

**Presented at Jazz at Lincoln Center  
Band Director Academy – *Big Band Rehearsal Techniques***

**Finding the Groove: Techniques for Working With A Student Rhythm Section**

INSTRUCTORS

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COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

Since the beginning of jazz history, the rhythm section has continued to evolve. Some of the early configurations were banjo, tuba and drums or bass, banjo and drums or piano, bass and banjo. When we think in terms of the modern rhythm section, it usually consists of bass, piano, drums and guitar. In some configurations, bongos, congas or etc. may be added.

In this session we will review each instrument's role and function within the modern rhythm section (bass, drums, guitar and piano), how each will work together to create and maintain a consistent groove, and how the section will accompany and lead the ensemble. Each clinician will also offer input into techniques to:

I) Instrument Roles in the Rhythm Section

A. Bass Role

1. Swing and groove
2. Responsible for keeping a steady pulse (an extension of the drums)
3. Expand and outline the harmony
4. Lock up with fellow rhythm section mates

B. Drummer's Role

1. Swing or groove
2. Primary time keeper (Drives the band)
3. Governs the dynamics of the band
4. Lock up with fellow rhythm section mates

C. Guitarist Role

1. Swing and groove
2. Outline the harmonic structure
3. Provide harmonic and rhythm accompaniment for the soloist (comp)
4. Keep the bass from rushing and drums from dragging

D. Pianist Role

1. Swing and groove
2. Outline the harmonic structure and provide accompaniment for the soloist (comp)
3. Provide rhythmic subdivision
4. Lock up with fellow rhythm section mates

- II) Effectively set up the section
  - A. Placement of instruments
    1. Line of sight – Making sure that everyone can see each other, can make eye contact for communication
    2. Proximity – The section members needs to be in close proximity to each other and to the rest of the ensemble
    3. Aural clarity – Each rhythm section member should be able to hear himself, each other and the rest of the ensemble
  - B. Appropriate amplifier settings
- III) Run an effective rhythm section rehearsal
  - A. The blues progression
  - B. Big band repertoire
- IV) Create communication with a soloist
- V) Generate energy and excitement in the ensemble
  - A. Understanding of orchestration within section
  - B. Leading the direction of the chart
- VI) Identify appropriate examples of good rhythm section “hook up”

#### LIST OF HANDOUTS

Laying the Foundation: Specifics for Rhythm Section Instruments  
Helpful Hints for Getting the Right Sound  
Key Rhythm Sections & Recorded Examples

## **Laying the Foundation: Specifics for Rhythm Section Instruments**

It is IMPOSSIBLE to have a swinging band if the rhythm section doesn't swing. This presents a particular challenge for those of us who are "horn-player" band directors. We have to devote MORE time to teaching and demonstrating concepts to our rhythm sections.

### **I) Instrument Roles in the Rhythm Section**

- A. **Drums** - Getting a good "feel" from the drummer starts with two basic grooves: (1. full-kit "Ride" and (2. closed hi-hat "tick, tick, ti-tick". In the full-kit ride; the drummer should "feather" the bass drum on all four beats; clap the hi-hat on 2 and 4, play a triplet-based pattern on the ride cymbal and "chop wood" on beat 4 (or 2 & 4) on the rim of the snare drum. All of these elements need to be in balance with one another. The Closed Hi-Hat groove is often used in conjunction with bass solos, or quiet sections of the music. The hi-hat is closed quite tightly with the left foot while the, left hand grasps the cymbals and clicks the stick on the stand. The right hand plays a "ride" pattern on the hi-hat, "tick, tick, ti-tick", which is based on the triplet.
- B. **Bass** - A Big Sound, Excellent Intonation and solid quarter-note time are essential for the bass player. Be sure that bass players are "pulling" down low, right at the end of the fingerboard and using a lot of "meat" on the side of the finger. Quarter notes should feel like 2/3 of a beat and line-up with the feathered bass drum. This "LOCK" between bass and drums is how "The GROOVE" is established. The great bassist, Ray Brown described a beat as if it were a sheet of paper held sideways. He liked to play on the forward edge of the beat in order to create forward motion and excitement in the groove.
- C. **Piano** - With the Bass and Drums establishing both the groove AND the harmonic structure, the role of the piano is to provide color and conversation and to further solidify the groove by displaying the subdivision. Red Garland made a career of playing on the "and-of-4" and the "and-of-2", anticipating the upcoming harmony and displaying subdivision. The piano can function just as a drummer in setting up figures within the big band. If the ensemble is going to enter on beat 2, for instance, the pianist playing something on beat 1 will effectively "set up" the ensemble figure. Count Basie was masterful at playing where necessary. Duke Ellington would often use the piano as another color for the ensemble. Duke would simply not play until the color of the piano was needed (when there was no background, solo sections, etc.).

The use of appropriate "voicings" is essential if it's going to sound like jazz music. For the most part, "rootless" voicings which use the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of the chords are most appropriate. Two-Hand voicings often "stack" fourths above the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>. Comping patterns should "find the holes" and alternate between playing on the beat and on the "And" which must be on the last triplet of a beat. Above all; don't get too busy!

- D. **Guitar** - For our purposes, the four-beat comping style of Freddie Green, the great guitarist for the Count Basie Band, serves as the example for the role of the guitar in the jazz rhythm section. He used sparse voicings, usually including only the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of dominant chords and strummed downward on all four beats. The desirable sound is made from the percussive sound of the stroke – the "chunk". Part of creating this chunk depends on the ability to mute the strings. The more the strings are muted, the better the percussive effect, but the challenge in muting requires that the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> ring while the

other strings mute. He used an arched-topped acoustic guitar and was largely un-amplified. It's not flashy or glamorous, but if the guitarist plays this style with enthusiasm and consistency, it will totally elevate the feel of the rhythm section!

## II) Medium Swing- the backbone

- A. The foundation of a jazz program should be the medium-tempo swing groove. Everyone should feel, understand and be able to sing and play rhythms, articulations and vocabulary, which are a part of the aural and oral tradition of jazz music.
- B. One has to listen to the language in order to learn how to speak it! The music came first. Music Theory gives us a way to explain, discuss and further understand what the music is doing. But we have to hear and feel it before we start to analyze it. We'll listen to some great examples of Medium Swing Groove; paying particular attention to the way everything revolves around the triplet subdivision.

## III) Let's Groove!

- A. Using THE BLUES as our vehicle, we'll put together the elements and techniques described so far to take a ride down SWING STREET (OK, so I'm a corny band director)! Once the groove is established, we can explore techniques for interacting with each other musically in order to create improvised conversation. The use of call and response, dynamics, pedal points, varied instrumentation, stop-time, different textures, double-time feel and much more, can create a tremendous variety of musical settings through which we can communicate our feelings.
- B. Next, we will use the music from the big band as our rehearsal vehicle. If possible, provide your rhythm section with a lead sheet of the tunes as well as their big band parts. It will be important for them to understand the form of the tunes and will allow them to make sense of the chart, orchestrate and direct the flow of the ensemble. **Orchestration** here simply means to create arrangements within the arrangement so as not to conflict with one another - allowing one player to be rhythmic while the other plays more sustained ("padding"), giving each instrument it's own space, playing in 2 rather than 4, etc. Other questions to be considered in terms of orchestration will include:
  - 1. *Should this be a 2-feel?*
  - 2. *Is it a driving 4-feel?*
  - 3. *Does this section call for a pedal point?*
  - 4. *If the bass is playing a pedal, would more sustained chords sound better?*
  - 5. *Should I comp more sparingly or fill it up?*
  - 6. *Should I catch the hits or provide just downbeats?*

## Helpful Hints for Getting the Right Sound

Drummers should first learn to feather the bass drums. Feathering means to play four on the floor with the bass drum lightly. This also helps boost the sound of the bass.

Bassists should first learn to walk accenting two and four. This helps them to lock in with the drums but also helps them to discover how to feel all four beats. This is especially important for the further development of their rhythm.

Pianists should first learn to use two hands when developing the rhythm, utilizing a stride style then moving on to more of a Charleston type comp. And of course, pianist must develop a strong understanding of chord function and voicing, etc.

One important tool in getting a young rhythm section to play well together is to get them to listen to recordings together. Also it is important to find great rhythm sections in your community to mentor the students. There is key information that can only be passed down orally or aurally.

### Guitar Types and Amp Adjustments

The most authentic sound for rhythm guitar is an acoustic arch-top guitar. The flattop, round-hole guitar can work but usually lacks the volume and the mid-range to cut through a big band. Electric arch-top guitars, which are usually plywood, can work with the help of an amplifier. The trick is to set the volume of the amp to the level of being *felt* by not necessarily *heard*. The optimum position of the amp is to the left of the guitarist, thereby putting your body between the amp and the back of the guitar. This will also cut down the possibility of feedback.

Solid-body guitars are more difficult to adjust for a good percussive rhythm sound. If the guitar has two pickups, the neck pickup will work best for rhythm. These guitars are also usually strung with light gauge strings and very low action, making it difficult to get a good “chunk”. It might be necessary to adjust the amp to a darker setting in order to make a solid-body guitar fit into to the band. The tone controls are usually variable from one to ten. Bass (or Low) should be no more than four. Midrange can be as high as seven or eight. Treble (or High) can be four or five. This would be a good *starting* EQ for guitar. For rock and funk tunes the back pickup will work better for *ostinato* parts. The treble (or High) control could be adjusted higher if the guitar needs more articulation for rock or funk style.

## **Key Rhythm Sections & Recorded Examples**

### **Dear Old Stockholm**

Miles Davis Quintet – 50's

Red Garland (P)  
Paul Chambers (B)  
Philly Joe Jones (D)

### **Bessie's Blues**

John Coltrane Quartet

McCoy Tyner (P)  
Jimmy Garrison (B)  
Elvin Jones (D)

### **Moanin'**

Art Blakey & the Jazz  
Messengers

Bobby Timmons (P)  
Jammie Merit (B)  
Art Blakey (D)

### **Solar**

Bill Evans Trio

Scott LaFaro (P)  
Paul Motion (B)  
Bill Evans (D)

### **Gingerbread Boy**

Miles Davis Quintet – 60's

Herbie Hancock (P)  
Ron Carter (B)  
Tony Williams (D)

### **Dizzy's Business**

Cannonball Adderly Sextet

Joe Zawinul (P)  
Sam Jones (B)  
Louis Hayes (D)

## **Big Band recordings**

### **Basie Straight Ahead**

Count Basie Orchestra - Freddie Greene, Guitar; Norman Keenan, Bass; Harold Jones, Drums  
1968 Chess/GRP

### **Explosive!**

Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra; Milt Jackson, vibes; John Clayton, Bass; Bill Cunliff, piano;  
Jeff Hamilton, Bass  
1999 Warner Brothers

### **Duke Ellington: The Blanton-Webster Band**

Duke Ellington Orchestra  
1986 RCA

### **The Complete Decca Recordings**

Count Basie Orchestra  
1992 Verve/MCA

### **The Complete Solid State Recordings of the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra**

1994 Mosaic