MASTERS PRESENTATION

AN ANALYSIS OF JACK DEJOHNETTE’S COMPING STYLE IN A JAZZ SETTING.

Roberto Morales  
RSM2532

Introduction

Jack DeJohnette has been a source of inspiration for jazz drummers for almost four decades. His approach as an accompanist is unique, musically deep, complex and unmistakable. Having such a unique approach, his drumming skills are present in many recordings of jazz greats such as: Charles Lloyd, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Bill Evans, Jackie McLean, Wayne Shorter, Joe Henderson, Stan Getz, Herbie Hancock, McCoy Tyner, George Benson, Pat Metheny, Michael Brecker, Dave Holland, Betty Carter, John Scofield, Dave Liebman, the list goes on and on. In terms of timekeeping DeJohnette’s contributions represent the epitome of broken swing. His textural, open and colorful approach present in the records he made for the German label ECM with artists such as Kenny Wheeler, Jan Garbarek, John Abercrombie, Mick Goodrick, Steve Khun and his most well known association with Keith Jarrett, are also a milestone for every serious jazz drummer. With more than 200 albums in his career, studying DeJohnette’s drumming in all of the musical scenarios he has been at would be an extremely long work; nevertheless I analyzed a handful of recordings that represent his approach. I choose the tunes Oral Loops, Billie’s Bounce, You And The Night and The Music, Nothing Personal, and It's Different Out There which feature distinct characteristics of DeJohnette’s comping.
Biography

Jack DeJohnette was born in Chicago on August 9, 1942. He started his piano studies at the age of four, by his teens he was playing professionally, leading his own trio. His relationship with the drums started in high school when he played for the marching and concert bands. Later on, one of his drummers left his kit in DeJohnette’s home, the attraction was immediate, and the independence and control over the instrument came naturally, leading to long practice sessions consisting on playing along with recordings and the study of the rudiments. In this development, he eventually started going to jam sessions to play and get inspiration and advice by local drummers such as Wilbur Campbell, Scotty Holt, Al Green and Harold Jones. In the early 60’s he became part of the Chicago free jazz scene becoming a member of the AACM (Association of the Advancement of Creative Musicians) which included members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

The year 1962 represented a turning point in his earlier career. That year he was called to cover for Harold Jones in a tour with the sax player Eddie Harris, at the time DeJohnette was dividing his time between being a working drummer, composing and leading his piano trio. After the tour, Eddie Harris told him: “Look, you play good piano, but you are a natural drummer. And if you stick with drums you’re going to go a long way.” (1) After considering that advice, he decided to focus just on the drums. That same year, DeJohnette had the opportunity to sit in with the John Coltrane Quartet receiving a positive feedback from the members of the band. After that, his confidence as a drummer was boosted and within three years, he had played with almost every jazz artist in Chicago.

In the summer of 1965 he was ready for a change and decided to go to New York City. The first night DeJohnette was in the Big Apple he went to Minton’s in Harlem, Freddie Hubbard was playing there and he ended up sitting in with the band. That
same night the organist John Patton hired him on the spot. Within a short time DeJohnette kept the attention of the sax great Jackie McLean, with whom, in September of that year, he recorded the Blue Note’s album *Jacknife*. What started as a trip to check out the scene, became the beginning of his long and prolific career.

In early 1966, DeJohnette was hired by Charles Lloyd for his Quartet, the band included Keith Jarrett on piano and Cecil McBee on bass. Lloyd explorations between jazz and rock exposed another side of DeJohnette’s drumming that kept the attention of Miles Davis, who in 1969 hired him to record the revolutionary album *Bitches Brew*. After the recording of ten albums including: *Jack Johnson*, *Live Evil* (1970), *On the Corner* (1972) DeJohnette left the band in 1972 to create the “Jazz infected cross-over band” named *Compost*. Including Harold Vick on Tenor Saxophone, Jack Gregg on Bass and Bob Moses on Drums, Vibes and Percussion, the group recorded two albums with Columbia, *Compost* (1972) and *Live is Round* (1973), the band dissolves in 1974. That same year DeJohnette started working with the guitarist John Abercrombie, recording his debut album *Timeless* for the German record label ECM.

