

RHYTHM SECTION TIPS

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BASS (Acoustic or Electric)

Most student jazz bands lack a proper concept of a coordinated rhythm section, particularly on “straight ahead” swing numbers. The following comments and observations should aid you in strengthening your rhythm section and helping your band to “swing.”

(Electric and Acoustic)

- Role: To “play time” with the drummer and to provide or support the bottom of the band harmonically.

Technical Aspects

- Position yourself so you will be able to see the drummer’s hi-hat cymbals and coordinate with it on beats two and four.
- “Pull” the strings; the emphasis should be at the beginning of the sound...aim for a LONG pizzicato sound (percussive sound with lots of definition).
- Strive for separation between notes.
- Set up the amplifier behind the drummer’s ears and behind your ears.
- Play stepwise or chromatic lines in the low register for jazz tunes.
- Most bass players play with the volume too high. The higher the volume, the muddier the sound.
- Increase activity (tension) at turn arounds (last two measures of a tune)—use flat 5 or half-step approach tones.
- Boost the treble a bit.
- Add more bass sound for ballads (slow tunes).
- Vary the dynamics behind soloists.

DRUMS

Concept: Draw the sound OUT, do not band the sound IN! Play lightly and sustained.

Role: Big bands seldom hire soloists...they hire time keepers.

- The drummer and the lead trumpet are the rhythmic and dynamic force of the band. The drummer provides the muscle, and controls the volume of the band.
- The drummer must put a “cushion” under the band.
- The left hand provides the “seasoning”, while the right hand is the “time-keeper.”

Needs

- **Snare drum** 5” X 14” metal shell
- Crisp, tension even around head
- Snare head should be tighter than batter head for a crisp sound.
- Heads pitched a minor third apart.
- **Bass Drum** 14”X 20” or 22”
- Low pitch, muffle to eliminate “ring”
- Front head is tighter than batter head
- Even tension around head
- Aim for a live resonant sound
- **Three Tom Toms** 9”x 13”, 16”x 16, 8”x 12”
- Form a triad from the floor tom upward, all drums should have different pitches.
- **Hi-Hats** 14” or 15”
- Use a heavier cymbal on the bottom for a bigger “chick” sound. Dig in with your toe.
- **Ride Cymbal** 20” or 22” heavy weight.
- **Crash Cymbal** 16”-18” medium or thin.
- Select cymbals that have contrasting colors.

Technical Aspects

TIME: If you can’t hear what’s going on—you’re playing too loudly and have stopped listening.

- Aim for a strong “chick” sound on beats two and four with the hi-hat cymbal.

- Give a strong accent on snare drum on beats two and four. This will help push the band and lock in the time. (This is good for 8-16 measures...or it will get boring.)
- The bass amplifier should be “behind your ears.” This will make it easier for you to coordinate beats two and four with the bass.
- The distance between beats must be equal. Some drummers rush beat four moving to beat one of the next measure.
- Count through all solos, fills, breaks, and rests. It is very important that you reenter exactly with the band.
- Aim for a flowing (legato) sound on the ride cymbal.

TASTE

- “What you don’t play makes it more interesting” Always support the band in your playing.
- For short, low register figures in the bones or saxes, use tom toms or bass drum.
- For short brass figures...use left hand on snare drum.
- For long ensemble chords, use cymbals supported by the bass drum and left hand on the snare drum.
- A “fill” is not a solo....it’s purpose is to;
 1. Set up the band for the next entrance.
 2. Act as a bridge between phrases.
 3. Begin or end a phrase.
- Your “fill” should be at the volume of the next entrance.
- Change cymbal sounds for various parts of the arrangement.
- Do not “fill” if the arrangement is heavily scored.
- Emphasize “turn arounds” (the last two measures of a tune)..create tension with pressed rolls or simple fills.
- Bass drums play “lightly” on all four beats. (Avoid heavy “Gorilla Foot.”)

