Solo analysis: Philly Joe Jones, Pot Luck

Hugh Denman

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Recording and Band

'Pot Luck' is a blues head composed by Wynton Kelly. The recording in question here comes from the Vee-Jay album 'Kelly at Midnite', a trio recording with Philly Joe Jones and Paul Chambers recorded in April of 1960.

Philly Joe and Paul Chambers were at the core of Miles Davis' first legendary quintet, formed in 1955. They became a most celebrated rhythm section within very few years, playing together as sidemen for Sonny Rollins, Art Pepper, Chet Baker, and John Coltrane.

Wynton Kelly first recorded with Paul Chambers and Philly Joe in 1958, on his album 'Wynton Kelly - Piano' (with Kenny Burrell). The next year, he joined Chambers in the Miles Davis quintet, replacing Bill Evans. By 1961, Philly Joe had been replaced by Jimmy Cobb (both in the Miles Quintet and in the Wynton Kelly trio), so the three musicians in this recording worked together for a total of about two years, with 'Pot Luck' recorded towards the end of their association.

It has been suggested that 'Kelly at Midnite' was Philly Joe's favourite record of his own playing[1].

Philly Joe Jones

Philly Joe Jones (born Joseph Rudolph Jones in 1923) was one of the defining drummers of fifties hard bop, and a favourite drummer of both Miles Davis and Bill Evans. He began his career playing in rhythm'n'blues bands in the forties but moved quickly into jazz, becoming the local first call drummer when luminaries such as Dexter Gordon came to Philedelphia.

His first major association was with the Tadd Dameron big band, with whom he played from 1948 until 1953. After this, he joined with Miles Davis, and the two played together until 1958. They became close friends and from 1952 to 1955, as Miles toured the States, he would use local musicians in every role except drums, bringing Philly Joe with him[2]. When the frustrations of this arrangement grew too much, Philly Joe suggested Red Garland for piano and Paul Chambers (then 20 years old); with the addition of John Coltrane, the first classic Miles Quintet was born. Though Philly Joe left the quintet in 1958, Miles still sought to retain some of his sound, saying "Even after he left, I would listen for a little of Philly Joe in all the drummers I had later" and admitting to sometimes asking other drummers to play "that Philly Joe lick"[3].

Jones was enormously popular and influential through the late fifties and early sixties, acting almost as the *de facto* house drummer for the Blue Note, Riverside, and Prestige labels and issuing several dates as a leader from 1958 onwards. He won the *Down Beat* reader's poll in 1957 ('New star' - drums) and 1962 (main drums category), placing second in 1961 to Max Roach.

However, his popularity declined markedly after 1962, which is sometimes attributed to the seismic rise to prominence of Elvin Jones. He moved to London to teach in 1967, where he was not allowed to perform by the local musician's union(!), and then to Paris in 1969. In 1972 he returned to Philadelphia and continued to record as a leader.

In his later years he returned to his point of departure, becoming the leader of 'Dameronia', a 9-piece group devoted to the music of Tadd Dameron. He played with Dameronia from 1982 until his death in 1985.

Philly Joe's playing was explosive and precise, sometimes criticised for being too loud but always playful and engaged when accompanying, and hugely inventive in drum features. He had fearsome rudimental technique, developed when studying in his early years with Charles Wilcoxon (whose book of rudimental studies is still used by drummers today), and rudimental ideas were a feature of his playing throughout his career. He was also noted for his brush technique, an aspect of jazz drumming on which he wrote the book himself ('Brush Artistry'). His time feel was relaxed, phrasing the ride cymbal sometimes slightly behind the beat, but always intense.

His playing was always structured over several levels (developing ideas within four-bar phrases, over a chorus or over several choruses, and over the course of an entire song), perhaps a legacy of his big band days with Dameron. His capacity to develop off-the-cuff shout choruses and to 'cook' was enormous, and he remains the quintessential jazz drummer for many (including, indeed, himself[4]).

[1] http://thebadplus.typepad.com/dothemath/2008/01/the-collected-d.html

[2] While listening to Miles + Philly, Wynton Marsalis was moved to comment on the close association between drums and trumpet: "And the trumpet and the drum are always connected. You know, the first depiction of a trumpet is on a kind of a vase. It's on a vase, an Egyptian vase, with drummers. We're always with drummers. In a Haydn Symphony, the trumpet and drums play together." http://thebadplus.typepad.com/dothemath/2008/12/interview-with-wynton-marsalis-part-two.html

[3] source: Miles' autobiography

[4] *"I'm my favorite drummer", he said without a hint of irony. "What about Art Blakey or Max?" somebody said. "What about Buddy*

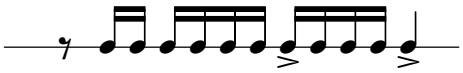
The Solo

The drum feature on this track consists of Philly trading four bar breaks with the piano over three choruses, and then taking a three chorus drum solo.

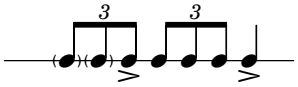
Three separate motifs feature extensively through the solo, designated 'A', 'B', and 'C' as follows:

Motif A: Two beats (either two quarter notes or two eighth notes), in which the first, stronger beat is played with the hand around the kit and the second / weaker beat played on the bass drum. If played as two quarter notes, the motif starts on beat 1 or beat 3; if played as two eighths, the motif will start on the beat. This creates a high to low melodic fragment—or, if repeated while moving the strong beat around the kit, the effect of a melody with a fixed counterpoint on the bass drum is created.

