Moroccan Chaabi Grooves

By Jerry Leake

Introduction

The music of Morocco is as diverse and as culturally rich as its people. Styles vary from region to region and are greatly influenced by the region's ethnic groups and cultural heritage. Depending on where you visit, you will hear classical Arab-Andalusian music, the folk music of the Berber people, Gnawa and the popular music styles of Rai and Chaabi.

The Berber people are indigenous to North Africa and make up a significant portion of Morocco's population. They possess their own language and have a long oral tradition of passing songs and poetry down from one generation to the next. There are three different Berber regions in Morocco and each possesses its own unique rhythms. Berber music typically involves drums, flutes, clarinets and a rabab, a one-stringed fiddle.

Gnawa combines hypnotic trance rhythms with ceremonial dancing and acrobatics. Brought to Morocco by West Africans, Gnawa evolved from the freed slaves in Marrakesh and Essaouira as both prayer and a celebration of freedom and life. Gnawa has inspired the development of modern Moroccan music and has fused with similar styles like jazz, reggae and hip-hop.

Rai is a form of folk music that originated in Algeria but became popular in the Moroccan cities of Oujda and Berkane during the early 1990s. Trendy with young people, the lyrics of Rai are traditionally concerned with social issues that have affected the native populations of North Africa. The music is an eclectic blend of traditional and religious drum patterns and melodies with electric instrumentation.

Chaabi is considered the pop music of Morocco that descended from Moroccan folk music. It refers to several types of popular music of Morocco, combining rural and urban folk music. The music features drums, lutes, stringed instruments, metal castanets, electric guitars and buzuks. You will hear Chaabi played in taxicabs, market stalls and clubs.

Frame Drum

"Frame Drum" is a generic term that is associated with hundreds of different types of instruments found throughout the world. It is described as one of the most ancient drums to have been invented. The Western tambourine is a type of frame drum that includes jingles and specialized techniques to serve classical music. Other traditional frame drums with jingles are the Brazilian pandeiro, the Egyptian riq, and the South Indian kanjira, to name a few. Contemporary designs number in the hundreds,

each tracing its roots to the more ancient traditions.

Bendir

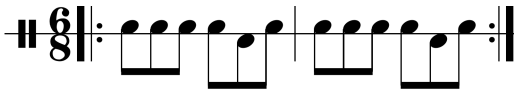
The bendir is a well-known style of frame drum used as a traditional instrument throughout North Africa. It has a goatskin head with thin snares affixed underneath to create a buzzing sound when struck. Large bendir can include jingles that combine drum tones, buzzing snares, and vibrating jingles. Bendir have a thumbhole to hold the instrument upright for playing subtle and intricate patterns with the fingers. Another technique involves holding the drum sideways and producing loud slaps and tones with the strong hand. It is this approach that is most often used to play the groove that will be examined more closely.

Bendir Groove

The examples in 6/8 that follow are based on one Moroccan groove that may challenge the player's awareness of downbeat and pulse. The pattern contains profound gravity that causes less experienced musicians to flip it to a different place in time. This is part of the mystery and magic of the phrase and is by no means a deficiency in one's rhythm sensibilities or skill.

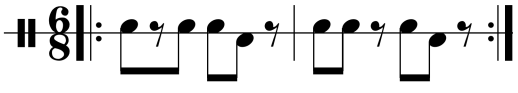
Example 1 below illustrates the implicit strokes of 6/8 (above the line) with open drum strokes (below the line) on the "and" of beat 2. Strikes above the line can be adapted to snare drum with those below played on tom. Brushes or drum rods are an effective way to minimize snare volume.

Ex. 1



Example 2 eliminates two strikes per bar and reveals a more traditional bendir groove. Vibrant slaps above the line flow into loud open tones, all played by the strong hand. On drum set the pattern starts to breathe with space and energy.

Ex. 2



Example 3 eliminates two more slaps per bar to produce an intricate "off-beat" pattern that is both challenging and inspiring. The previous

example included slap strokes on beats 1 and 2 of each bar to provide stability. Example 3 removes all beat anchor points. This kind of beat avoidance can be jarring to the newly initiated who struggle to find a relaxed flow, as if the mind and body were battling against each other. Players may experience the urge to flip the groove to more comfortable locations (discussed next).

As shown below, the asterisk (*) identifies the first drum stroke of the phrase.

Ex. 3



Flipping the Phrase

Learning music is first and foremost about process—working in stages to free the mind and accept radically different patterns that depart from your cultural and musical memory. Example 4 represents a common flip of the traditional phrase shown above. The asterisk (*) that marked the first tone of the traditional phrase is now repositioned to the downbeat. Herein lies the inherent "rhythm culture shock." More often than not, Western drumming places a strike on the downbeat, or at the very least some of the beats. The traditional phrase from Example 3 does neither.

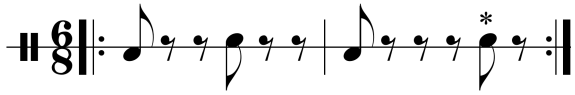
In the flipped interpretation below a kind of swing-shuffle-like quality is heard.

Ex. 4



When teaching the traditional groove from Example 3, I begin by playing just the pattern on bendir, without any indication of the beat or pulse—just pure sound. Eyes widen as I ask students to clap the beat. Inevitably claps realign the phrase into the notation of Example 5 below. When asked to try again, students often render what is shown in Example 4.