Ideas for varying backing behind soloists:

- Beats: 1. 2. 3. 4.
 SD Cym SD Cym (All using the right hand)

- Straight “4s” on the ride cymbal....for 8 measures...lightens the sound, particularly behind soloists, and keeps the time from dropping.
- Use closed hi-hat behind piano solo....8 measures.
- Accent the fourth beat of each measure with the left hand on rim of snare drum....8 measures...Help’s to lock in the time.
- Use a little more activity on repeats or on D.S.
- Avoid rudimental style solos...use rhythmic and melodic motives found in the piece.

Most Common Problems:

- Over playing....too busy---especially while backing soloists.
 - Not listening to the band.
 - Rushing (uneven spaces between beats) on up-tempo, dragging on ballads.
 - Inappropriate fills...does not fit the style or volume of the music.
 - Lack of dynamic changes...playing too loud all of the time.
 - Loses time behind soloists or during break-fills.
 - Most drummers have good technique but have bad rhythm (time).
 - Playing the ride cymbal backwards.
- Play with a musical touch...don’t attack the equipment!

PIANO

Role

- To “comp” (accompany) behind soloists
- To fill in empty spots or holes, especially at the ends of phrases and to add harmonic color to the band.
- Emphasize spots where chords change.

Technical Aspect

- Use short, crisp, staccato punctuations...do not play “mushy”
- Do not use sustaining pedal, except when playing ballads.
- Omit root of chord...the string bass plays the roots.
- Do not play time....fill in empty spots.
- Use a variety of chordal voicings (listen to Bill Evans, Oscar Peterson)
- Avoid doubling the bass line (except for pedal effects). This stifles the rhythmic effect.
- Do not use vibrato (Elec Piano) for up-tempo swing pieces.

- Play percussively and rhythmically.
Use 3-4 notes in the left hand and with the right hand use single notes, octave fills, runs, and embellishments.
- Play in the upper range for more variety.
- Avoid “oom-pah_ style of playing. Better to play off beat rhythmic patterns.

GUITAR

ROLE

- To put a sharp edge on the bass player and to put harmonic content to the Hi-Hat cymbals. To add “spice” to the rhythm section.

Needs

1. Wa-wa and other pedals
2. Phase-shifter
3. Volume pedal
4. Amp with two 12-inch speakers 50-100 watts

Technical Aspects

- Set up amp “behind your ears”
- Use back pick up (Rhythm, bass, fingerboard pickup) for jazz playing.
- Set up close to the drummer’s Hi-Hat cymbal and near the piano.
- Use heavy metal strings for jazz .10 -.052 gauge.
- Avoid treble sounds in jazz charts

Rhythm Guitar

(Basie-style jazz charts)

- Playing time
- Use acoustic (dry) sound...have middle control way down, set volume level low (number 1)
- Use 3 or 4 note chords (all notes sound at the same time)
- Use wrist motion—down toward the floor...whip the wrist... “Knock dust off of your knee”
- Play four short chords per measures, accenting beats 2 and 4.
- Use basic changes (avoid extensions such as #11, b9, b13, etc.)
- Root or 5th in bass, resolve tones smoothly when moving from one chord to the next chord.
- Avoid spread chords
- Downbeats are played with down strokes, while up beats are played with up strokes. Move the pick during the rests to maintain the time.

Comping

Provides a background behind soloists

- Not playing time
- Use chord extensions...high tension chords (9ths, 11ths, 13ths and so on).
- Omit root of chord
- Use rhythmic punctuations (not a steady beat) Listen carefully and fit in with the piano and drummer's accents.
- Play high on the guitar...play on top 4 strings.
- Use a brighter sound with a big band than with a combo.
- Turn volume down on the guitar and up on the amp.
- Solo playing...set volume know higher.
- Control volume with foot pedal.
- No use of fuzz pedal for swing numbers.

Style of Chords

- Open string chords—folk guitar; cannot control the length of notes.
- One finger—Rock style...gets too heavy for jazz playing
- 4 notes played at one time...rhythm guitar.
All notes are fingered---strings that do not sound are deadened with the left hand (x). The duration of the notes can be controlled.
- Comping: use spread chords, omit chord root, use inversions of chords for variety.

Listen to professional drummer's left hand punctuation patterns or recordings by: Paul Desmond (alto sax) with Jim Hall (guitar)
Oscar Peterson (piano) with Joe Pass (guitar).