

“And the Beat Goes On” – Keys to a Successful School Rhythm Section
Dick Dunscomb, Clinician

Rhythm Section Overview

Rhythm is fundamental to creating the feeling for any genre of music. It is therefore vital that the jazz rhythm section must create the appropriate rhythmic feel and style of swing.

In a traditional jazz ensemble setting with the piano, bass, guitar, and drums, the goal of each player is to collectively establish a good swing foundation for the rest of the ensemble, also called a *groove*.

The swing style may be foreign to many students so we will use the example of Count Basie’s rhythm section, commonly referred to as Basie’s “All-American Rhythm Section.” The musicians in that rhythm section were Count Basie, piano; Freddie Green, guitar; Walter Page, bass; Papa Jo Jones; drums.

The Heartbeat of the Band

Listen to the bass and drums in the Basie band as they complement each other. The bass plays steady, smooth quarter notes and the drums reinforce the steady beat with a triplet-based swing beat on the ride cymbal and the hi-hat cymbals on beats 2 and 4. An occasional cross stick is like glue for everyone. The guitar reinforces the beat by playing a steady quarter note pattern using downstrokes on the chords in a traditional acoustic jazz guitar style. The piano adds appropriate harmonic and rhythmic notes and colors.

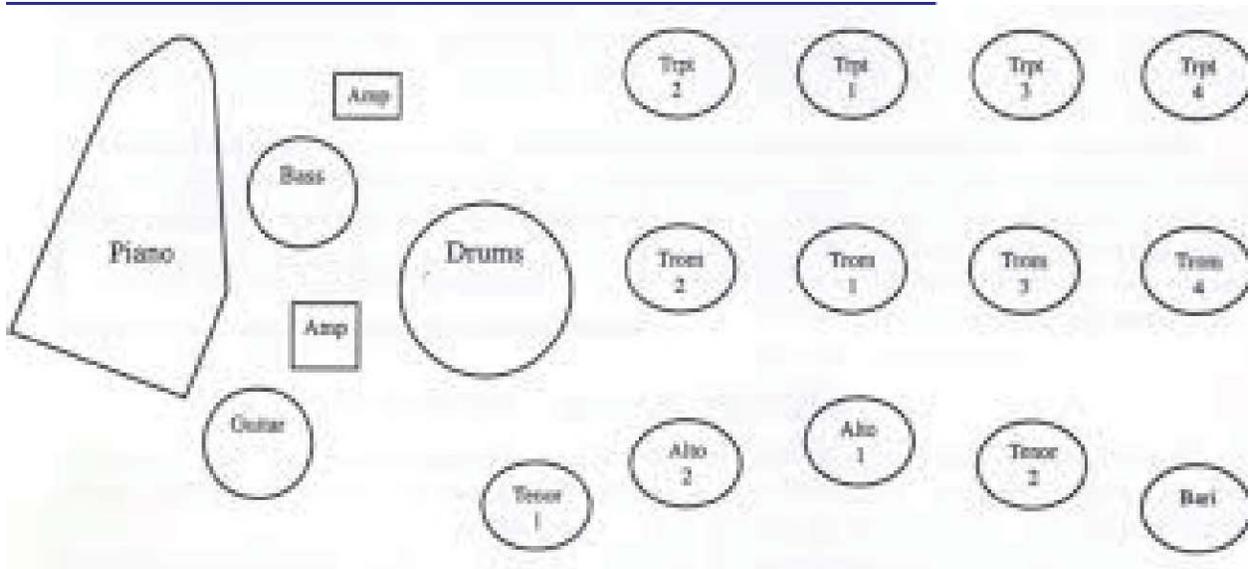
“All of Me”- Count Basie Orchestra

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JB2X5dfeTA4>

The Set-up

The set-up or positioning of the rhythm section is very important. In this traditional set-up each instrument can better understand and perform their roles. The piano and guitar are seated very close together. This is important, as they are responsible for the harmonic structure. The bass and drums are the primary timekeepers of the band, so they are close together. It is important that they all have visual and aural contact.

The drums are next to the trombones and the bass is next to the drums. The piano is to the right of the bass and the guitar is next to the piano. The bass and guitar amps are at least three feet behind the players. This helps them to more accurately hear their true sound.



Creating a Groove

The rhythm section must provide a *groove*. To keep from rushing or dragging - Subdivide! A good groove arises from musicians thinking alike and working together as a team, despite the fact that they play different instruments. The essential elements of a good groove are volume, sound, and time. The groove is the sound of musicians playing together, so if one instrument is louder than the others then there is no groove. Work on clarity of sound.

Each instrument should be clearly heard, so make sure the volume of each instrument suits everyone else accordingly. The groove is a happy feeling and the result of musicians playing and interacting together; they should not be overpowering, competing, or resisting each other.

A good way to emphasize this fact is to rehearse with a metronome. At the end of the day, the whole band should be aware of the time. If your rhythm section is having problems maintaining the tempo, then have them practice playing along with a metronome in rehearsal. This will alert them to the importance of keeping time.

