

Early Jazz-Styles for Brushes



by Gerry Paton

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Originally published 2010 by www.brushbeat.org

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Forward

Because much of the twenties belonged to the silent age of cinema, music tended to be overlooked by film makers. It was only when sound (quite literally) entered the picture that the first examples of brush-playing were captured on film, showing us exactly how it was done in the early days. By that time (the late 1920s) a reasonably standardised approach to the brushes had been adopted by most (if recordings are anything to go by) and this article is an attempt to chronicle that early style. Why? Because it laid the foundations for brush-playing in the Swing era. Beyond that even—one often hears remnants of the older brushes tradition when listening to classic recordings of Jump, R&B, Gospel and Western Swing music.

This seemingly forgotten style is therefore worthy of our attention. Not only to enable us to play early jazz with a more authentic voice, but also some of its close relatives and offshoots. A lack of archive material means that it is impossible to record every variation of every pattern that was around then. However, the following examples offer at least one way in which the generic beats of that period were played. Hopefully they will whet appetites and encourage further exploration of the music and artists discussed.

Basic Brushes-Comp

The most commonly heard brushes pattern during the transition from Hot Jazz to Swing stemmed from an adaptation of a parade-beat popular with New Orleans drummers. The basic principal involved one hand marking time in a steady quarter-note pulse, while the other accented beats 2 and 4 (everything being done on the snare drum). When using sticks, drummers would accent the ‘after-beat’ (backbeat in modern parlance) using quarter-note press-rolls, which they would quite literally drag-out by drawing their sticks across the head. Figure 1a demonstrates how this beat was played using the right-hand to perform the press-rolls, although which hand a drummer would actually use was a matter of personal preference.

Figure 1a

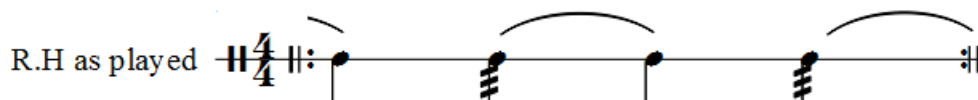


For ease of reading the rolls have been notated as crotchets, but the convention was for the first press-roll to follow through to the third quarter note of the bar: what Baby Dodds rather confusingly called a ‘three quarter’ roll. [1] Likewise, the second press-roll ended on

the first quarter note of the following bar (see figure 1b). The resulting overlap between both hands made things sound and feel a lot smoother.

The same principal applied when using brushes to play this beat, the brushes equivalent being pretty much a like-for-like adaptation of the sticks version in that one hand kept time while the other played quarter-note 'rolls' on the after-beats. Lack of rebound prevented the actual playing of press-rolls with brushes, but a drawing motion similar to that used when playing with sticks produced a crude approximation and came to be known as 'sweeping'. In this way the sweep became the brushes equivalent of the press-roll and to this day both strokes share the same notation. [2]

Figure 1b



The finer details of how this pattern was played with brushes varied from individual to individual. What follows is a description of the moves that jazz great Arthur 'Zutty' Singleton used for some of the numbers in the movie *New Orleans*. Although shot in 1947, Singleton's performances in the film give us a pretty good idea of how he played on the sides he cut with Louis Armstrong two decades earlier (when this basic brushes-comp first started to appear on recordings). Singleton was somewhat of a pioneer when it came to the brushes, having been given his first pair in 1921 by one of the founding fathers of New Orleans drumming, Louis Cottrell. Cottrell had briefly experimented with them, but appalled by the stains they left on his drum skins—possibly the humidity of New Orleans had caused the wires to rust, or the metal had been treated in some way—he promptly passed them on to Singleton. [3] Unlike some drummers of the time, Singleton actually liked brushes and the way he used them was particularly admired by the young Gene Krupa. [4]

Figure 2a

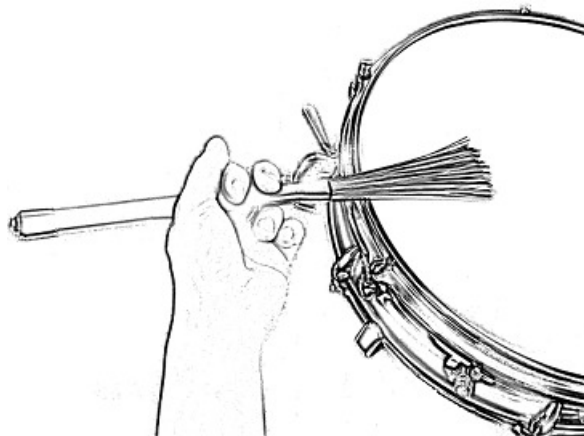
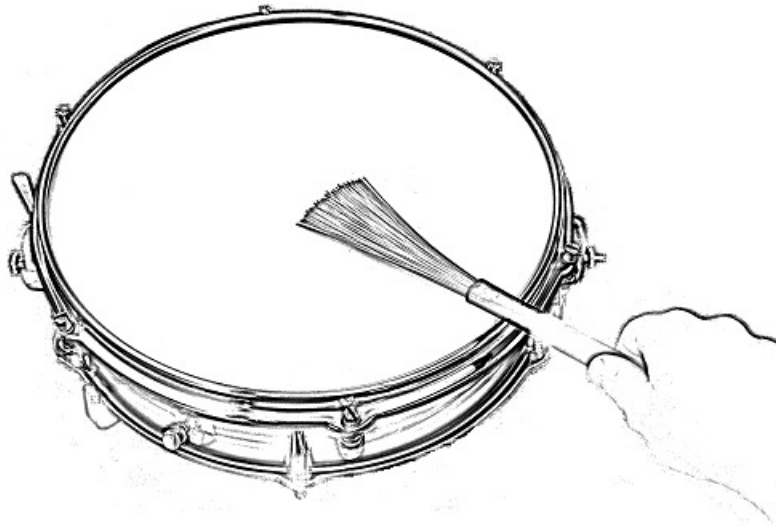


Figure 2a shows Singleton's left-hand placement. He played palm-up, holding the brush

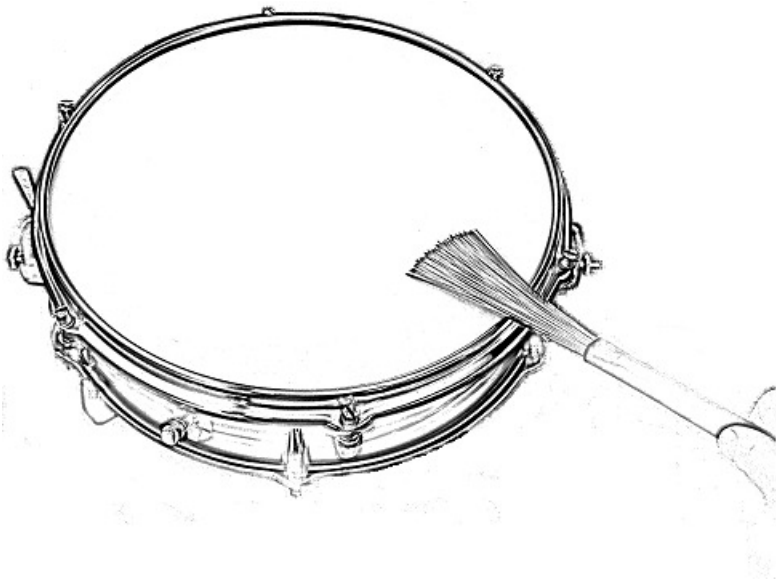
quite a way up the handle, close to the wires (closer than shown, but exact positioning will depend on the balance of your brush). The palm-up grip ensured that more of the flat of the brush came into contact with head, producing a softer and warmer tap. Singleton pointed his left-hand brush roughly towards the 2:30 position (imagining the brush as the hour-hand of a clock for one moment) and simply used it to mark time with a gentle, quarter-note pulse. As for his right hand, Singleton held his brush almost by the end of its handle, using German grip (palm facing downwards). Bring the brush down vertically on 2 & 4 (not too heavily though!) and aim to coincide the strokes with the left-hand taps on those beats:

Figure 2b



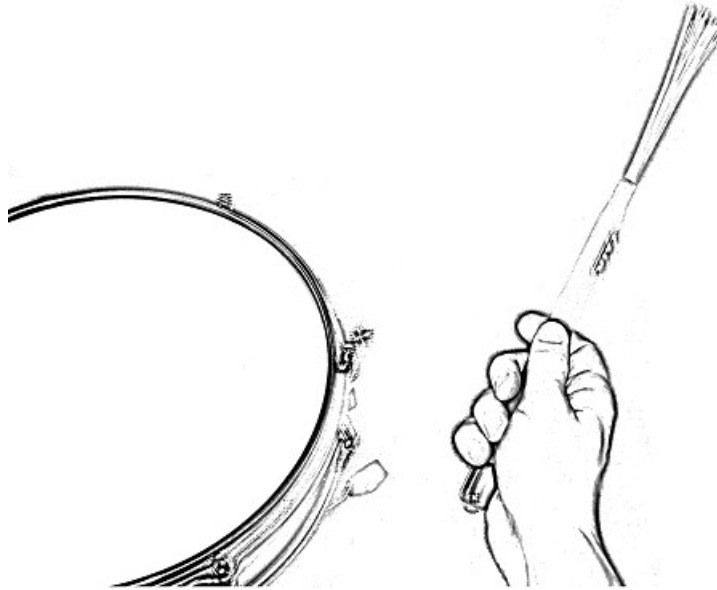
The right-hand brush remains in contact with the drumhead upon striking it and is drawn back diagonally, inline with the lay of the wires:

Figure 2c



The sweep finishes with the left-hand tap on the next downbeat. At this point the right-hand leaves the head and is rotated clockwise until its palm is parallel with the upper body. The brush then arcs back over to the starting position shown in figure 2b, the wrist of the right-hand dropping back initially but straightening as the brush descends to make the next after-beat:

Figure 2d



Although this off-head movement might seem a little theatrical, along with the diagonal direction of the sweep it allows the brush to be brought up to a decent height without feeling discomfort. It therefore facilitates a greater degree of dynamics as one can really accent the after-beat (if required to do so). A further advantage is that it helps to mark time at slow-to-medium tempos.

The right-hand part is performed as a continuous motion, looping without pause. Keep both limbs relaxed throughout and practice in the 86-92 bpm range. Purists should use brushes with a broad fan (rather than the skinny, bebop type shown) and angle their snare forward so that more of the flat of each brush comes into contact with the head. Raising the left-side of snare higher than the right will prevent the left-shoulder from dropping.

To get an idea of how this beat should sound, the 1928 Louis Armstrong track *Muggles* is required listening. The feel that Singleton achieved on *Muggles* is something to strive for. Due to the limitations of early recording equipment, capturing the sound of brushes wasn't easy (which partly explains the dearth of brush-playing on record throughout the 1920s). For the recording of *Muggles* however, producer Tommy Rockwell held Singleton's drum over the microphone while the drummer stood up to play. [5] Consequently every nuance of Singleton's performance was captured beautifully, and the recording is a breath of fresh air compared with many previous efforts to commit the sound of brushes to wax.

