

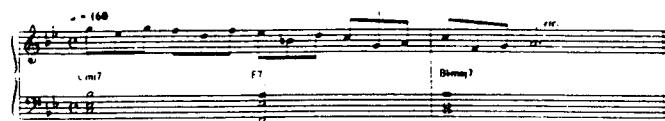
Who's Got Rhythm?

By Ted Rosenthal

The development of rhythmic skills, while vitally important for jazz pianists, often takes a back seat to the practice of harmonic and melodic concepts. If rhythmic skills are not honed, however, a pianist who is used to playing alone may have difficulty playing with a group. Unless you are playing rubato, or in free time, a jazz pianist needs to communicate and interact with a group through being rhythmically aware and alert. The way a jazz group's diverse improvised ideas fit together musically is through mutual agreement on rhythm. Good "time" and



Example 2A: Medium tempo, double-time feel



Example 2B: Fast tempo, simpler lines

a good "feel" are essential in order to interact smoothly within a jazz rhythm section (with a drummer and a bass player). Conversely, it is also essential for a solo jazz pianist to be able to create a variety of rhythmic feels (such as slow blues tempo, fast swing, or jazz waltz) without depending on a rhythm section.

A quick perusal of books on musical analysis reveals that most of them deal primarily with subjects other than

rhythm. In jazz, the situation is not very different, perhaps because of the difficulty in addressing rhythm in the absence of any groundwork set by the classical tra-

tises. With the exception of drum and percussion books, jazz books generally deal with topics other than rhythm. Jazz pedagogues, because they are working chiefly with an aural tradition, have not yet codified rhythmic ideas as fully as other musical elements. Books on jazz piano usually cover chord voicings, chord scales, and melodic and harmonic ideas as these relate to improvising over chords.

Although exploring harmony and melody will always be a big part of what jazz

pianists practice, rhythm should not be ignored! An improvised jazz phrase played in good time, even with a less-than-perfect melodic line, will almost always sound better than the right pitches played with an awkward feel.

Piano

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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 1997

Jazz pianists must learn how to develop rhythmic skills and work on their rhythmic deficiencies. Interaction with a rhythm section involves knowledge, understanding, and feeling for a large variety of rhythmic concepts. Basic skills include keeping steady time, syncopation, rhythmic phrasing, rhythmic variation, and being able to play in half-time or double-time. More advanced skills include polyrhythms, superimpositions of rhythmic groupings, phrasing over the bar, metric modulation, and playing in odd time signatures. All of these must be done in good "time" with a good "feel." Even though it is impossible to fully communicate through words what good "time" and good "feel" sound like when they are "swinging" or "in the groove,"

there are many ways jazz pianists can organize practice time to improve their rhythmic skills.

USING THE METRONOME

Practicing with a metronome is extremely useful, but not if you practice in the traditional way. In 4/4 time, practice as if the

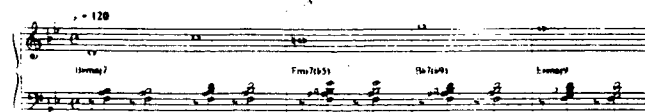
metronome clicks were on the second and fourth beats (as a drummer might play on the hi-hat). This means that the tempo on the metronome will actually equal the half-note. For example, practicing at 92, hearing the clicks as beats 2 and 4, means that the half-note = 92; therefore the quarter-note = 184 = medium swing (see example 1). Play either with a jazz feel, (swing 8th-notes, where the second 8th-note has a slightly shorter duration) or straight 8th-note grooves. Using the metronome on beats 2 and 4 is valuable for developing good steady time without the crutch of hearing the downbeat. It is useful in tempos from very moderate, where the quarter-note = 92 (metronome on 46), to the fastest tempos, where the quarter-note = 400



Example 1: Hearing metronome clicks on beats 2 and 4



Example 3A: Improvising with whole-notes



Example 3B: Improvising with 16th-notes

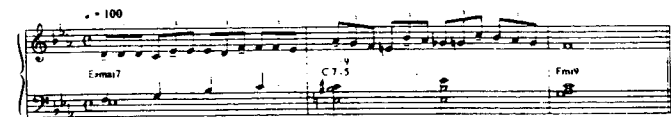


Example 4: Motive, placed in eight different points in the measure



Example 5: "In the Mood," syncopated 8th-notes in groups of three

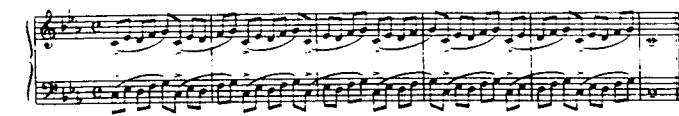
(metronome on 200). Hearing the metronome clicks on beats 2 and 4 is surprisingly difficult at tempos of quarter-note = 264 (metronome on 132) and higher. But learning to use the metronome in fast tempos is well worth the effort.