Ex. 5



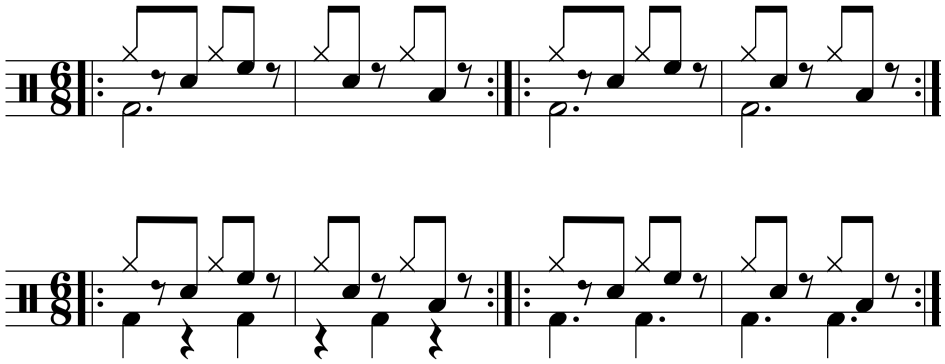
"Syncopation" is a general term that means a disturbance or interruption of the regular flow of rhythm: a placement of stresses or accents where they would not normally occur. Syncopation is the essence of jazz where on- and off-beat patterns form a partnership in composition, improvisation, and interaction. The traditional phrase in Example 3, which is built entirely with off-beat strikes, represents a high level of syncopation in a fixed groove.

Drum Set Adaptations: Cymbal in 4

What follows are adaptations of the bendir groove to playing the drum set. Notice that the snare drum, mounted tom and floor tom are used to orchestrate the bendir pattern, with a driving cymbal played on the beat. In this context the groove contains beat stability (cymbal) for the drummer to relax, the other band members to keep their place, and the audience to get up and dance.

As shown below, drum and cymbal patterns are unchanged in the four phrases, whereas the bass drum introduces 1, 2, 3, and 4 strikes. Know that these are basic styles that can be made into far more complex grooves.

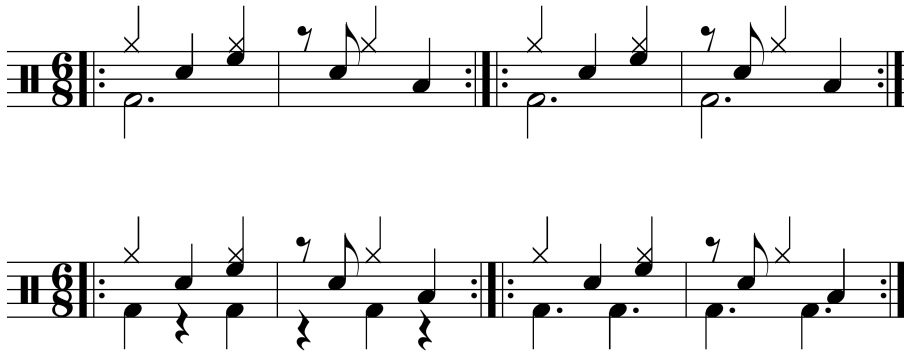
Ex. 6



Drum Set Adaptations: Cymbal in 3

As shown below in Example 7, the bendir adaptation and the bass drum patterns are the same as above. It is the cymbal that has been shifted into a "3 feel" to create an entirely new experience with the bendir structure. Cycle one variation for an extended period and shift back and forth between cymbal patterns in 3 and 4.

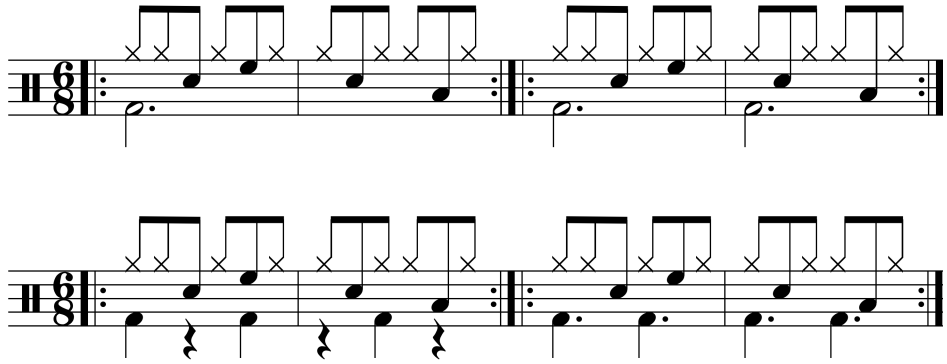
Ex. 7



Drum Set Adaptations: Steady Hi-Hat

In Example 8 below, the hi-hat plays a continuous triplet pattern with the bendir melody woven inside. Discover your own sticking that maintains a smooth flow.

Ex. 8



Conclusion

When asked to talk about “trance music” I usually begin by describing the traditional grooves of Morocco, while avoiding any references to electronic dance music, house and techno. These modern-day genres owe their very existence to the ancient traditions, with the vast continent of Africa representing origins that are often ignored. A search for “trance music” on YouTube gathered thousands of techno recordings and provocative cover images that numb the mind and musical spirit.

By contrast, a search for “Moroccan trance music” resulted in a virtual history lesson of pure acoustic sound, the ambience and mood of the ceremony with captivating melodies that evolve into driving grooves, and profound emotional chants that pay homage to the various ancestors and spirits. This kind of experience transports the listener into ecstatic states of consciousness, as if entering the very soul of Morocco.

Descriptive words are inadequate so go check it out!