

Feeling Good

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Examining the Swing Feel

Explaining a concept as subtle as “swinging” or how to achieve a swing feel can be tricky. The most integral part of traditional jazz, or the feel of jazz is strongly rooted in something intangible, something that must be learned through experience, and by hours of listening.

To get us closer to the mindset of jazz musicians, let’s look a few quotes from Paul Berliner’s epic study of jazz and jazz musicians “Thinking in Jazz.”

“One of the most obvious aspects of the music to people who know jazz,” observes Chuck Israels, “is: How does it feel in the swing? These are things that are very subtle and that jazz musicians appreciate in a particular way.”

(Chuck Israels is a composer/arranger/bassist who has worked with Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, Coleman Hawkins, Stan Getz, Herbie Hancock, J.J. Johnson, John Coltrane, and many others. He is best known for his work with the Bill Evans Trio).

Paul Berliner observes:

“The achievement of swing ultimately depends on the interplay of numerous factors ranging from the sheer variety of the artist’s rhythmic conceptions to the stylistic manner in which they articulate and phrase them, imbuing them with qualities of syncopation and forward motion”

As James Reese Europe explained in 1919, “We play the music as it is written, only that we accent strongly in this manner the notes which originally would be without accent.”

(During the first two decades of the twentieth century, James Reese Europe emerged as the most renowned African American bandleader of New York's entertainment world. Famed for his syncopated orchestral accompaniment, he became a major figure in promoting the popularity of social dancing and engendered a ragtime-based music that contributed to the emergence of jazz)).

Berliner quoting an unnamed artist:

“One artist dubbed a former commercial dance band musician as “corny,” or aesthetically naïve, because his pitches were “too short and staccato, not legato enough. They sounded rinky-dink, like Laurence Welk.”

Oddly enough I watched a ton of Laurence Welk and was impressed by the musicianship of the players in the Welk band. I grew up in a household that embraced jazz. My Dad’s

record collection included the quintessential cold war era jazz album “Take Five.” Others artists included Jay and Kai, Ben Webster, Erroll Garner, Stan Kenton, The Boss Brass and many more. By the time I reached college, I had developed a decent swing feel through musical osmosis.

Listening to jazz masters is clearly the best way to develop feel, but as an educator, who has the time to expose students to endless hours of jazz listening sessions? Let me outline a few ideas that can get your group swinging together.

First We Sing, Then We Swing!

I assumed that jazz lingo was reserved for movie and cartoon caricatures, the guy with the beret, sunglasses, beatnik soul patch and a trumpet tucked under his arm. If you are my age, you’ll remember the famous Flintstones episode with the beatnik jazz trumpeter using terms like “Cats” and Scoodily Wah, Wah.”

I attended Humber College in the early 1980’s. To my surprise, everyone used the language of the jazzy cat from the Flintstones. (Students of Ron Collier will know what I’m talking about). The rehearsals were filled with instructors teaching us figures by singing. At first I found it quite hilarious listening to grown men singing “doo –bop- she-doo-day, ah-boo-dalliah-zoot dat” with a straight face! I initially thought they were putting us on. Verbalizing or singing figures with syllables is a great way to demonstrate to your students what you need to hear in their performance. At first, your students will laugh at you, so be prepared.

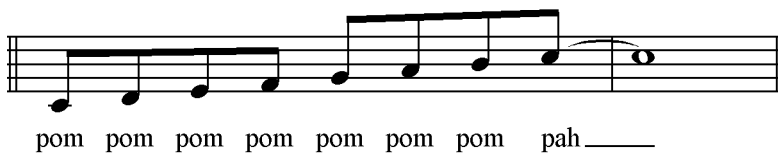
The following examples will be identified as “straight” or, with a “swing” feel. A straight feel refers to a figure with no inflection or added emphasis. The suggested tempo these particular examples is a quarter note at 120 beats per minute or a medium swing tempo.