Listening is as important as playing. Here are two examples of a groove:

“The Joy of Cookin’” – Count Basie <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09UmYjENIOQ>

“Take the A Train” – Duke Ellington https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KV8Hj_E8LJc

The Bass



Chuck Webb, bass

The acoustic bass sound is most appropriate for traditional swing music and all serious jazz bassists are encouraged to play and study the acoustic bass.

The bass player's time must be excellent so regular practice with a metronome is important. Walking a bass line while the metronome plays beats 2 and 4 is an accurate way to develop a solid swing feel.

The walking bass line is an independent melody line, that provides the rhythmic and harmonic foundation for the rest of the band, so playing in tune and with a solid time feel is a must. Remember the bass provides a pitch center and harmonic foundation for the entire ensemble.

The phrasing of the quarter notes is crucial to making the band swing. On medium to slow tempos the bass player should play legato so that there is very little space between notes. On faster up-tempo songs a little space between notes is desirable.

If the bassist plays an electric bass they can still achieve a convincing swing style and tone. Here's how: In order to get the warmer tone of an acoustic the bassist can play with the right hand close to the end of the fingerboard (some players even play right on top of the fingerboard at the 20-24th frets.)

Amplifiers come in all sizes and price ranges. An all-in-one (combo) amp is the most convenient for big band rehearsals and gigs. Place the amp 2-3 feet behind the player. The amp should be off center, so the sound is not blocked by the person in front of it.

When setting the dials on the amp it is best to set the tone controls on the amplifier (and the controls on an electric bass) to the “flat” position. This is usually at 12 o’clock, 0, or 5 on dials that range from 0-10. From this position the bassist can adjust the tone to best suit the acoustics of the room.

Listen to the masters – repeatedly and then again.

Ron Carter

Ray Brown

John Clayton

Eddie Gomez

Milt Hinton

John Patitucci

Rufus Reed

Esperanza Spalding

Christian McBride

Niels Henning Orsted Pedersen

The Drums



Jonathan Joseph, drums

The drummer's primary role is to be a time-keeper and to work with the entire rhythm section to establish a solid time feel and rhythmic groove. Second, the drum set has the critical responsibility of controlling the dynamics and setting the style and mood in the band. Third, the drum set acts as a gel among the different colors of the band with various cymbals that serve as a constant carpet of sound for the band. Fourth, and probably most important is to make the music feel good. Here is that *groove* word again.

It is important to note that in swing style the role of the drums is initially built around the cymbals. They create the spice that helps identify the style of the music and help provide solid time keeping for the ensemble.

Hi-hat cymbals 14" are appropriate. Choosing a ride cymbal is personal, but it is good to find one that produces a higher pitch with a sharp attack. The best place to strike the ride cymbal is part way between the edge and the crown of the cymbal. As you experiment your ear will help find the sweet spot on the ridge cymbal.

The ideal sizes for jazz drums in a big band are, bass drum 20"; snare drum 5 1/2" or 6 1/2 "x 14"; tom 10" or 12" x 8"; floor tom 14" x 14".

The drummer and bass player both must have solid and consistent time! Both should have and use a metronome when practicing. To help reinforce this the drummer should watch the bass

players striking hand and the bass player should watch the drummer's stick striking the ride cymbal.

Interpreting written drum parts with the following guidelines:

- Style and tempo – top left corner of the tune
- Road map – check for repeats, jumps, signs, etc.
- Identify sections of chart – head, solos, etc.
- Form – intro, head, transitions, endings - 12 bar blues, AABA, or other
- Fills – define the end of each section
- Dynamics – write in dynamics of band – generally play softer two places - on the head and in the solo sections

Listen to the masters – again and again

Louie Bellson

Jo Jones

Steve Houghton

Ed Thigpen

Terry Lynn Carrington

Peter Erskine

Jeff Hamilton

Ignacio Berroa

Art Blakey

Billie Cobham

The Guitar



Bill Boris, guitar

A key role of the guitar in a traditional big band is to play chords or “comp” in the rhythm section with piano, bass, and drums. *Comping* is providing rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment for soloists and or the ensemble. A secondary role is playing single note lines and/or as a soloist.

Freddie Green, the guitarist with the Count Basie band for many years, created a style of playing chords that used 2 or 3 notes per chord. Listening to the “masters” and emulating their approach is critical for a young musician’s development. Visit www.freddiegreen.com

A hollow body guitar is the best choice for big band, but almost any guitar can achieve an appropriate sound. The guitar sound should be crisp and clear without using too much treble.

The guitar should be felt more than heard. If the guitarist has a solid body electric guitar, he or she should strive to emulate an acoustic guitar sound. Adjust the various EQ settings on the amp to a darker sound.

The amp should be set flat; bass, treble and middle controls should be at 3 or 4 and volume on 2 or 3. The big band rhythm guitar sound is completely different from the rock guitar sound. You should actually hear some of the acoustic sound from the guitar itself when playing with the big band. The sound of the pick hitting the strings creates the rhythm and the feel, and the attack should align with the bass player's attack. Use primarily the upper strings. The sound of the guitar should blend with the bass and drums.

