

# **Jazz Rhythm Section Techniques**

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## Jazz Rhythm Section Techniques By Anthony Susi

### General Rhythm Section Considerations

1. Director needs to provide an accurate count-off, in the proper feel.
2. Balance is essential because if any part of the rhythm section plays too loud, the band is forced to play louder to hear themselves, resulting in distorted tone and intonation issues. It also puts a strain on brass players chops.
3. Rule of thumb: if you can't hear the piano, the drums, bass and/or guitar are too loud.
4. Make sure the rhythm section is set up as close to the band as possible in a tight knit group with bass and drums closest so the band doesn't have to strain to hear the time/tempo.
5. All rhythm section players angle slightly toward the band (tilted diamond).
6. All rhythm section players should be able to see each other for visual communication.
7. They must be completely conscious of each other's musical efforts and work together, not independently, to lay down the **groove/foundation** for the band (style, time, clarity, and color).

### DRUMS

#### INTEGRATION

A **"SHORT KICK"** in a tutti passage is a hit of the snare and bass drum together with the accents in the ensemble's melodic phrase. Trumpet patterns are often mimicked on the Snare because of its similar timbre and crispness. The Bass Drum in turn punctuates lower voice lines (trombone, tenor and baritone sax) because of its similarity.

A **"LONG KICK"** is often played by hitting the bass and crash cymbal together, with the sustaining cymbal sound reinforcing the long note (often preceded by 2 eighths on the snare).

Writing in key cued rhythm patterns in the drum part can help guide your drummer.

A **"SET-UP"** is a short rhythmic figure ("bucket of fish") played by the drummer just before a tutti or section entrance, preparing a more precise entrance through audible communication.

A **"FILL"** is a designated place at the end of a phrase for the drummer to improvise a short solo to set the upcoming ensemble or solo entrance. It should be appropriate to the style and what dynamic will be played at the conclusion of it. Keep fills simple to avoid speeding up the time.

When time gets off, the drummer needs to simplify playing and get the hi-hat clicking tightly on 2 & 4, while the ride keeps the ride cymbal cooking straight fours.

#### **BALANCE/STYLE: (Role is to keep time and establish the proper groove)**

**Swing Style** is based on a Top to Bottom Balance with a strong rhythmic drive from the ride cymbal and hi-hat and a softer independent line from the snare or bass drum. Hi-hat "sock" on 2 & 4. The Bass Drum in general, the jazz guitar, is more felt than heard, used sparingly.

**Rock/Funk Styles** are the opposite with the snare and bass drum being the primary rhythmic drivers.

#### **Latin Grooves** (Afro-Cuban and Brazilian)

1. Play on the dome/crown of the ride cymbal to simulate the cowbell or agogo bell sounds.
2. Turn the snare off to simulate a timbale.
3. Use rim knocks to simulate the clave sound. Flip the stick around and do not raise the tip of the stick off the head. Experiment with where the stick strikes the rim to find the "sweet" spot.
4. Bass drum match/lock-in to Bass Guitar rhythmic pattern.

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#### EQUIPMENT

The **Bass Drum** should be tuned below the lowest string on the bass (Great E) to an approximate pitch of Great C. The front head should be tighter than the batter head. To deaden the ring, a towel can be placed inside the bass drum. A 20" bass drum is a good choice because its size can prevent it from overpowering the ensemble or adding an unwanted muddy sound.

With **Toms**, there needs to be at least a difference of a third to a tritone between the floor tom and bass drum for contrast. The batter head should once again be looser. The toms should ring a little and be tuned to intervals that are separated by at least a third.

The **Snare Head** should be tighter than the batter head for a sound that blends with the toms yet is crisp enough for clarity (NOT too tight and high pitched for Swing). The 14" x 5.5" depth is a good choice. A coated head would be ideal for use with brushes.

The **Ride Cymbal** should be about 20" to 22" in diameter and medium thick to thick to play with good articulation and not washout with overtone and excessive ringing.

The **Crash cymbal** should be 16" to 18" in diameter and thin to medium thin to have an immediate crash response.

Your **Arrangement** should provide the shortest comfortable distance between drum and cymbals and you for ease of movement. Primary playing areas should be reached without twisting your wrist or excessive extensions of your arms to keep them relaxed and avoid tension.

Height and distance of **Throne** greatly affect the performance of the feet. Height and distance should not limit technique types used with the feet.

Moderate weight Maple **Sticks** provide excellent definition on the ride for swing styles while Hickory and Oak are better for heavier rock and funk styles. Whatever you choose, never use your drum line sticks on the drumset!

