

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF EVERY PRACTICE SESSION!



Developing A Good Time Feel

By Gunnar Mossblad

A jazz artist's rhythmic time feel is as unique, personal, and identifiable as their tone, harmonic, and melodic approach. Good time feel can be simply defined as playing rhythmically accurate or in time with a steady tempo, with or without accompaniment. In fact, a strong time feel is probably the most important element of any performer's responsibility to the music and the other musicians in a group. Time feel is an integral part of all other aspects of music. Without a concept of time, executed in a relaxed, accurate, and consistent way at any tempo even with the most beautiful sound, it is only organized noise. The first thing that an audience notices, good or bad, is a musician's time feel.

It is important to realize that even simple less complex melodic ideas can make an effective improvisation if executed with rhythmic precision (a good time feel). This is especially important to stress with young students who may not have fully developed tone or

technique on their instrument. Duke Ellington was renowned for his sparse solos with perfectly placed notes. Miles Davis was another musician who had an impeccable time feel and quite often based entire solos not on technique, but on a few carefully placed notes. During the swing era, big bands developed part of their reputation or 'signature sound' on their individual approach to the time. Check out Basie! In fact, before you attempt the exercises presented below, listen to several recordings of your favorite jazz master. Listen only for the time feel and try to define their unique approach to the time.

DEVELOPING A PERSONAL TIME FEEL

After you develop a basic understanding and technical proficiency of jazz style and rhythm, (see *The Mechanics of Swing, Jazz Player*, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 51), a more sophisticated and personal time feel should be developed. A strong sense of time and rhythm will

make other aspects of learning jazz easier, and frees you up to think about the musical content and expression in your improvisations.

There are three basic ways to play the time. The first way, often referred to as playing 'in the pocket' or 'down the middle,' places the rhythms as lined up to the basic pulse of the beat as possible. This basic feel serves as a reference point that all musicians use to place the time, and should be established when first learning the jazz style. In relationship to this basic time feel, you can play ahead (rushing) or behind (dragging) the basic pulse. Stretching and compressing the time in this way is often compared to rubato technique in classical music.

You should not play exclusively ahead or behind the beat. The center of the beat should be used as a reference or point of departure that is referred to regularly. Playing exclusively ahead of the beat is rushing. Similarly, playing consistently behind the beat is dragging. When the center of the beat is used as the standard of the time and tempo, then playing ahead or behind the beat becomes a musical device that will add to the musicality of the performance.

The way you play with the time is similar to the way a surfer rides a wave. Sometime the surfer rides the wave at the front or top (playing ahead of the time), and other times the surfer moves to the center or bottom of the wave (playing behind the beat). The surfer rides the wave in various places and moves to different areas of the wave based on what happens during the ride. Similarly, a jazz musician plays all over the beat from the front end of the beat to the back depending on the musical situation. This is dependent on the style of the composition, the musical ideas that you are trying to express, and the way the other musicians are playing at any given moment. The infinite possibilities for playing ahead, behind and on the beat becomes a very personal part of each jazz musician's overall musical identity.

PRACTICING AHEAD AND BEHIND THE BEAT

Developing the skills necessary to control and manipulate the time feel takes years of practice. Several simple exercises will get you started. After you feel comfortable with the basic exercises, you can apply the principle to larger and more complex applications.

A FUNDAMENTAL EXERCISE

A metronome should function as the reference point for the center of the beat (see Example 1). If you are comfortable with the metronome clicking on 2 & 4, it should be set to a medium swing tempo (40-60 beats per minute). If you are not completely comfortable with the metronome on 2 & 4, set the metronome to an equivalent tempo clicking on all four beats. Select a harmonically and technically comfortable scale that you do not have to think about to play. Using an eight-note rhythm, play one measure of the scale ascending and descending (1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-) in the center of the beat. After repeating this a number of times begin rushing ahead to a point that is ahead of the beat. Make sure you do not rush ahead a full $\frac{1}{2}$ beat. Play consistently a little ahead of the beat several times, then go back to the center of the beat and repeat several more times. Referencing the metronome all the time is of primary importance. After playing in the center of the beat several more times, begin slowing or dragging the tempo until you are slightly behind the beat. After repeats with this laid back feel, again return to the center of the beat and repeat the passage several more times.

As you become comfortable playing ahead and behind the beat, expand the exercise to include a full octave of the scale (2 measures), and eventually the full range of your instrument. As you become more proficient playing in different areas of the beat, begin playing ahead or behind for shorter amounts of time. You should become comfortable playing as few as one note or entire phrases in different places in the time while retaining a proper metric feel to the rhythms. Eventually rhythms other than eighth-notes should be introduced. Patterns and phrases extracted from transcriptions should be practiced in various time feels.

The objective is to have complete control of the time. Playing time should become second nature. When you have mastered your time feel, your creative energies can be applied to developing and executing musical ideas in your solo as well as communicating with the other musicians. You will have another expressive device to use in your playing, and will have developed a personal approach to the time that will help define your musical identity. §

EXAMPLE #1

PLAY ON THE BEAT PLAY AHEAD OF THE BEAT PLAY ON THE BEAT PLAY BEHIND THE BEAT

METRONOME = (1) 2 (3) 4 (1) 2 (3) 4 (1) 2 (3) 4 (1) 2 (3) 4

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The time signature is 4/4. The staff is divided into four measures, each containing an 8-note scale (1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-). Above each measure is a label: 'PLAY ON THE BEAT', 'PLAY AHEAD OF THE BEAT', 'PLAY ON THE BEAT', and 'PLAY BEHIND THE BEAT'. Below the staff, the metronome settings are indicated as '(1) 2 (3) 4' for each measure, with the first measure explicitly labeled 'METRONOME ='. The notation for 'PLAY AHEAD OF THE BEAT' shows the notes starting before the first metronome click, and 'PLAY BEHIND THE BEAT' shows the notes starting after the first metronome click.