Listening is an important part of playing. As the guitarist plays their part with the band, direct him or her to continually listen to all the instruments and remember that the guitar sound should be part of the rhythm section.

Listen again and again to the masters.

Herb Ellis	John Scofield
Freddie Green	John Pizzarelli
Jim Hall	Wes Montgomery
Russell Malone	Pat Metheny
Pat Martino	Joe Pass

The Piano



Miguel de la Cerna, piano

The first thing is to embrace the idea of playing with others. Piano is one of the few instruments where most students initially learn to play solo. Just like sports and games, playing with others can be way more fun than playing solo.

Just as with the guitar, the accompanying aspects of piano playing is known in the jazz world as comping. *Comping* is the rhythmic and harmonic support for soloist and/or the ensemble. When the piano is comping, it should generally stay within a range of one octave below middle C and two octaves above middle C. Be sure to stay out of the range below as that is where the bass plays most often. It is not recommended to double the bass part.

When comping the pianist will use from two to six note chords using as key notes 3rds and 7ths, with no note lower than C below middle C.

Interpreting written rhythm section parts is a challenge for all including the piano. The written parts are simply a guide for players to create their own parts. Remember, in some places the piano does not need to play at all. The damper pedal should not be used in most jazz music.

There are often situations where an electronic keyboard is necessary or preferred. Directors should invest in the best equipment possible. It is important to choose an instrument with weighted keys to give the player a touch and feel close to an acoustic piano.

It is important to purchase a good solid keyboard stand and a good keyboard amplifier. The amp should have multiple sound controls to achieve the best sound from the keyboard.

Listen again and again to the masters. Here is Count Basie's version of "All of Me."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JB2X5dfeTA4>

Count Basie
Duke Ellington
Chick Corea
Bill Evans
Herbie Hancock

Mary Lou Williams
Monty Alexander
Oscar Peterson
Thelonious Monk
Toshiko Akiyoshi



J. B. Scott, guest artist

Rhythm Section Keys to playing with a soloist

- **Establishing the Groove with each other**
- **Communicating with soloist**
- **All establish time while listening to soloist**
- **Steady comping, strong musical foundation**
- **Rhythm Section balance under soloist**

Resources

"Jazz Zone...the Beginning"

Many of the concepts and information in this clinic are present in my new jazz band method "Jazz Zone...the Beginning." The book shares my over 40 years of successfully teaching jazz to students at all levels.

We are fortunate to have many resources available that can help us teach jazz. It is important for all directors to become familiar with resources available. "Jazz Zone" is the first lesson-plan based jazz curriculum including on-line resources and four complete big band charts.

This innovative method will introduce students to jazz information and concepts through listening, imitating, playing, and creating. Using the aural language of the great masters the student learns through interaction. Eight top jazz musician/educators are contributing authors who discuss each instrument in the jazz band.

View director's book at: www.jazzzoneonline.com.

"Jazz Zone Together"

The writing of "Jazz Zone" led to the creation of "Jazz Zone Together." It is an innovative online virtual community that teaches, entertains and creates an interaction of music. Dick Dunscomb interviews recognized jazz musicians, educators, arts specialists, artists and celebrities. Each interview is approximately 45 minutes in length.

Some of the rhythm section interviews include:

Bass – Chuck Webb, Rufus Reid, J.B. Dyas, Lou Fischer

Drums – Ignacio Berroa, Jonathan Joseph, Sherrie Maricle, Rich DeRosa

Guitar – Bill Boris, Marty Ashby,

Piano – Darius Brubeck, Shelly Berg, Miguel de la Cerna, Dave Loeb

Other interviews include Arturo Sandoval, Alan Baylock, Miles Osland, Jamey Aebersold, Carmen Bradford, Bob Mintzer, John Fedchock, Howard Reich, Steve Wiest, among others.

See and hear the interviews on YouTube or at: www.printmusicsource.com.

Additional Resources

"Jazz Pedagogy, The Jazz Educators Handbook and Resource Guide"

J. Richard Dunscomb and Dr. Willie L. Hill, Jr.

Designed to provide a foundation and structure for planning and implementing a successful jazz program. It does so over the 384 pages of the book. The ultimate resource guide provides literally thousands of reference materials for the jazz educator. The included DVD has over 3 hours of valuable audio/video information including rehearsals with middle school, high school and university jazz bands. See and hear Willie Hill, Dick Dunscomb and Bob Mintzer rehearsing the bands. Also view how to teach improvisation, rhythm section techniques along with audio examples of swing, mambo, salsa, meringue, samba, and Afro-Cuban styles.

"Rhythm Section Workout for Jazz Directors"

includes – books, DVD and CD

(Shelly Berg, Lou Fischer, Steve Houghton, Fred Hamilton)

Important websites

www.jazzednet.org – Jazz Education Network

www.downbeat.com – DownBeat magazine

www.pbs.org/jazz - Ken Burns Jazz

www.yourjazzeducationconnection.com – Your Jazz Education Connection