Is there more to the myth than meets the eye... or hand or foot?
Norman Weinberg explores the independence concept on another level.

One day, a student in the class slipped and told Dr. Kaufman that it was his birthday. Immediately, Dr. Kaufman ran to the piano and began to play. What was he playing? His right hand was playing the tune ‘For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow’ in the key of D while his left hand played ‘Happy Birthday’ in the key of A flat. Ok, not too bad, right? But what made it even more amazing was that the ‘Jolly Good Fellow’ melody is sixteen measures of 6/8 time and the ‘Happy Birthday’ song is only eight measures long. The way Dr. Kaufman played it, both tunes started together and ended together. A little more impressive, no?

Right after class I went up to Dr. Kaufman and told him that he had a fantastic sense of independence and asked if he could play any two well-known songs together in different keys and at different RHYTHM. JULY 1989
speed. He told me I was crazy! He said that he worked out on that little tramp while he was in college as a practical joke to impress his friends. He also said that it was much fun to go out to parties.

Not long after that experience, Ray Shanker and Ali Raha came to the school to present a concert. Mr. Rima was asked to give a little demonstration to the percussionists.

Of course, as one of the world's best tabla players, he had unbelievable independence between the hands. When he did something that really blew my mind. He told the students about a traditional method of sending Ragas. As I understand it, everyone in the ensemble improves on a particular instrument or part and it's the tabla player's responsibility to let you know what's a little different to start. He created this particular melodic structure and imposed it on the tabla player's independence to let you know where the Raga starts and ends, and explained what he did.

The object is to play a rhythm (usually several beats long) three times. The first statement of the rhythm is at the original speed, then you repeat the same rhythm one-third faster than the first time. The third statement moves two-thirds faster than the first. Got that! The same rhythm is being played three times, each one slightly different. The final part: the last note of this rhythm occurs on the downbeat (the "one") of the last measure. The stroke where the Raga ends is where the Raga begins.

The practical concept was not lost on the audience. You could tell us that you're increasing the tempo by third! And on top of that you've planned out in advance where the first statement should begin! The more I think about this, the more I realize that he was really doing all that and improving the original statement of the rhythm. He also explained some different examples. When things got really hot, he played them simple to intact them, but the tabla player's independence to let you know where the Raga starts and ends, and explained what he did.

The next question from the audience could really be expected. He asked how he did it. His answer was no help at all. He said that he just had been doing it so long that he could offer any help or advice.

Last story, just a couple of years ago, I met a flutist who was actually a flutist. He was sitting in a restaurant that had plain white paper placemats with a book of raga sheets on each by the help of us. She picked up two of the raga sheets and asked me to spell out my last name. She then proceeded to write "Weissberg" in large letters on a napkin to get the name right with her left hand, and from right-
Recognize these measures as the polyrhythms of two against three and three against two. If you’re into polyrhythms, this is most likely the first one you learned to play. But in reality, you never play two different rhythms at the same time. Instead, you’re really playing a single rhythm which is comprised of two different voices.

You might have learned this rhythm as shown in the first measure of the example. You’re playing in 6/8 meter. The right hand plays all the eighth notes while the left hand plays on counts one, the “and” of two, four, and the “and” of five. If, however, you learned this pattern by playing triplet figures in 2/4 time. It doesn’t matter which way you approach it, it isn’t true independence. Each hand and each rhythm becomes interdependent and fits into the larger shell of the time signature.

Here is another situation where independence falls flat on its face and interdependence comes in to save the day. Examples Two-Five contain four different rhythms in four different meters. Example Two, in 7/8, is to be played on the bass drum. Example Three is to be played with the hi-hat using your other foot. Now that your feet are busy, Examples Four and Five should be played by the hands on two different symbols. OK, go for it! See if you’ve got the independence skills to play those four different rhythms with all four of your limbs. I’ll even give you a hint. Your hands are simply playing a three against five. So, in order to do that, you simply have to add your foot. Really? Try it, this article will want you there. You’re successful? If so, then you’re the first person on the planet to focus a single mind on four different tasks at the same time! When you take all four rhythms and string them end result looks like Example Six (this passage is from Chopin’s Jw, a drumset piece published by Southern Music). If you try to work this passage out (it’s still somewhat difficult) you’ll see how each limb can work along with the other to achieve independence. While no one can split the brain to play it, you could do it, but it’s easy to combine ideas together into a single task and a single rhythmic pattern.

