

Fundamentals of Rhythm Section Playing

By Paul Rushka, D.Mus.

prushka@stfx.ca

About the Rhythm Section

The rhythm section is a term that refers to the ‘engine’ of the ensemble – typically drum set, bass, piano and/or guitar, and occasionally other instruments such as vibraphone and various percussion instruments. Working together, the rhythm section is responsible for outlining the harmonic progression (chord changes) of the piece as well as providing the rhythmic ‘thrust’ or forward motion that drives the band and makes the music sound exciting and feel good! It is important for each member of the rhythm section to understand their role in the section, and to recognize that their individual part is a piece of the rhythm section sound.

Bass

The primary responsibilities of the bass in the rhythm section are to:

- a) Together with the drums, lay down the basic rhythm of the piece, and create a forward momentum that drives the musical work
- b) Outline the harmonic progression through the notes of the bassline

Things to think about:

- a) In a swing feel, make sure your notes are sustained for full value, connecting to the next note
- b) Strive for even weight on every beat (don’t accent beats 2 & 4, for example)
- c) Listen to the drummer and try to connect (lock in, or play together) in a way that creates energy and excitement

Drums

The primary responsibilities of the drum set in the rhythm section are to:

- a) Together with the bass, lay down the basic rhythm of the piece and create a forward momentum that drives the musical work
- b) Set up rhythmic hits for the ensemble
- c) Interact with the soloist through comping (often on the snare drum along with judicious use of the bass drum, although there are many other ways to do this)
- d) Lead the ensemble’s dynamics

Things to think about

- a) Listen to the bassist and try to connect (lock in, or play together) in a way that creates energy and excitement
- b) Dynamics of the drum set – when playing a jazz beat or feel, the ride cymbal should be the loudest, followed by the hi-hat, and any drums should be underneath that, except for occasional accents
- c) Don’t play the bass drum too strongly!!! (Jazz is very different from rock – don’t let the bass drum be the loudest part of your instrument)

Guitar

The primary responsibilities of the guitar in the rhythm section are to:

- a) Support the harmonic progression (chord changes) by playing chord voicings
- b) Comp (play the chord voicings) in a manner that reinforces the feeling and drive being produced by the bassist and drummer
- c) Occasionally provide fills or other interactive elements with the soloist and/or ensemble

Things to think about

- a) Volume – due to the use of amplifiers, it's very easy for the guitar to be too loud! Make sure that you can hear all the instruments in the rhythm section clearly (make sure that you can hear the other instruments of the rhythm section just as clearly as yourself)
- b) Chord placement – when comping, make sure that the placement of your chords help to reinforce the feeling generated by the bass & drums
- c) Aim for a variety of rhythms in your comping, and a mixture of short and sustained chords
- d) Feeling – if you are asked to play a “Freddie Green” feel (simple voicings on all 4 beats in a swing feel), your volume should be low, and you should try to get the bulk of your volume from your strumming hand. Aim for clear, strong strokes on every beat, and try to match the placement of the bass notes
- e) Be aware of overlapping roles between yourself and the pianist (if applicable)

Piano

The primary responsibilities of the piano in the rhythm section are to:

- a) Support the harmonic progression (chord changes) by playing chord voicings
- b) Comp (play the chord voicings) in a manner that reinforces the feeling and drive being produced by the bassist and drummer
- d) Occasionally provide fills or other interactive elements with the soloist and/or ensemble

Things to think about

- a) If playing an electric piano or keyboard, make sure your volume is matching the rest of the rhythm section
- b) Chord placement – if comping freely, make sure that the placement of your chords helps to reinforce the feeling generated by the bass & drums
- c) Aim for a variety of rhythms in your comping, and a mixture of short and sustained chords
- d) Be aware of overlapping roles between yourself and the guitarist (if applicable)

Areas of Development for Rhythm Section Performers

- a) Learn the basic feels most common to jazz: swing ‘2’ feel, swing ‘4’ feel, bossa nova, samba, non-latin even 8th note grooves
- b) Listen to examples of great rhythm sections for knowledge and inspiration
- c) Learn about fundamental music theory and how to create your own parts from just the chord symbols (ie basslines, chord voicings, etc)
- d) Develop your solo improvisation skills (although this is not necessarily a key part of rhythm section function, a core tenet of the jazz tradition is that *all* instruments improvise solos at times)

Suggested Listening:

Oscar Peterson Trio *At the Stratford Shakespearean Festival* (Verve Records)

Oscar Peterson (piano), Herb Ellis (guitar) and Ray Brown (bass) perform a masterful set and demonstrate how hard a band can groove, even without drums!

Miles Davis *Relaxin' with the Miles Davis Quintet* (Prestige Records)

Red Garland (piano), Paul Chambers (bass) and 'Philly' Joe Jones (drums) provide all kinds of momentum and swing on this classic recording

Miles Davis *Kind of Blue* (Columbia Records)

Considered one of the finest jazz recordings of all time, Bill Evans (piano), Paul Chambers (bass) and Jimmy Cobb (drums) demonstrate how a rhythm section can be flexible, intimate, supportive and propulsive.

Miles Davis *Miles Smiles* (Columbia Records)

One of the definitive recordings of Miles' band from the 1960's, featuring Herbie Hancock (piano), Ron Carter (bass) & Tony Williams (drums)

John Coltrane *A Love Supreme* (Impulse! Records)

McCoy Tyner (piano), Jimmy Garrison (bass) & Elvin Jones (drums) provide elasticity and a driving feel on this incredible recording.

Kenny Wheeler *The Widow In The Window* (ECM Records)

John Taylor (piano), John Abercrombie (guitar), Dave Holland (bass) and Jack DeJohnette (drums) demonstrate a contemporary interactive concept on this recording by famed Canadian musician Wheeler.

Kurt Rosenwinkel *The Next Step* (Verve Records)

In addition to being a riveting soloist and brilliant composer, Rosenwinkel provides a great example on this record of how a guitarist can balance comping duties with melodies. Featuring Kurt Rosenwinkel (guitar), Ben Street (bass) and Jeff Ballard (drums).

Joshua Redman *Round Again* (Nonesuch Records)

Brad Mehldau (piano), Christian McBride (bass) & Brian Blade (drums) provide a shining example of rhythm section playing in the 21st century.