



Powerhouse in the Mountains: Western Carolina University

By Gene Fambrough



Those who actively peruse YouTube for drumline videos have probably encountered the incredible achievements of the Western Carolina University percussion section. After being duly impressed, some might ask, “Where in the world is WCU?” and “How do they have this type of program?” Many would be surprised at the answers. Located in Cullowhee, North Carolina (nestled between Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee in the Smoky Mountains), it is a small public university with just over 10,000 undergraduate students. The answer to that first question is relatively easy, so I set out to discover the answer to the second, bigger question.

Matt Henley is Assistant Director of Athletic Bands at Western Carolina University, which includes assisting with the Sudler Trophy-winning Pride of the Mountains marching band, the Cathouse Pep Band, and all events that the organization hosts year-round. One of his primary duties is overseeing the 80+ students in the marching percussion program at WCU, which includes teaching and arranging for both Gold and Purple drumlines in the fall, as well as the Purple Thunder basketball drumline in the spring semester. Having earned both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in music from Western Carolina University, Matt was in a unique position to continue his involvement with the band program in an official capacity, and he hasn’t looked back since.

PN: What is your teaching philosophy in regards to the marching percussion section?

Henley: I feel that as a teacher it is my responsibility to set the group up for success through a consistent, organized, prepared, and positive approach. Essentially, it is my job to create an environment for the students to thrive. Through specific accountability of each player, their individual success will

spread to the entire group, thus making the ensemble reach new heights every year. It might be my age, but I have curiously become more cognizant of the overreaching life lessons being taught within the percussion program and the entire band. I see so many graduates moving on to develop their own goals and belief systems that, hopefully, began with a firm foundation laid during their time at WCU.

PN: When did you take over as instructor?

Henley: When I was a senior in college at WCU in the summer of 1991, I had completed my “quota” for marching band and was more focused on teaching, writing, gigging, etc. One day I was teaching a local high school band camp and was approached by a local band director, Bob Buckner. He told me that he was offered the Directorship of the WCU athletic band program, but that he would not take the job if I didn’t teach the drumline. I was shocked! After much deliberation and soul searching, I agreed. That fall of 1991 was my first “drumline” at WCU, and we barely had enough students to fill out the line. It was comprised of a couple of music majors, piano majors, girlfriends—you get the idea—4 snares, 1 quad, 4 basses, 2 cymbals, and no front ensemble. It was very, very raw, but it was a beginning. The first thing I said to the group on the first day of camp was, “Pick up an instrument that you think you would like to play, and we will start there.”

PN: The band program was pretty small at that point, correct? How did that impact your focus in the early years?

Henley: In 1991 there were 88 total band members, which included an 18-member dance team and no color guard. Bob Buckner was very smart in his early assessment of the group; there wasn’t a lot of “tradition” in the band at that time, so he decided to make marching band more of a lab for future

music educators. That is when we went to a “one show per year” model, to better simulate what they would encounter in their jobs. Combine this idea with a new structure to our Student Leadership Team and you have yourself the foundation that we began to build upon.

PN: Were there any “experiments” you tried early on that didn’t work like you envisioned? If so, how do you recover from those and continue to grow?

Henley: Luckily, there weren’t too many major catastrophes early on. I remember thinking that to hide our lack of talent within those early years, I should be “gimmicky” with my approach; if I used huge percussion props, toms, etc., then we could camouflage those shortcomings. That was not the thing to do! When I finally figured that out in the late 1990s, things really began to take off. Our focus was now centered on technique and execution of a book that was “doable” by us. That new mindset really helped propel us into the early 2000s, and we started gaining more respect as a marching percussion program.

PN: How does the university administration feel about a band program of over 500 with a relatively small student body? Has this changed through the years?

