

Video excerpts

The following excerpts outline the developmental journey of my playing without requiring the reader/listener to watch hours of footage. For this reason, video examples are front-loaded on what was an overall accumulative practice as research portfolio - the journey of the progression is the vocal point here, as opposed to some sort of arrival point. Examples of worthy play which in any way offer a repetition on previous ideas have been excluded.

Day 1 Development of new techniques

Video 1, Snare bend phrasing.

This opening example shows the relative speed at which ideas begin to emerge once settled behind the instrument. Initial struggles with my own setup are evident, but as we see here and later in documentation, some of these resistances serve to spark creative dialogue (video 4 for example).

Here I explore the different ways to approach pitch bending on the snare drum for the first time in my own playing. It is a practice that in modern times is quite common in improvisational play, with cliché connotations to those who take it to the extreme of playing recognisable melody on the kit. For that reason, I have always felt an unease with the technique, though undoubtedly it is a feature of Milford's playing. In this context, it is freed from its modern cliché. The awkward inward turn seen in the left wrist, initially a struggle, eases and develops throughout the playing process.

Video 2, Floor tom bend phrasing.

This technique is an obvious extension of snare pitch bending, though other phrasing is explored due to the nature of the setup of the drum kit. Having the ride cymbal close to hand makes for useful exploration. At 00:05 you will notice the right-hand technique is something similar to that of a bodhrán player. It's not an instrument I am completely unfamiliar with, though my brief time spent with it did have a part to play here.¹ Again, material consequently seems to flow quite quickly. New pathways are being opened up, and techniques from the right hand were then mirrored in the left. Patterns begin to emerge in play, and are placed within the wider dialogue of the kit. Limb independence is explored, and very quickly it is apparent that the requirement of a swaying motion has begun to inform my phrasing. The reaching down and leaning over on the floor tom of course needs a resultant upwards lift of the torso, and this requirement of upwards and downwards bodily movement informs the choice of musical phrasing. My playing now takes on the character of having an upright traditional posture, defined in opposition to the lower bent over phrasing required for pitch bending.

Video 3, Two drum rumble, plus combos.

Here we see the exact moment that the bodhrán style of playing in the right-hand leads to a discovery of new technique elsewhere, this time as a rumble between the snare and rack tom. The technique again is quickly absorbed and placed within a wider context. This was often the case that the slightest of considerations could lead to a completely new discovery. It should also be mentioned that the setup allowed for this chance motion to take place. Had the rack tom or snare drum been placed at different angles we perhaps couldn't have expected the same outcome.

Video 4, Hi-hat tom rumble

Again, resistance sparking creativity here, as the same technique is now applied to the rack tom and hi-hat. Accidentally catching the hi-hat is often an issue in traditional grip playing, however this technique is now actively applied, and its musical value extracted.²

Video 5, Tom stick distortion

Applying pressure to the skin of the rack tom with the left stick, and striking a rimshot (metal hoop and drum skin simultaneously) creates a distorted sound. Again, a follow-on discovery from the previous technique. In this example the level of distortion is not as pronounced in the captured audio as it was in the room; interesting in and of itself.

¹ Throughout the research period I noticed elements of my everyday life becoming a feature of play, in what was, at its core, a study of individual improvisers. This was as welcomed as it was unavoidable. Past musical influences as well as other rehearsal material would often emerge in play, reshaped and reimagined in their delivery.

² Trad grip. The traditional way of holding the drumstick in the left hand when playing a marching snare slung to the left of the player. It aided in getting the best angle for approach whilst still allowing the soldier to march. This remained with the birth of the drum set in the early development of the New Orleans jazz tradition.

Video 6, Hands on kit

Not a new concept, but one that was explored due to Milford's experience with percussion. This is informed by the pitch-bending and swaying motions.

Video 7, Left hand traditional grip first touched on.

NB audio in this section is impaired. Briefly touches on traditional grip and its variety of approaches, as well as its connotations to old school jazz musicians. It informs the sound we get from the drum as well as *what* we choose to play, through a combination of cultural conditioning and sensorimotor agency.³ I often play differently when using trad grip, or perhaps, when I *feel* like playing a certain way, I will intuitively switch to trad grip. Sometimes a choice of timbre, or perhaps a simple process of muscle fatigue, these mini-processes are often employed at a preconscious level.⁴

Video 8, Two hand trad grip into rim hits.

