

Master Class

By Richard Best



The Ride Rhythm: Getting it right

There are a lot of opinions floating about on how to approach the basic jazz ride cymbal. Much of it is confusing and some of it is just plain wrong. I also find that this fairly straightforward concept often gets lost under a great deal of verbiage. So I'd like to suggest that you forget everything you've heard or read about how to play a jazz ride pattern and instead approach it with a "beginner's mind".

It would be hard to find a better example of a jazz groove player than Elvin Jones. So let's begin by listening to Elvin to see if we can discover what he does that's so enticing. Elvin plays a very evident four to the bar (assuming 4/4 time, of course). There is *no* accent on 2 and 4 and *no* reinforcement on 1 and 3. What could be simpler? So we might begin by playing steady quarter notes on the cymbal, giving each stroke equal importance. (In fact, I recommend spending some time counting just '1-1-1-1' rather than '1-2-3-4'.)

Now Elvin can be a bit busy, but no matter how far he stretches out, he is always driving home a feeling of triplets: 1-trip-let, 2-trip-let, 3-trip-let, 4-trip-let. It's this relentless triplet feel within a solid quarter note pulse that gives us that key rhythmic element which, I think, defines the jazz groove.

If we apply these two simple concepts to the traditional ride cymbal pattern, then '1 2-uh 3 4-uh' becomes '1-(trip-let) 2-(trip)-let 3-(trip-let) 4-(trip)-let'. To execute the standard swing ride pattern, superimpose it onto a 'triplet grid', counting and feeling triplets all the time.

Now, that's Elvin. Not every jazz drummer gives it to us quite so neatly. Listen to a few other players and you'll likely discover that they put the skip beat – the 'let' – somewhere else. In fact, you'll find that the underlying grid can vary from eighth notes to sixteenth notes and beyond. Some of this variation is the drummer's personal style, sometimes it's done to accommodate the rhythmic feel laid down by the other players, and by far the most common reason is tempo. At very slow tempos, something like sixteenth notes or even sixteenth-note triplets will fit better, and at very fast tempos, eighth notes are pretty much required.

But start with triplets; it's almost always the right thing to play.

Here's an exercise that nicely illustrates the triplet-feel ride rhythm and gets your hands moving the right way. Play this with your leading hand on the cymbal and the other hand lightly on the snare while counting triplets continually, accenting the beats:

4/4 |: RLL RLR RLL RLR | RLL RLR RLL RLR :|

If you play left handed:

4/4 |: LRR LRL LRR LRL | LRR LRL LRR LRL :|