

# READING RHYTHMS

## Odd Meters *Text and examples by Norman Weinberg.*

**J**UST WHAT DOES it mean to play in odd meters? I've never liked the term 'odd' because it seems to have some negative connotations. But meters aren't odd because they are funny, deviant, or weird in some way. They're odd only because they're less common than other meters (and generally incorporate an odd number of beats in a measure, like 3, 5, 7, or 9). Odd meters aren't any harder to read or to play than any others—if you're familiar with how they work and practice them. Odd meters are sometimes found in fusion jazz, some progressive rock, and many ethnic folk musics.

Last month, this column covered meters in 2/4, 3/4, 5/4, and 7/4. In each of those time signatures, the quarter note served as the value of one count (remember that the upper number of the time signature signifies how many counts in a measure while the lower number indicates the note value of one count). This month, we're going to take a look at some meters that use an eighth note for the value of a single count. In a meter of 6/4, each measure has the value of six quarter notes. In 6/8 time, there are still six counts in the bar, but the eighth note (signified by the number eight), not the quarter, receives the value of one of those counts. This brings up an interesting question. If there are six counts in the measure, are there also six beats? Sometimes yes, and sometimes no.

In many meters, the terms 'beat' and 'count' are interchangeable. In 6/4 time, for example, there are six counts to the bar and also six beats, but in other meters, the number of counts and beats are not always the same. Take a look at a meter of 6/8 (see example 1). In these measures, there are six counts, but only two beats. How can this be? Meters are designated as either being simple or compound.

I dislike terms as much as the next guy, but you've got to admit that knowing the proper musical terms makes communication easier . . . "the little black oval with the line sticking up from the side and the squiggly thing hanging down" is not as clear as saying "eighth note". Simple meters can be defined as those meters which normally divide their beats into two even subdivisions. Compound meters have a basic pulse that is regularly divided into three parts.

In the first measure of example one, the

six eighth notes make up the six counts. To perform this measure, simply count the numbers from one to six and play a stroke on each number. But as the tempo begins to get faster and faster, the six counts should be phrased as two big beats with three divisions each (**one two three four five six**). This is what makes 6/8 a compound meter — each of the two main beats has three subdivisions. If you're having trouble seeing how six counts can be placed into two beats, sing the children's song 'Three Blind Mice' and tap your foot with the main beats. Notice what happens when you get to: "**cut off their tails with a carving knife**". Now, in the space of two foot taps, count to six by putting count one on the first foot tap (cut) and count four on the second (tails).

The second measure of the example contains only two dotted quarter notes. You already know that a dotted quarter has the same value as three eighth notes, and because we're working in a compound meter, there are three eighths to each beat. In other words, the eighth note receives the count, but the value of a dotted quarter note receives the beat. Each dotted quarter is subdivided into three eighths. In order to play this measure, place a stroke on counts one and four (you must still count the others).

The third measure is a little trickier than the previous two bars. In this measure, each beat consists of a quarter note and an eighth note. Each beat still contains the value of three eighths (or a dotted quarter note), but only the first and third counts of each beat are struck, because the quarter note has the value of two counts. When playing this measure, play strokes on counts one, three, four, and six. If this measure is repeated over and over, it will begin to sound like the ride cymbal pattern used in a standard shuffle beat.

The last bar in Example 1 presents a new problem. What do you do with the sixteenth notes? I'll give you three hints. Remember that a sixteenth divides an eighth note into two equal parts, the eighth note is getting the value of one count, and that the syllable 'and' is used for the first subdivision of a count. The envelope please . . . Yes, the first beat in the fourth measure is counted as 'one, two and, three and'. Since the eighth note gets the count, and there are two sixteenths to

each eighth, a single sixteenth has the value of one-half count.

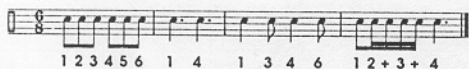
Most often, composers and copyists will do their best to beam notes together so that your eyes can take in three counts (one full beat) at a time, but it isn't always possible. Example 2 (in 3/8 time) shows several figures that can't be beamed, either because they contain rests or a quarter note. While it is a little more difficult to quickly grasp that these figures have the value of a full beat, try to approach them as a single 'word' instead of several different, independent symbols.

In the reading example for this month, there are meters of 3/8, 4/8, 5/8, 6/8, 7/8, and 9/8, each separated by a double barline. Some of these meters are compound (three, six, and nine), and one (4/8) is a simple one. In fact, a meter of 4/8 is very similar to a meter of 2/4 — each bar has the value of four eighths (or two quarters if you prefer). 5/8 and 7/8 time signatures are neither simple nor compound. These meters are typically called complex or asymmetrical (again, I think the name 'complex' is too negative), because the beat's subdivision values are not equal. The typical measure of 7/8 usually contains three beats (but always seven counts) which can be phrased as 2+2+3, 2+3+2, or 3+2+2. Because each beat can be subdivided into either two or three parts, the lengths of the various beats are not the same. In other words, a bar of 7/8 which is phrased as 3+2+2, has a longer first beat. In addition, the first beat is compound while the last two beats are simple. As you practice the exercise, notice that the phrasing of each measure is conveyed to you by the beams. If a group of three eighths are beamed together, then that is the compound beat in the bar.