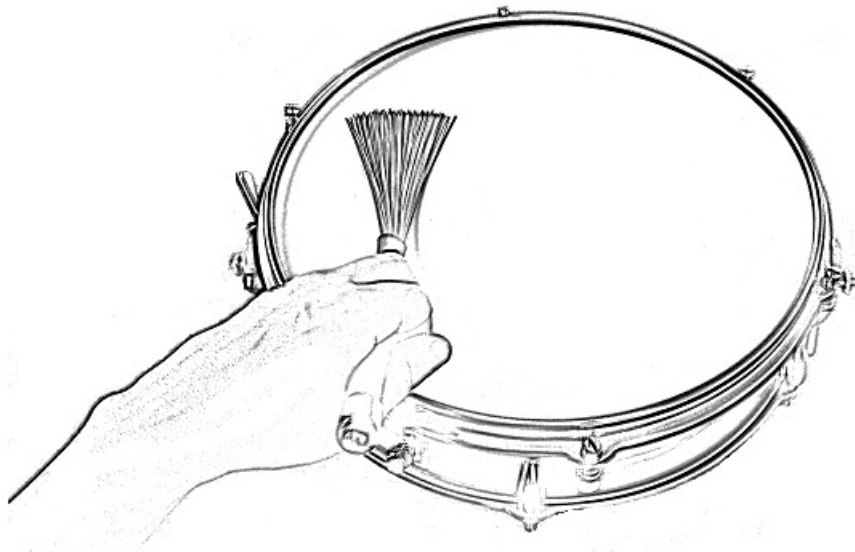
Muggles also features an early example of the basic brushes-comp played in double-time. Alas, available film footage only shows Singleton playing brushes at leisurely tempos, but the above moves work equally well in double-time. They will be smaller though, because there isn't time to raise either arm as high as before, or for the right-hand to sweep as far. For this reason Singleton's off-head hand-gestures are impractical, as well as unnecessary, so the right-hand simply remains palm-down throughout.

Left-Hand Sweeps

Which hand a drummer chose to sweep with was a matter of personal preference. However, over time it increasingly became the norm to use the right hand—which was stronger for most—to meet the demands of Swing's more intricate time-keeping rhythms. The left-hand now took care of after-beats, sweeping in a similar manner to the right-hand only using different techniques to do so, due to the quirks of traditional grip.

An early example of a left-hand sweep can be seen during film footage of *Louis Armstrong and His Harlem Hot Band*, shot in Copenhagen in 1933. [6] For the song *I Cover the Waterfront*, Armstrong's drummer Oliver Tines plays a quarter-note sweep on 2 and 4. His left-hand remains palm-down throughout, the brush held so that it points forwards. Contact with the head is made towards the left-hand side of the drum and the brush is dragged across to the right by the forearm:

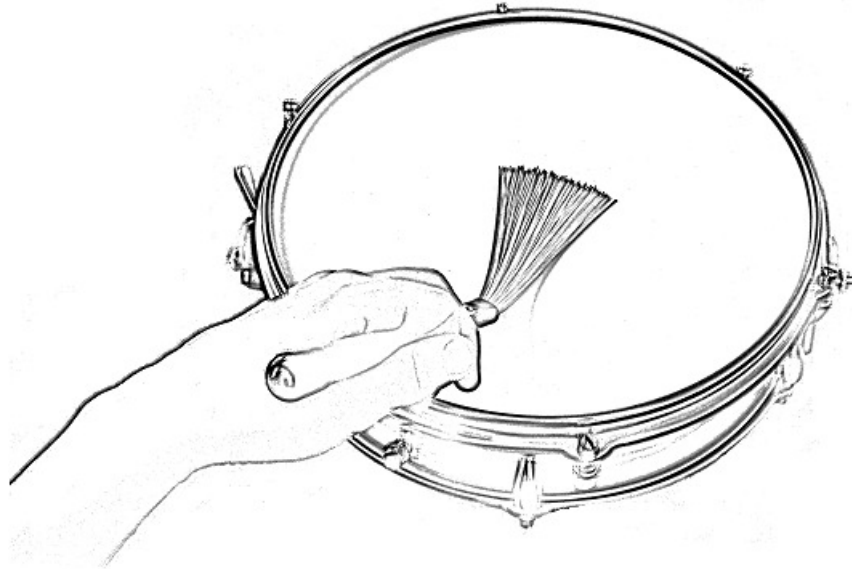
Figure 3a



As the sweep progresses the wrist pulls up slightly and the hand simultaneously lowers. This arcs the brush towards the centre of the drum (see figure 3b). Without using any undue pressure, keep the majority of the flat of the brush in contact with the head. Upon

completion of the sweep the left-hand lifts a slight distance and returns to its starting position to make the next after-beat. The whole motion is graceful and without pause.

Figure 3b



Compared with the more vertical approach of Zutty Singleton, this 'lateral' sweep from Tines produces a softer initial attack but a stronger swish effect.

As far as his snare-work is concerned, Tines' right hand is almost totally hidden from view during *I Cover the Waterfront*. It appears to be playing a quarter-note pulse for the most part, positioned off-centre so as to keep out of the way. The angle of the right-hand brush in relation to the drum suggests that French grip is being used. Try practicing this pattern at a steady 146 bpm.

The same sweep is used again by Tines for the number *Dinah*. Because of the quicker, cut-time tempo the right hand doesn't have time to make the start position shown in figure 3a. This means that with a minim pulse of approximately 138 bpm, Tines shortens the sweep, playing it almost as a straight pull into the centre of the head.

At similar brisk tempos a broader lateral sweep can be achieved by keeping the palm parallel with the upper body and sweeping from the wrist (see figures 4a and 4b), rather than a combination of wrist and arm as just described. The drummer Alfred 'Tubby' Hall can be seen doing this in a 1932 Betty Boop cartoon called *I'll Be Glad When You're Dead You Rascal You*—the animation is interspersed with footage of *Louis Armstrong and his Orchestra* and Hall is the featured drummer. Hall's left-hand skims the head on the after beats, the cut-time tempo of the tune having a minim pulse of approximately 160 bpm. On completion of each sweep the left hand barely lifts as it returns to its starting position to make the next after-beat. The motion involved is a simple flick-back of the wrist.

Figure 4a

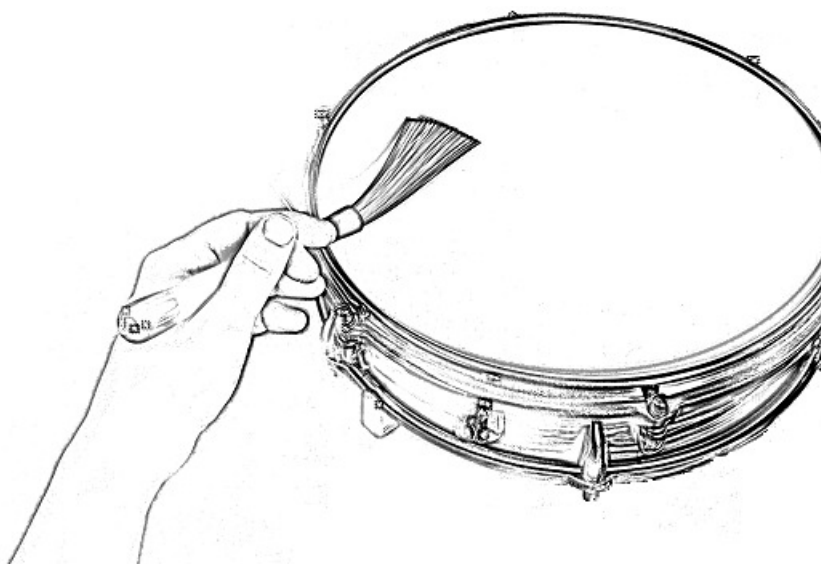
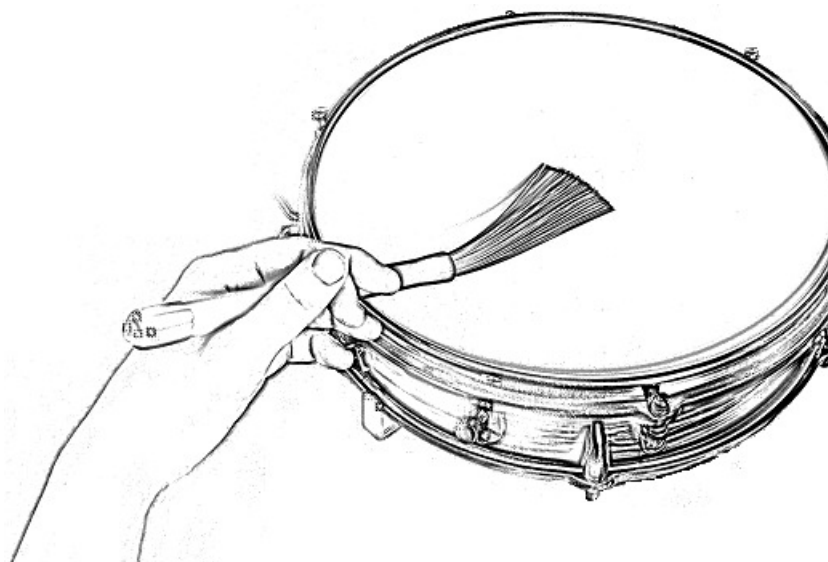
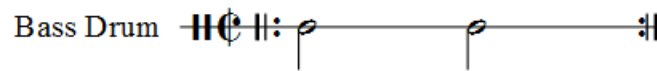


Figure 4b



To complete the cut-time feel, a minim pulse on the bass-drum, rather than a crotchet pulse, is recommended:

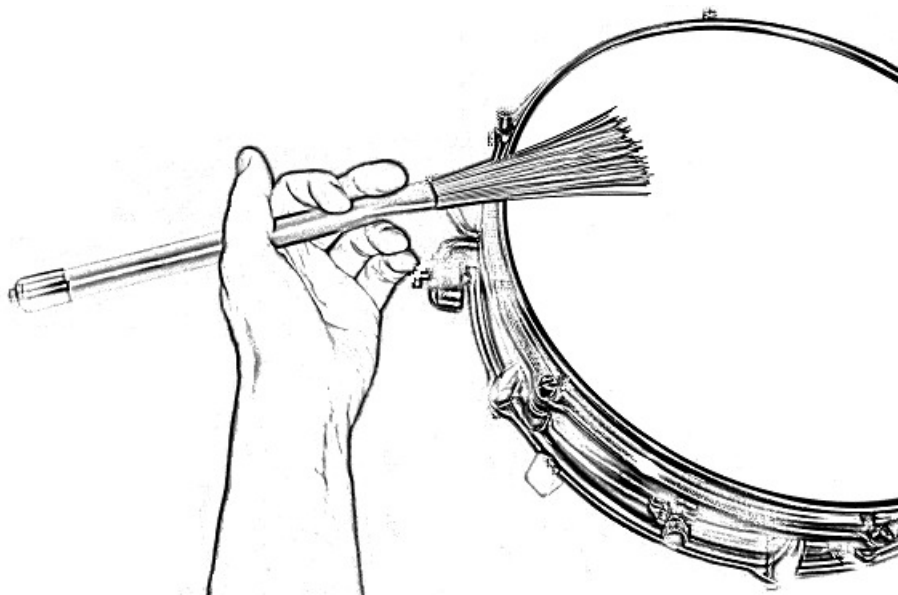
Figure 5



We now turn to two other left-hand sweeps, although neither involved accenting the after-beat. Instead, the left-hand marked time using short sweeps as an alternative to tapping.

