

School Jazz Rhythm Sections... from the beginning

Rhythm is fundamental to creating the feeling for any genre of music. It is therefore vital that the 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.

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 swing beat on the ride cymbal and plays the hi-hat cymbals on beats 2 and 4. 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.

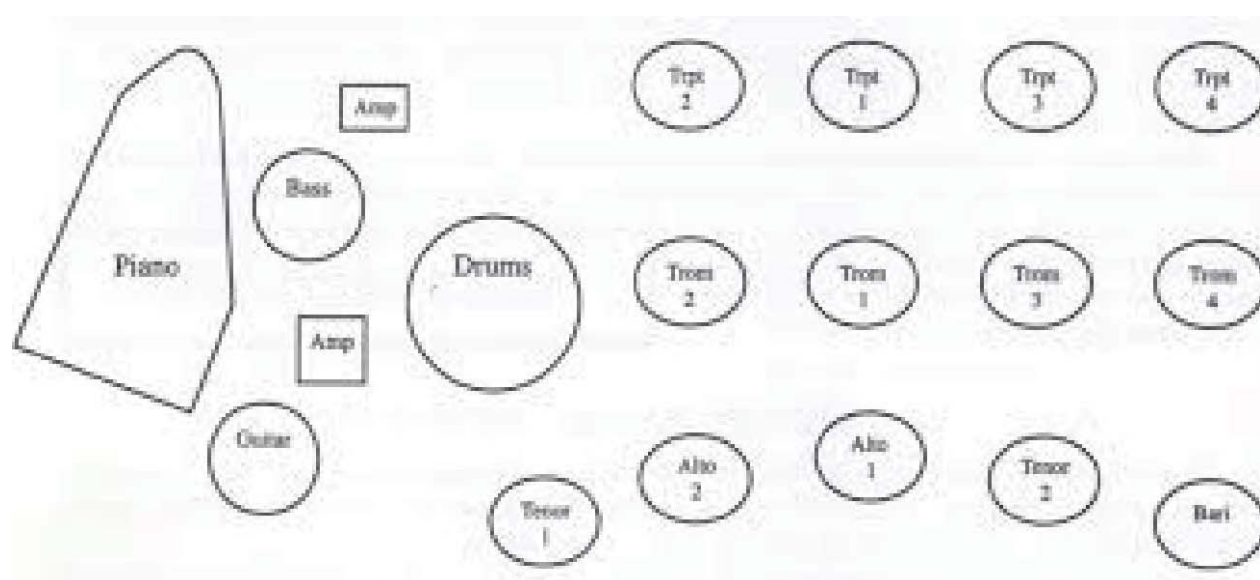
Let's listen and watch the great Basie Orchestra (big band) play their arrangement of "All of Me."

on line listening - count basic orchestra "All of Me"

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

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.

The drums are next to the trombones and the bass is to the right of the drummer's ride cymbal. 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.



How can our students sound like that? Let's take a brief look at each Instrument.

THE BASS

The bass in swing style music usually plays a walking bass line. This type of line typically uses quarter notes to outline the chord progression. Embellishing triplets and swing eighth notes may also be employed to add interest depending on the tempo. Pioneers of this style include Jimmy Blanton, Oscar Pettiford, and Walter Page who was the bassist in the "All-American Rhythm Section" of the Basie band. 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.

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. Legato phrasing is accomplished by using left hand fingerings that allow the bass player to keep a note pressed to the fingerboard as long as possible without having to interrupt it to get to the next note.

On faster up-tempo songs a little space between notes is desirable. Playing legato on up-tempo swing tends to make the groove feel sluggish. The bassist should try to make the line "bounce" by concentrating on the attack of the note and allowing the natural decay of the instrument to provide a little space between notes.

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. If the bassist plays an electric bass they can still achieve a convincing swing tone. Here's how:

First, remember that the acoustic bass has a darker and warmer tone than the electric. This means that the notes on electric bass will not have the natural warmth and bounce of an acoustic. 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.) This will give a "woodier" tone.

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.

Modern amplifiers come in all sizes and price ranges. An all-in-one (combo) amp is the most convenient for big band rehearsals and gigs.

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 bassist should concentrate on phrasing the notes so that the metronome feels as though it is swinging!

DRUMS

Together with the bass the drums reinforce the “heartbeat “ of the band. 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. The drummer’s initial focus in swing style is on the sound and style of the cymbals.

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 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 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 ride cymbal.

The hi-hat foot technique starts with the heel down on beats 1 and 3 and toe down on beats 2 and 4 in 4/4 meter. The goal is to create a nice tight “chick” sound with the hi-hat cymbals. Adjust the height and distance between cymbals until this is achieved.

The drummer and bass player both must have solid and consistent time! Both should have a metronome. To help reinforce this the drummer should watch the bass players striking hand and the bass player should watch the drummer's stick on the ride cymbal.

Listening to professional drummers playing in the swing style will create models to emulate. Following are some terrific swing-style players to listen to; Jo Jones, Ed Thigpen, Peter Erskine, Steve Houghton just to name a few. As with each instrument studying with a professional is highly recommended.

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. The following is a YouTube link showing Count Basie on piano performing with only bass, drums, and guitar. The video clearly reveals Freddie Green's great sense of time and sound.

"As Long As I Live" - Count Basie and Freddie Green - 1:18

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ad1nuBiYbr4>

A hollow body guitar is the best choice for big band, but 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. The guitarist may want to slightly raise the action of the guitar and use a string gauge starting at 11 or higher.

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. The sound of the guitar should blend with the bass and drums.

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.

Depending on the tempo, the guitarist usually plays quarter notes on every beat, and beats 2 and 4 are slightly accented. The time feel of the quarter notes should be as steady as a clock. The arm of the guitarist should strum glancing strokes with the pick across the top of the strings using only down strokes. Listen very closely to

the bass and drum time feel. The bass also usually plays quarter notes and the guitarist and bassist must be in sync on the quarter notes.

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. In addition to Freddie Green, to capture the jazz guitar sound, improvisation concepts and feel, check out guitarists Wes Montgomery, Jim Hall, and Pat Martino to name a few.

Visit www.FreddieGreen.com for more information.

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.

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.

In most swing arrangements, various instruments will play and improvise over some form of chord progressions and/or rhythmic beat. Most soloists, especially beginners, need to have a good solid

foundation and understanding of chord changes or a chord progression to feel comfortable in their improvisation.

As with all instruments it is key to listen to professionals in swing style. We recommend Count Basie and Duke Ellington as those models. Both excel at comping and soloing in swing style. They are easily found on YouTube.

Interpreting written rhythm section written parts is a challenge for all including the piano. To begin to comprehend the process the pianist must understand the following:

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.

Exercise 8.2 - piano

The image displays three systems of piano accompaniment for Exercise 8.2. The music is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The first system, labeled 'Piano', contains four measures with the following chords: Bb7, Eb7, Bb7, and Bb7. The second system, labeled 'Pno.', starts at measure 5 and contains four measures with the following chords: Eb7, E7, Bb7, and G7#5. The third system, also labeled 'Pno.', starts at measure 9 and contains six measures with the following chords: Cm7, F7, Bb7, G7#5, Cm7, and F13. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, a grand staff brace, and various rhythmic values such as quarter notes, eighth notes, and rests.

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. Many of the concepts in this article come from my new jazz band method "Jazz Zone...The Beginning." See and hear it at www.jazzzoneonline.com.

By J. Richard Dunscomb