

## IT'S ALL ABOUT THE RHYTHM (SECTION): THE KEY TO JAZZ ENSEMBLE SUCCESS

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The rhythmic feel is the most important element of jazz. Establishing the rhythmic feel, i.e. "finding the groove," is one of if not the most crucial elements of a successful jazz performance. The integrated efforts of the rhythm section are crucial to a successful "groove." There are three keys to the success of the jazz rhythm section: Groove, Time, and Clarity. This session will demonstrate rhythm section techniques that address the crucial elements of "groove" and style in authentic jazz performance.

Rhythm section playing in a jazz setting has 6 essential components:

- I. Facility and technique on the individual instruments. This may be achieved through scale, technical, and etude study, private lessons, jam sessions, etc. Achievement in this area should not be limited by faulty equipment. Use the best that your money can buy.
- II. An understanding of the jazz language and nomenclature. The understanding of the jazz language for rhythm sections begins with the understanding that rhythm parts are very seldom complete as written. It is what is done beyond what is written on the page that determines a quality section.
  - A. Chord Charts
  - B. Voicings
  - C. Drum Charts

Available resources include:

### **Theory/Technique**

"Elements of Jazz" by Jerry Coker (CPP/Belwin)  
"The Jazz Language" by Dan Haerle (Studio PR/Columbia)  
"The Jazz Sound" by Dan Haerle (Hal Leonard)  
"The Jazz Theory Book " by Mark Levine (Sher Music)  
"How to Practice Jazz" by Jerry Coker (Studio PR/Columbia)  
"Patterns for Jazz " by Jerry Coker (Studio PR/Columbia)  
"Building A Jazz Vocabulary" by Mike Steinell (available from Aebersold)

### **Director/General**

"Jazz Pedagogy: The Jazz Educator's Handbook and Resource Guide" by J. Richard Dunscomb and Willie L. Hill (Alfred)  
"The Real Jazz Pedagogy Book: How to Build a Superior Jazz Ensemble" by Ray Smith (Outskirts Press)  
"The Jazz Ensemble Director's Manual" by Rick Lawn (Barnhouse)  
"The Jazz Ensemble Director's Handbook" by John Berry (Hal Leonard)  
"The Jazz Educator's Handbook" by Jeff Jarvis and Doug Beach (Kendor)  
"Figure Reading Series" by Jerry Coker (a.f. Aebersold)  
"Sightreading Jazz" by Bob Taylor (a.f. Aebersold)  
"How to Practice Jazz" by Jerry Coker (a.f. Aebersold)  
"How To Learn Tunes" by David Baker (Aebersold)  
Jamey Aebersold Play-Along Collection (Numerous Vols. & counting)

- III. An understanding of the integrated role of each rhythm section player as related to each other and to the ensemble with which they are performing.
  - A. Bass/Drum Set Integration
  - B. Comping

### C. Auxiliary Percussion

- IV. An understanding of the techniques and methods necessary to successfully execute those roles. Pianists, guitarists, and bassists must become familiar with the system of chord and notational symbols that jazz composers use. They must learn how to be creative in developing voicings and lines for the notated chords. Percussionists must be able to play a variety of styles authentically. All rhythm players must learn the concepts of form and time keeping.

Available resources include:

#### **Piano**

- "Jazz/Rock Voicings for the Contemporary Keyboard Player" by Dan Haerle (Studio PR/Columbia)
- "Voicings for Jazz Keyboard" by Frank Mantooth (Hal Leonard)
- "The Chord Voicing Handbook" by Matt Harris and Jeff Jarvis (Kendor)
- "The Jazz Piano Book" by Mark Levine (Sher Music)
- "Jazz Keyboard" by Jerry Coker (a.f. Aebersold)

#### **Bass**

- "The Evolving Bassist" by Rufus Reid (Myriad Ltd)
- "Bass Lines in Minutes" by Kris Berg (Houston Publishing)
- "Building Walking Bass Lines" by Ed Frieland (Hal Leonard)
- "I Walk the Line" by Tom Anderson (a.f. Aebersold)
- "The Bottom Line" by Todd Coolman (a.f. Aebersold)
- "Big Band Bass" by John Clayton, Jr. (a.f. Aebersold)

#### **Drums**

- "A Guide for the Modern Rhythm Section" by Steve Houghton (Barnhouse)
- "Advanced Techniques for the Modern Drummer" by Jim Chapin (a.f. Aebersold)
- "Standard Time" by Steve Davis (Aebersold)
- "Essential Techniques for Drum Set" by Ed Soph (Aebersold)
- "The Drum Set" (Video) by Ed Soph (a.f. Aebersold)
- "Studio and Big Band Drumming" by Steve Houghton (a.f. Aebersold)
- "The Sound of Brushes" by Ed Thigpen (a.f. Aebersold)
- "Afro-Cuban Rhythms for Drumset" by Malabe and Weiner (a.f. Aebersold)