Cruising on Auto-Pilot

Let’s jump to the other mental process that occurs when drumming. This one is called cruise control or auto-pilot playing. Humans are capable of performing many types of chores without thinking about them at all. I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase “I bet he can’t walk and chew gum at the same time.” Most people can walk and chew gum because both of those physical actions are being performed without any mental energies being exerted.

I’m willing to put my money down that your moulds is. I bet that you can walk and chew gum at the same time, and also make your way down a flight of stairs while scratching your nose and reading a book. Try it, and you’ll surprise yourself. How can

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Independence or Interdependence?

For Yves, I’ve heard players do things that I thought couldn’t be done at high degree of independence. Upon closer examination, however, I proved myself wrong in every case. It seems that when we play, there are two different processes used which have been erroneously named independence. One of these is better described as interdependence.

As an example of interdependence, consider Example One. You might
drum and snare drum are doing? Is it easy for you to play steady quarter notes with your bass drum while running some dazzling fills around the kit? If you answered yes to either of these questions, you’re operating on auto-pilot.

Take a look at Example Seven. When I first started playing out of Jim Chapin’s Advanced Techniques For The Modern Drummer, I tried doing the exercises by thinking of each individual line (like the morning at school) I was called down several times by my teachers for playing drums in class (you know — on the desk). I came home from school and started playing the ride, bass, and hi-hat cymbal rhythms until dinner. After about three days, I could easily watch TV (also located in the living room), ask my mom a question, think about something unrelated to my playing, or even read my homework assignments without messing up. I realized that my body was starting to take over, while my mind was dealing with other matters.

At the end of that week, right before my lesson, I sat down and sight-read several chapters of the Chapin book. Now that my ride cymbal, bass drum, and hi-hat were on auto-pilot, all I had to do was read the rhythms for the snare drum. Instead of fighting with each little pattern and exercise, after one week I could play several chapters of the book.

Just a few weeks ago, I passed by one of the practice rooms at school and heard one of my students trying to master a tricky Samba beat. I wanted to see how he was doing so I knocked on the door and saw Example Eight up on the music stand. He found this example in a book of drum transcriptions and wanted to learn to play it, but was running into lots of trouble. He kept getting hung up in the middle of the first bar. A few times, he successfully negotiated the first bar but was leaving out two of the hi-hat notes. In other words, when he thought he was playing it correctly, he wasn’t.

My next step was to ask him to play the passage with his feet and leave out the hands. Did it. Could he play the hands alone, leaving out the feet? Yes. So what? We then added a left hand to the single right hand part. Even though he had mastered both the hands and the feet separately, he had to think about each of them. It took a great deal of concentration to play the feet, and concentration for the hands. Neither set of limbs was able to go on cruise control. When he tried to play them together, it just fell apart. I sat down at the kit and sight-read the pattern. Then I sight-read several other patterns that were on the same page. Boy, was he impressed.

I suggested that he just stay in the room and play the basic Samba pattern with his feet for a few hours. Once he could put the bass drum and hi-hat on cruise control, playing the hands was the only thing that required any concentration. Then he’d be able to play that exercise as well as any other that used a Samba pattern in the feet.

I don’t think he liked the idea very much since we all want to progress as fast as possible, see instant results, and come out of the practice room playing something that we couldn’t when we went in. It takes a good deal of time to play a single rhythm for days. But, believe it or not, that’s the only way that you can put cruise control so you only worry about the rhythm pattern, or idea can achieve cruise control status if you work on it long enough.

The Myth Laid to Rest

SOME THINGS MAY be played best by linking certain limbs to others or by severing one limb from the rest and putting it on cruise control. All drummers seem to float quickly between using interdependence and auto-pilot. It’s even possible to set certain limbs on cruise control and use interdependence with the remaining limbs. The technique required to play Example Eight (but I’ve never met a drummer who could actually play four different rhythms on each limb) is really a very basic rhythm at the very first time he tried it. To my thinking, this would be true independence.

So the next time you hear someone say that they’ve got great independence, write down four rhythms and ask them to play all four at the same time. Then tell them that you don’t believe in Santa Claus either.

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