Straight eighth note feel



We are all familiar with this figure. If you sing it in a classical style, you get this:

With syllables



To get swinging, we retain the “straight” feel, but simply add an accent or slight emphasis on the off beat.

Straight eighth note feel



This is the approach of a professional jazz musician. The swing feel is not far removed from the straight feel. A poor swing feel will accentuate the down beats.

This feels bad:



Let me re-establish the “good” feel by adding syllables.

With syllables

doo dah doo dah doo dah doo day ____

Musical notation on a staff with the same eighth-note sequence. The notes are connected with a slur. Syllables "doo dah" are written below the notes, with accents (>) on the offbeats (second, fourth, sixth, eighth, tenth). The sequence ends with "doo day" followed by a horizontal line.

All notes should be connected and played very legato. A slight accent or emphasis is executed on every off beat. If this seems like a great deal of trouble, it is. At first, this concept will be very uncomfortable and will require constant reinforcement.

Here is the same figure with a new syllable.

Alternate syllables

boo dah boo dah boo dah boo way ____

Musical notation on a staff with the same eighth-note sequence. Syllables "boo dah" are written below the notes, with accents (>) on the offbeats. The sequence ends with "boo way" followed by a horizontal line.

Sing this out loud and hear how funny you sound! Now get over it! Your next mission is to find a colleague and sing it to them with out cracking up. Good, now try it on some students! Great, now you’re swingin’ Man!

If you have ever played Westside Story, you will no doubt recognize the next example.



This approach is often used by orchestrators to aid classically trained musicians achieve or approximate swing. This provides some effect, but highly syncopated figures are impossible to read and inevitably the band ends up in the ditch.

Many times the 12/8 feel ends up sounding like the dreaded:



The problem is that your bah-dah-boo-day ends up sounding like dum-dee-dum-dum.

Arrangers in the dance band era would frequently use the dotted eighth sixteen figure to indicate the figures that where to be swung. This style specific notation was meant for a generation of players who grew up with swing music on the radio. Everybody knew how to swing, just like everyone now knows how to rock.

If you play these figures literally, you now have achieved the COMPLETE OPPOSITE concept to a correct swing feel. Again, the correct feel is much closer to a straight feel.

Sing this figure out loud.



dum-dit dum dit dum did dum dum ____

How good did that feel? Terrible, I know. Now sing the next example right away, remember to keep your feel straight.

With syllables




doo dah doo dah doo dah doo day ____

Groovy Baby!

Here is another effective way to achieve an acceptable swing feel.

Straight eighth notes



tah tee yah tee yah tee yah tah ____

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The melody consists of eighth notes: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, Bb5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, Bb6, C7. The notes are grouped into pairs with slurs. The lyrics 'tah tee yah tee yah tee yah tah' are written below the staff, with a blank line after the final 'tah'.

Articulation

Since this is an article for Canadian Winds, executing swing figures on our horns needs to be addressed. Here are a couple of general rules:


Quarter notes are short (unless there is articulation specified) Short notes are usually accompanied with a tongue stop. A classically trained brass player will typically attack a detached quarter note with the “Toe” articulation with a slight decay. The jazz approach usually stops the air with a tongue stop. “Tot” is a typical attack employed by horn players in a jazz setting, especially jazz ensemble.

Consecutive eighth notes are played legato. The following line is notated without articulation. Try to sing this phrase with the appropriate articulation and feel.



The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The melody consists of eighth notes: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, Bb5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, Bb6, C7. The notes are grouped into pairs with slurs.

Hopefully you sang something close to this next example.



tah tee yah tee yah tee ya tee yah tee yah tah ____ tee yah tot _

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The melody consists of eighth notes: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, Bb5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, Bb6, C7. The notes are grouped into pairs with slurs. The lyrics 'tah tee yah tee yah tee ya tee yah tee yah tah tee yah tot' are written below the staff, with a blank line after the final 'tah'.

Remember, the last note of the phrase will be treated with a tongue stop.

Avoid over articulating phrases.



It should play like this on trumpet and saxophone.