Led by the sound engineer/musician Manfred Eicher, ECM (Edition of Contemporary Music) Records was the vehicle for outing DeJohnette’s drumming and compositional style during the 70’s. His more prominent works as a leader include: *Pictures* (1976), *New Rags* (1977), *New Directions* (1978), *Special Edition* (1979). It was also with ECM when Keith Jarret, Gary Peacock and DeJohnette recorded their first album as a trio, that album was Peacock’s Tales *Of Another* (1977). In 1983 they recorded *Changes*, the first album under his best know musical association, The Keith Jarrett Trio. This magical musical combination has been touring and recording for more than thirty years and is consider one of the best, if not the best jazz trio of our time. Albums like: *Satndads Vol. I and II* (ECM,


DeJohnette’s list of work as a sideman is quite extensive, a few remarkable recordings beside the aforementioned albums are: Pat Metheny 80/81 (ECM, 1980), Dave Holland Triplcate (ECM, 1988), John Scofield, *Time on My Hands* (Blue Note 1990), Michael Brecker’s *Michael Brecker* (Impulse, 1987), *Ballad Book* (Verve, 2001), and *Pilgrimage* (Heads Up, 2007). The list of great recordings goes on and on.

**Earlier Influences**

To understand his approach, we have known DeJohnette’s influences. One of the biggest influences for DeJohnette in his early stage was Wilbur Campbell, in DeJohnette’s own words: “I got a lot from him. His approach was unorthodox. He somewhat bordered on the thing between abstractness and discipline, but he could swing his tale off and he could play solos that sounded like a guy shuffling a deck of cards - kind of like Elvin, but he had his own originality.” (2)

Scotty Holt was another Chicago drummer that influenced DeJohnette; “Another important player who was influential was Scotty Holt, who was influential in helping me interpret getting deep meaning out of playing standards.” (3)
Harold Jones drumming on the *Exodus To Jazz* (Vee-Jay, 1961) from Eddie Harris was another big influence. Art Taylor is another drummer who inspired him, his work on John Coltrane’s album *Giant Steps* (Atlantic 1960) particularly the track *Countdown*. Another Taylor’s work that served him as inspiration were *Monk’s Town Hall Concert* and *5 By Monk By 5* (Both albums from Riverside, 1959). Drummers like Donald Bailey and Tony Williams were important influences for DeJohnette during his development.

In terms of an artistic vision, his mentor was the composer-pianist Muhal Richard Abrams. He imbued on Jack a sense of individuality and self development. Abrams guidance encouraged DeJohnette to consider music as a way of life and not something that you study. That Individuality and self expression is the thing that makes the music what it is.

**Sound and Development**

DeJohnette’s comping has developed through the years, both sonically and stylistically. Famous for his dry and articulate ride cymbal sound DeJohnette’s playing is unmistakable. But the process to get that unique sound and style took him about two decades.

In his earlier recordings is evident the big influence of Tony Williams. Here are some words from sax great Dave Liebman about the first time he listened to Jack in the sixties; “.... to my ears, he played a little like Tony Williams who was the most talked about drummer along with Elvin Jones at that time.” (4) A reflection of that influence could be found in Jackie Mclean’s *Jacknife* (Blue Note, 1965), Bill Evans *Live at Montreux* (Verve, 1968), Joe Henderson *Tetragon, Power to the People* (Milestone, 1968 and 1969 respectively). That Tony influence was also reflected in terms of sound, DeJohnette’s choice at that time was an old 20” K Zildjian ride cymbal. Coming from the fifties tradition that kind of cymbal produces an open
sound with many overtones. In the early 70’s DeJohnnette started endorsing Paiste cymbals. He helped to conceive the famous 602 Sound Creation Series. In those years DeJonhette used a 22” ride cymbal, with a brighter and dryer ride cymbal sound his drumming style became more recognizable and unique. This cymbal sound is captured in ECM Albums like, Kenny Wheller, *Gnu High* (1976), *Deer Wan* (1977), George Adams’ *Sound Suggestions* (1979), Richard Beirach *Elm* (1979). In 1982 Jack switched to the Turkish cymbal company Istanbul that provided him with a 22” extremely dry ride cymbal sound with great stick articulation and almost no overtones. That type of sound became DeJohnnette’s unique characteristic. From then on and due to his association with the Keith Jarrett’s trio and collaborations with Michael Brecker, Dave Holland, Dave Liebman, Laurent de Wilde, and John Scofield during the 80’s, his sound and style became internationally known and represented DeJohnnette’s playing at the top of his game. In the early nineties DeJohnnette switched to Sabian, with that company he developed his signature cymbals the *Encore Series*. Maintaining the same dry characteristics of his Istanbul ride cymbal. He has been using Sabian cymbals to this day.