Be sure to leave about 1" of space between the open hi-hat cymbals to ensure the needed "sock" on beats 2 & 4 is audible. You should be able to comfortably fit the butt end of the drumstick in gap.

#### DRUM TECHNIQUES

##### Bass Drum Foot Technique

1. Rest your heel on the heel plate of the pedal instead of planting your toes way up top.
2. Adjust the throne so your kneecap is directly over your ankle.
3. Don't sit too close to the drumset (will result in limited foot pedal action with the heel down).
4. When speed/volume is needed, use the Heel Up position (ball of foot 2-4" up from the hinge).

##### Hi-Hat Foot Technique

1. For soft dynamics, the heel stays down.
2. For medium tempos and dynamics, use a rocking motion. Heel comes down on beat 1, ball of the foot slams down on beat 2 with enough force to raise the heel, heel down on 3, ball on 4.

##### Ride Cymbal Technique

The triplet feel is most commonly used in swing. The stick is held in the R.H. using just the thumb and forefinger with the thumb on top. Lower or raise the two-fingered grip until you find the spot that allows the stick to balance, rebounding easily. Taps falling directly on beats 2 & 4 are slightly accented and played with a slight rotation of the wrist. The other notes are a bounce, controlled by the middle finger. Locate the taps on 2 & 4 about two inches to the left of the area where the bounced notes fall, rebounding back to the original starting point, approx. midway between the edge and the center.

##### Swing Pattern

Avoid monotonous pattern of repeating the quarter and pair of eighths. The drummer should choose where to insert eighth note pairs amid a steady beat of quarter notes, lining up the ride cymbal quarters with the walking bass line. A drummer who chooses a variety of rhythms will listen and concentrate more.

##### Accompanying Soloists & Outlining Form

Every soloist should receive a different "color" from the drummer who paints a backdrop for each solo. Have the drummer change from a sustained ride cymbal for higher ranged instruments (trumpet & alto sax) to a tighter hi-hat sound for lower register instruments (trombone, tenor/bari- sax). The drummer can also change from a snare to rim knocks for the same reason cited. A different cymbal and/or pattern will help clearly outline the form (verse, chorus, bridge)

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#### Drum Soloing

1. Increasing the Dynamic and Speed of strokes will create tension or vice versa.
2. Incorporating Rests, Accents and Sticking Patterns (i.e.; paradiddles) as well as Syncopation is more interesting than a steady stream of 8<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> notes in parallel motion on the drums.
3. Distributing rhythmic figures between Hands and Feet is an impressive technique.
4. Keeping L.H. hand stationary (snare) while R.H. moves around toms creates a melodic phrasing.
5. Contrary motion with both hands going in opposite directions can create interesting results.

#### BASS

##### EQUIPMENT

Use a Bass **Amp**, not guitar or keyboard amp, as the frequency response/tone will be different.

For Electric Bass, use less lows, more treble with tone control to simulate Upright Bass. This will provide more definition/edge to their sound.

Recommend using a **Foot Pedal** for volume control with an amplified bass.

##### TECHNIQUE

For upright bass, best place to pluck the string for most definition and resonance is near the bottom of the fingerboard.

Try playing with the thumb and forefinger or thumb and middle finger when speed is needed.

For **Slap Bass**, hold your thumb like a hitch-hiker. Slap the meaty side of your thumb forcefully against the string around the 17<sup>th</sup> fret.

Direct the **Amp** so both the bassist and drummer can hear it, with a clear pathway to the audience/band without obstruction.

For **Walking Swing** line, emphasize beats 2 & 4 with a little more pull on the string.

For **Latin Style**, establish a repeated pattern, often dotted quarter and 8<sup>th</sup> note.

##### WALKING BASS LINE CONSTRUCTION: (Dual Role - Harmonic & Rhythmic Foundation)

1. If you are creating your own walking bass line, play the root on the first beat of every measure.
2. Move from root in an arpeggiated or scalar passing tone on beat 2 to another chord tone on beat 3.
3. Approach each new or repeated chord by half steps from above or below on beat four.
4. Be sure direction of your bass lines rise and fall smoothly within an octave range in each measure.
5. If the same chord occurs on consecutive measure, try playing the root on the downbeat of the first measure and the fifth on the downbeat of the following measure.



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#### VOICING CONSTRUCTION

#### PIANO

The **3<sup>rd</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> of chord** must always be present, with no note lower than middle C.

Ideally the best way to voice any chord is to leave out the root in the right hand; that should be covered in the bass or L.H. (minimize finger movement when shifting from chord to chord).

Encourage pianist to play **Open Voicings** (spread, greater than an octave).