Trombonists must articulate all notes with something similar to a “thah” syllable.

This figure:



Plays like:



The execution of basic articulation (in the jazz style)

The performance of Jazz and commercial articulation can vary slightly from classical or traditional phrasing. I will outline the similarities and differences below.



Short is short, right? The Harvard Dictionary of Music defines staccato as “detached” and “The shortened performance of a note so that it sounds only for a moment.”

That definition is vague to say the least. I’ve always considered the staccato (dot) a phrasing or articulation mark that shortens the length of the treated note by half.



Becomes



This is basic stuff, but notice the difference in approach and performance technique between the jazz and traditional approach.

Note this simple figure:



It is traditionally performed using the following articulation/vowel:



The jazz approach is fatter and much more deliberate.

This figure:



Is performed like this:



There is less space between each note and the “short” quarter note is longer!

Let me confuse matters more by suggesting this approach:



Yes, the tenuto marking. If we take the tenuto marking laterally, we would add length and emphasis to each note! I'll revisit *tenuto* later.

The other articulation indicating a short note is the "Hat".

The Hat



Most call this articulation marking a hat but The Harvard Dictionary refers to it as a "wedge" and suggests that the "wedge" is a very forceful and pronounced staccato. This is true although jazz players (as usual) have blurred the tradition. The "dot" and the "hat" are interchangeable.

Generally, the hat receives no more emphasis than the dot. If you are questioning the validity of the previous statement, please refer to any Sam Nestico score. When it comes to classic jazz notation and correct articulation, Sammy is the man!

Go Long

Tenuto is defined as "Fully sustained, occasionally even a bit longer than the note value requires."



More basic stuff, but as discussed in the previous article, the tenuto takes on a critical function in the example below. The tenuto marking over the eighth note indicates that the performer **MUST** connect the first note to the following quarter with the hat.



Doo Dat Dat

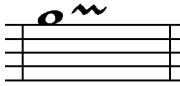
This is a very common figure in jazz. Many composer and arrangers use this articulation configuration. Notice the two short notes with different markings. I'm not sure of the origins of this double standard, although it may be a hold over from the traditional intent of the "wedge/hat."

Shake it Baby!

The shake effect is a dramatic embellishment that requires a good level of skill.



Or just a wavy line that looks like a mordent is a common ornament.

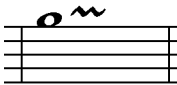


The shake is simply a quicker variation of the trill. Depending on the arranger, the “shake may look like a trill, but is to be executed like a “shake.”

The following is the traditional indication, but in a jazz context it takes on new meaning. The trill:



Is played like:



The performance of a trill/shake on piano and woodwinds is a little more obvious than on brass instruments. Basically, the shake is a lip trill on steroids. It's wider, meaning it encompasses a larger interval and is much more aggressive, even violent! Consider this technique as you would a martini. The trill is the stirred version, and the shake is obviously, the shaken. As with gin, shaken can lead to a bruise.

For more information on shakes (and everything else dealing with brass) please refer to “Brass Tactics” by Chase Sanborn. Chasesanborn.com

The Fall

This effect falls into two categories, the long fall and the short fall.

The short fall:

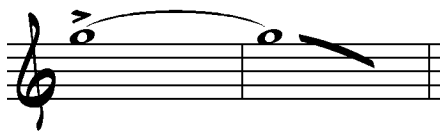


This typically sounds like POW, it's that simple. Brass players attack the note the immediately relax the embouchure and quickly descend through the harmonic series. Trombone players often extend the slide as they fall. For the most effective woodwind fall, establish the note, and then quickly descend through the chromatic scale. The chromatic scale fall is the most dramatic effect.

The Long Fall:



This involves the same technique only the fall is executed well after the initial attack



. Depending on the taste and discretion of the director, this fall can be played 2 ways:

- Fall through 8 beats
- Fall after the 8 beat

If I was interpreting this notation, I would initiate the fall after the 8th beat.