Example 6: Eighth-note triplets in groups of four



Examples 7A, 7B, 7C: Five-note patterns against 1, 2, and 3 beats



Example 8: Five-note pattern that doesn't resolve until 5 bars later

Other "mechanical" rhythmic devices can also be helpful. A drum or rhythm machine can set up a basic beat, which will help you practice anything from steady time to advanced polyrhythmic superimpositions over the basic beat. Remember, however, that it is always important to practice musically, even though you are playing with a machine. Pretend that you're interacting with an actual drummer.

TEMPO AWARENESS

Systematic practice with a metronome or other machine will also help organize what it feels and sounds like to play at various contrasting tempos. It is important to be aware of different tempos and how they sound and feel. By practicing

chord-scale relationships, and improvising over basic chord progressions are all important. Working on rhythmic aspects, however, should also be included. To work on rhythm, try creating melodies in one duration—all whole-notes, half-notes, quarter-notes, 8th-notes, triplets, and so on. This will further increase your rhythmic awareness and test your creativity.

contrasting tempos (for example, quarter-note = 60 = slow ballad; quarter-note = 160 = medium swing; quarter-note = 260 = medium up-tempo swing; quarter-note = 360 = very fast swing), the mind organizes what kinds of rhythms can be

created and executed. Center in on what types of note durations you can execute at various tempos. For example, certain medium tempos can be played with double-time lines and/or double-time feel. These would be 16th-note lines instead of predominantly 8th-note lines. At faster

tempos, 8th-note triplet lines might be the fastest you could improvise (see examples 2A and 2B). At very fast tempos, perhaps only quarter-notes with occasional 8th-notes might be appropriate.

MELODIC DURATIONS

Melodic soloing over chord changes is one of the things jazz pianists practice the most. Melodic and harmonic considerations often seem to predominate. Building melodies, playing chord scales, studying

Melodic considerations are obviously quite different if you are improvising all whole-notes versus improvising all 16th-notes (see examples 3A and 3B).

RHYTHMIC TRANSPOSITION

An awareness of each beat is also integral to rhythmic phrasing. When I find a chord voicing or melodic idea I like, I practice transposing it through all the keys, most often via the circle of fifths. The rhythmic equivalent of this would be to practice starting and ending phrases on different beats. That way you can get a variety of rhythmic implications out of the same, or similar, phrase. To practice this way, you must be aware of the eight points in a measure. Although there is a triplet lilt to swing 8th-notes (especially in slower tempos), the 4/4 measure is best divided into eight points for phrasing. This means you can begin or end any phrase on any one of these eight points—1, 1+, 2, 2+, 3, 3+, 4 and 4+.

Each point has musical and rhythmic characteristics, but they can generally be grouped in pairs. Beats 1 and 3 are basic downbeats and the squarest spot to end a phrase. They give a feeling of completion, but don't add forward motion or rhythmic interest. Technically, beats 2 and 4 are not syncopations, but they are useful starting and ending points. Drummers typically play the hi-hat on beats 2 and 4, and we also snap our fingers on 2 and 4 when we count off a song. Starting or ending on 2 and 4 can add a swinging feeling without an actual syncopation.

Beats 1+, 2+, 3+, and 4+ are syncopations, but they have different characteristics. Ending a phrase on beats 1+ or 3+



Example 9: Phrasing in duplets, quartuplets in 3/4 time



Example 10: Phrasing in two or four, in 3/4 time



Examples 11A, 11B: Hindemith exercises, adapted for jazz styles



Examples 12A, 12B, 12C: "Charleston" rhythm, on different beats



Example 13: Left-hand comping rhythm, free solo in right hand



Example 14: Improvisation using two contrasting rhythmic motives

has a surprising and sudden halting effect. The jerky quality results from a delay—instead of sounding a note directly on beat 1 or 3, you delay it and syncopate it to the offbeat. Resolving a phrase on beats 2+ or 4+ has quite another effect. This resolution gives a feeling of forward motion, of going on. Beats 2+ and 4+ are anticipations of the downbeat, and they are very effective places to resolve a phrase.

To practice the eight-points-in-a-measure concept, improvise lines through a progression or a song, starting or ending phrases on all eight points. You can try similar or contrasting phrases. You can also practice one point exclusively, or vary the points. A simple motive can be placed in eight different points in the measure (see example 4). Each starting point gives a different rhythmic implication to the motive.

RHYTHMIC GROUPING, RHYTHMIC SUPERIMPOSITION, POLYRHYTHMS

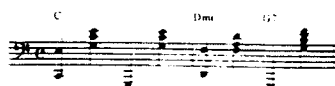
In jazz, it is very common to group tuplets in ways that play up syncopation. The first famous notes of "In the Mood" show how 8th-notes in groups of three produce syncopations and polyrhythms (see example 5). Similarly, 8th-note triplets in groups of four also produce interesting rhythmic patterns that go against the grain (see example 6). Other

hours of 5-finger exercises yet, almost always, they are grouped evenly—in fours, sixes, or eights. Make these exercises uneven by sticking

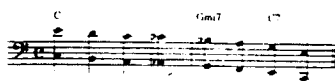
to a five-note pattern group and fitting the quintuplets against one, two, or three beats. Adapt a familiar Hanon exercise to a five-note pattern-group in this manner (see examples 7A, 7B, and 7C). Another approach to 5-finger exercises is to keep the five-note pattern grouped in 8th-notes, creating a rhythmic superimposition that goes over the bar and doesn't resolve until five bars later (see example 8).