Henley: Our administration is very supportive of the ensemble. Through a recent student survey, we found out that the marching band is the number-one “site destination program” across all disciplines on campus—meaning more students come to Western Carolina for its marching band than any other reason. We are honored by that, and we feel a great duty to not only give our students a world-class experience, but to also be a strong ambassador for our university that will make our administration, student body, and community proud. Last season we had every academic major at WCU represented within the band,



Matt Henley

"The Pride of the Mountains marching band has been incredibly blessed with talented performers who chose to become members of our program. In the last 10 years we have experienced steady membership growth and talent across the marching band, which peaked in 2019 with an incredible 535 members in the program. As a music educator with a percussion background, I am grateful for the talent and training our battery and front ensemble percussionists contribute to the band program. From a recruitment aspect of things, it is exciting to know that high school percussionists look to the Pride of the Mountains percussion program as a collegiate destination to display their talents. As a team of directors and motivated students, annual programming becomes a 'sky is the limit' project. The perfect mix of what is possible, what they as performing ensemble would embrace, as well as creating a challenge for them (while being entertaining) is never an easy task. With that said, our membership looks forward to that challenge each year and will do all they can to continue to raise the bar for our band program."

—David Starnes, Director of Athletic Bands, WCU.

and I believe that our administration sees and realizes the more global reach that the band and music can have at our school.

PN: Talk about recruiting strategies that have led to this point, by yourself, Bob Buckner (previous director), and David Starnes (current Director).

Henley: A multi-faceted approach to recruiting has always been our focus. Events and performances staggered throughout the calendar year seem to have a better result than just "seasonal" ones, as we try to keep the band program active and "in the public eye" consistently. Through district bands, summer camps, day skill camps, auditions, the marching band contest we host, exhibition performances, basketball pep band, basketball drumline, and social media, we are consistently sending out our message. All of that to say though, the number-one recruiter for any program is quality. Great high school band students know when something is good and when it's not. If you put quality, approachable, inviting, fun, stimulating, impressive performances out there, you will attract talented students who want to be a part of it.

PN: Was there a specific year that you noticed a definite positive change in the

group, either in numbers, quality, or attitudes, or has it always been a slow, steady climb?

Henley: Having done it as long as I have, the answer is yes. However, I don't want to diminish other years by pointing out specific ones, because to me it has been a remarkable steady climb. Inevitably, you are going to see certain peaks that you hit along the way every four to five years. These are usually built on bigger program goals that we set in our office. Every year there has been growth and remarkable performances, and I have loved them all!

PN: Amazingly, Western has two drumlines. Describe how this came about and how you make this work in the band program—rehearsals, game day, exhibitions, etc.

Henley: Yes, this is pretty crazy; I get asked about this topic a lot. In 2009 I was hosting our initial audition date, and for the first time in program history, I couldn't find a place for everyone. There were about 12 students who were going to be cut, and it broke my heart. It went against everything that I believed in as an educator. So I went to Bob Buckner with a proposal: we had just bought new drums, and if I could use the old equipment I could create a second drumline as our "JV" group. It would be

▶ Tap to play Video



"Purple Thunder" (second drumline)

a teaching tool, and a motivator for students who weren't quite ready for the top drumline experience. We affectionately refer to them as "Purple Thunder," while our top group is the Gold Line. At the time I was lucky to have a section leader living in the area who had just graduated. Austin Sanders [currently teaching at JF Byrnes High School] was eager to get on board as the instructor, and away we went. The Gold Line focuses on their role with marching band performances, while Purple Thunder has their own warm-ups, stands beats, parking lot shows, the "3rd Quarter Throwdown" performance at football games, parades, and special community events. It really has helped to transform many players who have come through the program, and has allowed them to receive necessary training and experiences to achieve their larger goal of being on the Gold Line. Through the years we have had several Purple

"Having the opportunity to work with a college drumline, let alone WCU's *second* drumline, was an amazing way to gain perspective on the activity at a collegiate level, and what it takes to build a group from the ground up. When I first came in to teach Purple Thunder, I was committed to building an inviting, yet more competitive environment for students who wanted the chance to improve their skills. The standards were raised, and the group progressed in technique, performance quality, playing ability, and leadership—as did the overall culture. Requests started coming in from different programs in the university and county to have them come perform at events, so it was exciting to witness that growth. I am grateful to have worked with Matt as well, and for him giving me the opportunity to invest in the group."