Doit



This is a common effect with a very unusual name. When performing a doit, attack the note and quickly ascend in an upward motion. Brass players quickly rip up through the harmonic series, woodwinds move upwards through the chromatic scale.

The sound should resemble the word “doit”. You can replicate this sound by singing “doit” and raising the pitch of your voice at the end of the word. Try it.

I work for an arranger who is very prominent in the commercial studio scene in Toronto. He is not a horn player but a rhythm section player and consequently, didn't learn the proper jargon. He refers to the doit as a *doink!* The musicians on the studio floor (especially the horn players) find this hilarious.

Drop

This effect is achieved by dropping down to a note from an undetermined note above. For best results, chose a note well above the destination note.



When demonstrating the drop, I'll sing from a high to note to the lower note using YEEEEOT. I understand this sounds incredibly ridiculous but verbalising effects is quite effective. *I've seen this effect referred to as a "plop". (I'll leave that one alone)*

Ghosting:

Ghosting requires the player to imply the note and not actually play it. It's similar to a "Hick Up". Experienced jazz players will ghost notes naturally. Ghosting enhances the feel of the phrase and improves the "rolled eighth note feel". Arrangers indicate the notes to be ghosted using brackets.



Back Phrasing:

This technique means different things to different people. Most horn players I know refer to back phrasing as a technique employed by jazz players intentionally playing behind the beat.

Singers often delay the melody or a phrase by a beat or two to achieve an effect called back phrasing. For the purposes of this article, I will refer to back phrasing as playing behind the beat.

Back phrasing is also known as playing *laid back* or just *back* or *playing behind* (the beat). A jazz player who back phrases might be described as someone who plays *back* or in extreme cases, *WAY BACK!*

Back phrasing is an integral element of the jazz feel and specifically, the swing feel. You may not recognize when some is back phrasing – all you know is that it feels good. In my mind, a successful jazz solo or performance is 90% feel and 10% content. In other words, it's not what you're playing - it's how you're playing it!

The Clock

Let's assume that the centre of a beat or pulse can be graphically demonstrated as the hands of a clock at high noon. One second before noon will be considered "on top" of the beat, two seconds before the beat is "on top". Three, four and five seconds is simply rushing. Conversely, one second after noon is back two seconds will be *way back*, 3

seconds is dangerously close to being late and 4 and 5 seconds is down right slowing down.

Back phrasing in this context is dangerously close to slowing down. I encourage my band to experiment by actually playing a fraction of a second slower. We repeat a 16 bar phrase a number of times until we reach a consensus. Believe me, it won't happen right away, be positive but be warned, they will resist until they get it. Once you nail it, you'll know by the smile on everyone's face, it feels that good!

The Hammer

This is not a reference to the city of Hamilton, or to former Philadelphia Flyer enforcer Dave Schultz, but to an optical/audio illusion we've all experienced. This occurred to me last summer as I observed a roofer in the neighbourhood nailing shingles to a roof top. Consider the hammer hitting the nail as the moment of articulation (on our horns). Due to the distance and the fact that light travels faster than sound, we see the hammer come down, but hear it impact a fraction of a second later. This is what back phrasing feels like.

Put Your Junk In The Trunk

I've been known to say, *let's put this one in the trunk!* referring to a song or arrangement that needs to swing extra hard (heavily rolled eighth notes) and back phrased. (I used to use *back seat*, but I've re-thought that one). This is just a reminder that the feel of the music will be played *back*. For example, while travelling in your car with *junk in the trunk*, you move ahead with the contents behind you. Everything is moving together, it's just that the contents of the trunk arrives shortly after you do.

Assignment:

Find some recordings with the artists listed below and experience the feel for yourself.

Classic Back Phrasers

Dexter Gordon
Miles Davis
Ben Webster
Count Basie
Louis Armstrong
Lester Young
Rich Perry

Classic Canadian Back Phrasers

Kevin Turcotte
Ed Bickert
Perry White
Mark Eisenman

Guido Basso
Rick Wilkins
Mike Murley