

The Purdie Shuffle

Revisiting A Classic by Jim Payne

MUSIC KEY	
open	○ R.C.
H.H.	⊗
S.D.	●
B.D.	⊙
H.H. w/ foot	⊗
	Ghost note

This article contains my personal step-by-step process for learning the super-funky Purdie shuffle, which was made famous by the legendary R&B drummer Bernard Purdie. The exercises outlined here—which were devised over an eight-day practice routine where I studied Bernard’s signature beat on Steely Dan’s “Home At Last,” from the *Aja* album—are designed to take the mystery out of this classic half-time shuffle groove.

FIRST SESSION

The Purdie shuffle demands strong chops, so I began by practicing exercises derived from the challenging book *4-Way Coordination*. The beat also requires steady notes with the foot on the hi-hat, so I incorporated that into the exercises. I put a quarter-note rest at the end of each four-bar phrase in order to relax and regroup before repeating the exercise. Concentrate on crisp execution with no flams between the limbs, while also letting your body flow with the pulse. It’s important to avoid being stiff.

The Purdie shuffle is a half-time groove, so I thought the best way to write it was as 8th-note triplets with the backbeat on 3. Here’s the basic hi-hat and snare drum pattern.

Adding the bass drum gives you a basic half-time shuffle—a great groove in itself.

I usually keep both heads on the kick to get an open jazz/funk sound with a distinct pitch. But for straight-ahead funk or pop/funk, you need more of a boxing-glove *thud*. So I took off the front head, put in a nice fuzzy blanket, and topped it off with a good-size rock to keep the blanket in place and get an even heavier sound. With this setup, I could bury the beater in the head without getting double hits. I also increased the tension on the pedal to get more action from it, since this groove requires quick double strokes.

Next, I practiced filling in the triplets with the snare. It’s important to play the hi-hat and snare very softly and at the same volume. (Soft snare hits are called ghost notes.)

Now try putting the backbeat on 3.

SECOND SESSION

I began my second session with ten minutes of coordination exercises to loosen up. Then I worked on combining the half-time shuffle in Example 2 with the filled-in triplets from Example 4.

Bernard came to my gig one night at the North Sea Jazz Festival. I asked him to sit in, and as he went up he said, “You’ve got to put a little more bass drum in your shuffle.” He got on the stand and proceeded to demonstrate on the next

tune. He had just the right balance among the cymbal, snare, and bass drum. The bass drum was driving but not overpowering.

Because the Purdie shuffle requires steady notes on the hi-hat with the foot, the inevitable question is: Should I bounce my left foot or keep it flat on the footboard? To me, bouncing feels right some of the time. But at other times it takes too much energy to always keep your leg lifted. I decided to try both methods when I practiced the following groove with the right hand on the ride cymbal.



THIRD SESSION

After ten minutes of jamming and ten minutes of coordination practice with a metronome, I figured it was time to get serious about the hi-hat part in the Purdie shuffle. I worked on the following exercise with the heel up and with the heel down. (I was still unsure which way to go.) The main problem with the bouncing technique is that the left foot doesn't always come up when the right hand comes down, which can create sloppy hi-hat sounds. I tried laying back on the beat, and that seemed to help.



Next, I isolated the left foot and just played quarters using the bouncing technique. Then I decided to see what would happen when I added the bass drum and put the entire beat together.



I was playing the beat, but it was sloppy and uneven, with no feel or groove. Basically, I wasn't comfortable enough with it to relax and concentrate on time and feel. I was too caught up in the coordination and mechanics.

FOURTH SESSION

The next day I didn't notice much improvement. I invented some more exercises and played them, but I didn't see any real progress.

FIFTH SESSION

On this day, I changed tactics. I tried just playing the shuffle for a while, concentrating on precise coordination and execution. I was doing well, but I was so intent on getting it right that I overdid it. I burned out and got leg cramps. I had to remind myself—as I have many times in the past—that I couldn't learn this beat by playing it for eight hours straight without stopping. It would likely take a few days of shorter sessions before I really had it under control.



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SIXTH SESSION

I started this session by playing the shuffle for five minutes, stopping, and then doing something else for half an hour. Then I played the beat for another five minutes.

I hadn't seen any results for a few days, which caused me to start judging myself too quickly. That was a mistake. I had to be confident that eventually my muscles would learn to play the groove correctly.

SEVENTH SESSION

I decided that if I really wanted to nail the Purdie shuffle, I should learn the entire chart to "Home At Last." It's one thing to learn a beat, but it's another thing to memorize the structure, the figures, and the dynamics of a complete tune.

Purdie's performance on "Home At Last" is brilliant. His groove is flawless, even when he's catching ensemble hits. He also throws in some tasty accents and fills, and he plays with incredible dynamics.

I wrote out a drum chart and started seriously listening and playing along to the song. Then I recorded myself on video playing the tune. On the first take, I looked awkward and shaky, and the groove was weak. There was clearly more work to do. Here's the chart:

Drums
Intro/Piano

A Horns enter

B Voice enters

C

D

E

Coda

Ride Out - Fade

D.S. al Coda

EIGHTH SESSION

For my final day of practicing the Purdie shuffle, I started a routine where I'd play "Home At Last" two or three times during each session. I ended up using the heel-down technique on the hi-hat. A week had gone by, and I now felt good enough to record myself playing the song again. You can see videos of all the examples and the final result of my playing along with Purdie on moderndrummer.com and in the digital edition of *MD*.

Jim Payne has played with Maceo Parker and the J.B. Horns and has produced records for Medeski Martin & Wood. He teaches in New York City and online. His new book/DVD, *Advanced Funk Drumming*, was recently released by Modern Drummer Publications. For more on Jim, visit funkydrummer.com.



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