

The Basics of Jazz

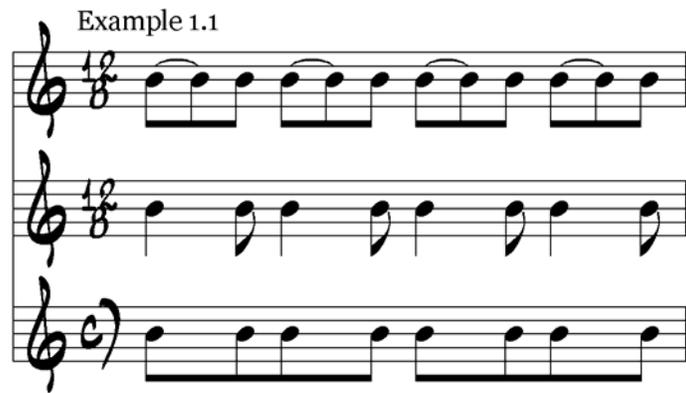
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Basic Swing

The foundation of Jazz is Swing (“It Don’t Mean A Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing”). Swing can mean several things, but for our purposes, when we talk about swing we will be talking about swing eighth-notes.

In effect, playing jazz is like playing 12/8. Swing eighths can be broken down into: [example 1.1 swing eighths vs. triplets]

Example 1.1



Example 1.1 consists of three staves of music in 12/8 time. The top staff shows a sequence of eighth notes with beams, representing the way they are played. The middle staff shows a sequence of eighth notes with beams, representing the way they look. The bottom staff shows a sequence of eighth notes with beams, representing the way they look. A vertical red line is on the right side of the staves.

The top two staves are what swing eighths would look like if notated the way they are played, with the bottom staff showing the way it looks.

When people learn to swing, one of the first obstacles they encounter is the discrepancy between the way the notes look and the way they sound. Below in Example 1.2, is notated how an F scale *looks* and what it would look if the notation reflected the way it *sounds*. Notice how they look different than they sound.

Example 1.2



Example 1.2 consists of two staves of music in 12/8 time. The top staff is labeled "Looks" and shows a sequence of eighth notes with beams, representing the way they look. The bottom staff is labeled "Sounds" and shows a sequence of eighth notes with beams, representing the way they sound. A vertical red line is on the right side of the staves.

There are more elements to swinging than just this, but it is the first step – seeing the notes one-way, and playing them another. It may help if, at first, you think of jazz being in 12/8. It takes a little getting use to, but with some practice, you can easily make the adjustment.

Keeping swing smooth is very important for several reasons. First, fluidity is needed to help propel the lines. It is easier to play fast lines when things are smooth. Second, it creates a striking contrast when angularity is added through the melodic line.

Practice all your scales in swing style, slurring them as you play. [Example 1.3] Slurring will help keep the rhythm smooth, which is essential and will be discussed further in the next chapter. The goal is to make it sound and feel natural. Also, playing scales with a swing feel is a great change of pace when practicing!

Example 1.3

The image shows two staves of music. The top staff, labeled 'Looks', is in 3/4 time and shows a melodic line with slurs over the notes. The bottom staff, labeled 'Sounds', is in 4/8 time and shows the same notes with a single slur over the entire line, illustrating the intended smooth feel.

Listening to the drums, specifically the ride cymbal, will help when playing. A good drummer makes swinging easy by giving you a good swing feel. By focusing and matching the feel of the rhythm section will help you keep things relaxed.

Bebop Tonguing

If you've experimented with swing eighths, you noticed that while it sounds okay, something is missing. It is this point that separates the hip from the others. This is also where misleading information can occur.

One of the biggest misconceptions is that in order to swing, you should put accents on every up-beat.

Example 2.1

The image shows two staves of music. The top staff, labeled 'Looks', is in 3/4 time and shows a melodic line with slurs. The bottom staff, labeled 'Sounds', is in 4/8 time and shows the same notes with accents on every up-beat, illustrating how this destroys the smoothness.

The notes are in the swing style, but it does not sound quite right. All the accents unfortunately destroy any smoothness that you create. So, it is not right with the accents, but it is not right totally slurred: something is left out.

What is absent is Bebop Tonguing. Put simply, the key to swinging authentically is Bebop Tonguing. In Bebop Tonguing, you tongue the upbeat and slur to the downbeat. [Example 2.2] This style of articulation is not notated in the music; the player is expected to know to use Bebop Tonguing automatically. Because of its importance and “secretive” nature, you could consider Bebop Tonguing one of the secrets of Jazz.