Demonstrates further exploration of trad grip in both hands. Movements now becoming more natural and feeling less awkward. Once again we see a new and unrelated musical motif emerge from play, this time in the style of folk Bulgarian Tapan player. Another example of how other elements of musical life can influence your improvisational processes; at the time I was also working on tracking a piece of music with a Bulgarian piper. Milford often welcomed multi-cultural influences in his playing, and so too I embraced this element.

Video 9, Animated play.

Similar to Milford's style of play, I find myself in a section of music taken from a wider 48-minute performance, where my actions and soundings become coupled. What I mean by this is, there is a direct relationship between how I behave, and what I play. My overall body language has changed, and so too has my playing approach. In a conversation like manner, I switch between the rim of the rack tom and floor tom, embodying the musical gestures in an animated style of playing. Not only does it connect me directly with what I am playing, in another sense it legitimises my sense of timing. If we *mean* what we play, in that if we explicitly attach our phrasing to the actions of the body, in personified gesture, then as a listener or watcher, we are engaged deeply in what we see and hear as something "more believable". Now of course, I am attaching character (at the risk of becoming a caricature) to performance in an extra communicative manner, in what would suggest the existence of an audience - in this example the video camera. I was aware of its presence, however this action was first and foremost musical. Yes, it was informed by Milford's approach, which is ultra-communicative with an emphasis on the word performative, which suggests, audience, but there is more to be said for the musical benefits of this style of playing. And I am aware of the danger of entering into theatrics. Music must be the driving force in this approach, for without command of the body and instrument, the honesty (for lack of a collection of words that carry meaning across) is lost. But it is certainly worth exploring further.

Video 10, Head movement and phrasing, the potter's nod.

I have a friend who is an experienced potter. He shared an interesting story with me about his kinship with a wild cat who developed a phenomenon called, 'the potter's nod' while watching him throw the clay.⁵ Not all potter's have a nod, only some. They say it helps them see the lay of the clay as they are turning, others developed it from their teacher, a bit like the wild cat. Others say it's a habit of their practice and they aren't aware of it but if they had to explain it, it would be something similar to helping them focus on the task at hand, looking at the angles, watching *without* watching, as they use their hands, doing without thinking.⁶ I found this fascinating. In this clip around the 00:14 second mark I sway my head in an exaggerated motion. This initially was the result of the gravitational pull on the head as I lean over the snare drum, however the spinning of the head resulted in processing the kit from a different angle, which led my attention to the left ride cymbal as a viable area of play when pitch bending on the snare, this time with the right elbow.

In other moments of play however, it is a way of preventing the gravitational pull of movement to dictate where to go next. It is not a conscious action in the moment but upon reflection, it breaks the cycle and acts as a reset

³ 'We propose that the various aspects of the phenomenology of the sense of agency relate to both the intrinsic and the relational (meta)stability of the action/perception schemes that together constitute the sensorimotor level of agency. These intrinsic and relational aspects always involve the world in some non-trivial sense and do not require internal comparison between neural signals as the epistemic signature of a controlled act.' (Buhrmann, T., and Di Paolo, E. 2015)

⁴ Philosopher Shaun Gallagher defines the *preconscious* as 'subpersonal processes that play a dynamic role in governing posture and movement' (Gallagher 2006)

⁵ Seen at 00:31 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Qr57ApAVLg>

⁶ The potters nod throws up some similar questions among ceramicists, as with performing musicians. <https://community.ceramicartsdaily.org/topic/19842-potters-nod-what-is-it/>

button to ground myself again and focus on the task at hand, without being swayed by motion. In any case, the potter's nod made an impact on my playing at both conscious and preconscious levels. This is an excerpt taken from a longer improvisation (see footnote 16).

Video 11, Swaying motion.

Self-explanatory; an example of said swaying motion in practice.