—Amanda Muse, former member of Gold line, Purple Thunder instructor, 2018-19.

Thunder instructors, but it looks like I will be teaching both units this fall. It is completely exhausting, but well worth the educational experience that these students are getting! The drumline has grown to where now we simply cannot take every person who auditions, but it has allowed for us to make membership in both groups more competitive, which makes all of us better.

PN: Describe the audition process and what you look for in potential members.

Henley: We have two audition days: one in May, which is a high school clinic as well, and another in June. Everyone auditions for the top group at the first date; we then take a snapshot of where we are, pass out the Purple Thunder music, and students then have a month to decide how to focus or refocus their efforts. We return in June and make final decisions about instrument assignments.

In terms of what we want in potential members, we look for two main aspects. Obviously, their talent level and



skill set should be high enough. More importantly, however, is how they've prepared for the auditions in advance. This tells me everything about their work ethic, which in turn will bleed over into the season; their preparation and how they respect the process will contribute to our success.

PN: How much do you lean on staff throughout the season? Do they do any arranging? When were you first able to bring some help onboard and in what capacity?

Henley: People are usually shocked when they find out how small our percussion staff actually is. From 1991 through 2004 I wrote for and taught the drumline, the front ensemble, and the rhythm section. In 2005, Jon Henson began teaching the front as a graduate student while I continued to write for everything. When Jon was hired as a third director in 2007, he continued to teach the front and rhythm section, and he assumed the writing responsibility for those groups. I have always taught and written for the top drumline, but in 2009 when our second drumline began, the instructor of that group wrote their exercises while I contributed occasionally. The only external percussion staff that we have had

is the Purple Drumline instructor, and one part-time bass drum tech the past few years, Taylor Barnes. All other instruction has been done by our Section Teaching Assistants [section leaders].

PN: Describe how the "rhythm section" started and its evolution and contributions to the ensemble.

Henley: In the mid-1990s the idea of turning pop tunes into marching/DCI-type charts was gaining momentum. The melodies satisfied our football crowd, but the drive, intensity, and difficulty of the visual and music inspired our students; it was a win/win, and adding a rhythm section just made sense to push this concept. Eventually we moved them onto the field for blend and pulse center purposes, but that "sound" helped us to approach arrangements in very different ways and also encouraged us to take risks through the use of electronics that other peer institutions simply could not do. It gave us a strong identity and has helped to mold our personality as an ensemble.

PN: Do have a specific writing process? Not only for wind charts but percussion features?

Henley: I have my own personal generalization of battery writing. I tend to cat-

egorize phrases or moments into three basic ideas: groove-based writing, melodic writing, or impact writing. Most of the time the arranging process falls under one of these categories. Therefore, I ask myself, "What does the music need? What do the wind players need to be successful?" Sometimes it needs a stylized groove that makes the arrangement feel good, sometimes I can explore more melodic/tonal ideas in a contemporary style, and sometimes the moment is for impact; for those moments I can go into a more gutsy rhythmic and dense condition that has flow, with the idea of tension and release always in the back of my mind. I don't necessarily start with a particular instrument every time; I try to let the music tell me where to go first.

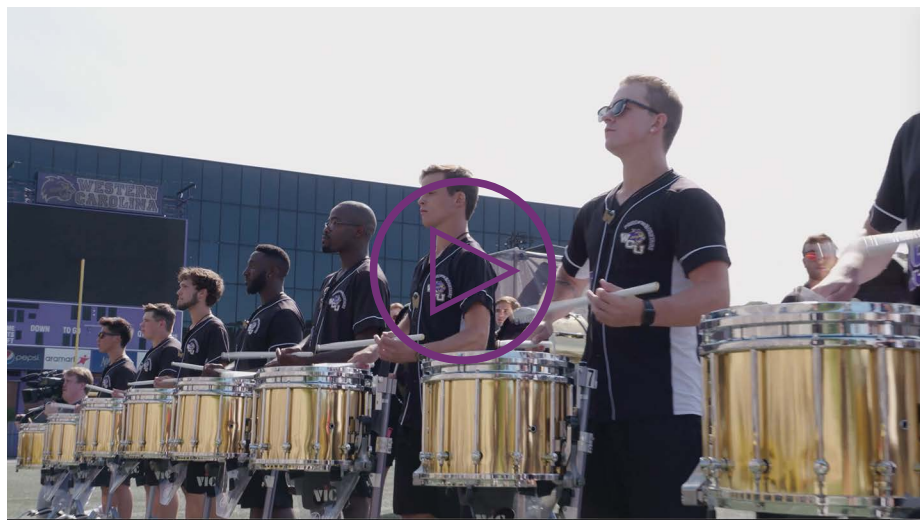
Each instrument has its own characteristics: tone, timbre, articulation, implement possibilities, projection, etc. It just makes sense to take all of these things into account when writing a chart. There really is a choir of soprano, tenor, bass, with cymbals painting