Example 2.2 Bebop Tonguing

Looks

Sounds

When applying the slurs you have to be carefully not to make the ends of them (the downbeats) short. While this may be common in classical music, it is not appropriate for jazz. In order to keep the smoothness needed for swing, the downbeats need to be legato.

One way to keep things in perspective is to re-examine swing eighths. Look back at the two notes of a beat in example 1.1. Notice that relationship: the downbeat is twice as long as the upbeat. This is a good reminder to keep the ends of the slurs long.

Along with the misguided accents, the other common mistake is to clip the ends of the slurs. When the ends of the slurs are played short, it causes the swing to sound “hokey.”

Since we try to keep things smooth, the tongue on the upbeats creates a contrast, which is often mistaken for accents. The effect of Bebop tonguing should just be an interruption of the legato line. When practicing Bebop tonguing, slur the whole passage first then add the tongue on the repeat: the two should sound and feel very similar. Remember, there should be no difference in the air-stream between slurring and Bebop tonguing.

Bebop tonguing even applies to pieces where everything is slurred. There was a period when publishers marked everything to make sure that the passages were played legato and smooth.

Once you are comfortable with swing and Bebop tonguing, try using it with other scales and music – it is a great way to have fun!

Rules of Jazz

As jazz evolved through time, there developed certain “rules” to how jazz should sound. These rules were not written down or stated in any fashion. Players learned them by

listening and mimicking other players. These stylistic idiosyncrasies create what I call “The Rules of Jazz.” As with bebop tonguing, these are not generally marked in the music; it is expected that the player is familiar with these. By following these guidelines, you will be on your way to sounding and playing like a true jazz player!

Since jazz was not written down, but passed down aurally, not all players will employ all of the rules. In fact, due to the wide variance in individual playing styles and interpretations, there are some that do not follow any of the rules. It is these differences in approach that make jazz so personal and exciting! But, by employing these guidelines, you will be able to blend in and play in any setting.

Rule #1: All Eighths are legato unless marked otherwise.

This goes back to the idea that swing needs to be smooth. By playing all eighths long, this eliminates any “hokeyness.” Proper use of Bebop Tonguing helps keep things smooth. Play through Example 3.1, making sure to keep things legato. If you are having trouble with keeping things smooth, go back and slur the passage to reacquaint yourself with how it sounds legato.

Playing jazz should feel easy. If it seems uncomfortable, focus on keeping things legato. Generally, if you make things smooth and legato (especially if you are using Bebop Tonguing), everything will be okay.

If the composer/arranger wants to make an exception and have the eighths short, they will mark it in the part (finally, something notated!) to make sure there is no misunderstanding. (This pertains to our friend UMO – Unless Marked Otherwise)



Rule #2: All Quarter Notes are Short UMO (unless marked otherwise).

Similar to all eighths legato, all quarter notes are short. Short in Jazz is not the same as short in Classical. In Classical short means “as short as possible,” where as in Jazz it means “shorter than normal but with weight or attitude.”

The syllable used for short notes is “Daht.” Notice how “Daht” has weight to it, yet it does not give the note full value. Compare this syllable with its use of the softer beginning “D” to the more percussive attack of the Classical “T” (Ta, Tut, etc.). When playing short notes, use the syllable in order to give the note its proper weight and length. I like to think of short notes as “Big Bertha Notes” – lots of attitude, nothing wimpy or pristine about them.

While it depends on the music, not only do you accent ties but also a crescendo/decrescendo. This falls under the heading of general musicianship.

By crescendoing the notes, you give the melodic line momentum.



Rule #5: Triplets and Sixteenths are slurred UMO

Triplets and sixteenths always present a problem for jazz beginners. Since the music is not generally marked properly, diligent students will attempt to tongue the individual notes for the triplets and sixteenths. This not only breaks the good swing feel, but can be very difficult to accomplish when the tempos are fast. (Imagine trying to tongue sixteenths when the tempo is 230!)

What we end up doing (again with the jazz secrets) is slurring triplets and sixteenths, even though they are not marked that way. Of course, our friend UMO still applies.

If the triplet/sixteenth grouping is preceded by an upbeat eighth-note, be sure to include the grouping with the bebop tonguing.

Bebop tonguing also applies to eighth notes after the grouping.



If there is some articulation marked in the triplets or sixteenths, it is generally in conjunction with a slur (slur two- tongue the next, etc). As always, slurring keeps the smoothness of the swing.

Quarter notes after the grouping do require a tongue, in order to give the proper “Daht”.

Conclusion

Playing jazz can seem a daunting task with many unnotated elements. As we have seen, it is as simple as applying Bebop tonguing and following five simple rules. Using these will demystify the idiosyncrasies of jazz. By following these guidelines, you can blend in any situation and will be on your way to sounding and playing like a true jazz player!