

Brush Basics

A streamlined, easy-to-follow guide to 18 of the most commonly used brush patterns including swing, ballads, Latin, and 3/4.



By Richard Best

Brush Basics

First, Some Terminology

- Your **Lead** hand is the one you usually use to play a ride cymbal — typically the right hand for a right-handed player and left hand for a left-handed player.
- Your **Sweep** hand is the other hand. Although either hand can be used to sweep, for the majority of play one hand will sweep while the other hand taps. Note that some brush patterns reverse the sweep and tap hands, and some require sweeps from both hands.
- When a brush is close to the body, we'll call that the **Near** (N) position. When farthest away from the body, the brush will be in the **Far** (F) position.
- The **Home** position is where you place the **sweep** brush when you count '1' — i.e. the down beat of the bar. Home can and will change for different patterns.
- Clockwise rotation is **CW**; counter-clockwise is **CCW**.
- For clarity and consistency, I am going to assume a right-handed player and clockwise (CW) sweeping preference for the left hand, with 'home place' in the Near position at the start. For left-handed play, reverse the hands. Also refer to the *Direction Table* on page 4.
- Note that the accompanying diagrams give a general idea for placing the brush moves. Don't worry about doing them exactly as depicted. Just adjust the moves and positions as needed — whatever works for you.

The Grip

Play matched grip? Some people will insist that only traditional grip is suitable for brush work. This simply is not true. Traditional grip may occasionally offer a few minor advantages, and you might consider giving it a try, but there's no advantage to it. (I switched to matched grip for playing brushes and I'm glad I did, although I prefer traditional grip otherwise.)

The Basic Sweep

Let's focus on the **sweep hand** first. Begin by describing a large circle on the drum using the tip of the brush. Try both **CW** and **CCW** motion to see which one feels more natural to you — the one that feels 'right'. (You can always work on the other direction later if you want, but it's quite unnecessary.) When doing a sweep, try to use as much of the drum surface as possible. Strive for a smooth, even 'shshshsh' sound. Do not force the brushes.

Now, as you're making the sweep, count one beat for each full circle (**Fig. 1**).

You'll likely find that one position on the drum feels better for making your count: when the brush is closest to your body (N) or when it's farthest away (F). It doesn't matter which one you pick. Always work with what's most comfortable. For example, I'm generally more comfortable circling CW with my left hand, and the **Home** position **Near** my body; you might feel more natural circling CCW while counting the beats in the **Far** position.

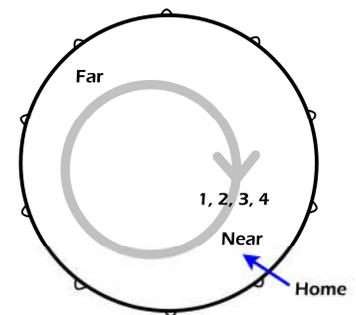


Fig. 1: Basic sweep with Home in the Near position

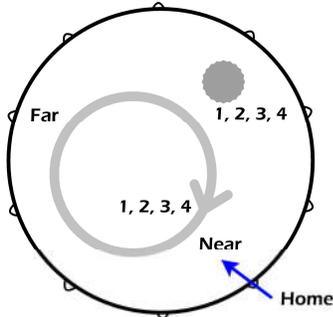


Fig.2: Sweep plus tap, Home in the Near position

The next step is to add some rhythm. As you make circles with the sweep hand and count 1, 2, 3, 4 in the Home position, tap your other brush on the beats (**Fig. 2**).

Once these movements become consistent, you can add a swing beat with the lead hand: 1, 2-uh, 3, 4-uh (**Fig. 3**). Be meticulous in striking your beats as the sweep hand returns to the Home position. Keep the skip beats light and the quarter notes even.