"One of the unique aspects of our percussion section is the use of a rhythm section on the field as it adds a unique opportunity—with the combination of electronics in the front ensemble—to recreate some of the musical content of our song selections. It also allows for non-traditional marching band students to get the opportunity to perform with us. Not only does the band serve as a laboratory for our performers and future music educators, but our large use of electronics and sound reinforcement gives students in our Commercial Music and Audio Production program a place to get real hands-on training in their field. The combination of live performers working with sound engineers creates a great learning environment for all the students."

—Jon Henson, front ensemble/
rhythm section coordinator.

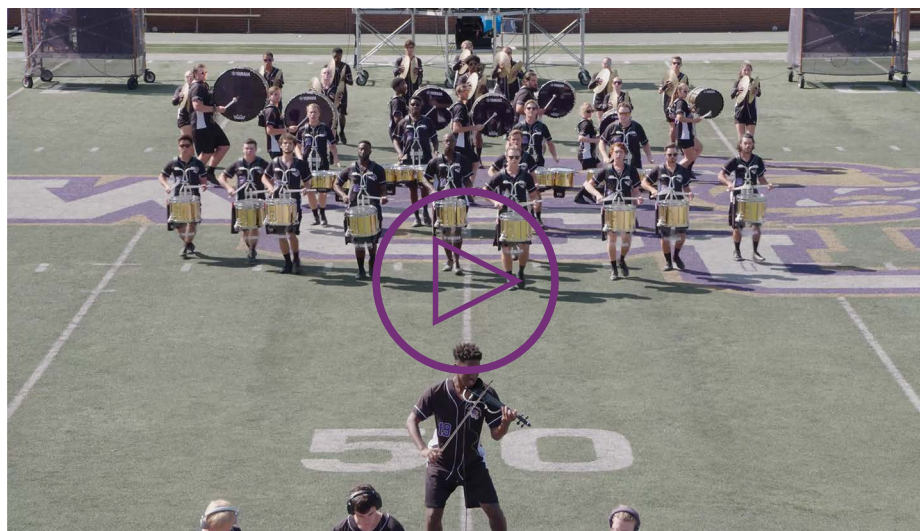


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Part 1 - POTM Field show "Believe" (percussion section only)

▶ Tap to play Video



Part 3 - POTM "Gold" drumline feature

the color to the musical canvas. I have branched out many times before, but it is most common for me to focus on their roles within the arrangement based on these inherent natural musical traits of the instruments.

PN: Do you ever depend on students to come up with new ideas? If so, please give some examples.

Henley: Yes! We start every spring with a meeting of our new STAs [section leaders], and we discuss the exercise program for the fall—what should stay, what should go, what we need—and

they inevitably want to contribute to some part of it. Currently, our leaders are collaborating on an exercise together while I help to steer that ship. It's great fun to be able to discuss the pedagogy behind the piece, what our goals are with it, and for them to have some creative license and share their musical voice. I love it! Another area where students have input is usually the section "licks" within the drum feature. Many times, the STAs will get together with their friends to write them together. I give them a framework, and they make it happen. Sometimes it's questionable,

but most of the time it is some really creative and challenging stuff!

PN: Talk a little about WCU's 2019 production and how that came about.

