

Understanding Your Rhythm Section

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Over the years I have received many inquiries from public school music educators about how to deal more effectively with their young rhythm sections. This is not surprising, since jazz band directors typically have background as brass or woodwind players, and may not understand why their rhythm section appears to struggle while the rest of their band is functioning well.

The first step is to understand the distinct differences between the rhythm section and the horn sections and the unique challenges the rhythm section faces.

To begin with, the members of each horn section are all playing the same instrument – ie, everyone in the trumpet section is playing a trumpet, everyone in the trombone section is playing a trombone, and so on. Thus there is a certain musical (and psychological) empathy of each player in the section for one another, as they share similar challenges in playing their respective instruments. In contrast, the members of the rhythm section are playing instruments totally different from one another --piano, guitar, bass, drums. They do not share the same kind of instrumental common ground. The individual members of an inexperienced rhythm section can, as a result, feel very much alone in their early attempts at ensemble playing.

Their insecurity is exacerbated by the musical charts put before them. The wind players are given musical scores which are intended to be played quite literally. They recognize the notational marks they find on their musical scores as the same notation they have used since they began taking lessons on their respective instruments and participating in concert band, marching band, etc. Once the articulations have been clarified they are ready to play.

In contrast, when the rhythm section members receives their parts, they are presented with a set of “hieroglyphics” which may be totally foreign to them. Their parts must not only be read, but interpreted. The pianist and guitarist are given a chart with time slashes and chord symbols, from which they are expected to create tasteful voicings and comping rhythms. The bass player is given a similar chart and expected to invent a suitable bass

line from the chord symbols. The drummer in turn is given a chart that tells him/her what everyone else in the band is playing, but doesn't tell him/her specifically what to play. In effect, the rhythm section is the only section in the band that is constantly improvising. Nothing like a little more added stress! So, from the very first day, the rhythm section typically lags behind the horns in playing the charts, thereby gaining an image of themselves as substandard readers -- when in fact they really have to start learning to read all over again.

Lastly, the rhythm section is the only section in the band that is almost constantly playing. Whereas the horn sections have built-in places in the music where they can put down their horns, collect their thoughts and prepare for their next entrance (solos, solis, etc.), there is no similar physical or mental rest for the rhythm section. They are expected to provide constant support.

By identifying some of the unique challenges facing the young rhythm section, I hope to have provided some insights that may help to more effectively deal with them. In future articles we will explore various techniques and methods which will further enhance the functioning of your rhythm section.

Bio-

Jack Mouse is the Coordinator of Jazz Studies and Drum Set Instructor at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois. He is a staff artist/clinician for Yamaha, Sabian, Aquarian and Vic Firth. His recent recordings include *Agents of Change* (Blujazz) with the Janice Borla Group and *The Truth of the Matter* with the Dan Haerle Trio (Seagull). Visit Jack's website at www.jackmouse.com.

