

Understanding the Jazz Feel

By
Per Danielsson

Recently I had the pleasure of touring with Mel Bay recording artist Corey Christiansen. The band consisted of Christian Fabian on bass, Danny Gottlieb on drums, myself on piano and Corey on guitar. During our stay in St. Louis we also recorded several instructional DVDs under Corey's, Danny's and my name (look for them in your local music store). Before the session Danny and I had an interesting conversation about time and feel in jazz and how to teach it to students. That conversation is the basis for this month's article.

The feel in jazz is completely different from most music styles. The only way to understand the treatment of time and rhythm is to spend countless hours listening. It is hard to explain the feel in words but it is possible to explain it theoretically. Again, to be able to apply this theory you have to listen to jazz recordings and get a natural feel of how jazz is supposed to sound.

The first thing that needs to be learned is to understand how the eighth notes differ in jazz compared to other types of music. In jazz the eighth notes are based on what we call triplet feel. By sub-dividing the eighth notes into triplets, and putting a rest on the middle note, you'll be able to create a swing feel.

Regular 8th notes.

Musical notation for Regular 8th notes. The piece is in 4/4 time. The melody consists of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The bass line consists of chords: Dmin7 (D, F, A, C), G13 (G, B, D, F, A, C), and C6 (C, E, G, B, F). The notation shows a piano accompaniment with a treble clef and a bass clef.

Triplet feel 8th notes (swing)

Musical notation for Triplet feel 8th notes (swing). The piece is in 4/4 time. The melody consists of eighth notes grouped in triplets: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The bass line consists of chords: Dmin7 (D, F, A, C), G13 (G, B, D, F, A, C), and C6 (C, E, G, B, F). The notation shows a piano accompaniment with a treble clef and a bass clef.

Students who have little knowledge of jazz often play the eighth notes like the example below.

Musical notation for Wrong eighth notes. The piece is in 4/4 time. The melody consists of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The bass line consists of chords: Dmin7 (D, F, A, C), G13 (G, B, D, F, A, C), and C6 (C, E, G, B, F). The word "Wrong" is written above the melody in the second and third measures. The notation shows a piano accompaniment with a treble clef and a bass clef.

In my experience, I have noticed that the best way to break this habit is to play the eighth notes straight and legato together with a metronome. This forces you to relax the tempo and gives you better control over how the eighth notes should feel. When comfortable with this approach, start to implement the triplet feel.

It is also important to incorporate the triplet feel subdivision when comping. Look how the examples are written below and how they're actually played.

Written:

Musical notation for the 'Written' example. It shows a piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The right hand plays a melody of eighth notes, and the left hand plays a bass line of eighth notes. The notation is written in a standard staff with a grand staff. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody consists of eighth notes: C4, E4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C6. The bass line consists of eighth notes: C3, E3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The notation is written in a standard staff with a grand staff. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody consists of eighth notes: C4, E4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C6. The bass line consists of eighth notes: C3, E3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The notation is written in a standard staff with a grand staff. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody consists of eighth notes: C4, E4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C6. The bass line consists of eighth notes: C3, E3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5.

Played:

Musical notation for the 'Played' example. It shows a piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The right hand plays a melody of eighth notes, and the left hand plays a bass line of eighth notes. The notation is written in a standard staff with a grand staff. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody consists of eighth notes: C4, E4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C6. The bass line consists of eighth notes: C3, E3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The notation is written in a standard staff with a grand staff. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody consists of eighth notes: C4, E4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C6. The bass line consists of eighth notes: C3, E3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The notation is written in a standard staff with a grand staff. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody consists of eighth notes: C4, E4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C6. The bass line consists of eighth notes: C3, E3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5.

Practice the etude together with the recording and try to adapt the triplet feel. The recorded track consists of melody and a bass line which leaves space for you to add the left hand voicings. When adding the left hand, try to use the comping patterns that are displayed earlier in this article. However, focus on the melody line before worrying about the left hand.

Remember to relax when you play. The most common rhythm mistake made by jazz students is rushing (playing ahead of the beat). Practice with a metronome or play-along CD and RELAX. I once had a teacher tell me: "Be musically exciting, but don't get excited."

Per Danielsson

F7 Bb7₃ F7

Bb7 F7 Am7(♭5) D7(♭9)

5

Gm7 C7 Am7(♭5) D7(♭9) Gm7 C7

F7 F7 Cm7 F7

Second Chorus

Bb7 F7 Am7(♭5) D7(♭9)

17

Gm7 C7 C7♭9 Am7(♭5) D7(♭9) Gm7 C7 F7