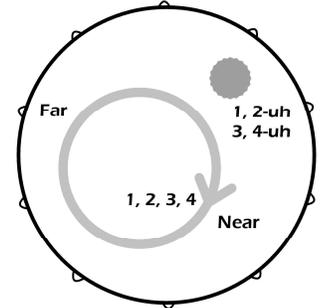


Fig.3: Basic Swing Ride

Now, let's reverse our counting. Play the sweep in the same direction, but place your counts **opposite** to your Home position. So if you were counting with the sweep **Near** your body, switch to counting when the brush is **Far** (**Fig. 4**). Once this becomes

comfortable, you can add taps on the beat with the your lead hand, and then the swing ride rhythm.

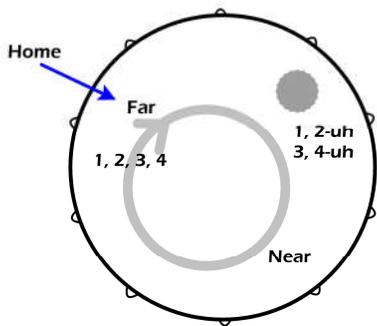


Fig.4: Basic Swing with Home in the Far position

The goal here is to be able to play wherever the count falls no matter what. Say you throw in a simple lick, but when you return to playing time, your hands are not where you expected them to be. If you're comfortable with both count positions for the sweep — Near and Far — your hands will never be 'out of position'. If you can count and feel the time either way, your hands will fall into a natural sweep pattern regardless of where the count falls.

Upping the Tempo

As tempos increase, the full sweep can become a challenge, but all we need to do to cope is cut our circles in half. This time as you practice the sweep, count 1 in the Home position and 2 in the opposite position; 3 would then fall in the same place as 1, and 4 will be in the same place as 2 (**Fig. 5**). Let's say you're more comfortable counting in the Near position. Counting with the Full Circle sweep would happen on N-N-N-N. Your new counting would then be N-F-N-F. (If you prefer the Far position, then your new count would be F-N-F-N.) Be sure to describe a half circle for each count. When consistent, add a tap on each beat with your lead hand, and then add the skip beats.

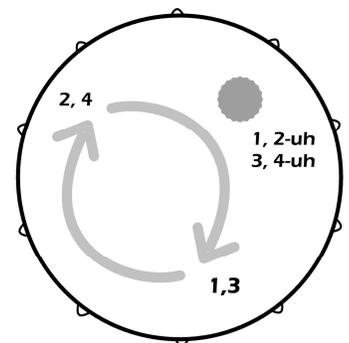


Fig. 5: Half Circle Sweep - Near

Also work on starting your count in both positions: N-F-N-F and F-N-F-N (**Fig. 6**) so the sweep feels natural regardless of where the down beat falls.

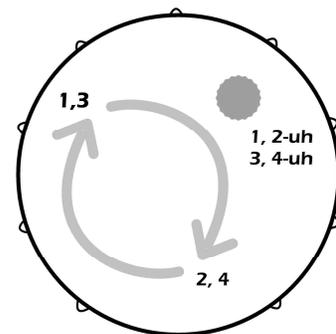


Fig. 6: Half Circle Sweep - Far

Swing & Sway

When you begin playing a swing ride rhythm along with the half-circle sweep, you may be inclined to tap the drum in the same spot ... or not. If you watch experienced players, you'll notice that they often move the lead hand around quite a bit. You'll also notice that their hands move in opposite directions: As the sweep hand crosses to one side of the drum, the tap hand will naturally move to the opposite side. The effect might remind you of windshield wipers.

We can use this movement to add some rhythmic motion and interesting effects to our playing (the drum usually produces a slightly brighter sound near the edge and a fuller sound near the middle.) Begin with a slow half circle sweep pattern. As your sweep hand approaches the Near position, play your tap toward the other side of the drum, crossing over your sweep hand. When your sweep moves to the Far position, play your tap near the edge of the drum (**Fig. 7**). Think of those wiper blades as you work on this, paying attention to playing well-formed half circles with your sweep hand. Also work on starting your count in both positions: N-F-N-F and F-N-F-N (of course your tap hand position would change as well). This is your all-purpose 'any tempo' brush pattern.

