by Scott Neumann

Sketch-Style Writing From the Groove

When I write multiple compositions for a recording or a band, I create a common thread that runs through each piece, presenting a unified musical statement. Composing for my band Osage County's eponymous debut disc (Chicken Coup) was no different. I wanted the music to possess a combination of rhythmic groove and memorable melodies, and also to have an open quality to harmony and form. To get these results, I used a less-is-more, sketch-like approach.

With several of the Osage County compositions, I started the composition process from the drum set. After creating the rhythmic feel of the song, I sang melodies and bass lines over the drum part. Then I moved between the drums and piano to notate melodies and add harmonic content. I would end up at the piano to complete each composition.



With the song "Mud," the bass line came to me first. I then moved to the drums and tried different feels over it. I chose a variation on the drum 'n' bass groove (Example 1). I liked the combination of that fast, static feel over the open half-note feel of the bass line. With the feel established, I started singing melodies over the groove while at the piano.

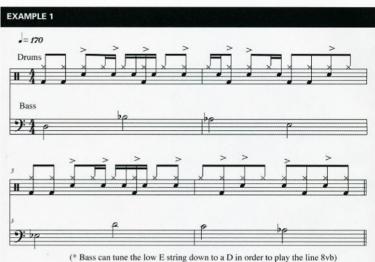
Since there was a variance between the velocity of the drum and bass parts, I wanted the melody motion to be somewhere in the middle. I used quarter-note triplet figures to help the melody float over the groove (Example 2).

The song became a variation on the blues in D minor, with changed-up phrase lengths (20 measures of D minor/eight measures of G minor/four measures of A7). At the A7 chord I wrote the melody with some five-note groupings. This adds rhythmic tension to the melodic feel (Example 3). Once the band actually played "Mud," the exposition (the drum groove, bass line and melody) established a clear mood, so at the solo section—open D minor—the soloists knew how to begin. They often started over the groove, but the rhythm section was free to shift rhythms or even dissolve into a rubato feel. The return of the bass pattern at the end of the solo section signaled the recapitulation of the melody.

Some of the compositional ideas in "Meserole" came from outside sources. The rhythmic feel came from the Meters. It's a two-measure, mixed-meter pattern that has a dash of quirkiness (Example 4). From this groove, I sang melodies while at the drums and came up with a melody that mirrored the feel (Example 5). The melody is subdivided solely in 16th notes, which helps it lay right with the drum groove.

I wrote a repetitive melodic hook (Example 6) that is in the last 7/8 measure of each chorus of the solo form. The band plays the hook in unison. It serves as a musical land-

mark for both the band and the listener, which is especially useful during a drum solo over the form. After writing the song I realized that the hook idea was similar to Jaco Pastorius' "The Chicken." Unlike "Mud," the solo form in "Meserole" is cyclical. But, because there are only two chords (E_b minor7 and A_b7), the song has an open quality. The soloist can build intensity with each chorus, while having the hook as a send-off for













EXAMPLE 4

the next chorus.

For Osage County, I find sketches work better than fullfledged arrangements to achieve the open, improvisato-

ry mood. I enjoy hearing the musicians develop the arrangements in practice and performance, and I enjoy hearing them stretch in such an open context.

New York-based drummer Scott Neumann and Osage County's self-titled disc is available from chickencouprecords.com.