

# 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 (9<sup>th</sup>s, 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).