**Ride Cymbal Approach**

DeJohnnette's uses the ride cymbal as the primary voice in his comping. Because of the dryness of his ride cymbal, he can play more active phrases and still have definition of every note. DeJohnnette takes into account all the beats of the measure by playing eighth notes on any part of any beat, representing the complete opposite to the traditional stable and pattern oriented ride cymbal approach gravitating around beats two and four. He uses endless combinations of phrases on the ride cymbal as the main tool for time keeping. By combining quarter notes, eighth notes and tying them, the result is a fluent and unpredictable way of driving the band.

As a result of the level of activity on the ride cymbal, the placement of eighth notes
is in the “cracks”, which means that the eighth notes are not completely swung, neither are they played in a straight fashion but somewhere in the middle of these two subdivisions. Although DeJohnette’s eighth note placement is very consistent, he can also include straight eighth feel and sixteenth note feel to create contrast in his ride cymbal phasing.

In order to prioritize the ride cymbal phrasing, a remarkable aspect of DeJohnette’s style is his absolute mastering of dynamic contrast. In general, the snare drum and bass drum are always played in a softer dynamic compared to the ride cymbal. It is very impressive how he can be so active with these elements without overpowering the ride cymbal.

**Harmonic Comping**

Contrary to traditional jazz drummers such as Max Roach or Art Blakey that used a static ride cymbal pattern when the comping gravitates around snare and bass drum phrases, DeJohnette’s approach follows the conceptual footprints of Tony Williams who uses alternate ride cymbal patterns as his main comping voice. Due to the active ride cymbal phrasing, in my opinion DeJohnette conceives the ride cymbal as a “melodic” source which became his primary voice.

Following that concept, the snare drum and bass drum became supporters of those ride cymbal melodic ideas. He uses upbeats and downbeats that are played in unison with certain parts of the ride cymbal melody creating a vertical harmonic comping. The way that Jack DeJohnette use the hi hat, covers two different functions. It could be used as a part of the harmonic comping played in unison with the ride cymbal, and as a counterpoint element to the ride cymbal melody. In both cases, he could use both the splash and the chick sounds. Depending on what the musical situation calls for, he can play on all four beats when he is playing in an intense and energetic musical situation. Very rarely and just for specific sections of a song, he can play beats two and four for a more traditional feel as in the song
Wabash II of the record “Time on my Hands” by John Scofield.

Here is a clear example illustrating these points, of DeJohnette’s comping over a bass solo on the tune Oral Loops from the Laurent De Wilde’s album Odd and Blue (IDA Records, 1989).

This transcription is a clear and representative example of the way he uses his ride cymbal. As you can see, the ride cymbal is very active as the leading voice. In every measure, the ride cymbal is being supported by the snare drum in an almost imperceptible dynamic. In m. 3 the use of a hi hat splash sound on the upbeat of four supports the ride cymbal, at the same time it creates a sonic disruption of the fluidity of the ride melody. The use of the hi hat as a counterpoint element against the ride cymbal is clear in the upbeat of two of mm. 4, 6, and 8. There, the hi hat is played as a “response” to the three eighth notes played on the ride cymbal.

Linear Ideas
Another important part of DeJohnette’s style is the use of linear ideas to create contrast during his comping. The term linear drumming is used when an idea is played using one drum or cymbal at a time, meaning that there are not unisons (harmonic support) involved in the execution of the idea. A linear idea could be as short as a couple of beats, or it could repeat for several choruses to create contrast and a broken feel.

Here is a dramatic example of DeJohnette’s use of linear ideas. In this case, he plays a three beat cross rhythm linear idea over a twelve bar blues tune Billie’s Bounce. The tune belongs to the ECM’s Keith Jarrett’s Trio Album *Tokyo 96 (Live)*.

![Billie’s Bounce](image)

The idea consists of five consecutive eighth notes starting on the upbeat of three of m. 11 of the melody. First, using his right hand, DeJohnette plays two eighth notes on the high tom. Then using his left hand, he plays two eighth notes on the snare drum, finishing with one eighth note on the hi hat played with the foot.
While DeJohnette is repeating the idea, he moves his right hand to the middle tom (upbeat of two, m.12), then to the high tom again (upbeat of one, m.13). Finally his right hand stays on the ride cymbal (upbeat of four m.13) repeating the cross rhythm for fifteen times until the end of the chorus when he plays the bass drum to delineate the form (upbeat of four, m. 24).

**Phrasing Analysis**

DeJohnette’s ride cymbal phrasing combines three and four beat ideas. Because of that and the amount of variations that include tied notes and long crashes (that could be considered as resolution points) his comping could sound deceptive and even confusing. The reality is that he organizes his ideas in groups of four or eight measures always respecting the form, but not necessarily resolving his ideas on obvious beats in relationship to the form.

