

# INDEPENDENCE and *Santa*

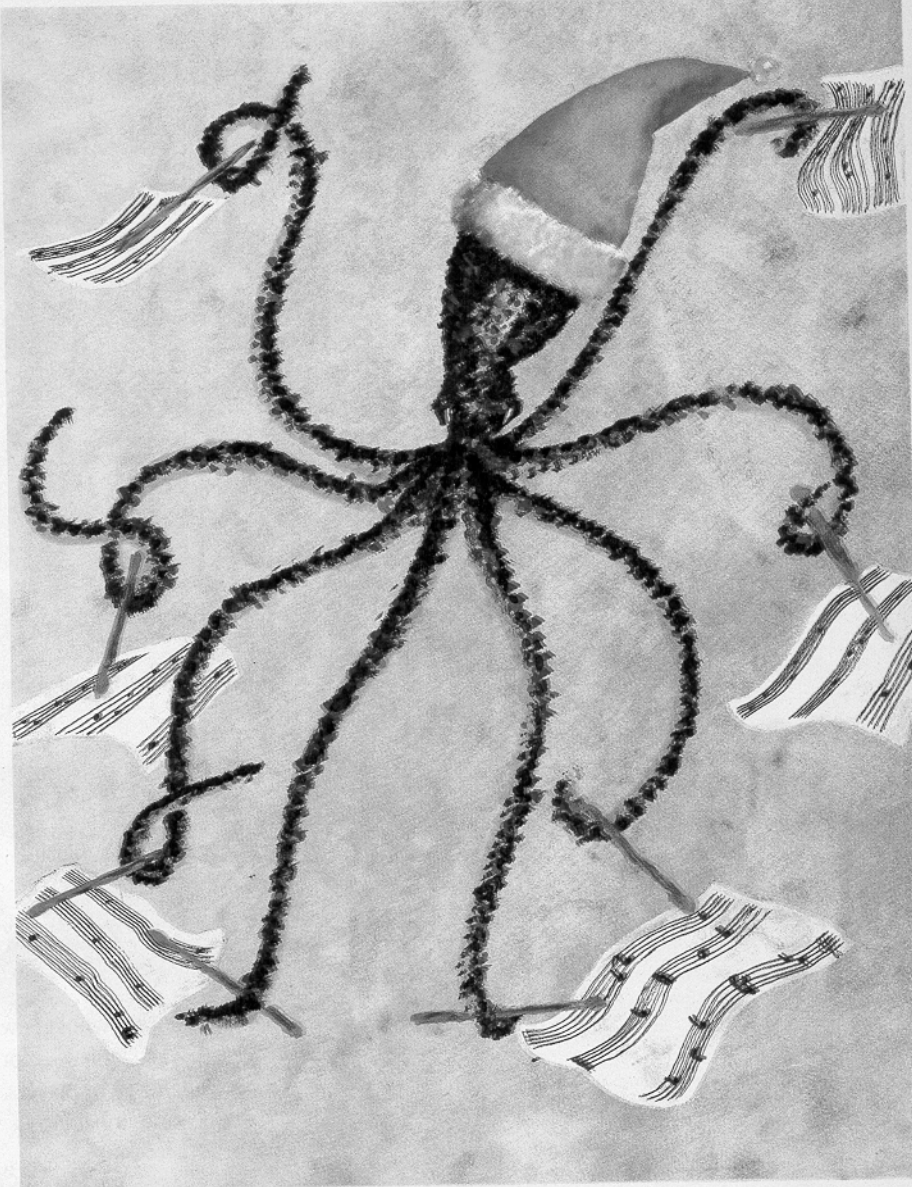


Illustration: Steff

**I**NDEPENDENCE. WHAT A fantastic concept. It seems that all my life I've been striving to achieve a better sense of independence in my drumming. I've played through most of the books. You've seen them: *Independence for the Advance Drummer*, *Independence for the Left Hand*, *Rock and Roll Independence*, and on and on. I practiced all the patterns and worked really hard at it, but you know what? I don't think that there's such a thing as independence.

