One of the big differences between rock and jazz drumming, as we saw last month, is that jazz emphasizes cymbals, while rock focuses more on drums. Another major trademark of jazz-style drumming is the high degree of improvisation involved. Rock drummers tend to work out beats, plan the exact location of fills, and "drumstrate" their parts. Jazz drummers often blur the line that separates beats from fills and compose their parts on the fly.

An improvising drummer listens to the

musical fabric of the ensemble at the moment and adds his or her musical thoughts to the
collection. Sometimes the thoughts are little comments that are integrated and absorbed
into the basic time-keeping patterns. Other times, the thoughts are more structured and
act as statements to the other musicians in the
group.

Comments develop continually in the flow of musical ideas. When visiting with a group
of people, you’re likely to voice little comments, such as, “Yeah,” “Uh-huh,” “I think it was
Wednesday,” or, “Really!” In the same way, a drummer’s comments can serve to underscore,
explain, or illustrate the music of the other mu-
sicians.

Statements are more substantial and seem
to organize or direct the musical conversation.
According to the dictionary, statements are ex-
pressions of fact or opinion. An improvising
drummer might play a statement that leads the
group from the verse into the chorus. When
there is a lull in the conversation, the drummer’s
statement can easily offer up new topics of
interest.

In Example 1, notice how the drum part
comments on the rhythm of the verse melody,
and then provides a statement that leads into
the next section of the piece. Example 2 shows
a similar interaction between the drum part and
the rhythm of an improvised solo.

Sound Selection. Generally speaking, the
snare drum in swing jazz should sound bright,
clear, and crisp. If a snare sounds heavy or thick
it will cloud the texture during any busy pas-
sages. It’s a good idea to use a rimshot with
a lot of crack for accents and for kicking the en-
ssemble.

Likewise, toms in swing tend to be brighter
and higher, and to offer more natural sustain
than their rock counterparts. While it’s common
for a drummer to use a wooden beater on the
bass drum for rock and funk, jazz drummers
often use a hard felt ball. The bass drum should
have a punchy (not brittle) attack, moderate de-
cy, and a clear tone. On all instruments, dy-
namic contrasts can run the gamut from ghost
strokes (notes that are all but inaudible) to
powerful rimshots.

Programming Tip. By definition, improvi-
sation calls for immediate musical actions and
reactions created on the spot during a perfor-
mance. While it’s difficult to capture the spop-
teatness of an improvised performance with a
drum machine or sequencer, here is a pro-
gramming tip that may help.

Lay in your music with a scratch drum track.
Then, when a good deal of the music has been
completed, erase the old drum track and build a new
one. Work with long patterns. By programming
longer patterns (try eight or sixteen bars), you’re
less likely to come up with ideas that sound
repetitive. Record the voices of the drum kit one
at a time, and feel free to let each instrument
comment upon the music taking place. When
the drums are complete, go back and finish the
other instrumental tracks while relating to the
drum kit’s comments and statements.