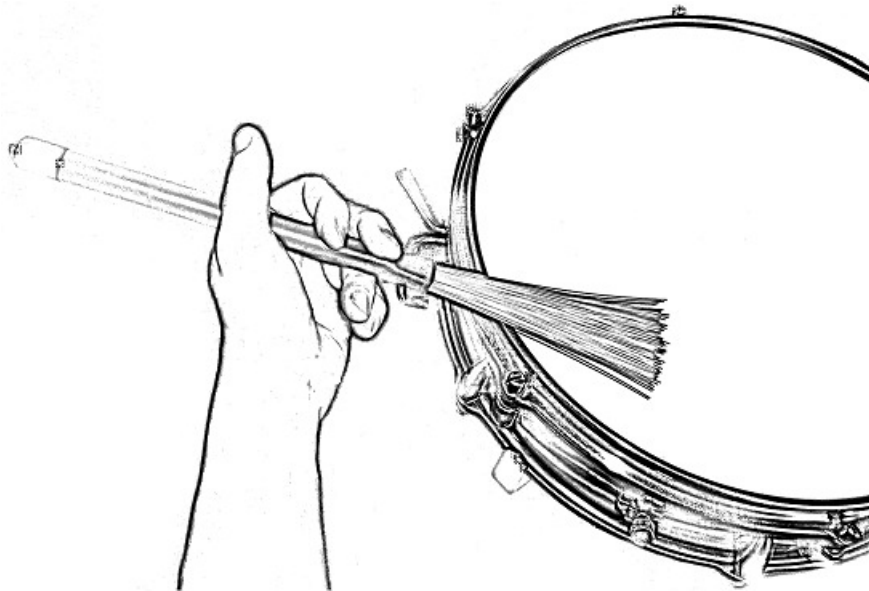
First up is Zutty Singleton, his moves taken from a performance of *Ain't Misbehavin'* in the 1943 film *Stormy Weather*. Once again, Singleton holds his brush palm-up. This ensures that the majority of the flat of the brush comes into contact with head, producing a softer sweep. All the motion comes from the fingers, which are loosely extended at the beginning of each sweep, the brush hovering above the drum-head and pointing roughly towards the 2:30 position:

Figure 6a



The fingers then quickly retract into the palm, the brush skimming the head in the process (see figure 6b). The brush leaves the head towards the end of its travel and is lazily returned to its starting position by extending the fingers again. The whole procedure begins anew and in this way a soft, quarter-note pulse is produced. Care should be taken to avoid accidentally brushing the head during the return manoeuvre. The feel is relaxed throughout—try practising at tempos in the region of 92 bpm.

Figure 6b



The notation for this variation of the basic brushes-comp is as follows:

Figure 7



The 1943 date of the film means that we can't guarantee Singleton played this left-hand pattern in his former years, but a similar time-keeping sweep was known to at least one drummer in the late 1920s: Frank 'Josh' Billings. Although Billings was predominately known for his suitcase drumming, he was a conventional drummer too and most of his moves translate well to the drums on account of him having used traditional grip to hold his whisk brooms—no mean feat! Where his left-hand sweep differed from Singleton's is in the way he caught the 'head' (a suitcase bound with crinkled wrapping paper in Billings' case) on the upsweep too, so as to double-up the time. This is easier than tapping 'on the spot' at medium-to-fast tempos.

The notation for Billings' left-hand variation is as follows:

Figure 8



Beginning on an upsweep, the left-hand moves in a pendulum motion, catching the head during the middle-part of each swing. Due to the flatness of his suitcase, Billings played palm up, extending his fingers to give better support to his broom. The same technique works equally well with a wire-brush and makes the pattern much easier to play. All movement comes from the wrist and forearm, the fingers remaining stationary throughout. Figures 9a and 9b show the off-head extremes of each sweep.

Figure 9a

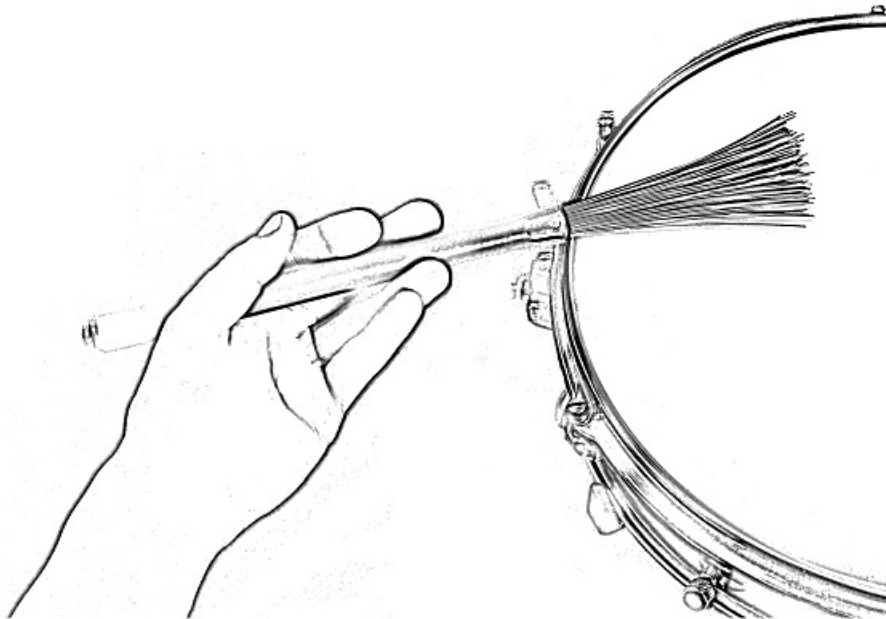
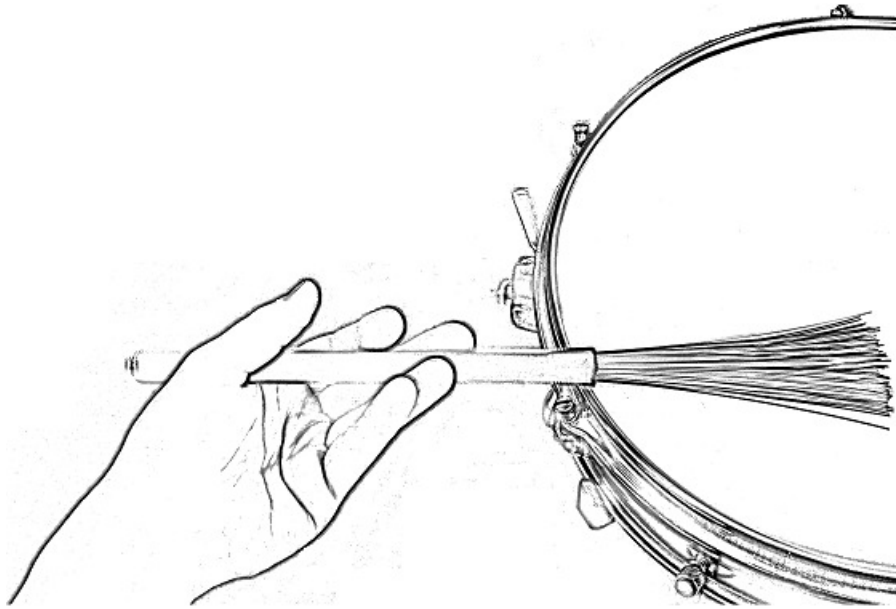


Figure 9b



Appearing with *The Mound City Blue Blowers*, Josh Billings can be seen playing the above sweep in the 1930 film *Nine O' Clock Folks*. The Blowers perform the classic tune *St Louis Blues* and because of its brisk tempo (approximately 200 bpm), Billings' left-hand 'sweep'—more of a lateral tap if anything—is quite short.

This same lateral-tapping approach can be seen in a 1931 Pathetone reel showing Noble Sissle and his band, performing *Little White Lies* at Ciro's club in London. [7] The drummer—presumably Sissle's long-time sideman Jack Carter—used a pendulum motion similar to that of Billings, only in this instance his left hand didn't mark time but accented the backbeat instead. The other main difference is that the brush points forward: it swings from right-to-left, briefly clipping the head on beat 2, and then returns in the opposite direction to clip the head on beat 4. The pendulum motion may be wider and the direction different, but the principal remains the same. Although Sissle's drummer seems to use this move more for theatrical effect than anything, it does produce a different accent than when tapping 'vertically', so its use is justified to a certain extent. As for the drummer's right-hand, it is pretty much hidden from view, but for the most part it sounds as if he's keeping time using a simple quarter-note pulse. The song is in cut-time with a minim pulse of around 110 bpm.

Interestingly, Philly Joe Jones outlined a similar pattern, which he called 'The Cup', in his 1968 publication *Brush Artistry*. The only significant difference being that in Jones' case the pendulum swing was used to laterally sweep beats 1 and 4 instead of 2 and 4. Also, it seems that he mainly used his pattern at slow tempos. Although Jones probably came up with the beat himself, perhaps it was inspired by older-generation drummers who used

ideas similar to those outlined above.

Before we move on it is worth taking note of the right-hand sweep that Billings employed during *St Louis Blues*. On the after-beats he simply draws back his right-hand in a short, straight line from north-to-south (see figures 10a and 10b). However, Billings used German grip so his whisk-broom was sweeping in a direction that ran against the lay of its bristles. This meant that his sweep was, in fact, lateral. The motion involved is somewhat reminiscent of Oliver Tines' sweep in that Billings raised his wrist while lowering his hand as he pulled his broom back. Because Billings quite literally had to work within the narrow confines of an upended suitcase, you could be forgiven for thinking that this 'pull back' sweep was unavoidable. He would also use a diagonal right-hand sweep when playing the suitcase though, similar to Zutty Singleton's sweep, so there was an alternative. It is therefore not inconceivable that this sweep was a legitimate brushes technique too, one that Billings adopted for his whisk-broom playing. Either way, it works well with a wire brush.

Figure 10a

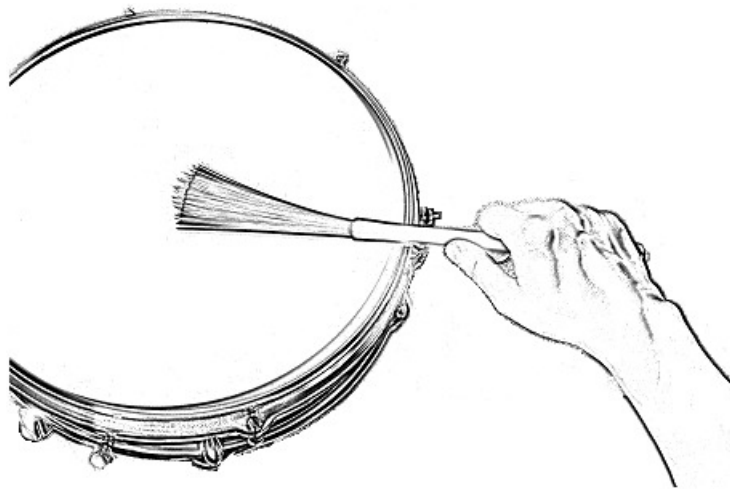
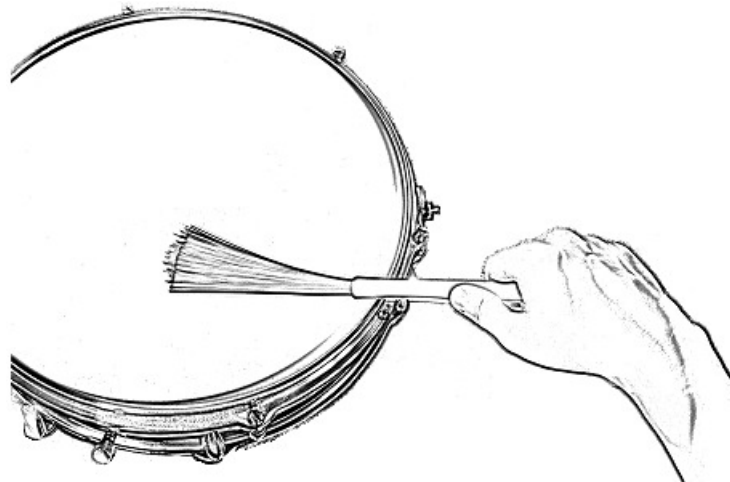


Figure 10b

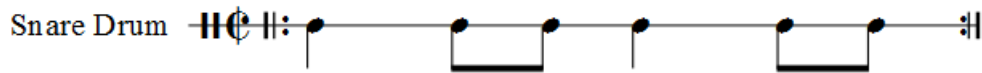


Varying the Beat

The majority of brush-work heard on recordings that date from the late 1920s is of the no-frills variety. Nevertheless, there were some drummers who liked to break up the monotony of the basic brushes-comp by playing more elaborate time-keeping rhythms, if only for a few bars. These rhythms would later form the language of Swing and many of the following beats, which made their debut during the period when jazz was still 'Hot', became stalwarts of the Swing era.

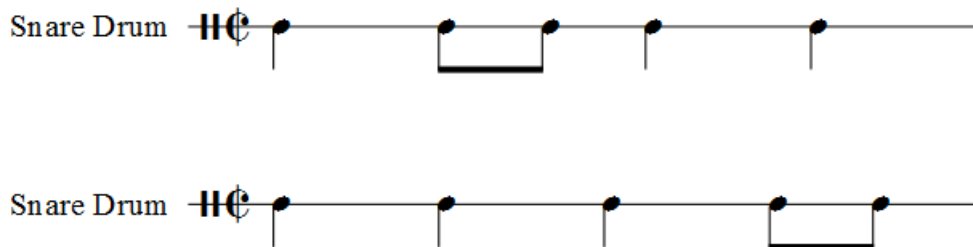
The typical, jazz ride-cymbal pattern that we all know and love started to appear on records towards the tail-end of the '20s and drummers like Tommy Benford incorporated it into their brush playing. On the 1928 Jelly Roll Morton track *Mournful Serenade*, Benford can be heard playing the 'spang-a-lang' swing pattern (see figure 11) with one hand while his other accents the after-beats with quarter-note sweeps. The eighth notes of figure 11 should not be played as written ('straight'), but with a swing feel. The same applies to all other examples (unless indicated to the contrary).

Figure 11



In some bars Benford omits one of the 's' of beats 2 and 4 (figure 12 shows both permutations). In this way he was able to develop phrasing that not only complemented the soloists, but also the arrangement as a whole.

Figure 12



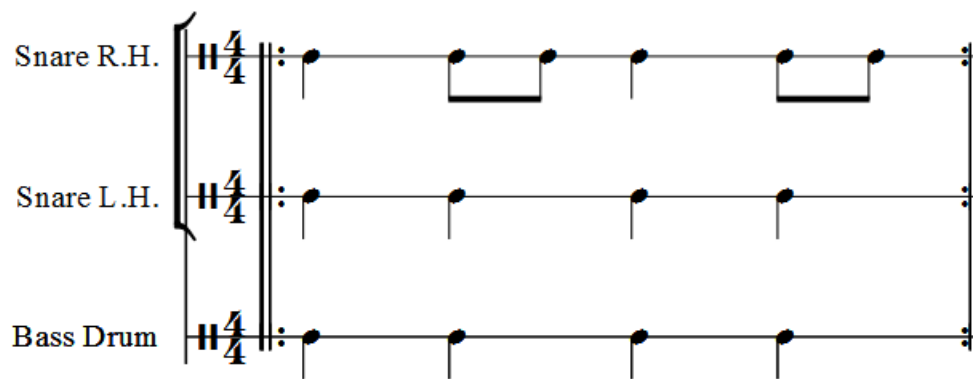
The tune has a slow, cut-time feel that was beginning to go out of fashion by the late '20s, the trend being to play 4/4 time on slower numbers. Still, try practicing the above ideas in cut-time with a minim pulse in the region of 50-52 bpm. Unfortunately Benford's playing is a little heavy-handed and not exactly inspirational in terms of feel. As far as recordings go, this was pretty much the norm for the times and was almost certainly due to the limitations of early recording-equipment—the engineer probably asked him to drum louder so that the microphone could pick up his brush-work. As technology improved, so did the sound of brushes on records and some of the sides that Benford cut with Bubber Miley in 1930 show his brush-playing in a better light. As a case study though, *Mournful*

Serenade has plenty to teach us and we will return to it later. Another example that features the patterns of figure 12 is the Louis Armstrong track *Basin St Blues*, recorded towards the end of 1928. The featured drummer, Zutty Singleton, used them in a much subtler way and you really have to listen out for the ‘catches’ (the &s of beats 2 and 4).

Josh Billings had also incorporated the spang-a-lang rhythm into his repertoire by the late 1920s. In the 1929 short film *The Opry House*, he can be seen using it during the intro of *I Ain’t Got Nobody*, performed by *The Mound City Blue Blowers*. Like Tommy Benford, he played the pattern with one hand (the left in Billings’ case) while sweeping after-beats with the other (pretty much Zutty Singleton’s right-hand sweep, minus the off-head flourishes). However, unlike Benford, he only employed it for a few bars as a contrast to the main comp, rather than adopting it as the main rhythmic theme. *I Ain’t Got Nobody* is in 4/4 and the tempo is approximately 132 bpm.

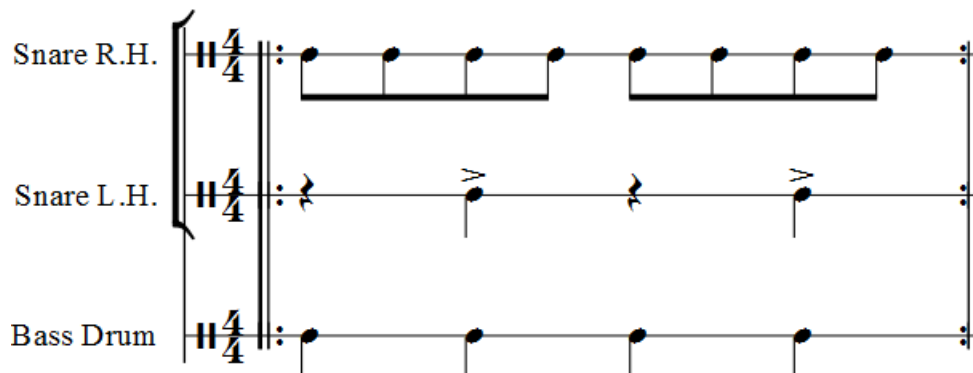
Another way in which Billings used the spang-a-lang rhythm was to transfer it to his right-hand and simply mark time with his left (see figure 13). He can be seen playing this way in the aforementioned *The Opry House*, during a section of *My Gal Sal*. This time the tempo is brisk, approximately 216 bpm.

Figure 13



Returning to Billings’ performance of *I Ain’t Got Nobody*, another beat that he utilised to good effect was the following shuffle:

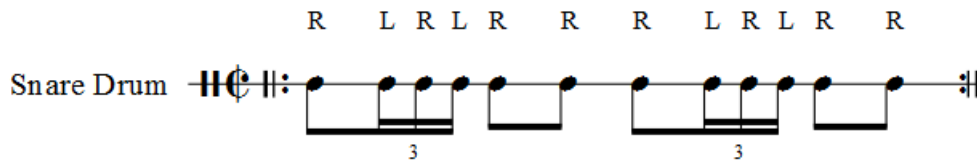
Figure 14



Played behind Red McKenzie's kazoo solo, the busier right-hand pattern added some necessary momentum. This shuffle is also featured during one of the choruses, used for a bit of variety. Although hand placement isn't critical as no sweeps are involved, Billings used a fun little move in his left-hand that is worth outlining. Hold the brush palm-up, pointing roughly towards the 2:30 position. On beats 1 and 3 move your left elbow *slightly* outwards while simultaneously raising the forearm. As the brush lifts off the head the palm will rotate clockwise, dipping the brush downwards. On beats 2 and 4, simply return the elbow to your side while lowering the arm. This brings the flat of the brush down onto the head on the after-beats. Although this elbow movement soon becomes tiresome, played for a chorus or a few bars it adds a little fun to the proceedings and gets you into the groove because of the gentle swinging motion created in the upper body.

Somewhat reminiscent of a shuffle, another variation of the spang-a-lang rhythm crops up during part of Louis Armstrong's 1929 recording *Knockin' a Jug*, where drummer Joseph 'Kaiser' Marshall can be heard playing little triplet figures before each after-beat (see figure 15). The tune is a 12-bar blues and it has a cut-time feel with a minim tempo of approximately 66 bpm.

Figure 15

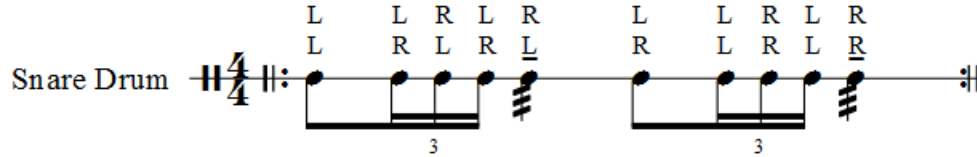


We can only guess how Marshall played this rhythm, but the sticking as indicated is taken from the late, great Eddie Locke's performance on *The Art of Playing with Brushes* DVD. [8] During his 120 bpm Swing demonstration, Locke can be seen breaking into this pattern as an interlude and Kaiser Marshall did exactly the same thing nearly 80 years earlier, on *Knockin' a Jug*, only he played the beat for good deal longer: for an entire verse (interspersed with fills) behind Joe Sullivan's piano solo.