When I was younger, I believed in independence, and like a young child who still believed in Santa Claus, I would constantly seek it out. When a child reaches the age of five or six, he begins to wonder if there really is a Santa Claus, but is a little afraid that if he admits that Santa doesn't exist, then all the presents might stop appearing on Christmas morning. I wanted to believe in independence for a long time – much longer than I believed in Santa, but I was afraid that if I gave up the search, especially when the goal might be just around the corner, then independence

**Is there more to the myth than meets the eye . . . or hand or foot?  
Norman Weinberg explores the independence concept on  
another level.**

would never be mine. It wasn't until I was much older that I came to the realization that independence, like Santa Claus, just doesn't exist.

## Storytime

I'D LIKE TO tell you a couple of stories . . . In graduate school, I took a course on Oriental Art Music with a wonderful teacher and a true genius, Dr. Walter Kaufman. Not only was he a composer, performer, author, and teacher, he was also very hip for a man well into his seventies. He'd been to the mountains of Tibet several times, climbed the Himalayas, lived with men of mystery who had knowledge of the occult, and had even visited with the Dalai-Lama himself. I'm sure it was no mystery that I was quite impressed by this man.

One day, a student in the class slipped and told Dr. Kaufman that it was his birthday. Immediately, Dr. Kaufman ran to the piano and began to play. What was he playing? His right hand was playing the tune 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' in the key of D while his left hand played 'Happy Birthday' in the key of A flat. Ok, not too bad, right? But what made it even more amazing was that the 'Jolly Good Fellow' melody is sixteen measures of 6/8 time and the 'Happy Birthday' song is only eight measures long. The way Dr. Kaufman played it, both tunes started together and ended together. A little more impressive, no?

Right after class I went up to Dr. Kaufman and told him that he had a fantastic sense of independence and asked if he could play any two well-known songs together in different keys and at different

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speeds. He told me I was crazy! He said that he worked out that little trick while he was in college as a practical joke to impress his friends. He also said that it was great fun to play at parties.

Not long after that experience, Ravi Shankar and Alla Rakha came to the school to present a concert and Mr. Rakha was asked to give a little demonstration to the percussion students.


Of course, as one of the world's best tabla players, he had unbelievable independence between his hands. But then he did something that *really* blew my mind. He told the students about a traditional method for ending Ragas. As I understood it, everyone in the ensemble improvises on a particular musical structure and it's the tabla player's responsibility to let the group know when it's time to end. First, he played some simple formulas, then moved on to rhythms that were just too intense to handle, and explained what he did.

The object is to play a rhythm (usually several beats long) three times. The first statement of the rhythm is at the original speed, then you repeat the same rhythm one-third faster than the first time. The third statement moves two-thirds faster than the first. Got that? The same rhythm is being played three times, each one slightly faster. OK, now comes the hard part: the last note of this rhythm occurs on the downbeat (the "one" count) of the last measure. That stroke is where the Raga ends.

This particular concept was not lost on the players in the audience. "You mean to tell us that you're increasing the tempo by thirds? And on top of that you've planned out in advance where the first statement should begin?" The more I think about this, the more it freaks me out! It's true, he was really doing all that and improvising the original statement of the rhythm. He proved it several times by showing us many different examples. When things got really heavy, he tried to help us keep our place in the time structure by playing the basic rhythm with his left hand on the bayan (lower drum) and the improvised rhythm on the upper drum with his right hand.

The next question from the audience could easily be expected. We all asked him how he did it. His answer was no help at all. He said that he had just been doing it all his life and it wasn't really any big deal.

Again, I thought I'd found someone who had true independence, but as great as he was he couldn't offer any help or advice.

Last story. Just a couple of years ago, I met a flutist who was also an artist. We were sitting in a restaurant that had plain white paper placemats with a box of crayons stationed on each of the tables. She picked up two of the crayons and asked me to spell my last name. She then proceeded to write "Weinberg" from left to right with her left hand, and from right to left with her right hand.  RHYTHM JULY 1989



► to left with her right hand. Then she did the same thing with the opposite hand; left hand writing backward and right hand writing forward. Too much! As if that wasn't enough, she wrote my name right side up and upside down at the same time.

I thought, "Boy, this could really be the one." Writing two different things with two different hands proved that Santa and independence really did exist. We started talking about these feats of skill and she told me that it wasn't very hard for her to do. She was ambidextrous and could write equally well with either hand. All of these tricks were essentially done by mirroring one hand with the other (see the **Mirrors** diagram).