Henley: Many of the charts that we write have a basis within a bigger idea, and nothing could be more true of that than this past season's percussion feature. The entire production was titled "Believe," and it was built around that word emblazoned on the side of the Macy's Department Store in New York City. Our band was headed to march in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and we thought it would be cool to build the show around that idea. Each part of the show was then built around this idea:

- Part 1 - Believe in Me (Believe in yourself and believe in your own potential)
- Part 2 - Believe in You (Believe in the friend beside you and help them succeed)
- Part 3 - Believe in Us (Believe in the power of US and what we can accomplish together)
- Part 4 - Believe in Miracles (Because when you believe in yourself, believe in those around you, and believe in the power of doing great things together, then you can certainly believe that miracles are going to happen in your life)

Part 3 was the percussion feature, and the words really spoke to me. I was perusing the internet one day and saw an amazing video by B.C. Manjunath. It suddenly hit me: what if we were to collaborate with him and write something together? US—the power of us coming together. From Bangalore, India all the way to Cullowhee, North Carolina, could we cooperate to achieve something greater together? So, I hunted him down through social media and we started a conversation. I was really taken back by how humble, kind, and genuine he was. The idea was very exciting to both of us, but we really didn't know where to start.

Eventually, Jon Henson and I began

"I was super thrilled when Mr. Matt Henley reached out to me to perform for one of the Western Carolina University Band's challenging pieces. It was indeed an amazing experience to record both audio and video, one of highlights for me from last year. When Mr. Henley shared one of the clips from a performance, I felt very thankful when I heard the large crowd cheering the part that I was involved. My sincere gratitude."

—B.C. Manjunath.

tracking down South Indian inspired musical ideas and just brainstorming about what some of the phrases might look like. From there, I wrote down a one-line schematic of the chart by measure number. I went through each phrase and identified what I would compose and what Manju would write. Once finished, I wrote my parts and took this skeleton score to him, and with those parameters he began to compose his portions. I then went back and wrote to his ideas, and he wrote to my ideas. It was truly a collaboration in every sense of the word.

After the rhythmic ideas were laid, we were able to go back and make a more solid harmonic and melodic palette in which to reside. It was a bit backward from the normal way of arranging for marching band—rhythm first, instead of melody first—but it worked.

The power of US certainly came shining through, and I believe that our students really benefited from the experience. It was one of the coolest compositional adventures of my lifetime.



Gene Fambrough is Assistant Director of Bands and Associate Professor of Percussion at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). He directs the Percussion Ensemble, Steel Band, Drumline, and Electro-Acoustic ensemble, and assists with all aspects of the UAB Band program. He holds degrees from the University of Georgia, East Carolina University, and the University of Alabama.

Cymbals

Performance Time 1' 57"

BELIEVE - Pt. 3

WCU "Pride of the Mountains" 2019 Arr. Matt Henley/Jon Henson/BC Manjunath

♩ = 152

1

A

9

B

17

C

♩ = 164

♩ = 178

sfz

mp

24

D

ff

32

E

40

F

51

G

59

H

I

5

fff

70

ff p ff

Snare

WCU "Pride of the Mountains" 2019

Arr. Matt Henley/Jon Henson/BC Manjunath

● = 152

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BELIEVE - Pt. 3 -Snare... Pg. 2

The musical score is divided into several systems, each with a starting measure number in the left margin. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings, along with specific performance instructions for the Manju instrument.

- System 1 (Measures 45-57):** Labeled "Manju in" and "Manju out". It features a series of eighth and sixteenth notes with various fingerings (3, 5, 7) and dynamic markings (*p*, *mp*, *mf*, *f*, *ff*, *mp*, *ff*, *mp*, *f*, *p*, *f*, *mp*, *mf*, *f*). A "Split" instruction is present at measure 49.
- System 2 (Measures 58-61):** Labeled "Manju in". It continues the melodic line with dynamic markings (*mp*, *f*) and fingerings (3, 5, 7).
- System 3 (Measures 62-65):** Labeled "Manju out". It features a "solo" section with dynamic markings (*mp*, *mf*, *f*, *ff*) and fingerings (3, 5, 7).
- System 4 (Measures 66-73):** Labeled "Manju in". It includes a "Manju out" section and a "All" section. Dynamic markings include *fff*. Fingerings (3, 5, 7) are indicated.
- System 5 (Measures 74-77):** Labeled "Manju in". It continues the melodic line with dynamic markings (*p*, *ff*, *sfz*) and fingerings (3, 5, 7).

