

Shifting the Backbeat: The Polymetric Pogo and Other Such Things

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Abstract

It is almost a truism to say that much rock music features a snare drum backbeat. Mark Butler has remarked that these weak-beat accents are so pervasive as to be “normative,” concluding that “there is little reason to regard the attacks on beats 2 and 4 as belonging elsewhere.” Sometimes, however, rock drummers challenge this normative state by using various backbeat manipulations. If we assume that isochronous snare drum hits are heard as a backbeat, placing those snare drum hits on beats *other* than 2 and 4 creates a particular kind of metrical dissonance, which I refer to as *backbeat shifting*.

I explore two ways in which a backbeat shift occurs, primarily the *quick flip* and the *polymetric pogo*. A quick flip usually occurs at a phrase break, where the drummer apparently (but intentionally) “drops a beat” and then resumes the backbeat pattern, thus shifting it “to the left.” A polymetric pogo involves a situation where the backbeat-insistent drummer is pitted against the rest of the band playing in an asymmetrical meter, resulting in snare hits that bounce back and forth between even-numbered beats and odd-numbered beats every other measure.