Marshall must have been situated too close to the microphone in the studio as the drums are very prominent on the recording, begging the question why the tune was ever approved for release. It is possible that time constraints prevented the musicians from attempting another take and something had to be salvaged of the session to cover expenses. The band had consumed a gallon jug of whisky (hence the title of the tune), [9] which can't have helped matters—they might not have been in any fit state to record another take! At any rate, the fact that the drums are easily heard is to our advantage and as with *Mournful Serenade*, *Knockin' a Jug* serves as a good case-study (more on this tune shortly).

In 1929, Zutty Singleton cut *(What Did I Do To Be So) Black And Blue?* with Louis Armstrong and later that year *Turtle Twist*, as part of *The Jelly Roll Morton Trio*. On both sides, Singleton played his own take on the pattern shown in figure 15. He chose to forego the catches on the &s of beats 2 and 4, instead leaving in the sweeps on the after beats, as shown in figure 16.

Figure 16



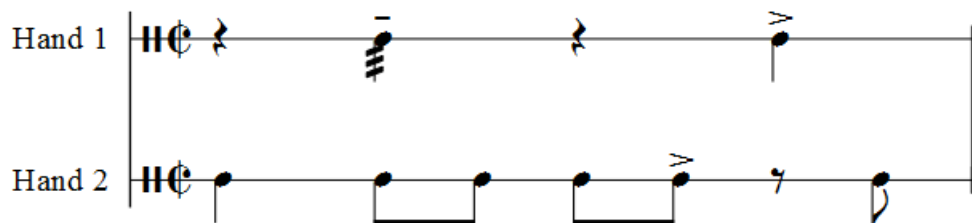
Unlike the Armstrong side, Singleton only used this pattern towards the end of *Turtle Twist*, to add some momentum and to help build a suitable climax. Given that Singleton swept with his right-hand the uppermost sticking is the most obvious choice, but it is also possible that he alternated between each hand to play the sweeps (more on this approach later), hence the alternative sticking. Try practicing the beat in the 100 to 104 bpm range.

This wasn't the first time that Singleton had used this little triplet figure. It can be heard throughout Louis Armstrong's 1928 recording *Basin Street Blues*, where Singleton used it more as a fill starting on the & of beat 4 and leading into beat 1 of the following bar.

Fills

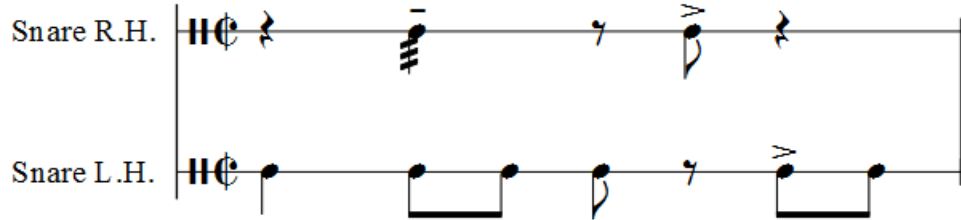
When brushes were used on recordings in the late 1920s, very few drummers played fills. Perhaps they were hampered by the lack of rebound from the brush. Whatever the reason, the trend was to keep time and do little else. One drummer who stands out for his use of fills during this period is Tommy Benford. Often overlooked by jazz historians, Benford was an influential drummer on the New York scene, especially seeing as he gave lessons to the young Chick Webb. [10] A number of Jelly Roll Morton sides from the late '20s feature his brush-work and on *Mournful Serenade*, one hears an early instance of what would become the most commonly used brushes fill of the Swing era (see figure 17).

Figure 17



Which hand played what is unknown in Benford's case, hence the ambiguous labelling of each part, but the accent on the & of beat 3 was often played by the hand that kept time. Having said that, I've seen more than one example of a Swing-era drummer sweeping with their right-hand but switched roles for the fill, so that a left-hand accent ends up on beat 4 (see figure 18).

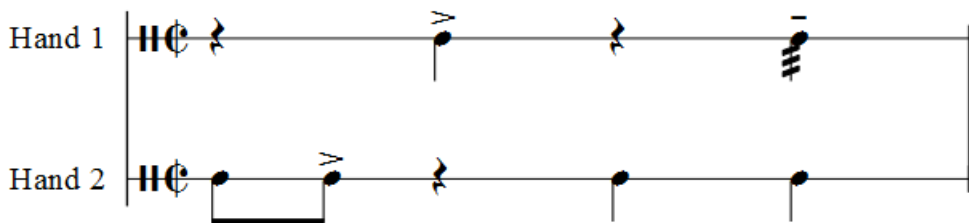
Figure 18



When using traditional grip the left-hand can produce a particularly strong accent, so presumably the above sticking was desirable because the extra emphasis on beat 4 gave a sense of finality to the fill. Another advantage is that the spang-a-lang rhythm is preserved in the left-hand so there's no break in continuity.

There was further mileage to be had from this fill, as can be heard on another Jelly Roll track that Tommy Benford appeared on called *Shoe Shiner's Drag*. As well as playing it totally straight, Benford also displaced the fill by a minim, resulting in the following variation:

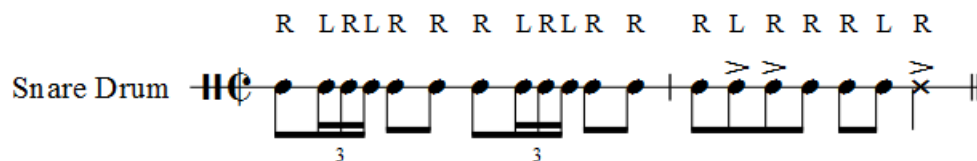
Figure 19



Not only did Benford use this fill to delineate sections within the tune, but he also dropped it into the middle of a four-bar phrase during a piano interlude, acting more as a variation of the basic comp rather than a fill. It's possible that Benford was imitating Warren 'Baby' Dodds, who had pulled the same stunt over a year earlier on yet another Jelly Roll Morton side, *Mr Jelly Lord*. Both drummers seem to get away with it because shifting the fill to the 'front' of the bar gives it less of a sense of finality. Also, they played the fill lightly. Bear in mind the alternative sticking of figure 18 that may have been implemented.

During *Knockin' a Jug*, Kaiser Marshall played something similar to this displaced fill in the last bar coming out of Joe Sullivan's piano solo:

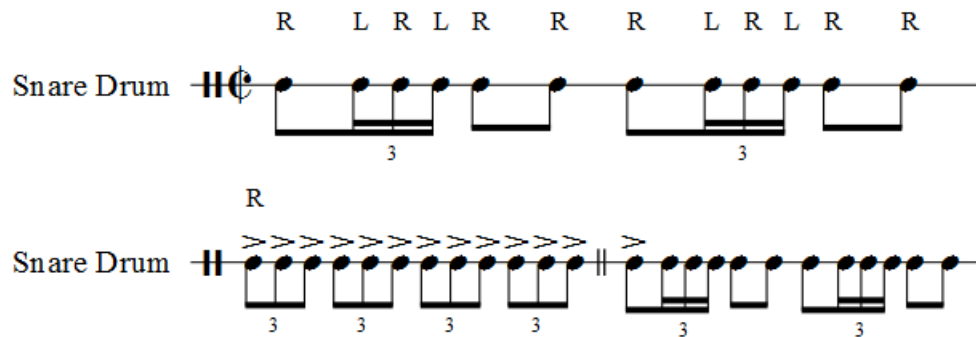
Figure 20



The final quarter-note has some ring to it so Marshall was either utilising the rim in some way, or he'd damped the head throughout by dead-sticking his left brush (assuming the above sticking was used), but allowed his drum to ring openly on the last note.

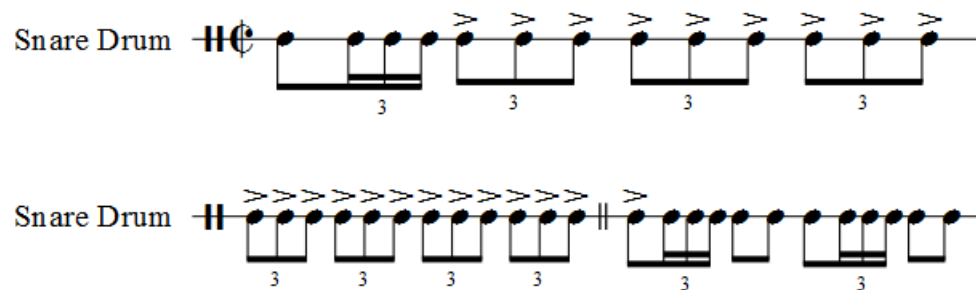
Earlier in the same section, Marshall fills a whole bar with eighth-note triplets as a way of breaking up the relentless repetition of his beat:

Figure 21



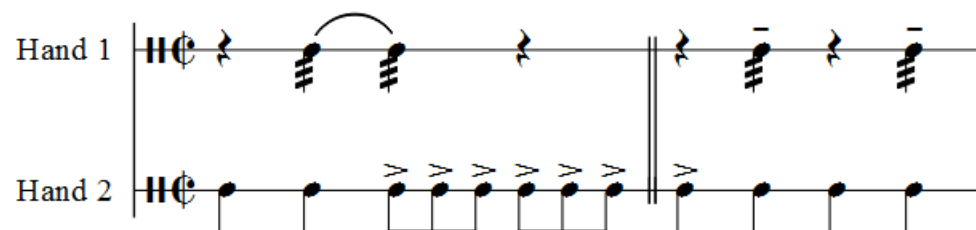
And moments later, yet more triplets:

Figure 22



Marshall's penchant for triplets can also be heard towards the beginning of the record, during Eddie Lang's guitar solo. The basic brushes-comp is used and Marshall simply fills the last two beats of the bar with eighth-note triplets. It would appear that he played them with one hand because the second time that he used the fill, he extended the sweep so that there was overlap between the hands:

Figure 23



Of course the second grouping of triplets may have been played by ‘Hand 1’, in which case it is also possible that the longer triplet chains of figures 21 and 22 were divided up between both hands in a similar manner. Or perhaps both hands played triplets. As for how Marshall extended his sweep, we can only guess. The left-hand sweeps of Tines and Hall, featured earlier, can both be looped-back so that the brush returns to its starting position—circular motion like this wasn’t unheard of in those days, as we shall soon see.