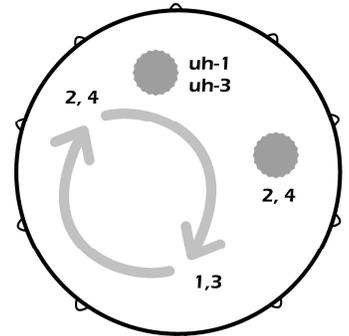


Fig 7: "Swing & Sway"

Slower Than Slow

Some occasions call for just a whisper of backing with a mere suggestion of rhythm or pulse. A good way to do this is with full circles on the snare. Play a circle with the sweep hand, counting the pulse in your home position. Now do the same with the lead hand sweeping in the opposite direction. So, if the left hand is moving CW, then the right hand would move CCW (**Fig. 8**). Imagine a circle that goes from 8 o'clock and loops around the drum's mid-point. That's where your sweep hand should go. Your lead hand would create a circle that starts at 2 o'clock and then loops around the mid-point (for left-handed play, see the *Direction Table*, below). The trick here is to avoid the brushes crashing in to one another: When the brushes come together in the middle of the drum, your lead brush should pass deftly over the other brush.

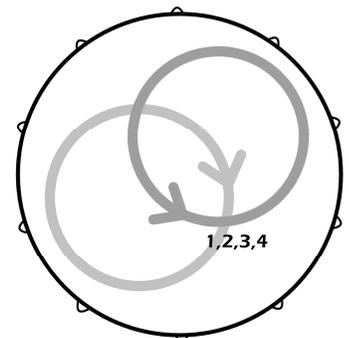


Fig. 8: Two-handed Circles

Direction Table

		CW	CCW
Right-handed	RH	2:00	4:00
	LH	8:00	10:00
Left-handed	LH	10:00	8:00
	RH	4:00	2:00

A Secret Weapon

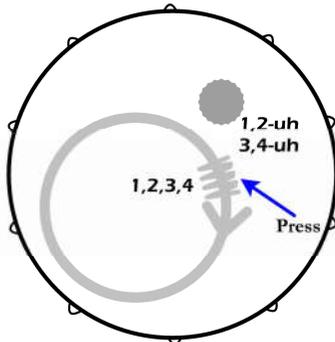


Fig. 9: Sweep With Press

Sweeping and tapping are all very nice, but how can we create some real rhythmic motion with our brushes? It's all done with a small adjustment to the sweep that adds a powerful bit of texture to our playing.

Start with a full circle sweep with your sweep hand. Now, as you count the beats, press the sweep brush into the drum head slightly (**Fig. 9**). This produces a subtle accent. The result sounds something like 'SHUshshsh, SHUshshsh' rather than the nondescript 'shshshshsh'.

The next step would be to add the technique to your two-handed sweep, pressing on both brushes as you play the beats (**Fig. 10**). This creates a very effective legato pattern that is excellent for ballads.

The Linear Sweep

Here's a technique that can really get things cooking at medium to fast tempos. Rather than playing half circles, move your sweep brush back and forth, more or less in a straight line, counting your beats at the beginning of each stroke (**Fig. 11**). Do not lift the brush at the end of the strokes. Although this technique is 'built for speed', practice it very slowly. Here's why: As your sweep approaches the beat — as you're counting 'uh' of a shuffle rhythm — press the brush into the head to create an accent on the skip beat. Your goal is to play a shuffle with just the sweep hand: 1-UH, 2-UH, 3-UH, 4-UH ... slide-press, slide-press, slide-press. Add a ride pattern with your lead hand and you're playing a very hip rhythm with loads of swing.

Quickly Now

Fast tempos seem to always present a challenge, and as soon as you master one blistering tempo, someone calls another even faster one. So it's a good idea to have a few tricks in your kit for such occasions. Here are two simple techniques that will work for tempos up to 300 bpm and beyond.