#### **Bass/Drums**

- "Essential Styles for the Drummer & Bassist" by Houghton and Warrington (Studio PR/Columbia)
- "Jazz, Rock, & Latin Sourcebook" by Charles Dowd (a.f. Aebersold)
- "Afro-Cuban Grooves" by Goines and Ameen (a.f. Aebersold)

#### **Guitar**

- "The Jazz Guitarist's Handbook" by Bruce Forman (a.f. Aebersold)
- "Jazz Guitar Workshop" by Martin Crum (a.f. Aebersold)
- "Encyclopedia of Guitar Chords" by William Bay (a.f. Aebersold)
- "A Chordal Concept for Jazz Guitar" by Peter O'Mara (a.f. Aebersold)
- "Voice Leading for Guitar" by John Thomas (a.f. Aebersold)
- "Jazz Rhythm Guitar" by Jack Grassel (a.f. Aebersold)
- "Latin Guitar: The Essential Guide to Brazilian and Afro-Cuban Rhythms" by Bruce Buckingham (a.f. Aebersold)

#### **Latin Percussion**

- "Latin American Percussion" by Birger Suisbruck (a.f. Aebersold)
- "Rhythm's Talk" by Kenneth Nash (a.f. Aebersold)
- "The Essence of Afro-Cuban Percussion & Drum Set" by Ed Uribe (a.f. Aebersold)
- "The Essence of Brazilian Percussion and Drum Set" by Ed Uribe (a.f. Aebersold)
- "Mastering the Art of Afro-Cuban Drumming (Video) by Ignacio Berroa (Alfred)

#### **Vibes**

- "Jazz Vibes: The Art and Language" by Jon Metzger (a.f. Aebersold)

- V. An understanding of the various jazz styles and a historical basis for their use. It is very important that all rhythm section players have an understanding of the players who have defined the stylistic developments on their instruments. It is essential that developing players make listening (and transcribing) a regular part of their development.
- A. Swing (Straight Ahead, 2 beat, and Shuffle)
  - B. Latin (Afro-Cuban and Brazilian)
  - C. Ballad (Swing and Rock)
  - D. Rock/Funk
  - E. Fusion
  - F. Odd Meters
- VI. Opportunities for application. Rhythm sections should take as many opportunities to play together as possible. They should not consider the ensemble rehearsal as their only opportunity to play. Their experience should also include sectionals on their own, jam sessions, combo settings, and playing along with recordings and a metronome. They should practice playing not only the ensemble selections, but jazz standards as well to expand their repertoire and enhance their learning and experience.

## **Rhythm Section: Tips for Success**

By

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Listening is the key to a better rhythm section. That means listening to each other and listening to professional rhythm sections as models. Each member of the rhythm section should understand and know the roles of each other member of the section.

### **I. Bass**

1. Playing bass in jazz groups requires the dual function of rhythmic and harmonic foundation simultaneously.
2. In a conventional rhythm section, the ability to play a walking bass line is paramount. 90% of the time is spent accompanying others, but the bass line should stand on its own harmonically and melodically (voice leading).
3. Start by playing simply. TIME IS ALWAYS THE FIRST PRIORITY!!!
4. Lock in w/ drums. Bass line and ride cymbal must coincide.
5. Rules of Thumb (swing):
  - a. Place root of chord on downbeat of each chord change (5th can occasionally be substituted)
  - b. Precede root w/ half step either side
  - c. Fill In with chord tones appropriate scale tones, chromatic motion, digital patterns.
6. Each note should have precise, definite attack followed by dark sustained sound.
7. Shape of the bass line should rise and fall in a gradual manner, not angular. Register should be determined by the existing conditions of the moment to coincide or contrast w/ what is going on.

### **II. Drums**

1. The drummer's function is to keep time AND establish the "Groove" (i.e. Stylistic feel)
2. Ride cymbal and hi-hat are most important for swing.
3. Basic ride rhythm is dependent upon tempo and style of tune.
4. Hi-Hat "pops" on 2 and 4 with a "chick" sound.
5. Stick placement is important to a sustained, consistent sound on ride cymbal.
6. Bass drum should be used for accents and delineating form.
7. Snare pattern should either be a repetitive riff or compliment to what is happening at moment.
8. Drummer should "play the form" changing the pattern to coincide w/ formal sections.
9. Kicks, hits, and fills are distinct from set ups.
10. Kicks and hits that are a quarter note or shorter should be enhanced by snare only, those that are longer than quarter w/ bass drum and crash cymbal together.