## Mirrors

Weinberg gtsdnisW

MeinpoB

Weinberg

OK, time for a test. I asked her if she could write my name forwards and backwards, just as she did before. But this time, begin with the "W" in the left hand and the "g" in the right hand. She said that she had never tried anything like that before, but was willing to give it a shot. The result was that she could do it, but her hand movements were very choppy and hesitant. The reason for her hesitancy was that she would write one letter, stop for just a moment, and write the next set of letters. Eight letters, eight pauses.

Last test. Could she write two different sentences at the same time, both moving from left to right (I thought that this might make it easier), but one with each hand? This proved to be much more of a problem for her. My belief in independence was over. It was time to grow up, face the facts, and admit that true independence falls into the same class with Santa, Superman, and the Easter Bunny. If all these people didn't have true independence between two hands, how could I ever achieve true independence between all four limbs?

## Independence or Interdependence?

FOR YEARS, I'VE heard players do things that I thought could only be done with a high degree of independence. Upon closer examination, however, I proved myself wrong in every case. It seems that when we play, there are two different processes used which have been erroneously named independence. One of these is better described as *interdependence*.

As an example of interdependence, consider **Example One**. You might

recognize these measures as the polyrhythms of two against three and three against two. If you're into polyrhythms, this is most likely the first one you learned to play. But in reality, you never play two different rhythms at the same time. Instead, you're really playing a single rhythm which is comprised of two different voices.

You might have learned this rhythm as shown in the first measure of the example. You're playing in 6/8 meter. The right hand plays all the eighth notes while the left hand plays on counts one, the "and" of two, four, and the "and" of five. If not, then you learned this pattern by playing triplet figures in 2/4 time. It doesn't matter which way you approach it, it isn't true independence. Each hand and each rhythm becomes interdependent and fits into the larger shell of the time signature.

Here is another situation where independence falls flat on its face and interdependence comes in to save the day. **Examples Two-Five** contain four different rhythms in four different meters. **Example Two**, in 7/8, is to be played on the bass drum. **Example Three** is to be played with the hi-hat using your other foot. Now that your feet are busy, **Examples Four and Five** should be played by the hands on two different cymbals. OK, go for it! See if you've got the independence skills to play these four different rhythms with all four of your limbs. I'll even give you a hint: Your hands are simply playing a three against two pattern, so all you have to do is add your feet. Really . . . try it, this article will wait for you.

Were you successful? If so, then you're the first person on the planet to focus a

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single mind on four different tasks at the same time! When you take all four rhythms and cook them together, the end result looks like **Example Six** (this passage is from *Chrysoprase IV*, a drumkit piece published by Southern Music). If you try to work this passage out (it's still somewhat difficult) you'll see how each limb can work along with the other to achieve interdependence. While no one can split their brain to perform four different tasks, it's easy to combine ideas together into a single task and a single rhythmic pattern.

## Cruising on Auto-Pilot

LET'S JUMP TO the other mental process that occurs when drumming. This one is called *cruise control* or *auto-pilot* playing. Humans are capable of performing many types of chores without thinking about them at all. I'm sure you've heard the phrase "I bet he can't walk and chew gum

### Example 1.



### Example 2.



### Example 3.



### Example 4.



at the same time." Most people can walk and chew gum because both of those physical actions are being performed without any mental energies being exerted.

I'm willing to put my money where my mouth is. I'll bet that you can walk and chew gum at the same time, and also make your way down a flight of stairs while scratching your nose and reading a book. Try it, and you'll surprise yourself. How can

this be? Here you're performing four different physical movements as well as focusing all your mental energies on the content of the book.

The answer is simple. You've been walking from about the age of ten months, you've been scratching your nose since the first week of your life. You might have learned to navigate stairs by the age of two, discovered gum by age three or four, and have been reading since you first entered kindergarten. All the physical movements are taken care of by your kinesthetic abilities to repeat movements that you've done for several years. The only thing you need to concentrate on is the text of the book you're reading.