Motif B: A four-beat rhythm using 16th notes on the snare:



Motif C: A three-beat rhythm using triplets / swung eighths, in which the second accent (falling on the beat) is moved around the kit and the other notes are generally played on the snare:



The first four bar break is Philly Joe's explosive jumping-off point, bursting forth in answer to a somewhat sparse, melodic opening four bars from Wynton Kelly. In this break Philly Joe uses straight eighths and sixteenths from beat one of bar 1, which creates enormous intensity. Melodic conception is foregone here in favour of rhythmic drive; in each bar a self-contained, dense rhythmic phrase is played: contiuous eighths in the first bar, continuous sixteenths in the second, and a dotted-quarter motif (5 sixteenths and a sixteenth-note rest) in the third. None of these phrases exhibit much of a syncopated feel and the overall effect almost flattens the listener. The fourth bar is played with considerably more space and a swung eighth feel, making for a smooth transition back to the answering bars on the piano.

The second break introduces motif 'A'. The quarter note rests between statements of the motif in the first two bars creates a momentary '2' feel, which contrasts with the third bar where the rests are ommitted. The first note of the motif is played around the kit for melodic effect. The fourth bar of the break uses triplets to fill back to the time playing, so the break as a whole increases in rhythmic density as it progresses (quarter notes, to continuous eighth notes, to eighth note triplets).

The third break also uses motif 'A' played as two eighth notes, but with an eighth note rest between each occurence, so that the rhythmic cell is a dotted quarter note. The cell is sustained without variation over the entire four bars, suggesting a kind of single-minded intensity and feeling almost like a metric modulation.

The fourth and last break recalls the first in the first two bars, using sixteenths on the snare and a straight eighth feel; motif 'A' recurs in the second and third bars, and the break finishes with a modulation.

The drum solo proper opens using a variation of motif 'A', played over two quarter notes with the first note doubled as two straight eighths. A drag on the snare is played before or after the motif and the placement of this drag is varied for interest. The second four bars include the first appearance of motif 'C' (in bar 42 of the transcription) and connect with the first four by playing motif 'A' in bar 43, this time as continuous eighth notes. The last four bars of this first chorus introduce motif 'B', here preceded by two beats, a quarter note rest and a drag on the snare. This makes the phrase six beats long, so repeating it shifts the accents around the bar. The transition to sixteenth notes make these last four bars the most intense of the first chorus, as is often the case when playing over a blues.

Motif 'B' is played over the bar line into the second chorus of the solo. Here the two beats that preceded it in the first chorus are discarded, so the rhyhmic density increases. It is played three times unmodified (bars 49–51) and then used a basis for various sixteenth-note rhythmic patterns up to the ninth bar of this chorus. This chorus also peaks in the last four bars, specifically in the triplet rolls at bar 58. Motif 'C' is used in the last two bars of this chorus to mark the transition back to a swung eighth / triplet feel in the third chorus.

The final chorus recalls motif 'A' in its two bars and then uses continuous triplets up to its conclusion. Motif 'C' is repeated 8 times, starting at beat two of the third bar of the chorus (bar 63 in the transcription); as it is a three beat motif, the accents shift around the bar, and the downbeat accent is moved between the toms and the snare. The consistency with which this accent pattern is adhered to means that the transition to a three over two accent pattern (triplets grouped in pairs) marks the ninth bar of the chorus very clearly, reinforcing the blues form. Motif 'C' is then used to play out the end of this chorus.

Rich? Nobody has faster hands than Buddy Rich." Philly Joe just shook his head: "Put me in a room with any drummer you want—all those cats—give them as many drums as they want, and just give me a snare, a hi-hat and some cymbals..." - from 'Cooking With Philly Joe', http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=23759

Conclusions

Several years ago the Wynton Kelly compilation 'Pot Luck' was recommended to me by a drum teacher as an example of swinging jazz playing. At the time I had particular expectations of 'jazz' music, coloured perhaps principally by the fact that the music was fifty years old. Walking bass lines and swinging piano improvisation met these expectations, but Philly Joe's explosive playing certainly did not[5]. The drum feature on 'Pot Luck' was one of my especial bugbears; too loud, too straight, entirely out of context, I thought.

Having spent more time with jazz music and this solo in particular since then, it's become one of my favourite drum features of that era. There's a lot to like: the creativity displayed in working with the three motifs; the clarity of the form in the solo choruses; phrasing across bar lines; and the use of dotted quarter, three beat, and six beat phrases so that familiar patterns are shifting around in the bar as they are played. These devices sound so natural that it is much easier to sing the solo than to write it out. The constrictions of the 'four-bar box' are hardly felt.

The energy with which the drum feature commences—and sustains throughout—is uplifting but can still seem a little incongruous against the piano trio background. It may be that the drum mix is a little high on the recording, or that in a live setting the energy of all three players in the trio would be equally palpable. Or perhaps it's more likely that in a few years the solo will make even more sense again than it does now.

[5]It was in this same period that I admonished a guitar player for playing sixteenth notes on a standard. "Jazz is supposed to *swing*," I said; " - so no sixteenth notes!"

Solo transcription

A dotted line above the staff indicates that eighth notes should be played straight; otherwise they are played swung. The hi-hat plays on 2 and 4 throughout letters ‘B’ and ‘C’.