1. The "Polka Cheat"

This is a very easy technique that has more of a two-beat feel, so let's count it in 2/2 or 'cut time'. This time use your **lead** hand to sweep a straight line on the drum — bottom to top or top to bottom — and count 1. Lift the brush slightly at the end of the stroke and then sweep back along the same line counting 2, lifting again at the end of the stroke. That is the basis of your bar. Now, with the **other** hand, tap on '&-uh' between the sweeps (**Fig 12**). Thus: Sweep / &-uh / Sweep / &-uh / Sweep / &-uh. It's possible to play this one extraordinarily fast.

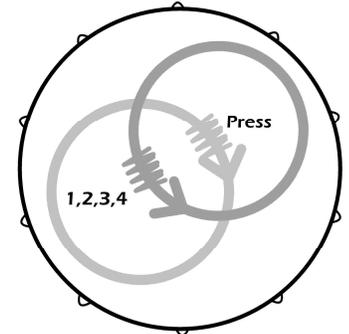


Fig. 10: Two-handed Circles with Press

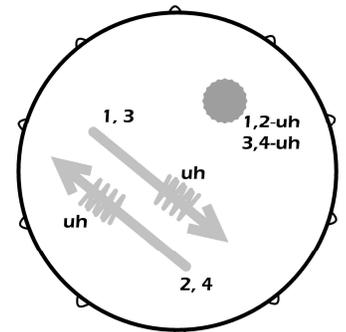


Fig. 11: Sweep with Press

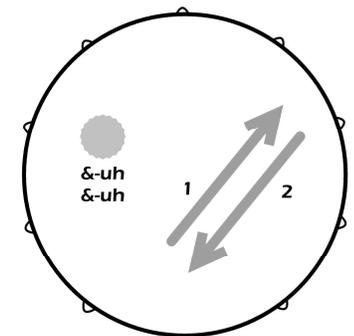


Fig. 12: "Polka Cheat"

2. Fast Jazz

For a more authentic swing rhythm, we need to modify our polka beat slightly — turning the whole thing inside out and upside down, but otherwise it's just about the same. Count this one in 4/4.

Begin with a tap on 1 with your lead hand. Then sweep a straight line on 2 with your sweep hand. Tap 'uh-3' with the lead hand, followed by a sweep on 4 returning along the same line. Tap 'uh-1' to start the next bar. So:

1 / Sweep / uh-3 / sweep / uh-1 / sweep / uh-3 / sweep / uh-1, etc.

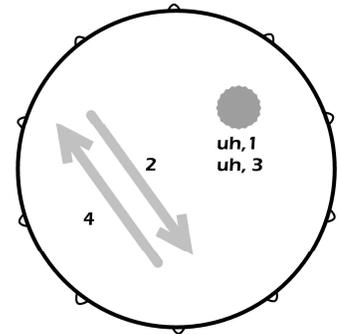


Fig. 13: Fast Jazz

When you finish each sweep, lift the brush slightly so the next sweep has a bit of attack to it (**Fig. 13**).

Going Up Country

The 'freight train shuffle' is ubiquitous in up-tempo country music. It's a 'two-beat' pattern and really couldn't be easier to play: eighth notes, nothing but eighth notes. The key is in where you put the accents — the pulse.

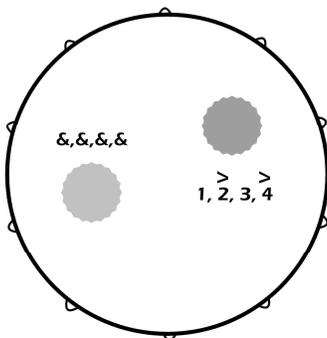


Fig. 14: Freight Train Shuffle

Begin by playing 1 and 3 on the bass drum, 2 and 4 on the hi-hat. Now, using plain old alternating strokes, play eighth notes on the snare, accenting 2 and 4 (**Fig. 14**). And that's all there is to it: 1-&-2-&-3-&-4-& ... chuck-a-CHUCK-a-chuck-a-CHUCK-a. Keep in mind that tempos can run right up the scale (have a listen to *The Orange Blossom Special* — a classic application). As you work on this, try to remain calm. Seriously, fast tempos are much easier if you focus on relaxing your hands as much as possible.

