3b 

Here are a few more examples based on the previous, simple Charlie Watts-like fill. This is actually more what Charlie would *really* do:



I play fills like these next two all the time, because they don't use a lot of notes, they feel great, *and* they flow.



Or



The above two fills could be used in a softer song by substituting the hi-hat (closed or open) for snare or tom hits.

Do I play a flowing fill every time I fill? Heck no! Sometimes we need to put a stop on things—a button. And some fills are big dramatic “sign posts” that announce boldly, “Here it comes, fasten your seat belts!” Some music calls for this kind of drama. Film scores are where you might find these. When the bad guy is finally getting killed: “I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!” Or heart-wrenching ballads: “I love you so much I’m gonna diiiiieeee!”

Examples of these types of dramatic fills are hardly necessary, because we all play them easily. But here’s one that we all probably know: Phil Collins’ tom fill in “In The Air Tonight.” Now *there’s* a musical announcement.



Determining the nature of a song is a distinction that we, as drummers, need to make to play the song *at all*. This totally affects our fills. What is the essence of the song? When in doubt, I always automatically default to smooth, flowing fills.

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