

# Peter Erskine: The Use of Melody in Teaching Drumset

By Colleen Clark

**P**eter Erskine; the name is synonymous with legend. Winner of two Grammy awards and nine nominations, having played on over 700 albums and film scores, and with the biggest names in music, Erskine continues making his mark in music to this day. As a bandleader or co-leader he has released over 50 albums (and counting).

What is perhaps most intriguing about Erskine's output and career is the diversity of styles he has mastered. From Stan Kenton to Maynard Ferguson, Steps Ahead, Joni Mitchell, The Yellowjackets, Weather Report, The Brecker Brothers, Steely Dan, and numerous symphony orchestras, including Chicago, L.A., Berlin, and London, (this is a very short list), his career continues to span styles and spaces. There is no question that Erskine has been part of some of the most influential groups in music. His ongoing output will continue to stand the test of time.

**Colleen Clark:** Please provide a preview of your PASIC clinic for those who will be able to attend, and add a little more information for the folks who may not be able to attend PASIC this year.

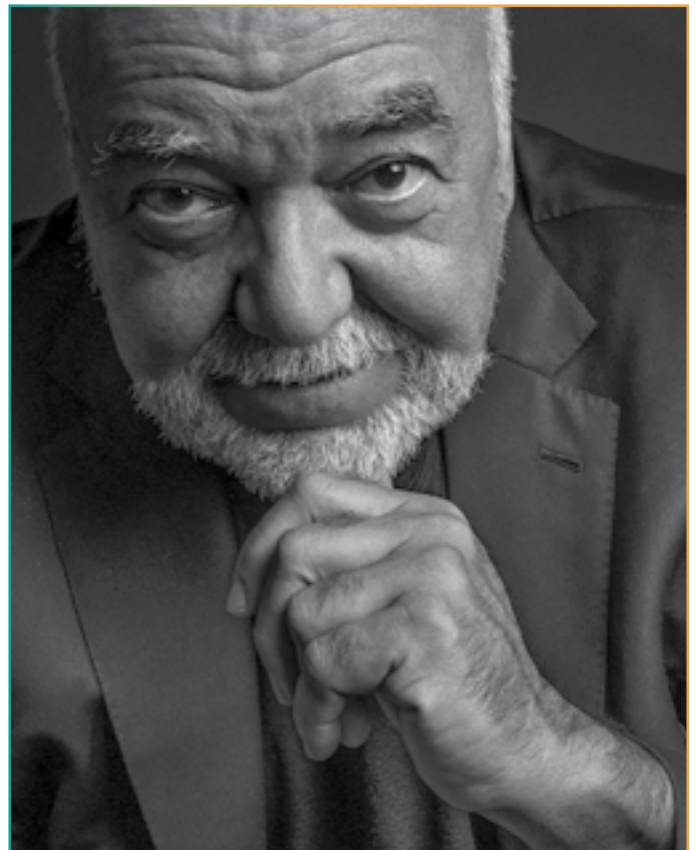
**Peter Erskine:** Here's an overview or context to what I'll be speaking about. Melody is something that is not taught so often to drummers. It's not even taught so often to saxophonists, trumpet players, pianists, or anyone else in jazz institutions. We've gotten so concerned with teaching improvisation and helping students navigate harmonic landscapes, but we have overlooked the simple act of being able to play a melody.

For horn players, where can they take a breath? When should they take a breath? Which notes should be rearticulated versus tied or legato? What kind of emphasis or accent?

As you know, I asked you how to pronounce "Colleen"; I don't know how else you might pronounce it, but it seemed good form to ask. And so, musicians should ask themselves, "How do I pronounce this?" or "What story am I trying to

convey here? How should this melody be played?" In terms of general musicality, this addresses what I think has been an oversight.

On a more practical level for drummers, it's very easy to get wrapped up with technical concerns. Students at any number of stages are wrestling with the instrument and with themselves: "What hand do I start this with?" for example.



PETER ERSKINE

If a drummer is thinking melodically, I'll suggest that we consider Joe Morello. Think of the solo he plays on the Bru-beck studio recording of "Take Five." Where did Joe Morello's playing come from? And then we can go back further.