Playing in 3/4 time offers numerous possibilities for rhythmic interest. Phrasing in duplets and quartuplets is common in a jazz

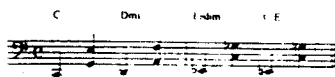
waltz. This can also lead to the superimposition of 8th-notes in 3/4 time (see example 9). Also, phrasing in groups of two or four beats (against the grain of three) will add to the rhythmic variety in a jazz waltz (see example 10).



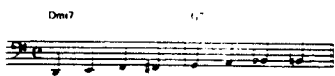
Example 15: Stride patterns



Example 16: Walking tenths



Example 17: Broken tenths



Example 18: Walking bass



Example 19: Boogie bass

TWO-HAND COORDINATION

It is important to become more physically and mentally coordinated to execute two-hand rhythmic patterns and to play rhythmically independent parts with each hand. Practice playing melodies and/or rhythms with one hand and, with the other, tap or play strict time or contrasting rhythms. Hindemith's *Elementary Training For Musicians* has these types of exercises—and they are hardly elementary! When you switch hands (with the left taking on more complicated activity), it often becomes much more difficult. These types of exercises are excellent training for rhythm and coordination. They can also be adapted to use more syncopation and jazz-style rhythms (see examples 11A and 11B).

COMPING: RHYTHM AND COORDINATION

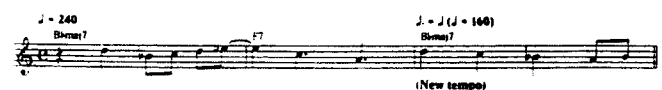
Jazz pianists spend a lot of time "comping" for, or accompanying, other members of the group. They usually use two-handed voicings played in various rhythms that interact both with the rhythm section and the soloist. When the pianist is soloing, usually with the right hand, he comps for himself with left-hand voicings. Organizing and practicing comping rhythms helps rhythmic fluency and coordination. Practice a simple "Charleston" rhythm through a progression or a song (see example 12A). Then rhythmically transpose the figure to other places in the measure (see examples 12B and 12C). Permutations of this kind can provide a great deal of variety. Another practice tool is to take a left-hand comping rhythm and solo freely in the right hand, while keeping the left hand rhythm constant (see example 13).

RHYTHMIC MOTIVIC IMPROVISATION

Developing a motive instead of just "running through the chord changes" is a valuable practice tool and an important improvisational approach. You can also develop rhythmic motives while being free with the pitches. A variation on this



Example 20A: Metric modulation, accelerating to a new tempo



Example 20B: Metric modulation, bringing back the original tempo

idea is to develop an improvisation using two contrasting rhythmic motives (see example 14). The pitch material can be quite free because the ear will hear the continuity of the similar rhythms.

THE LEFT HAND

Working on left-hand accompaniment patterns is helpful to acquire rhythmic solidity. Stride patterns (see example 15), walking tenths (see example 16), broken tenths (see example 17), walking bass (see example 18), and boogie patterns (see example 19), can all be useful. Practice the left hand alone. Once it is steady, add right-hand improvisations. Use some of the rhythmic concepts discussed above in the right hand, while you keep the left hand steady and swinging.

METRIC MODULATION

Metric modulation is an advanced concept of playing rhythms that become the basis of a new tempo (see example 20A). The soloist plays quarter-note triplets at the end of the chorus. These triplets then become the quarter-note pulse of the new tempo. In effect, there is a 50-percent tempo acceleration (quarter = 160 to quarter = 240). At the end of the faster section, the soloist can play dotted-quarter notes that become the basis for the next tempo, which is in fact 50-percent slower, bringing back the original tempo (see example 20B). This is one of the more common and useful examples of metric modulation.

ODD METERS

Another advanced rhythmic skill is being able to play in odd meters such as 5/4, 7/4, and 7/8. More and more jazz musicians are becoming well-versed in this area. Playing in odd meters presents special challenges, including figuring out how to divide the measure (in five: 2+3 or 3+2; in seven: 3+2+2 or 2+3+2, and so on). Certain mathematical relations of how phrases will work within the meter also need to be studied and internalized. Most importantly, playing in odd meters involves feeling comfortable in the groove of the odd-meter pulse. This will only be accomplished by practice (alone and with a group) and experience.

As with all practice and developmental work in jazz, creativity, flexibility, and ingenuity are of prime importance. Working on creating fluency and variety in rhythm can be as interesting and exciting as explorations into harmony and melody. Think like a composer! ✚



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Editor's Note

Yes, we *do* know what 16th-notes look like! In the article by Ted Rosenthal, "Who's Got Rhythm?" (November, December, 1997), example 3B was the same as example 3A. Example 3B should have appeared as it does below. We apologize to those of you who wished to follow through on Rosenthal's improvisational suggestions.



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