### **III. Piano**

1. Pianist's role is to provide harmonic identity and color with rhythmic punctuation.
2. Sustain pedal should only be used for ballads and special occasions.
3. Use voicings that coincide with player's level (3-6 notes) and style and texture of tune. (Never double LH & RH voicings)
4. The 3rd & 7th are crucial notes for harmonic identity. 6th and 9th are best for harmonic color. Root and 5th are least important for pianist unless 5th is altered.
5. Less is more rhythmically, i.e. do not overplay. Every chord and *every* beat do not have to be played.
6. Range of chord voicings should fall between small C (C below Middle C) and C3 (2nd ledger line above the treble staff).
7. Move the fewest fingers possible from chord to chord.
8. Chords that last for extended time can be enhanced by planing and/or voicing change.
9. Introduce and resolve tension for forward movement.
10. Chord substitution and Interpolation can enhance harmonic Interest.

### **IV. Guitar**

1. Role is similar to pianist, but may also include single line and melodic functions.
2. Voicings should be in the mid range of instrument; not extremes unless specifically called for.
3. Voicings should be concentrated on top four strings.
4. Less is more in thickness of texture. (3-4 note voicings are more than adequate)
5. Sound should be warm with no effects.
6. Guitarist and pianist should NEVER comp at same time. (One should drop out or fill alternate role).
7. Introduce and resolve tension for forward movement.
8. Chord substitution and interpolation can enhance harmonic Interest.

### **V. Auxiliary Percussion**

1. Should only be used on appropriate style charts. Don't use just to occupy extra players.
2. Short repetitive patterns (2 measures or less) should be used.
3. Instrument choices should correspond to style of tune.
4. Less is more. Use it like spice in a gourmet recipe.

**Jerry Tolson** is professor emeritus of jazz studies and music education at the University, where he was chair of the department of academic and professional studies, directed jazz ensembles, and teaches jazz pedagogy, jazz style, jazz history, Black Church Music, American Soul Music, and African American Music classes.

Tolson has made presentations at state, regional, and national Music Education conferences, the International Association for Jazz Education Conference, Jazz Education Network, the International Academy of Law and Mental Health, and the Midwest Clinic, as well as universities in the U.S. and abroad. As a composer/arranger Tolson has written over 150 original tunes and dozens of arrangements for both large and small instrumental ensembles as well as vocal jazz ensembles. His vocal jazz works are published by UNC Jazz Press. He is a clinician/consultant for Kendor Music Publishing Company, a division of Excelcia Music, a content consultant for Pearson/Prentice Hall Educational Publications, and serves as an adjudicator, guest conductor, and jazz camp instructor internationally. Tolson has directed All-State and Honor Jazz Ensembles in Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, and Kentucky. In addition, he was a long-time faculty member of the Jamey Aebersold Summer Jazz Workshops. He is the Co-director of the Louisville Jazz Workshop, a summer adult jazz experience.

He is the founding educational director for the University of Louisville Jazz Festival and co-founder of U of L's African American Music Heritage Institute, a celebration of the contributions of African Americans to America's musical history, and the Louisville Jazz Workshop, an adult summer jazz experience, as well a national series of jazz teacher training institutes. Tolson's articles have appeared in *Music Educator's Journal*, *Jazz Educator's Journal*, *The Journal of Jazz Studies*, *The International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* and *The Instrumentalist*, and he is a contributor to the following publications: ***Teaching Music Through Performance in Jazz, Volumes I and II*** (GIA, ed. Carter and Miles), ***Jazz Pedagogy: The Jazz Educator's Handbook and Resource Guide*** (Warner Bros (Alfred) Dunscomb and Hill), and ***The Jazzer's Cookbook: Creative Recipes for Players and Teachers*** (Meredith Publ.). His jazz pedagogy book, ***The Jazz Commandments: Guidelines for Jazz Articulation and Style***, is published by Kendor Music. He is also the author of the e-text, ***African American Music: History and Heritage*** (Great River Learning, a division of Kendall-Hunt Publishing).

Performing on keyboards, woodwinds, and vocals, Tolson has recorded six CDs, *Nu View*, *Back at the Track*, *Late Night Cruise*, *Black Sand Beach*, *Just Chillin'* and *Fresh Squeezed*, and has worked with artists such as Delfeayo Marsalis, Antonio Hart, Don Braden, Rufus Reid, Kevin Mahogany, James Moody, Benny Golson, Mark Gross, Winard Harper, and Grace Kelley. His groups have appeared at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland, the Umbria Jazz Festival in Italy, and in Barbados, Brazil, and Trinidad.

Tolson has been named to "Who's Who Among America's Teachers", and he has received the Kentucky Music Educators "College Teacher of the Year" award, the University of Louisville Exemplary Multicultural Teaching Award, and has twice been recognized with the University of Louisville Distinguished Faculty Service Award. Mr. Tolson's other professional memberships include the College Music Society, National Association for Music Education, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), the American Federation of Musicians, Kentucky Association for Jazz Education, Jazz Education Network (JEN), and National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS).