

# Feathering the Bass Drum — *The Power of Subtlety*

by Phillip Smith

“Four to the bar,” “four on the floor,” or “feathering”: These are the most common terms used in jazz to describe the act of lightly playing 4 quarter notes per measure on the bass drum.

Feathering came to prominence during the big band and bebop years (1930s-1940s). Prior to that the bass drum was played heavier and was a more integral sound within the band itself especially in Dixieland and New Orleans brass band styles where the imitation of marching drummers was the norm.

Many drummers believe that feathering actually stopped during the bebop years, but that couldn't be further from the truth. With bebop drummers “dropping bombs” on the bass drum it gave many the impression that feathering had been replaced by constant syncopated bass drum fills. However close listening to many of the great bebop drummers — Kenny Clarke, Max Roach, Philly Joe Jones etc. — will reveal their mastery of feathering. And before you say that it is an antiquated sound that modern drummers spurn, let me remind you that contemporary drumming greats Carl Allen, Kenny Washington, Lewis Nash, Steve Gadd, Jeff Hamilton and (the late) Tony Williams all feather(ed) the bass drum.

Feathering was originally a way to emphasize and add some percussive attack to the acoustic bassist's quarter-note walking line. However it also does several specific things for the drummer and the rest of the band. First it lays a solid foundation for the entire group. It also adds a layer of bottom end to the drummer's individual sound. In a normal swing groove the basic instruments are all high pitched (cymbals, hi hats, & snare), thus the addition of some low end to the mix lends stability to the groove. Finally it directly affects how the drummer plays. The hands play differently over the top of a constant quarter note bass pattern than without. The feathering motion provides a solid reference that allows the hands to play syncopated rhythms against it. Also many drummers find that without feathering it makes them feel obligated to play more syncopated bass drum and snare drum ideas to fill spaces.

## TECHNIQUE

One of the most important factors in achieving the correct feathering volume and sound characteristics is proper pedal technique. Most drummers using the feathering technique play with a felt beater on a medium to loose tensioned pedal. The bass drum is generally double headed with no hole in the front head and tuned higher and more open (sometimes totally open or with just a felt strip) than the “rock/funk” sound with a pillow.

Begin with the heel down style of playing. Some drummers play heel up (and play heel up well) however, most find it more relaxing and easier to feather with their foot resting the entire time. The heel down technique produces a more legato, resonate sound which is generally desired for this style.

The leg should remain very relaxed much like when you are sitting, dangling your legs off a boat dock or ledge. Your foot should be comfortably on the pedal with your heel on the heel plate, though some players like to have their foot high up on the footboard with the toe-stop removed. Using the weight of your leg and perhaps a bit of foot pressure should make the beater sit about 1 to 2 inches from the head. When making the stroke you should strive to keep that 1 to 2 inch distance between the head and beater. The space should only widen when you intend on making accented strokes.

The feathering stroke is compared to lightly tapping your toe, however, plenty of sound will be generated from the small ankle movements. Allow the beater to rebound off the head. The finishing position should

be the same as the starting position. The main point is to get the bass drum head vibrating just enough to generate some low end frequencies, you don't need to hear the attack and definition of each note.

## **PRACTICE TIPS**

A good exercise to test your new technique and improve your control of the pedal is to play quarter notes spanning the dynamic spectrum. Keep the dynamic level of the hands and the left foot on the hi hat the same and only change the dynamic level of the bass drum. Also work on the inverse of this, keep the quarter notes on the bass drum very soft and change the dynamic level of the other limbs. This will help you develop the independence and touch needed to effectively feather the bass drum.

Practice feathering using the Chapin book, *Advanced Techniques for the Modern Drummer*. Play the entire first half of the book with a light four on the floor. Also try feathering with many of the systems created for use with the Ted Reed book, *Syncopation*. There are many other books available which will give you plenty of practice on feathering. With a little creativity you can develop your own system of practice in no time.

After a while put your new skill to work with some recorded music. There are numerous trio recordings available that do not use drummers, the most common configuration being piano, bass and guitar. Many of these recordings also feature legendary players such as Ray Brown, Ron Carter, and Christian McBride. "Playing" with the masters is a great way to perfect your time, feel, touch and sound.

Lastly, make sure you spend some time playing brushes. Playing with brushes is an artform unto itself, and a good brush technique on the drumset incorporates feathering the bass drum.

## **SOUND & APPLICATION**

If you are ever in a playing situation where someone turns to you and tells you to stop playing the bass drum, you are playing it too loudly. The old saying, "felt but not heard," is never truer in this sense. The feathering technique should never be heard as a separate rhythm riding above the volume of the rest of the drumset. However it should be noticed when it is REMOVED from the foundation of the kit.

I've consciously experimented with stopping the bass drum during playing situations to see what effect it might have on the music and my fellow players. In every encounter the entire group noticed that something seemed to have gone wrong. One band member put it succinctly by saying it felt like the bottom had dropped out of the group.

Practice, practice, practice and then practice some more. Feathering is foreign and difficult to master for some, but mastering the technique is extremely rewarding and will add a tremendous amount of depth to your playing. In time, feathering will become as natural as the jazz ride pattern or the hi hat on 2 & 4. Plus, who knows, maybe the guys in the band will notice a whole new feel and depth to your playing. Never underestimate the power of subtlety.

*This article appeared in the September 2002 issue of Modern Drummer magazine and is reprinted with their permission.*

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