A variation on the freight train shuffle is to play on the down beats rather than the back beats. Play the rhythm as above, accenting 1 and 3 rather than 2 and

4. Once that becomes comfortable, try adding an accent on '2-&'. The resulting rhythm goes | 1 ■ ■ & 3 ■ ■ ■ ■ | 1 ■ ■ & 3 ■ ■ ■ ■ |. Note: Some tunes may suggest that you apply both of these techniques, perhaps one pattern fitting well with the verses and the other working better for the chorus or bridge.

Fast Latin

Here's one that takes a bit more dexterity and control. Play a linear sweep with your Lead hand, lifting the brush at the end of the stroke. Then do the same with the other hand. Now sweep back along the same line with the Lead hand, and repeat with the other hand (**Fig. 15**). Count one half beat (eighth notes) for each stroke. You are playing alternating strokes, but with sweeps: R-L-R-L ... Sweep-Sweep-Sweep-Sweep. For faster tunes, this one is well worth the effort it takes to get your hands working together.

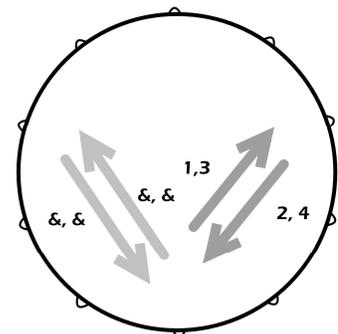


Fig. 15: Fast Latin

Slow and Easy

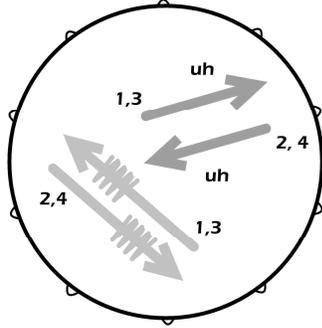


Fig. 16: Slow & Easy

When a ballad calls for something more than a simple wash, the two-handed linear sweep is a perfect solution. With the sweep hand, play a back-and-forth sweep. Then play a similar sweep with your lead hand (**Fig. 16**). Do not lift the brushes off the drum. Again, keep those wiper blades in mind. If you like, you can press on 'uh' with one or both brushes.

The Linear Shuffle

This is a variation on the above. At the end of the lead-hand sweep, lift and tap 'uh' and then tap lightly on the beat as you start the next sweep. Do this at the end of each sweep of the lead hand for a shuffle (**Fig. 17**). Omit the 'uh-2, uh-4' to create a swing pattern. You can also add a press on 'uh' with the sweep hand.

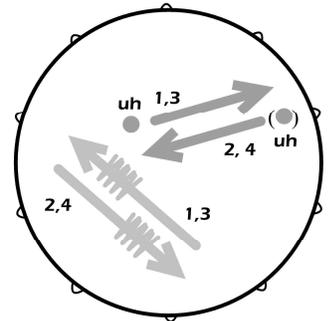


Fig. 17: Linear Shuffle

The Peanut

Here's another pattern that's good for slow tempos. This one has a bit more substance than the two-circle sweep.

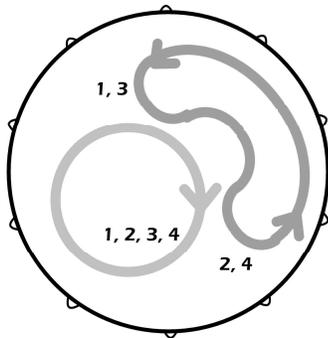


Fig. 18: The Peanut

Start with a full circle with your sweep hand. Then, with your lead hand, trace a peanut or kidney shape that goes over and under your sweep hand. As you count 1, your lead hand will sweep above the other brush. Continue on, looping toward the edge of the drum, and then pass below the sweep hand while counting 2 (**Fig 18**). And repeat. Done correctly, your lead hand will gracefully work its way above and below your sweep hand, giving you a gentle yet full sounding rhythm.