One basic technique establishes the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> as the lowest sounding note and then alternates the use of the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> as the lowest tone in the next chord, maintaining smooth voice leading.

Another Jazz chord voicing technique is comprised of stacked intervals of a 4th.

Avoid doubling the bass in the left hand, even though the piano part is often printed that way.

#### RHYTHMIC COMPING: (Role is Harmonic Identity/Color with Rhythmic Punctuation)

Fill in the holes/rests of the wind section with tasteful block chord patterns, often within the range of a 10<sup>th</sup>. (quasi Count Basie): No sustain pedal for comping; reserve use for ballads.

Patterns that usually consist of short punctuation, not half note sustained chords.

In traditional Afro-Cuban Music, the piano helps establish/maintain the rhythmic pulse. This is often done with a **Montuno rhythm** with is a repeated syncopated phrase, usually 2 bars in octaves.

#### EQUIPMENT

#### GUITAR

A hollow body guitar is ideal but to simulate it with a solid body electric guitar:

1. Select the "neck" pickup (located closest to the fingerboard). Never use the "bridge" pickup for jazz style music.
2. Heavier String gauges provide a desired warmer, darker sound and better intonation.
3. A clean sound without distortion effect should be used.
4. Strum with a medium thick pick, not thumb. Downbeats are played with downstrokes.
5. A cabinet with one 12" or 10" speaker is sufficient with a minimum for 20 watts to a max of 60.
6. Place the amp behind them so the whole rhythm section can hear it and also use their body as a buffer to prevent feedback between the amp and guitar pickups.
7. Do not use a Bass amp as the frequency response and tone quality will be different.
8. Turn up the volume and all tone controls on the amp down (barely audible, no more than 3).
9. Turn up the volume control on the guitar up.
10. For jazz style, use more low and mid on the amp tone settings, less treble for mellower sound.
11. A mellow and sweet sound can be produced strumming at the end of the fingerboard - it becomes more twangy toward the bridge.

#### COMPING STYLES

Confine yourself to the top 3 or 4 strings, excluding the 2 low strings to avoid muddying up the sound by conflicting with the bass player.

##### SWING

For tunes in the Basie swing style, strum 4 chords to a bar, accenting beats 2 & 4, slightly dampened (Freddie Green). Primarily mid-range voicings, low on the fingerboard. Freddie Green chords utilize 3 notes containing the root, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> played on the 6<sup>th</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> strings.

Another common style involves playing short punctuations, very similar in concept to what the drummer might do on the snare drum.

##### FUNK

Sparsely strumming chords in 4 sixteenth note groupings on beat 2 or 4.

##### LATIN

A variation of comping where a straight eighth subdivision is used, with emphasis on consecutive upbeat strums. The guitarist can also replicate the **Montuno** played by the pianist, play whole or half note sustained chords (lay a pad) or mimic the **3 - 2 Son Clave** rhythm pattern.

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### COMMON PRACTICES FOR JAZZ PIANO & GUITAR

Can add color by occasionally doubling melodic lines.  
Vary your chord voicings; learn different inversions.  
Try to retain common tones between different adjacent chord to eliminate large shifts.  
Don't overplay when you're not the soloist.  
Play in a different register than the soloist.  
Be aware of each other's parts and try to play in separate ranges or alternate passages.

#### GUITAR & PIANO COMPING

1. Four slashes in a measure doesn't mean you should play a chord on every beat.
2. Comping should be sparse behind a melody or soloist (**Repetitive Rhythm** but not busy).
3. The primary strumming pattern is the "**Charleston**" **Rhythm** of a quarter note on beat one and eighth note on the upbeat of two.
4. Decide in advance when to play to avoid conflicting comping patterns. Alternate on some sections.

### RECOMMENDED LISTENING

#### DRUMS

Louie Bellison, Art Blakey, Gene Krupa, Peter Erskine,  
Steve Houghton, Mel Lewis, Buddy Rich, Ed Shaughnessy,  
Ed Soph and Dave Weckl. \*Latin -Tito Puente

#### BASS

Swing -Jimmy Blanton, Ray Brown  
Bebop -Oscar Pettiford  
Hardbop -Charles Mingus  
Cool Jazz -Paul Chambers  
Fusion/Funk -Jaco Pastorius & Stanley Clarke

#### KEYBOARD

Swing -Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Oscar Peterson  
Modal Jazz -Bill Evans  
Funk -Herbie Hancock  
Latin -Chick Corea

#### GUITAR

Swing -Freddie Green, Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass, Pat Martino  
Fusion -Pat Methany, George Benson

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