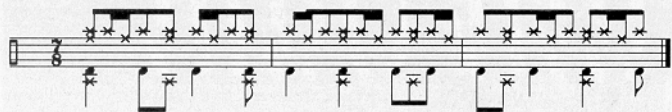
How do drummers apply cruise control? Next time you're laying down a strong, steady rock beat, notice if you're thinking about your hi-hat. Are you concentrating on each of those eighth notes, or are you primarily interested in what your bass

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**Example 5.**



**Example 6.**



**Example 7.**



**Example 8.**



drum and snare drum are doing? Is it easy for you to play steady quarter notes with your bass drum while running some dazzling fills around the kit? If you answered yes to either of these questions, you're operating on auto-pilot.

Take a look at **Example Seven**. When I first started playing out of Jim Chapin's *Advanced Techniques For The Modern Drummer*, I tried doing the exercises by thinking of each individual line (like the

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first two measures of the example). When that didn't work, I cooked the two voices together and switched to thinking of both hands in an interdependent manner (like the last two measures of the example). Even though this method helped me to play the exercise, it sounded forced and choppy. I couldn't really improvise while playing the cymbal pattern.

I knew that if I was going to conquer that book and really be able to play all the passages with style and control, something drastic would be needed. I sat down at the drumkit and played the ride cymbal pattern by itself. After about a half hour, I added four quarter notes with the bass drum. Another half hour passed, and I added the hi-hat playing on counts two and four.

I remember sitting in the living room (where my kit was set up) and playing this constant swing pattern over and over and over. After about an hour, my practice session was finished for the day. The next RHYTHM JULY 1989

morning at school I was called down several times by my teachers for playing drums in class (you know - on the desk). I came home from school and started playing the ride, bass, and hi-hat cymbal rhythms until dinner. After about three days, I could easily watch TV (also located in the living room), ask my mom a question, think about something unrelated to my playing, or even read my homework assignments without messing up. I realized

that my body was starting to take over, while my mind was dealing with other matters.

At the end of that week, right before my lesson, I sat down and sight-read several chapters of the Chapin book. Now that my ride cymbal, bass drum, and hi-hat were on auto-pilot, all I had to do was read the rhythms for the snare drum. Instead of fighting with each little pattern and exercise, after one week I could play several chapters of the book.

Just a few weeks ago, I passed by one of the practice rooms at school and heard one of my students trying to master a tricky Samba beat. I wanted to see how he was doing so I knocked on the door and saw **Example Eight** up on the music stand. He found this example in a book of drum transcriptions and wanted to learn to play it, but was running into lots of trouble. He kept getting hung up in the middle of the first bar. A few times, he successfully

negotiated the first bar but was leaving out two of the hi-hat notes. In other words, when he thought he was playing it correctly, he wasn't.

My next step was to ask him to play the passage with his feet and leave out the hands. He did it. Could he play the hands alone, leaving out the feet? Yes. So what was the big deal? Why couldn't he play the hands and feet together?

Even though he had mastered both the hands and the feet separately, he had to think about each of them. It took a great deal of concentration to play the feet, and concentration for the hands. Neither set of limbs was able to go on cruise control. When he tried to put them together, it just fell apart. I sat down at the kit and sight-read the pattern. Then I sight-read several other patterns that were on the same page. Boy, was he impressed.

I suggested that he just stay in the room and play the basic Samba pattern with his feet for a few hours. Once he could put the bass drum and hi-hat on cruise control, playing the hands was the only thing that required any concentration. Then he'd be able to play that exercise as well as any other that used a Samba pattern in the feet.

I don't think he liked the idea very much since we all want to progress as fast as possible, see instant results, and come out of the practice room playing something that we couldn't when we went in. It takes a good deal of discipline to practice a single rhythm for days. But, believe it or not, that's the only way that you can put cruise control to work for you. Any rhythm, pattern, or idea can achieve cruise control status if you work on it long enough.

## The Myth Laid to Rest

SOME THINGS MAY be played best by linking certain limbs to others or by severing one limb from the rest and putting it on cruise control. In reality, drummers seem to float quickly between using interdependence and auto-pilot. It's even possible to set certain limbs on cruise control and use interdependence with the remaining limbs (the technique required to play Example Eight). But I've never met a drummer who could actually play four different rhythms with each limb the very first time he tried it. To my thinking, this would be true independence.

So the next time you hear someone say that they've got great independence, write down four rhythms and ask them to play all four at the same time. Then tell them that you don't believe in Santa Claus either.

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