

*A  
Guide  
for the  
Modern Jazz  
Rhythm Section*

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A structural and developmental guide for  
success in today's jazz rhythm section

by  
Steve Houghton



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## *Steve Houghton*

Steve Houghton is one of the most talked about drummers in the ranks of today's rising young musicians. A featured staff drum clinician for Yamaha Musical Products, Steve has a wealth of experience credited to his early career as a professional musician. He is currently a member and soloist with the Freddie Hubbard Quartet and maintains a busy teaching schedule at the University of Southern California and the Percussion Institute of Technology. In addition, Steve keeps busy in the L.A. studio scene.

A native of Kenosha, Wisconsin, Steve attended the University of Wisconsin at Madison and later North Texas State University where he performed with the 1:00 Lab Band. Following his attendance there, Steve toured with the Woody Herman Orchestra for two years. Returning to Texas, he was first call studio drummer-percussionist in Dallas where he played for national radio and television commercials. Steve has also performed and recorded with such artists as Gary Burton, Paul Anka, Doc Severinson, Bobby Hutcherson, Clark Terry, Joe Henderson, Harold Land, Mick Goodrick, Joe Farrell, and the Toshiko Akiyoshi-Lew Tabackin Big Band.

Now residing in Studio City, California, and having conducted numerous clinics, Steve Houghton's training and vast recording experience provide a true learning experience because of his ability to communicate with a pro as well as an aspiring student. This book is a result of these clinics and an active career as a professional percussionist.

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## Foreward

The rhythm section has been traditionally referred to as the section that "keeps the time" in the band. Today, this is still a misconception among some jazz ensemble directors. It is true that the piano, drums, bass, and guitar supply rhythm and time, but this is also the responsibility of the entire band. If the band doesn't play "in time" it negates the whole purpose of the rhythm section.

The rhythm section has much more responsibility than just "keeping the time"; they can actually be referred to as "the improvising section." In one evening of music, the majority of what they play is rarely on the printed page. A rhythm section player must have more than a strong sense of time and "feel"; he must be creative as well.

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### Examples:

1. The piano player must look at a chord symbol and decide how to voice it (what register to play it in, when to invert the chord, what bass note to employ). This is commonly called "comping" in jazz terms and will be referred to as such throughout the following text.
  2. The bass part may have only chord symbols and the word "Rock". The bass player must then devise a bass pattern that fits the style of rock music within the chords and melody.
  3. The guitar player must always be sensitive as to *when* to play. Piano and guitar playing at the same time may sometimes result in confusion. The guitar player must determine many of these things on his own, because the parts are often very sketchy.
  4. A drum part will read "Play 32 bars of time." What you do with that "32" is up to the drummer. If the drummer is backing a soloist, he will be sensitive to that soloist. When playing behind the band, the drummer should be aware of what the band is doing and support it... to enhance that particular style.
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Thus, we see that the rhythm section is the only section in the band that really has a chance to be creative and "stretch out." I believe the big band will only be as good as the emphasis and training within the rhythm section. These key players must *think and play together* and (from "inside the big band") must develop the *moods* and *creative aspects* of the music. This is style, pulse, and *excitement!* This is the rhythm section.

Considering the beliefs and statements mentioned previously, it is this author's intent to present this book only as a practical guide for a successful performance of the jazz rhythm section. It is *not* a technique book that relates how to play each instrument. It is a general approach in developing a total cohesiveness and ensemble approach within the rhythm section.

# 1.

## *Rhythm Section Setup*

The rhythm section must be positioned correctly whether in a combo (small group) setting or a big band setting. A superb performance by any combo or big band depends on the members of the rhythm section having visual and acoustical contact as well as proper spacing for clarity and control.

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### *Visual Contact*

1. Visual contact between the members of the rhythm section is a "must". You *cannot* expect smooth rhythmic and harmonic interaction if the players are unable to see one another.
  2. "Comping" responsibilities (between piano and guitar) can be resolved by the "nod of a head".
  3. Drumset and auxiliary percussion compatibility will also be realized when visual contact can be maintained.
- 

### *Acoustical Contact*

Rhythmic stability will be achieved immediately, if the rhythm section members can hear one another.

1. The bass player and drummer should be *physically close* so they can "lock in" the time.

2. The auxiliary percussionist should be located *near the drummer* so that both players are together rhythmically and "time-wise."
3. To achieve harmonic compatibility, the piano and guitar players should be *near one another*. Different chord voicings between guitar and piano should be resolved by prior discussion and listening to each other as they play together.

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## Group Placement

The rhythm section players using amplification should position their amplifier controls *near one another* to assure correct volume, tone control, and good balance within the rhythm section.

Important considerations also include: 1) the *balance* of the rhythm section in relation to the full band as well as *individual soloists*. 2) ready access to controls making it possible for the amplified players to make subtle adjustments from tune to tune, soloist to soloist, and practice area to performance hall. 3) the drummer and piano player (when not amplified) realizing similar responsibilities for balance.