The next example puts together all the topics that I have discussed in this document; Ride cymbal phrasing, time feel, dynamic balance, harmonic comping and linear approach.
This example shows how DeJonhette uses three beat, cross-rhythms over 4/4 time. It also shows how he can base his ideas focusing in different beats, and the use of linear ideas to create different and unexpected ride cymbal phrasing. The phrasing of the first A section in terms of cymbal phrasing is divided in four groups of four, three groups of three, one group of four and one group of three.
The first two measures are treated like a two feel, gravitating to beats one and three. In mm. 3-4, DeJohnette’s ideas start on beat two and are preceded by one beat of silence creating an unexpected turn for the listener.

Three beat cross-rhythms are part of the common language in jazz. They are usually played in the form of a pattern that is repeated and resolves in an evident beat related with the form. DeJohnette’s approach is that he plays a number of three beat ideas that are not played in the form of a repetitive pattern. With that he creates an advanced application of cross-rhythms that generates tension, avoiding common resolution points in the form.

In the second half of the first A section (mm. 4–8), the ride cymbal phrasing now consists of three three beat ideas, then one four beat idea, followed by a three beat idea. As you can see, the only three beat idea that is repeated is the first one. The idea starts on the downbeat of m. 4, consisting of a quarter note followed by two eighth notes and an upbeat on beat three. This idea is repeated starting on beat four. Because DeJohnette is not repeating any idea in this phrase, he’s not landing on a resolution points, which doesn’t give us a clear lead-in to the next section. The suspense is created from the lack of regularity in the phrasing.

DeJohnette’s phrasing for the second A section is different again. It consists of two four beat ideas followed by four three beat ideas and three four beat ideas. The interesting fact in this case is that the first three beat idea is played in a linear fashion. Starting on the downbeat of m. 11, the idea consists of four eighth notes, three on the ride cymbal, one on the bass drum followed by a quarter note silence.

The B section is grouped into four four beat ideas, which resembles the first a section. However, where DeJohnette is almost doubling his ride cymbal phrase with the snare drum (m. 20), the phrasing quickly changes. In mm. 21-23 DeJohnette creates a six over four polyrhythmic feel. He is using the ride cymbal to play six beat idea that is played twice. Starting on the downbeat of m. 21 the idea consist on two eighth notes, two quarter notes, two eighth notes, followed by an up beat and a
quarter note. The snare drum is used to play four notes along with that six beat idea creating the polyrhythm. For the first six beat idea (m. 21), the four notes played on the snare drum is irregular; the upbeat of one, beat three, the upbeat of four, and then the upbeat of one of m. 22. For the second six beat idea, the four notes played in the snare drum are also different; beat three of m. 22, the downbeat, the upbeat of two, and the upbeat of three of m. 23. With this detailed variance, DeJohnette creates a new comping dimension with polyrythm.

The last A section is no exception to the established irregular phrasing. Similar to the second A section, it contains one four beat idea, four three beat ideas and four four beat ideas. In this section DeJohnette also includes some linear ideas that give a spacious feel in mm. 26, 27, and 30. The first one is a three beat idea that starts on the downbeat of m. 26. This is a traditional 3/4 ride cymbal pattern played in a linear fashion. The second idea is a similar ¾ ride cymbal pattern but with the last quarter note replaced by an upbeat (starting on beat three of m. 27), and the third linear idea (m. 30) becomes a four beat idea when it’s tied to an extra quarter note. Notice how DeJohnette avoids anticipating the beginning of each section with a long note or a fill. Instead of that, he uses the tied notes as part of his normal comping in random places within the form. This particular fact, coupled with DeJohnette’s unique cymbal phrasing, makes his comping unique.

**Multiple pitch riding / Use of Triplets**

Jack DeJonhette is capable of getting several sounds out of his ride cymbal due to the cymbal’s dryness and the way that DeJohnette uses the stick. By hitting the cymbal with the shoulder of the stick, DeJohnette gets a noticeable and controlled higher pitch. Combined with the lower pitch he gets by hitting the cymbal with the tip of the stick, he can create two-pitch ideas while he is comping. In addition to that, he can also generate forward motion by adding triplets, either as a part of the comping or in the form of fills.
To demonstrate these devices I will use a transcription from the intro of the Michael Brecker's song *Nothing Personal*. The song is based on a repeated bass line, which opens up the possibilities for rhythmic exploration.