Thinking in melodic terms takes away the pressure of the technical expectation. A pivotal recording was made by Max Roach and Buddy Rich called *Rich vs. Roach*. They both have their own bands on either side of the studio in the stereo imaging. The two bands play the melody, and then Buddy takes the first solo. In typical Buddy fashion, it's a snare drum-centric solo. It's exciting. It's great. It's all the more amazing when you realize he's playing on calf [heads], and bass drum pedals were not marvels of technology back then. And yet, somehow, he's managing to play lots of amazing stuff. Okay, so wow, that was great.

Then the band comes back in, and now it's Max Roach's turn. For his solo, the bass player starts walking steady quarter notes. The bass player is playing the changes – the harmonic structure of the tune. Max's solo is like a horn solo. Now, as a young drummer – I think I was six or seven when I heard this – this made a very strong impression because the Buddy solo was amazing, but I couldn't even begin to identify with it. But the Max thing, I immediately sensed, "I can do that. That's attainable." That's not beyond the scope of imagining. So that ignites a creative spark in a young drummer because he or she goes, "That I can do. That's possible."

In the teaching of playing a melody, I've approached it by utilizing the drummer's dominant hand for playing the higher notes of the melody. Horn players will generally emphasize those notes, because it takes a bit more air pressure to play the higher notes [sings a Charlie Parker melody as an example]. It also creates in the mind's eye a melodic shape. It's kind of a cheat or a trick to choose the dominant hand for the higher notes. That will help the drummer play a more convincing melody instead of just using alternate sticking, the goal ultimately being not training drummers to be able to play bebop melodies, but the goal being that when they improvise, they don't have to search for a sticking. It's automatic because, hopefully, they've spent enough time practicing melodies, so then when they start [sings and emphasizes higher notes of the phrase], they're free from any technical considerations or second guesses or doubts. It will come naturally.

It's like when we tell our students, "Being in this class is not so that you can recite these little arcane bits of historic data or trivia ten years down the road, but so you learn *how* to learn." You learn "how to"; that's why you have to learn all this stuff. Even though it's annoying, it's not to turn you into an expert in something you're not interested in, it's to turn you into an expert in what you want to do.

The ultimate goal is to free the inner voice of the drummer so that he or she doesn't need to be concerned with the "how." You study mallets; you've got a run – a scaler passage. When

you're first starting out, left or right? After a while you can see it coming and you just know, right-hand start. Then you don't get tangled up at the end of it. And that's just purely from the doing. That's basically the approach. It's creating three-dimensional melodic playing on basically what is considered a two-dimensional instrument – the snare drum – and then turning that into a whole universe of musicality on the kit.

**Clark:** That's fantastic. You had mentioned one record that highly inspired you, *Rich vs. Roach*. Can you recommend some other records for listeners who aren't as familiar with Max?

**Erskine:** The *Freedom Now Suite* recording has some terrific examples. Any recording of the quintet Max had with Clifford Brown would qualify. Let's not just limit this to Max. The things we hear first tend to make very strong impressions. I'm going to throw in a couple of others. The Art Blakey album *The African Beat*. It starts off with a prayer. And then there's a song; the English title is "There is Happiness in Love." Blakey plays one of the greatest drum solos I've ever heard. As a melody, it's not an aria from an opera, but thematically, it's so powerful, and that's an important component of melody. For me, that would qualify.

Another one is *Gretsch Night at Birdland*, where Blakey and Philly Joe [Jones] accompany one another and trade solos. Despite the fact that one gets the ride cymbal pattern turned around for a minute, the melodic content of both of their solos is so great.

On another note, I came across an image of the Louie Bellson *Drum Primer* book. On the cover it says, "Stick control, music counting, and reading thru the melody way." One thing Louie said, which really stuck with me, was at a PAS convention. He said, "Chick Webb: we got it all from him, Pete." It was unsolicited. I didn't ask him, "What do you think of Chick Webb?" He just said, "Chick Webb: we got it all from him." If Louie Bellson says so, I believe it. **PN**

## DRUMSET

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