Playing in 3/4 Time

Most of the 4/4 brush patterns will work for playing 3/4 with little or no modification other than the counting. And since we spent some time counting in both Near and Far positions, playing in 3 should immediately feel quite natural.

For a basic pattern, play a full circle sweep counting 1, 2, 3 in your home position, then add a swing ride on the beats with your lead hand: 1, 2-uh, 3 or 1, 2-uh, 3-uh (**Fig. 19**).

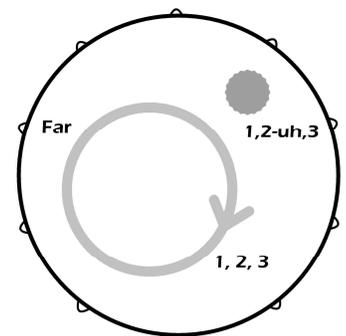


Fig.19: Basic 3/4 Swing Ride

3/4 Half Circle

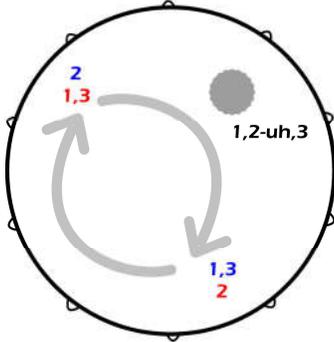


Fig. 20: 3/4 with Half Circle Sweep

For medium tempos, some players advocate playing a full circle sweep over 3 beats. I find this awkward and unnatural, so I prefer to play a half circle sweep. This means that each bar requires 1 ½ circles, and the down beat will change sides each bar, i.e. **N-2-3, F-2-3 (Fig. 20)**. Otherwise, the movement is the same as if playing 4/4. You can then add a swing ride. With a ‘windshield wiper’ motion, the lead hand beats will also change sides each bar. The result is a natural side-to-side rhythm that gives you control of the down beat regardless of where your hands happen to be.

3/4 Linear

Approach this one the same way as the 4/4 sweep pattern. Begin with a back-and-forth sweep counting in 3. As with the half circle, your down beat will change sides from bar to bar. Then add your lead hand, playing 1, 2-uh, 3, again with the down beat changing sides (**Fig. 21**). Add a push accent on 'uh' with your sweep brush if you like. This and the 3/4 Half Circle are naturals for the wiper blade motion.

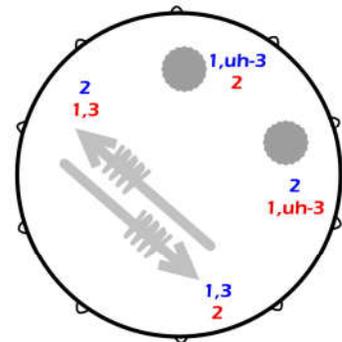


Fig. 21: 3/4 Linear

The Half Peanut

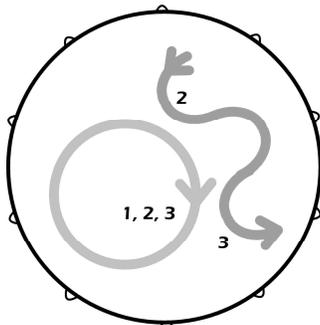


Fig. 22: The "Half Peanut"

This simple mod will give you a strong yet subtle rhythm with very little effort. Begin with full circles with your sweep hand. Now, when you count 2, drop your other brush near the top of the drum and trace the top lobe of the ‘peanut’. Finish by tracing the bottom lobe on 3, lifting the brush at the end of the stroke (**Fig. 22**). Note that the skip beat is ‘implied’ in the middle of the peanut.

Summary

Keep in mind that these are basic patterns that are intended to get you through most playing situations. There is a lot more to discover about playing with brushes. Also play around with the patterns to discover sounds of your own. Almost any combination of taps, sweeps and circles is worth exploring. Enjoy!

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