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## Important Individual Considerations

1. **Drums** - Should be next to the trombone section (see diagrams). Music stand should be to the drummer's side so that visual contact with the director is not lost. Drumset should be set up "around your body", as comfortable as can be. Don't set drums up just so they *look good!* Cymbals should *not block* the eye contact with the leader.
2. **Auxiliary Percussion** - Should be *close to the drummer* (behind him). If vibes are used, they should be placed toward the front so that their sound projection can be heard more readily. Good percussionists can really enhance a performance just as tasteless percussionists can destroy it.
3. **Piano** - When two keyboards are used, they should be set up next to one another. The player should be able to *see the director and the band* at all times. a) When using acoustic piano, a microphone usually has to be employed because acoustic pianos get "swallowed up" by big bands. b) When using just an electric piano and no amp, make sure the speaker partially faces the audience so the amplified sound can be heard. c) If an amplifier is used, the pianist can face more toward the band and the director.
4. **Guitar** - The guitar player should set up just *behind* the piano (see diagrams). a) It is recommended that the player *sit down* rather than stand, in order not to "block the sound" or visual contact of the other players. b) The guitar player should be placed *next to* and *not* directly in front of the amplifier. c) The amp should *not* be in front of someone else in the group.
5. **Bass** - The bass player should be positioned *next* to the drummer. a) The bass player should be able to see and hear the drummer's *hi-hat* clearly. b) When both basses (acoustic and electric) are used, extra space must be made available. c) When the bass player is positioned directly to the right of the drummer, the amp should be positioned so that both the drummer and the band can hear the bass (see diagrams).

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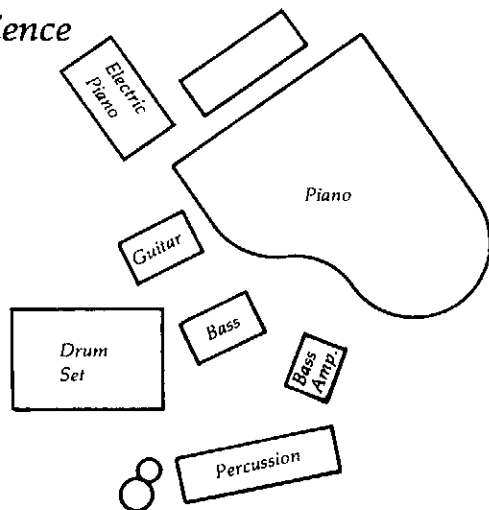
## Trouble Areas

The following are questions to ask yourself concerning problem areas the rhythm section might encounter.

1. Can *everyone* in the rhythm section see and hear the director (for cutoffs, downbeats, cues, etc.)?
2. Is the rhythm section (especially the drummer) as close to the band as possible? (The rhythm section should not be separated from the band even though it may *look appealing*.)
3. Can the soloist come down and play the solo *near the rhythm section* to feel the pulse and the time of the rhythm combo?
4. Does the rhythm section have a *speaker monitor* near them so they can hear the soloist? Many times the soloist can only be heard by the audience. This leaves the rhythm section remote in terms of interaction.
5. Can the band hear the rhythm section? The drums and bass *must* be heard by the whole band. If this is a problem, a speaker monitor will solve it.

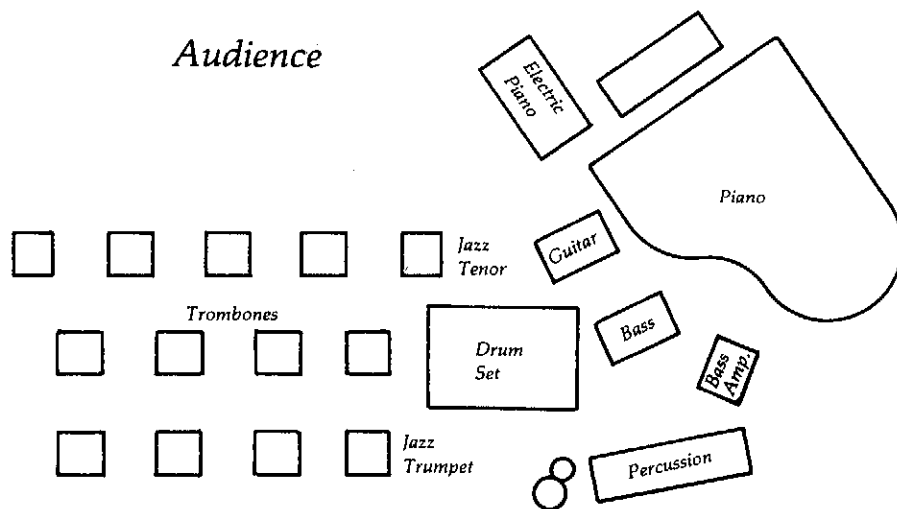
### 1. Rhythm Section Setup

Audience



### 2. Rhythm Section / Band Setup

Audience



### 3. Sample Speaker Monitor Setup

Audience