To round off this section we will analyse some of the fills used by Josh Billings. Because Billings isn’t as well known as some of the other drummers mentioned in this article, his inclusion may seem a little odd—especially as he was mainly known for playing a suitcase with a pair of whisk brooms! The fact that he was no great innovator when it came to drums is a plus though. The films that he made with the Blue Blowers are snap-shots in time, recording for posterity many patterns and ideas that were in common use then. From his performances we can therefore gain valuable information about sticking and hand placement, which isn’t always possible to decipher from recordings alone.

It would be doing Billings a disservice to say that he had no voice at all, however. There was clearly a style of his own interwoven with the clichés of his day and almost without exception his fills were always very musical. I therefore make no apologies for the examples that follow, all of which stand on their own merits.

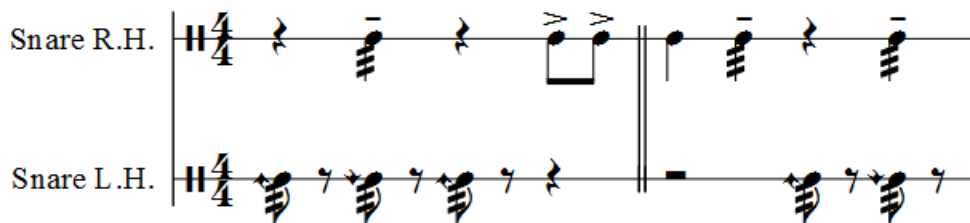
Firstly we’ll look at a selection of fills from *St Louis Blues*, as featured in the film *Nine O’ Clock Folks*. Play a quarter-note pulse on the bass drum for all of the following examples. Figure 24 shows Billings using the simple idea of anticipating the second after-beat by an eighth note.

Figure 24



This next fill partially uses the spang-a-lang rhythm in the right-hand by accenting the second after-beat and its corresponding catch on the & of beat 4:

Figure 25



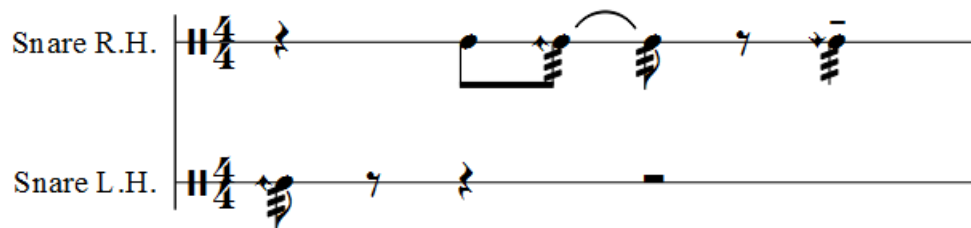
And here we have an example of the after-beat being delayed by an eighth note:

Figure 26



Note that an upsweep is used to play this displaced sweep—using German grip there should be no problem sweeping from south-to-north before reversing the direction for the following after-beat. Billings later recycles this idea to delay the first after-beat of the bar:

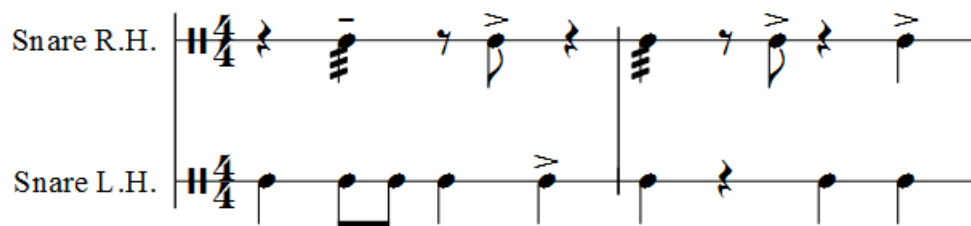
Figure 27



Our next selection of fills are taken from the film *The Opry House*, beginning with some of those featured in the song *I Ain't Got Nobody*. As before, for each example keep a quarter-note pulse going on the bass-drum.

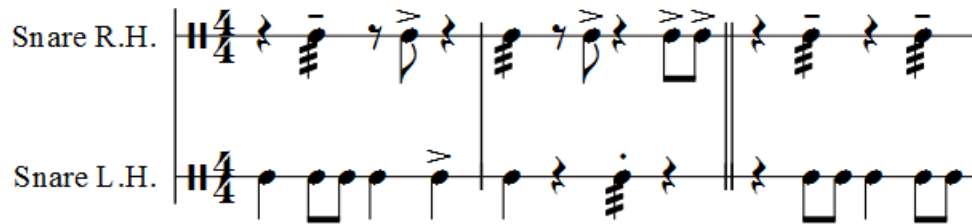
The slower tempo of *I Ain't Got Nobody* allows for the development of more interesting ideas and in figure 28 we see a right-hand sweep incorporated into the fill. The positioning of the right-hand, and the grip used, should follow that shown earlier in figures 2b and 2c.

Figure 28



Billings later expands on the above idea and even incorporates a short sweep from his left hand:

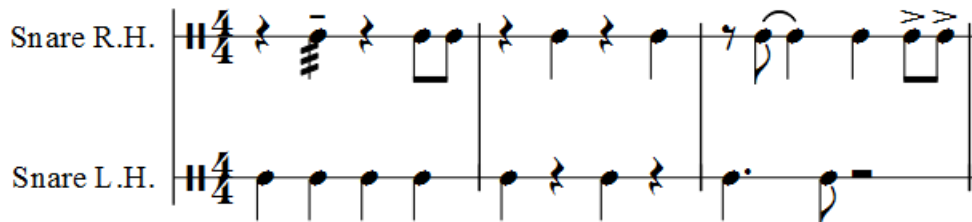
Figure 29



To play this left-hand sweep simply hold the brush pointing to the 2:30 position and draw back inline with the lay of the wires. The last bar of figure 29 shows how Billings would typically recover from fills, the rests on beat 1 being covered by the 'bass drum' part (a four-to-the-bar kick to the suitcase with his heel).

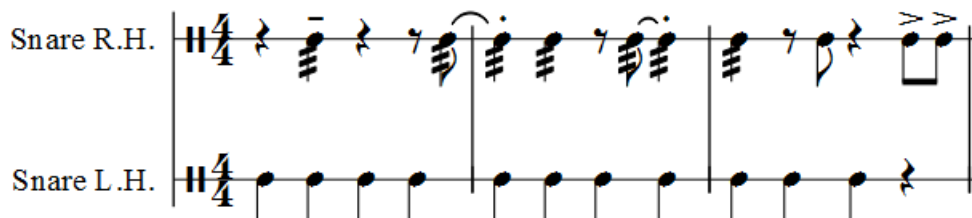
Figure 30 shows Billings merely drumming with his whisks as if they were sticks, the strokes in bar 2 being to the sides of his suitcase. This was seemingly done for show, but by keeping everything within the confines of the drum head the fill works equally well with a snare drum and brushes.

Figure 30



This next fill foreshadows an idea typical of the Swing era, where rhythms were created by dividing the bar (or bars) into eighths and then accenting the first of every three notes:

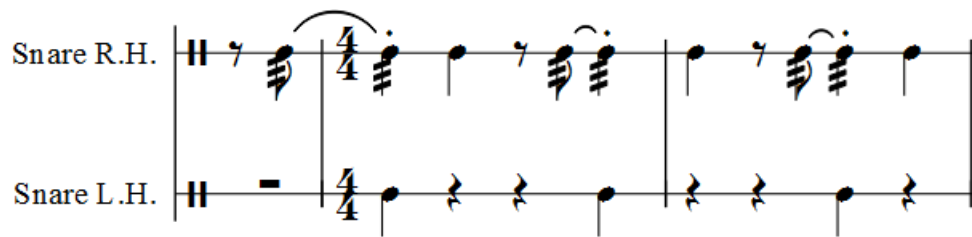
Figure 31



Drummer Vic Berton can be heard incorporating similar figures into his playing on the 1928 Red Nichols side *There'll Come a Time*. Unfortunately Berton's brushes are barely audible on the recording and it is unclear whether he was sweeping in a manner similar to Billings, or merely tapping-out the rhythms he played.

Returning to Josh Billings' performance of *I Ain't Got Nobody*, he also played the following fill, which is a variation of the idea demonstrated in figure 31:

Figure 32



On beat 4 of the bar proceeding the main body of the fill—shown above as an anacrusis—both hands rest. However, the space is filled by the four-to-the-bar thump of the bass-drum part. This fill is basically the one used by Gene Krupa during the piano solo on the 1928 recording *Indiana* by *The Eddie Condon Quartet*. It is possible that Krupa himself taught Billings how to play the fill, as their paths crossed about the time when *Indiana* was being recorded. [11] The main difference with Krupa's version is that he played the last quarter note of the fill as a cymbal crash. It is unclear from the recording whether he also incorporated the right-hand sweeps (a nice addition by Billings if this wasn't the case).

The next two examples show different sticking for almost identical fills:

Figure 33

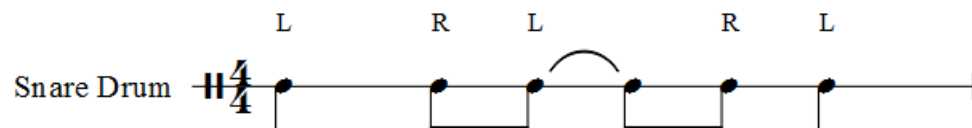
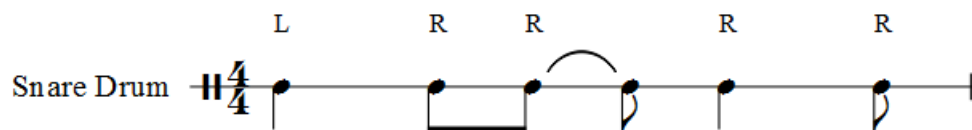


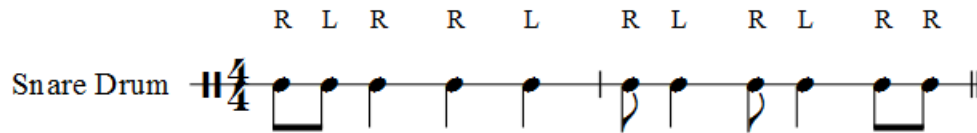
Figure 34



The following fill shares the same syncopated motif as was used in figure 33, only shifted to a different part of the bar. Both hands rest for a quarter note before playing the fill, the

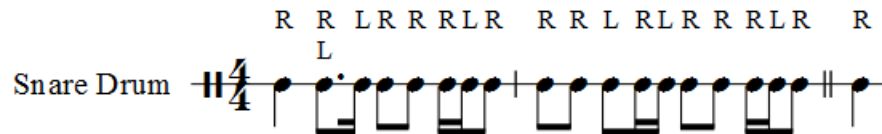
gap, once more, being filled by the bass-drum part.

