Drummer Jeff Salisbury explains what drum rudiments are, plays a rudiment everyone knows and demonstrates what melodic motion – the concept behind his new drum method – means and sounds like on a drumset.

Drummers, especially the best ones, have a secret. In performance they're the coolest musicians on stage, T-shirt clad free spirits who drive the music forward with passion and pyrotechnics. In the privacy of the practice room, though, they come dangerously close to nerd territory, laboring to perfect wonky drum “rudiments” with names like the “ratamacue,” the “single dragadiddle” and the “inverted flam tap.”

Jeff Salisbury, who’s taught drums at UVM since 1995, has impeccable cool credentials. He’s toured with legendary bluesman Albert King and the storied sixties soul band Cold Blood, studied with luminaries Bob Moses and Max Roach and been a fixture of Burlington’s music scene since the 1970s.

But he’s also a fan of those rudiments, which he’s been practicing religiously for 50 years to keep his on-stage chops sharp. And he loves the drum method books of which they are often part, enough so that he’s amassed a garage full.

Perhaps it’s no surprise, then, that he recently added his own drum method to the aspiring drummer’s library: Melodic Motion Studies for Drumset, published by Hal Leonard, the world’s largest music publisher, which is being praised widely for its originality.

Salisbury came to the novel concept behind the book — thinking of drumming in terms of motion and melody — by happy accident.

One day a new student came to him with a goal for his lessons. “He said he could play some funk, some Latin, and a little jazz, but he didn’t really know how to get around the drums,” Salisbury recalls.

The phrase stuck with Salisbury. What did it mean, exactly, to get around the drums, and how could he teach someone to do it?

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For an answer, his intuition took him to one of his favorite drum methods, the classic *Manual for the Modern Drummer*. The book took the fancy sticking patterns a snare drummer might play and spread them over three drums, a snare and two tom toms.

It struck Salisbury that the exercises, reduced to their essence, amounted to “patterns of clockwise and counterclockwise motion,” as the drummer’s sticks — and hands — moved from drum to drum.

What would happen, Salisbury wondered, if he added a fourth drum to the instructional palette and made the motion of the drummer’s hands around the drumset — “getting around the drums” — the point of the exercise?

As he wrote out the four-drum patterns — systematically varying rhythms, the starting point on the four drums and the motion patterns of his hands — more and more ideas, original ones, kept emerging.

“I thought, ‘Well, I've never seen these before,’” he says. He sent the exercises off to his professional association, the Percussive Arts Society, which agreed to publish them in its journal, *Percussive Notes*.

Encouraged, Salisbury kept writing and eventually had enough exercises for the book-length method that would be published by Hal Leonard.

**Animal magnetism**

One might wonder why Salisbury’s drum method, or anyone else’s, is needed. Drumming seems to arise naturally in humans from some prehistoric part of the genome.

"We never really get away from that connection to the primitive beginnings of drumming,” Salisbury says, “but there's a lot more subtlety to the accompaniment than just, like, sitting down and being Animal from the Muppets."

Salisbury’s hope is that his new method can help players develop that subtlety.

For this reporter’s benefit, he demonstrates what his “melodic” exercises — which exploit the sonorities of the differently sized drums and cymbals in a drumset — sound like, when applied to real music.

He plays a standard “fill” — the percussive flourish every rock fan would recognize that ends one musical phrase and tees up the next. The playing is expert but familiar. Then he plays the same lick, but works his hands around the drumset in an odd but logical pattern that doesn’t look like it would happen naturally.

A propulsive, variegated mosaic of unexpected sound bursts forth.

“You just take a different approach,” he says.

What could that approach mean for the developing drummer?

“Hopefully, it will broaden their pallet of expression,” he says, “and give them some ways of looking at things they hadn’t thought of.”