This example represents how complex DeJohnette’s comping can be. In mm. 2, 9, 13, 14, 16, 17, 22, 23 and 24, he uses a higher pitch on the ride cymbal to add an
extra color to his comping. The use of triplets in a linear fashion between the ride cymbal and the snare drum is present in beat one of m. 7, beat two of m. 11, beat three of m. 14, beat one of m. 16 and beats three and four of m. 21. Besides that, DeJonhette uses triplets to play fills in mm. 4, 13, 14, 23 and 24. Another impressive aspect of this particular example is his control while playing three consecutive ghost notes on the snare drum that can be found in beat two of m. 11 and beat four of m.13.

**Broken time**

One of the most fascinating characteristics of DeJohnette’s comping is his broken, complex and elaborate approach to time while he is playing over pedal points or in duos. A duo situation allows DeJohnette to have a higher level of activity that results in more aggressive, broken and bold drumming.

Two great examples of DeJohnette’s broken time playing are found Dave Liebman’s *It’s Different Out There* (Trio + One, 1987) and Michael Brecker’s *Syzygy* (Michael Brecker, 1986). For this presentation I have analyzed DeJohnette’s broken time playing of the song *It’s Different Out There.*
Due to all the space that a duo situation provides, DeJohnnette plays a very complex, yet fluid comping that adds new elements to his characteristic active ride cymbal playing. The snare and bass drum are more present than in recordings that use larger instrumentations. The bass drum takes an especially dominant role in terms of activity and it is played louder than in other examples. In this example, the bass drum is regularly played in groups of two notes; an upbeat followed by a downbeat (presented in blue color in the transcription). The great majority of the
downbeats are reinforced by either a crash sound or a quarter note played on the ride cymbal. There is not a clear tendency to emphasize a specific beat, as equal attention is put on beat three (mm. 5, 9, 12, 14) and on beat two (mm. 11, 17, 19, 24).

DeJohnette’s approach also includes stronger linear ideas played between the snare and the bass drum in conjunction with his ride cymbal. Some notes in those ideas are doubled with the ride cymbal leaving space for long crash sounds, creating a different kind of activity. This is evident in mm. 6-7. DeJohnette plays a four beat linear idea starting on the upbeat of beat three of m. 6. The idea (presented in green in the transcription) consists of seven consecutive eighth notes starting with two notes played on snare drum, followed by two notes played on the bass drum, two notes on the snare drum and one note on the bass drum. This exact idea is repeated in mm. 15 and 16. In m. 27 the idea is displaced, starting on the upbeat of one. In m. 18, DeJohnette plays a fragment of the aforementioned idea (presented in purple in the transcription). He plays one note on the bass drum, two notes on the snare drum and one note on the bass drum starting on the downbeat. He also uses this same fragment on beat two of m. 21 but, in this case, he adds two extra eighth notes, one on the bass drum and one on the snare creating a three beat idea.

There is also a rhythmic motive that is repeated and orchestrated in different ways throughout this complex way of comping. The motive (presented in red in the transcription) consists of the downbeat, upbeat of two and beat four, and is present in mm. 2, 23, 25, and between mm. 19 and 20. The motive is always played with the bass drum and lines up with the ride cymbal. In m. 23 DeJohnette changes the orchestration of the motive, he also plays an additional note. The downbeat is played on the snare drum, the upbeat of two is played on the bass drum and beat four is played on the bass drum followed by an extra eighth note on the upbeat of
four. In m. 25 the rhythmic motive is played on the bass drum played in unison with the ride cymbal and each note is followed one eighth note later, played on the snare drum, (upbeat of one, beat three and upbeat of four). The motive is also displaced in m. 19, starting on beat three.

One last linear cell appears in mm. 3, 16 and 26. The idea (presented in light blue in the transcription) consists of four consecutive eighth notes. The first two eighth notes are played on the snare drum, the third one is played with the foot (in m. 3 on played with the hi hat, and in mm. 16 and 26 on the bass drum) followed by the fourth eighth note note played on the snare drum. The idea starts on beat three in mm. 3 and 16 and on beat two in m. 26.

**Conclusion**

The contributions that Jack DeJohnette has made to the contemporary jazz drumming are undeniable. His approach has influenced several generations of drummers including those who became the new referents during the nineties and two-thousands such as Jeff “Tain” Watts, Bill Stewart, and Brian Blade. After more than fifty years of career DeJohnette is still touring, composing and recording his own music. Whit out any doubt he is one of the few Jazz Masters alive.
References