Figure 35



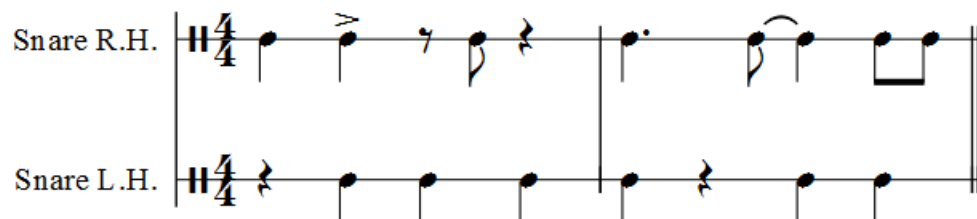
Unlike the previous examples, the eighth notes in this next fill are played totally straight. There is swing though, only it all happens in the sixteenths, creating a double-time feel. Billings used this fill to come out of the shuffle pattern outlined in figure 14, which explains why it begins with a right-hand stroke:

Figure 36



This next fill is featured in the song *My Gal Sal*, during the section where Billings plays the beat shown in figure 13. Due to the faster tempo no sweeps are attempted, but note the similarity of this fill to the one presented in figure 29.

Figure 37



The last two notes are played without accent, acting more as a pickup into the next bar.

Latin Jazz

Early Jazz sometimes had, as Jelly Roll Morton put it, a 'Spanish tinge' to it. The influence of Latin music goes back much further than the Jazz age though. Rhythms like the Habanera (see figure 38) had been introduced into New Orleans by the 1830s via the port's connections with Cuba; and by the end of the ragtime era, the Habanera and also the 'Tangana' (the predecessor of the modern tango) were an integral part of the city's musical vernacular. [12]

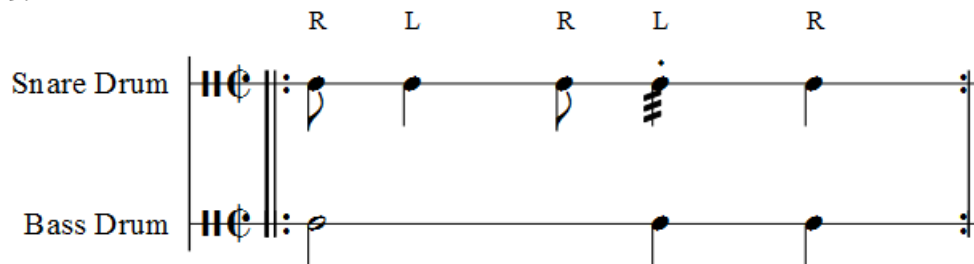
Figure 38



The Habanera was favoured by a number of notable ragtime composers. W.C. Handy, for example, who famously used the rhythm for the sixteen-bar introduction and refrain of *St. Louis Blues*. The Habanera and Tangana would survive the onslaught of 'Dixieland' music, but by the early 1930s both rhythms were considered slightly passé—in jazz circles, at any rate—and when covering Handy's classic, a number of notable musicians of the period either shortened or largely omitted the Habanera sections of *St. Louis Blues*. Either that or a generic swing rhythm was used instead. This fall from grace, coupled with the problems that early recording engineers faced when trying to record the full drum kit, leaves us with few examples of how the Habanera was played by drummers. We should therefore be grateful that an instrumental version of Handy's song by the *Mound City Blue Blowers* was captured for posterity. In the film *Nine O'Clock Folks*, their arrangement of *St. Louis Blues* leaves the Habanera sections intact and Josh Billings' performance gives us a valuable insight into how the first Latin Jazz was played (see figure 39).

Unlike the modern convention of playing everything 'straight', many early jazz musicians would swing the eighth notes of Latin rhythms. A good example of the laidback feel this created can be heard on the 1926 Jelly Roll Morton side *Original Jelly Roll Blues*, where drummer Andrew Hilaire played the Habanera rhythm shown in figure 38 using castanets. The Habanera as played by the Mound City Blue Blowers on *St. Louis Blues* however, has a subtler swing feel, because of their up-tempo interpretation of the song. Nevertheless, the swing is there and should be incorporated when playing the Habanera rhythm.


Figure 39





As with previous examples, Billings' left-hand sweep is performed by drawing the brush off the surface of the head, inline with the lay of the wires (use a 2:30 position in the left hand). Just for fun, try giving the above beat the same loping, swing feel as Morton's *Original Jelly Roll Blues*. Start by slowing the pace down to a minim pulse of approximately 76 bpm.

For the sake of completeness, figure 40 shows the main fill that Billings used during the Habanera sections of *St. Louis Blues*.

Figure 40

Snare R.H. 

Snare L.H. 

Bass Drum 

Unfortunately this brief overview of early Latin Jazz concludes here. For the most part, the Habanera seems to have fallen into disuse during the swing era—although it remained an important part of New Orleans music and would later resurface in the R&B of the 1950s. It is interesting to note its early roots though and there is no reason why this rhythm couldn't be put to good use by contemporary drummers.

Continuous Swish

There were two ways of generating continuous swish in the early days of brush playing, the first being to overlap quarter-note sweeps, alternating with each hand. Possibly the earliest recording to feature this approach is *Knockin' a Jug*, where Kaiser Marshall used it extensively behind Louis Armstrong's opening solo:


Figure 41


Hand 1

Hand 2

We can gain visual clues as to how this pattern was executed from Josh Billings. During the footage of the Blowers performing *I Ain't Got Nobody*, Billings played the following fill:

Figure 42

Snare R.H. 

Snare L.H. 

The right-hand tap on beat one is on account of the fill being used at the end of a section featuring the shuffle outlined in figure 13, and for the after-beats Billings used a right-hand sweep (described earlier) that was almost identical to Zutty Singleton's. As for his left-hand, once again Billings simply draws his whisk off the top of his suitcase, sweeping inline with the lay of the bristles and using a 2:30 position by the look of things. Despite having used whisk brooms, his moves translate well to the brushes.

The second way in which continuous swish was generated was by circling. This was done in a manner similar to the modern way of circling, only the right hand appears to have been used instead of the left (for reasons that will become apparent later). It was a technique unique to the brushes and not merely an adaptation of something normally done with sticks (which has been the case with the majority of examples considered so far). An early pioneer of circling was dance-band leader Ben Pollack. Although Pollack retired early from drumming so that he could concentrate on conducting from out front, friends would occasionally coax him back behind a drum kit. On one such occasion in the early 1940s, Mel Tormé recalled of Pollack that:

"He laid down a rocking beat that lifted up the whole room. Pollack had a specialty: he would play with brushes, with the left hand caressing the snare drum and the right-hand brush pressed against the bass-drum head while moving in a circular motion. Nothing fancy, mind you. Merely keeping perfect time, which, after all, is the basic function of the drummer." [13]

The practice of playing the bass drum with a 'beater' of some description was a leftover from the days of 'double drumming'. Before foot pedals came along, some theatre drummers would play the bass drum with a mallet or stick while simultaneously playing the 'side-drum' (snare) with their other hand. This meant that one drummer could do the job of, what would normally be done by, two. The bass drum would be positioned to the drummer's right and the side-drum to their left, as is the norm nowadays. [14] Even when drummers started to use foot-pedals, the practice of double drumming continued—it still had its uses—and in the case of Ben Pollack, he simply chose a 'fly-swatter' to play his bass drum, instead of the more conventional mallet or stick. He also took the unusual step of circling with it (although whether he was the first to do so is debatable). Pollack wasn't averse to striking his bass drum with his swatter either. Benny Goodman, reflecting on his time spent playing with Pollack in the late 1920s, recalled that on up-tempo numbers:

"Pollack had a fly swatter and he'd lean over and be banging on the bass drum with it, yelling, 'Take another one, take another one,' and we'd keep on like that, generating a lot of steam. I must have enjoyed it, because we did it a lot. Nobody else at the time was doing it." [15]

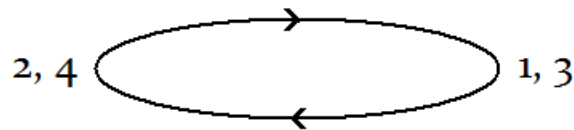
Furthermore, Ray McKinley remembered that:

"Ben used the set as an orchestra of instruments. Everything he did fed the pulse of the band. He was the first drummer I ever heard play the dotted eighth and sixteenth rhythm, with a stick and a brush, splitting the rhythm up between the snare and bass drum. He was a pioneer who did several things first." [16]

Although there appears to be no early footage of Pollack playing drums, a 1929 Vitaphone short featuring *Red Nichols and his Five Pennies* seems to have captured on film the beat that Mel Tormé recalled Pollack playing—or at least something very similar. The drummer, Bob White, can be seen sweeping the upper part of his bass-drum head, while his left hand makes straight east-to-west sweeps of the snare on the after-beats. White's left-hand motion is similar to Tubby Hall's sweep, only in reverse: contact is made in the middle of the head on beats 2 & 4 and then the brush is swept across to the left-hand side of the drum. The similarities end there though. White played palm-up, his wrist remaining fairly straight throughout the sweep with most of the motion coming from his forearm.

Unfortunately White's right hand is almost totally obscured by his bass drum. He appears to be playing a elliptical pattern as illustrated below:

Figure 43



Although shown as a clockwise movement in figure 43, the actual direction of White's sweep is difficult to determine due to the squashed nature of the ellipse. It is also possible that he was sweeping anti-clockwise, or even using a 'windscreen wiper' manoeuvre. As White's brush sweeps into beats 1 & 3, his right shoulder pushes forward. It drops back again en route to beats 2 & 4. The end result of all this shoulder movement is that a swaying motion develops in the upper body, somewhat akin to a Hula dance only done with the shoulders instead of the hips. Needless to say, this rather theatrical display is optional, although it does help to keep time. Try not to get too obsessed about copying the *exact* motion of White's right-hand. A simple circle (which, after all, is what Ben Pollack supposedly used), sweeping in either direction and of minim duration works equally well. As for White's right foot, it knocks out a steady four-to-the-bar pulse, so his bass drum performed a double role when playing this pattern. Try practicing this beat at tempos in the region of 136 bpm.

In later years, when the swing era was in full bloom, drummers like Gene Krupa would use their right-hand to circle on the floor tom (once it had been invented!) [17] Double drumming with a fly-swatter on the bass drum is most likely how it all started, though. How circling began in the first place isn't so obvious. Some have suggested that the initial idea came from watching dancers tracing circles on the floor with their feet and there is something to be said for this theory. Drummers routinely rubbed shoulders with 'hoofers' when working in cabaret, vaudeville and the big shows that toured in the '20s. Some of those tours made it over to Europe and the pianist Elliot Carpenter, who left the US in the 1920s to work in Paris, made the following observation about that period:

'As far as the dancing was concerned, it was a matter of perfect timing between drummers and the dancers. I don't know who was inspiring whom, but there's many a time I've noticed that the dancers would borrow some of those rhythmical beats the drummers were doing

and vice versa. When the boys would put in some of those little things they were doing, the drums would pick it up and right away too. So it was a question of improvising between the two of them.' [18]

In 1927, *Dance Magazine* published an article that demonstrated some contemporary jazz steps of the day. [19] One of the examples given was a slow, circular motion of the foot, so it is possible that drummers borrowed this technique from dancers. Incidentally, Cab Calloway can be seen demonstrating a circling step in a Paramount promotional film from the early '30s and his moves—seen for a fleeting moment—are reminiscent of the way drummers circle with a brush. [19]

Although it is impossible to say for sure whether there was cross pollination of the circling technique from dancers to drummers, musicians like Ben Pollack, and even the lesser known Bob White, were clearly key figures in popularising it among the drumming community. And for that reason, they deserve our utmost respect.