Video 12, Stick see-saw

Taking the motion of the rack tom and hi-hat approach and applying it across the bow of both ride cymbals, this technique uses the sticks fulcrum point in a see-saw motion across the camber of the cymbal.⁷

Video 13, Exploration of stick rumbling/buzz rolls across kit.

Documents the result of a combination of sticking using the previously discovered stick rumbling along with 'buzz rolls'.⁸ This technique is new to me.

Video 14, Milford, and thoughts on gesture.

Some closing thoughts captured at the end of the first improvised session.⁹

Day 2 Cymbals, resonance, and environment

Video 18, Learning and embedding the angles of the cymbals - clearing new pathways

Here I assess, play with, and *feel* the angles of rebound in the sticks from the cymbals. I am clearing new pathways of movement whilst exploring musical phrasing as opposed to a purely technical exercise. You can see the subtle moments of tempo change as I slow down to process the movements, again feeling them from a whole body perspective.

Video 19 Standing angle for cymbals - exploring cymbal hum - listening to my environment

Standing allows for a better angle of approach on the cymbals and allows for full exploration of the cymbal compared with the limitations of a seated position. As the cymbals resonate under particular disturbances, their tonalities fill the room. Again, something less prevalent in the recording, but fully present in the room, there are a range of overtones that emerge. One tone of a few that can be identified is a minor third, for example. It is these tonalities that inform the playing.

Day 3 Performance develops

Video 22 and 23, Flow - Upward cymbal hits - developed stylistic play.

A good example of flow in performance, not to be misunderstood with the experience of flow. Here I am referring to *flow as a practice*. Ideas are executed freely with minimal resistance. The drums are played in a full body, wavelike approach. Thoughts are stilled and feelings, gravity; sensorimotor agency, dominate the direction of play (conversationally explored in video 30). Evidence of left hand (considered the weaker hand) development is clear. Employing a range of techniques gained so far that come together cohesively.

Video 27 and 28, Standing playing backs of cymbals.

New technique for me. Different tonalities and colours emerge from both the cymbals and the stick when applied in this manner, using the shoulder (tapered area below the tip of the stick) for a dry, dense attack on the back edge of the cymbal.

Day 4 Feelings

Video 29, Feeling the hands.

Here I discuss left hand technique, and also allude to the impact of Steve Davis' teachings before having begun research on him. All our influences are continuously present in our playing in some shape or form. It was clear at this point in the research that my technique was already becoming shaped by musical choices.

⁷ To explain, the ride cymbal when laid on a flat surface has an arch to its structure, or a bow/camber.

⁸ Pressing the tip of the stick into the drum with pressure added to the top end of the stroke, in order to get a fast return on rebound which sounds like a "buzz" on the snare drum. The term is transferable to any surface.

⁹ At 01:00 the improvisation mentioned has not been attached to this work, but can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9DHGH1yXrE&ab_channel=ConorMcAuley if you so choose.

Video 30 Building new pathways - Milford Graves and Zazen.

Conversational in my approach here in an attempt to vocalise the feelings and intentions behind this style of play, this clip is complicated by poor language use. I mention thought patterns and habits, in terms of breaking them. What I should say is, develop my sensorimotor capabilities to allow for the process outlined in video 22 and 23 to take place. Further references are made to Milford Graves, and Zazen.

Closing thoughts

Studying Milford Graves was an important first step in the research process. The immediate benefit to my playing was obvious; simply sitting down to a daily dedicated practice in this sense was very helpful. Something of interest during the research process, I only used drumsticks. No other use of musical accessories or preparation of the drum kit was explored. Though even within this “traditional” style of playing, new techniques emerged. There is something to learn even from the processes we are most familiar with.

Milford has such a big character, and I did struggle slightly in an attempt not to mimic his behaviour behind the drums. As mentioned before there is a danger of entering into theatrics, but music, and awareness, were always at the front of my playing. His character, his beliefs, his ways of being, were of great inspiration. He draws out the energy of those around him and lifts people higher with his music. Something I aspire to do with my own playing. It is a good reminder at times to ask ourselves the question, ‘*Why are we behind our instrument?*’