The score concludes with a final measure (77) marked with a double bar line and a "sfz" dynamic marking.

Tenor

Performance Time 1' 57"

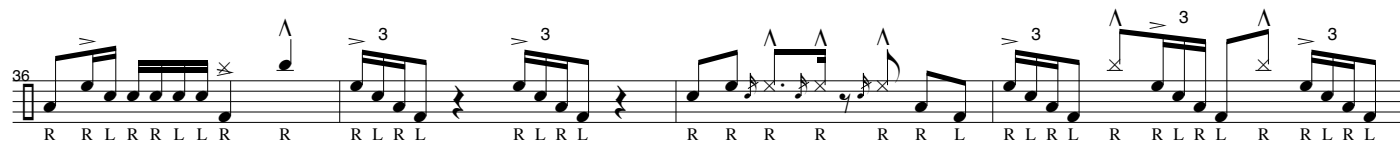
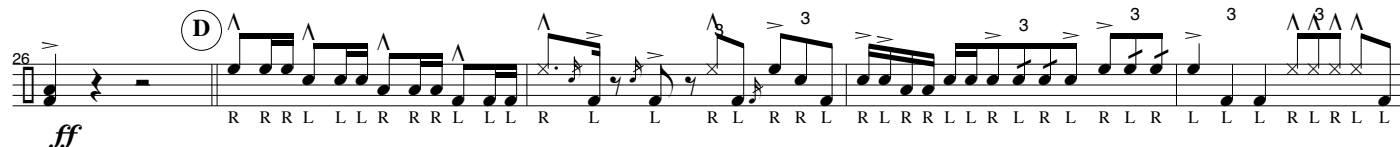
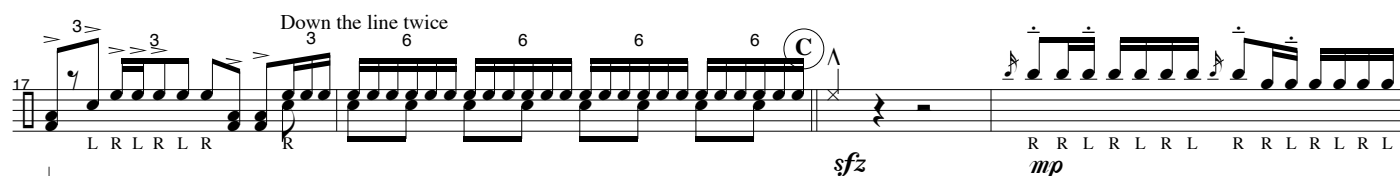
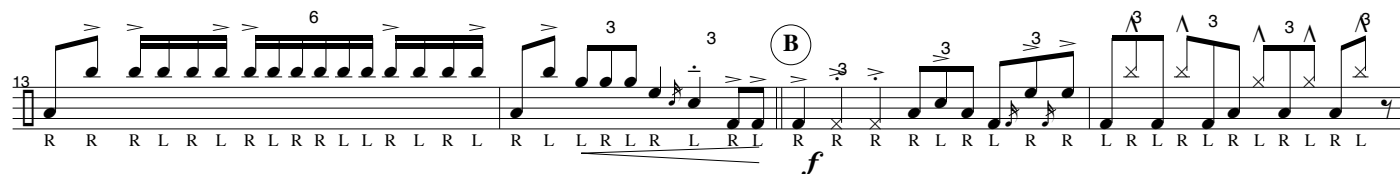
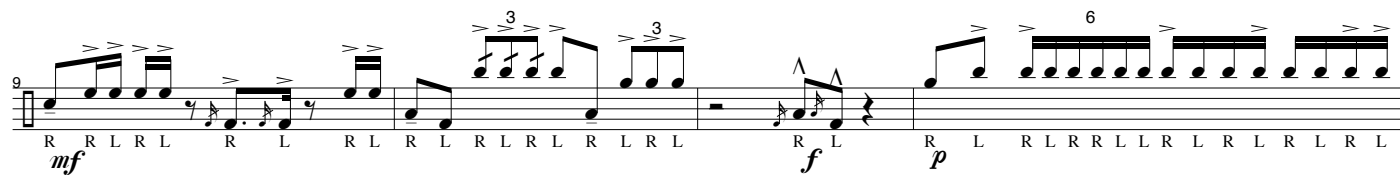
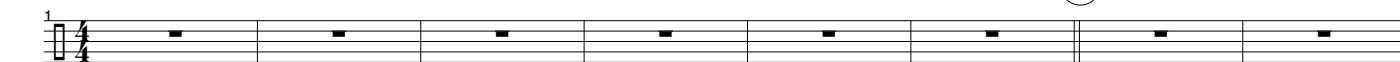
BELIEVE - Pt. 3