Taking Things Further

Many of the recordings mentioned so far can be accessed for free via internet radio sites such as we7.com. Alternatively you should be able to find everything at redhotjazz.com or possibly even youtube. Because modern recordings have been made from original discs, filtering is routinely used to eliminate background noise such as crackle from surface scratches. That same filtering can eliminate some of the intricacies of the drummer's performance (this is particularly the case for *Shoe Shiner's Drag*, I have found), so do search around for different recordings and find one that show the drums in their best light. I've also included a 'recommended listening' section below that lists some landmark recordings, as far as the history of the brushes is concerned. Again, you should be able to find most of it at the sites mentioned above.

As for the film clips, many are to be found on the internet but some are of questionable quality, often with images that are out-of-synch with the sound. A general video search using google should help you to track down the best quality clips. Failing that, sometimes you just have to bite the bullet and purchase whatever DVD includes the original footage.

If you've made it this far, you should now have a greater understanding of how brush playing developed, and hopefully a greater respect for some of the pioneers of the craft. From a simple adaptation of a popular parade beat, a style of brush-playing developed in the 1920s that laid the foundations for subsequent generations, and many of the techniques and concepts that we take for granted nowadays were forged during that period. Perhaps Tommy Benford, Kaiser Marshall, and Ben Pollack aren't as well known as some of the greats of jazz drumming, such as Zutty Singleton and Tubby Hall, but they were influential in their day and their names deserve to be remembered. And speaking of Zutty, for those who fail to see the relevance of his seemingly outmoded style of playing, try his basic comp with some simple, pop bass-drum patterns. It's surprising just how funky things can get, especially when his left-hand, time-keeping sweep is employed. So, perhaps there's still some life left in these old patterns. Let's hope so.

Recommended Listening

Mr. Jelly Lord

(Jelly Roll Morton)

Jelly Roll Morton Trio

June 10, 1927, Chicago, Illinois

Victor 21064-B

Drummer: *Baby Dodds*

As featured on: *Jazz & Blues Piano Classics*

There'll Come a Time

(Wingy Manone, Miff Mole)

Red Nichols and his Five Pennies

Mar 29, 1928, New York City

Brunswick 3995

Drummer: *Vic Berton*

As featured on: *Red Nichols & His Five Pennies 1926-1930*

Shoe Shiner's Drag

(Jelly Roll Morton)

Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers

June 11, 1928, New York City

Victor 21658-B

Drummer: *Tommy Benford*

As featured on: *Jelly Roll Morton, The Essential Collection* (West End Records)

Mournful Serenade

(Joseph Oliver)

Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers

Jun 11, 1928, New York City

Victor V-38024-B

Drummer: *Tommy Benford*

As featured on: *The Original Mr. Jelly Lord 1923-1941*

Kansas City Stomp

(Jelly Roll Morton)

Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers

June 11, 1928, New York City

Victor V-38010-A

Drummer: *Tommy Benford*

As featured on: *The Original Mr. Jelly Lord 1923-1941*

Shreveport Stomp

(Jelly Roll Morton)

Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers

June 11, 1928, New York City

Victor 21658-A

45623-1

Drummer: *Tommy Benford*

As featured on: *The Original Mr. Jelly Lord 1923-1941*

Indiana

(Hanley)

Eddie Condon's Quartet

July 28, 1928, New York

Parlophone R-2932

Drummer: *Gene Krupa*

As featured on: *Jazz In Chicago, Vol. 1*

Basin St Blues

(Spencer Williams)

Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five

December 4, 1928 in Chicago

Okeh 8690

Drummer: *Zutty Singleton*

As featured on: *Louis Armstrong Hot Fives & Sevens Volume 3* (JSP)

Muggles

(Armstrong)

Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra

December 7, 1928, Chicago, Illinois

Okeh 8703

Drummer: *Zutty Singleton*

As featured on: *Louis Armstrong Hot Fives & Sevens Volume 3* (JSP)

Tight Like This

(Curl)

Louis Armstrong And His Savoy Ballroom Five

December 12, 1928, Chicago, Illinois

Okeh 8649

Drummer: *Zutty Singleton*

As featured on: *Louis Armstrong Hot Fives & Sevens Volume 3* (JSP)

St. James' Infirmary

(J Primrose)

Louis Armstrong And His Savoy Ballroom Five

December 12, 1928, Chicago, Illinois

Okeh 8657

Drummer: *Zutty Singleton*

As featured on: *Louis Armstrong Hot Fives & Sevens Volume 3* (JSP)

Mahogany Hall Stomp

(Spencer Williams)

Louis Armstrong And His Savoy Ballroom Five

March 5, 1929, New York City

Okeh 8680

Drummer: *Paul Barbarin*

As featured on: *Louis Armstrong Hot Fives & Sevens Volume 4* (JSP)

Knockin' A Jug

(Armstrong, Condon)

Louis Armstrong and his Orchestra

March 5, 1929, New York City

Okeh 8703

Drummer: *Kaiser Marshall*

As featured on: *Louis Armstrong Hot Fives & Sevens Volume 3* (JSP)

(What Did I Do To Be So) Black And Blue?

(Andy Razaf / Fats Waller)

Louis Armstrong & His Orchestra

July 22, 1929, New York City

Okeh 8714

Drummer: *Zutty Singleton*

As featured on: *Louis Armstrong Hot Fives & Sevens Volume 4* (JSP)

"I'd Love It"

(Redman, Hudson)

McKinney's Cotton Pickers

Nov 6, 1929, New York City

Bluebird B-10706-A

Drummer: *Kaiser Marshall*

As featured on: *Coleman Hawkins, The Essential Sides Remastered 1929-1933*

Wherever There's A Will, Baby

(Donald Redman)

McKinney's Cotton Pickers

Nov 7, 1929, New York City

Victor 22736-B

Drummer: *Kaiser Marshall*

As featured on: *Coleman Hawkins, The Essential Sides Remastered 1929-1933*

Turtle Twist

(Jelly Roll Morton)

Jelly Roll Morton Trio

Dec 17, 1929, New York City

Victor V-38108-A

Drummer: *Zutty Singleton*

As featured on: *The Original Mr. Jelly Lord 1923-1941*

Smilin' The Blues Away

(Harrison Smith)

Jelly Roll Morton Trio

Dec 17, 1929, New York City

Victor V-38108-B

Drummer: *Zutty Singleton*

As featured on: *The Original Mr. Jelly Lord 1923-1941*

Blue, Turning Grey Over You

(Andy Razaf, Fats Waller)

Louis Armstrong & His Orchestra

Feb 1, 1930, New York

Okeh 41375

Drummer: *Paul Barbarin*

As featured on: *Louis Armstrong Hot Fives & Sevens Volume 4 (JSP)*

Loving You The Way I Do

(Scholl, Morrissey, Blake)

Bubber Miley and his Mileage Makers

Sep 13, 1930, New York City

Victor 23010-A

Drummer: *Tommy Benford*

As featured on: *Classic Jazz From New Orleans To Harlem Volume 044*

The Penalty of Love

(Heba Jannath, Donald Heywood)

Bubber Miley and his Mileage Makers

Sep 13, 1930, New York City

Victor 23010-B

Drummer: *Tommy Benford*

As featured on: *Classic Jazz From New Orleans To Harlem Volume 044*

References and Notes

1. *"Shimmy Beat And Press Roll Demonstration", Footnotes to Jazz, Vol. 1: Baby Dodds Talking and Drum Solos*, Folkways Records, FW02290, 1951.

2. According to singer Bing Crosby, who took up drumming while studying law in the early 1920s:

"I never did learn a professional drumming technique. I faked rolls with a wire fly-swatter or I frim-frammed the cymbals with the swatter or a stick instead of rolling, which was one way of sounding like an accomplished drummer in spite of a lack of technical ability."

Call Me Lucky: Bing Crosby's own story, as told to Pete Martin.

Also see brushes section of the *Gene Krupa Drum Method* (1939).

3. *The Book of Jazz, from then till now: a guide to the entire field* by Leonard G. Feather, 1965 (page 125).

Jazz Masters of New Orleans by Martin T. Williams, 1967 (pg 182, 1979 edition).

4. From Singleton, and also Tubby Hall, Krupa learned *when* to use brushes within a song. *World of Gene Krupa: that legendary drummin' man* by Bruce H. Klauber, 1990 (Page 22).

5. *Jazz Masters of New Orleans* by Martin T. Williams, 1967 (pg 192, 1979 edition).

6. From the film *Kobenhavn Kalundborg Og?* (1934).

7. Noble Sissle and his Band, 1931 Pathetone 42 (Rank), performing "Happy Feet" and "Little White Lies". *Entertainers in British films: a century of showbiz in the cinema* by Denis Gifford, 1998 (page 235).

8. *The Art of Playing with Brushes*, Hudson Music, 2007, HD-DVD-BR21.

9. *Hear me talkin' to ya: the story of jazz by the men who made it*, by Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff (Page 275, 1962 penguin edition).

10. According to Benford:

"Chick Webb was in New York, and his uncle, George Young, had introduced us and asked me would I mind teaching him what I could. I let him sit in at the Hoofer's Club, and it used to drive Willie the Lion crazy, because Chick still didn't have it together."

American Musicians II: Seventy-One Portraits in Jazz by Whitney Balliett, 1986 (page 48, 2005 edition).

11. Krupa had come to New York at the behest of Eddie Condon for a job that ultimately fell through. They were staying at the Cumberland Hotel and were later joined by Mezz Mezzrow and Josh Billings, who shared their rooms. *We Called It Music* by Eddie Condon, 1948 (Pages 106 and 110, 1962 edition).
12. *Listen Again: a momentary history of pop music* by Eric Weisbard (pages 75-76)
13. *It Wasn't All Velvet: an autobiography?* by Mel Tormé, 1988 (page 61).
14. *Percussion Instruments And Their History* by James Blades, 1992 (Page 459)
15. *Jazz: a history of America's music*, Geoffrey C. Ward, Ken Burns, 2000 (Page 136)
16. *The Oxford Companion To Jazz* by Bill Kirchner, 2000 (pages 684 & 685).
17. See brushes section of the *Gene Krupa Drum Method* (1939).
18. *Jazz Away From Home* by Chris Goddard, 1979 (page 298).
19. *Tap Dancing America: a cultural history* by Constance Valis Hill (page 78).
20. Irving Mills' promotional short film made by Paramount in 1933, featuring the Mills Blue Rhythm Band and the orchestras of Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway. *Duke Ellington's America* by Harvey G. Cohen (page 142).