

XVIII. Rhythms Used In Comping

There are certain styles, with associated rhythmic figures, that appear time-and-again in the jazz repertoire. By far, the most prevalent of these are the medium-to-up-tempo 4/4 swing tune, the jazz waltz, the ballad, and the Bossa Nova. While it would be silly, as well as wrong, to say that you should play the same thing on every swing tune or on every Bossa Nova, there are many things that are done pretty much all the time that work well and that help to delineate the style.

I sometimes liken the central rhythmic figure that makes a groove tick, to the idea of the “mantra” in Eastern meditation practices. A mantra is a word to focus on, and to come back to, when the mind wanders while meditating. The meditator attempts to keep the mantra central in the mind while meditating. All other thoughts flow out and back from the repetition of the mantra. The rhythmic figures used to thresh out a groove serve a somewhat similar purpose. All the rhythms played by everyone in the ensemble should mesh with, and not clash with, the main rhythmic figure(s).

A rhythmic counterpoint is always active, where all the rhythmic attacks of one part that somebody is playing (say the bass player) occur in the cracks of another part (say the guitar player’s part). There are places where their rhythms have identical attacks, and there are places where they are in rhythmic counterpoint. The overall effect is a composite rhythm, consisting of all the attacks in all of the parts, and the whole thing must fit the groove.

A. Swing:

Swing music is based, for the most part, on a type of triplet rhythm. The basic pulse is achieved via a figure consisting of two 1/8 note triplets tied (i.e. one 1/4 note triplet) alternating with an 1/8 note triplet. This is usually counted with the syllables “1 and, 2 and, 3 and, 4 and”, etc. rather than “1 (&) ah, 2 (&) ah, 3 (&) ah, 4 (&) ah”, etc. (which is the way that 1/8 note triplets are usually counted).

This = This

The exact same Common Time figure could have been written in 12/8, without all the 3’s and brackets, but usually it is written in Common Time as described below.

This is really a type of shorthand notation whereby the “swing 1/8 notes”, as they are called, are notated like regular or “legit” 1/8 notes. This saves the copyist lots of time and trouble because he does not have to write out all of those 3’s and brackets for all the triplets, or write the chart with a 12/8 (or 9/8 for a jazz waltz) time signature. The text “Swing” is written at the beginning of the music to let the players know that the swing shorthand notation is being used. If a series of legit 1/8 notes needs to be played, the text “Straight Eighths” or “Even” is written above the passage, and then the text “Swing” is written again to resume the swing eighths.

Swing

This is played like: This

Counted

1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

When “comping” in a swing setting, for the most part, you will just be tastefully mixing up the attacks of your chord voicings between down beats and swing upbeats. When an accompanist gets much more busy than this, he is in danger of getting in the way of the musician he is supposed to be “accompanying”.

Swing A_m7

All down beats

All upbeats

Mixing downbeats and upbeats

Note: The faster the tempo gets, the less the swing upbeats will feel like triplet figures. As the tempo increases, swing 1/8 notes begin to be played much more like even 1/8 notes. Even at medium tempos there is much variation in the way that different players in different eras play(ed) the swing upbeat. Sometimes, it is closer to the next downbeat (i.e. more like the 4th 1/16 note) and sometimes it is further away than an exact triplet (i.e. more like a somewhat sloppy or uneven legit 1/8 note). You'll have to listen closely to lots of jazz records from several eras, and try to play along, in order to understand what I'm talking about. This can't really be explained in words or with notation. It can be learned, but I don't think it can really be taught.

1. 4/4: The Charleston Figure

One figure that is extremely important in swing music is what is often called the "Charleston figure". It gets its name from a popular dance and tune of the 1920's. It consists of an attack on 1 followed by an attack on the "and-of-2" (i.e the upbeat of beat 2).

Here is the basic figure:

Swing C6

I'm sure you've heard this a million times on lots of tunes. I always associate this rhythm with the opening vamp of Sweet Georgia Brown.

- Try comping through several tunes, like All Of Me, using this figure all the way through. In the spots where the chord changes on beat 3, you will have to anticipate the new chord by playing it on the and-of-2 instead. A trick that jazz players like to do is to time-shift this rhythm, so that the distance between the two attacks remains the same but the first attack happens a beat later, like this:

Swing C6

- Try comping through several tunes (in 4/4) using this figure all the way through. In the spots where the chord changes on beat 3, you will have to delay the new chord by playing it on the and-of-3 instead. Shifting it one more beat to the right, we get:

Swing C6

- Try comping through a 4/4 tune using this figure (i.e. the 2nd bar) all the way through. In the spots where the chord changes on beat 1 you will have to anticipate the new chord by playing it on the and-of-4 instead. Shifting it one more beat to the right we get:

Swing C6

- Try comping through several tunes using this figure all the way through. When the chord changes on beat 3,

you will also need to delay its attack until beat 4 instead. Shifting it one more beat to the right we get:

Swing C6

- Try comping through several tunes using this figure all the way through. When the chord changes on beat 3, you will also need to anticipate its attack on the and-of-2 instead. Chords occurring on beat 1 can be anticipated a full beat (i.e. on beat 4 instead), or omitted.

If we time shift the figure one more beat to the right, we will be back where we started.

Tip: Experiment with time shifting of some melodies too, using this same technique. Try time shifting rhythms by increments smaller than a 1/4 note as well (i.e. 1/8 notes, 1/16 notes etc.). It's all good discipline.

- Now, try comping through several tunes using the above figures and switching between them at will.

Now that you are comfortable and in control of playing all the possible downbeats and all the possible upbeats, try comping using just the general idea of - some downbeats here and there - peppered with some upbeats now and then... Like this:

Swing C7 F7 C7 G m7 C7

2. 3/4 Jazz Waltz

The Jazz Waltz is a feel that also uses swing upbeats. The same type of swing shorthand notation is used.

In my experience the most common comping figure for a Jazz Waltz is the following 2 bar figure:

Swing C6

There is a nice rhythmic counterpoint that happens with a bass player when he plays on the downbeats of each bar while the guitar rests ... or the guitar player can add his own bass notes in the cracks.

This figure is also often inverted so that the second bar happens first:

Swing C6

This next figure is often thrown in to spice things up. It is actually a poly-rhythm. It outlines 2 equal pulses within the 3 pulses of the time signature. (Sometimes called a "hemiola".):

Swing "2 over 3" same thing written differently