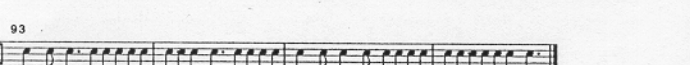
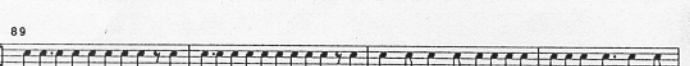
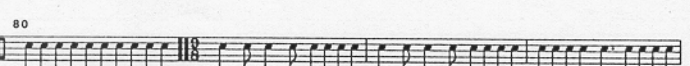
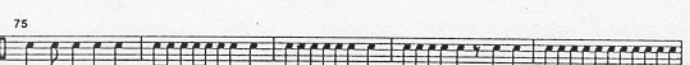
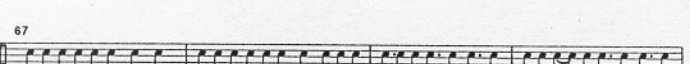
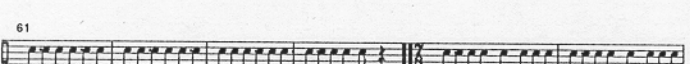
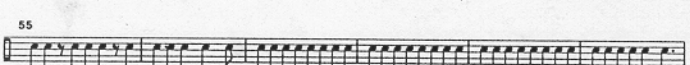
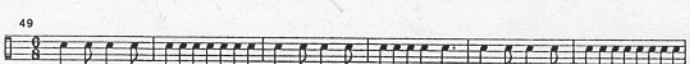
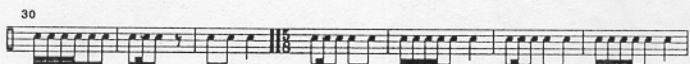
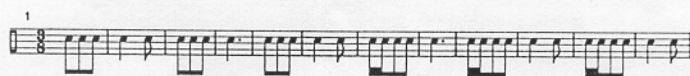
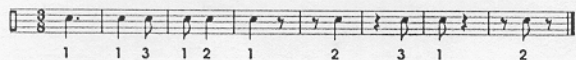
I suggest that you begin practicing these exercises slowly at first (gee, have you heard me say that before?), bringing up the tempo only after you feel more secure. Also, in the asymmetrical meters, try to get a feel for the basic pulse of the beats by putting a small stress at the beginning of each beamed grouping (these are the beats). As I said at the start of this column, odd meters are only odd because they are less common. As you gain more experience in reading them, they will become more 'normal'. ®

RHYTHM NOVEMBER 1988

### Example #1



### Example #2



## TRIGGERING THE FUTURE



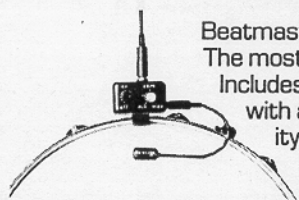
ELECTRONIC DRUMS AND ACCESSORIES  
FOR MORE INFORMATION, CALL: (213) 281-4779  
1706 NORTH VINE STREET, SUITE 333  
HOLLYWOOD, CA 90028

## THE TECHTONICS COMPANY DRUM TRIGGERING SYSTEMS

The Techtonics 2000 Electronic Bass Drum Trigger Plate. Compatible with virtually all bass drum pedals and drum brains without the need of a pre-amp or special cables.



**\$125.95\***



Beatmaster™ Acoustic Drum Triggers. The most versatile triggers available. Includes a pick-up and a control box with an on/off switch and sensitivity adjustment for complete triggering control at the drum.

**\$39.95\***

Beatmaster™ replacement pick-ups available for **\$12.95\***

\*Manufacturer's suggested list price.

### THE TECHTONICS COMPANY

1030 E. Duane Ave.  
Suite F  
Sunnyvale, CA 94086  
(408) 245-0500

Dealer Inquiries Welcome

Gregory Grainger (Whitney Houston)  
Vic Mastrianni (Reba McEntyre)  
Harvey Mason (studio)  
Sonny Emory (EW&F)  
Rayford Griffin (Jean-Luc Ponty)  
David Owens (Thomas Dolby)  
Zoro (New Edition)  
Dean Sharp (Billy Ocean)  
Land Richards (Gladys Knight)  
Michael White (Teena Marie)  
Alan Diaz (Paul Stookey)