WCU "Pride of the Mountains" 2019

Arr. Matt Henley/Jon Henson/BC Manjunath

♩ = 152

(A)



45

mp

51

G

f

this soli written by Timothy Sandiford

Manju in

Manju out

56

mf

H

64

fff

I

70

74

p

ff

Bass

Performance Time 1' 57"

BELIEVE - Pt. 3

WCU "Pride of the Mountains" 2019

Arr. Matt Henley/Jon Henson/BC Manjunath

$\bullet = 152$

A

mp

B

f

C

$\bullet = 164$

sfz *mp*

$\bullet = 178$ $\bullet = 184$

mf *f* *ff*

D

E

F

BELIEVE - Pt. 3 -Bass... Pg. 2

47 *p* *mp* *mf* *ff* **G**

54 *mp* *f* *mp* *f* **H**

60 *R R L L R* *R L R R L L* *R L R R L R L R L* *R L R L R L R L R* *R R R R L L* *R L R L R L R L R L R L*

64 *R L* *fff* *L R R L* *R L* *R L L R* **I**

69 *R L R L R L R L R R L* *R L R R L L R L R R L L R* *R R R L L L R R R L L* *R R R L L L*

73 *R L R R L L R L R R L L R L R R L L R L R L* *R L R R L L R L R R L L R L R L* *R L R R L L R L R R L L R L R L* *R L R L R L* *R R* *p* *ff*

Vibraphone 2

BELIEVE PT. 3

WCU "PRIDE OF THE MOUNTAINS" 2019

Arr. Matt Henley | Jon Henson

1 *mf*

8 *mf*

14 *f* *ff* *Splash! Ch.*

18 *sfz* *mf*

23 *fff* *ff* *Sus. Cym.*

28 *Ch. Splash! Sus. Cym.* *Ch. Splash! Sus. Cym.* *ff*

36 *ff*

42 *mf*

49 *p* *ff* *mf* *ff* *Sus. Cym.*

56 Clap

Sus. Cym.

H

mf

p

f

63

Sus. Cym.
Ch.

I

ff

ff

69

ff

f

3

3

3

3

73

3

3

ff

ff

BELIEVE PT. 3

WCU "PRIDE OF THE MOUNTAINS" 2019

Arr. Matt Henley | Jon Henson

1 A

f *p*

8 *mf* *p* *mf*

14 B *f* *f* *ff* Splash!
Ch.

18 C *sfz* *mf*

22 6

25

6 6 3

Ch. Splash! D Sus. Cym. Ch. Splash! Sus. Cym. Ch. Splash!

ff *ff*

31

Sus. Cym. E Tom

ff

39

ff

3 3 3 3

F

43

Tamb.

mf *mp* *f* *mp* *mf* *f*

G Clap

50

f *mf* *ff*

H Tom

57

f *ff*

64

Sus. Cym.
Ch.

I Tom

ff

70

ff *f*

73

ff *ff*

PN



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