

The Jazz Commandments

Guidelines For Jazz Articulation And Style

by Jerry Tolson



MP3 Recordings (with and without soloist)
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Chapter 1

The Swing Feel

In some ways, the concept of swing is the Holy Grail of Jazz . It is the foundation of all jazz performances. Even if the piece is not specifically in the traditional swing style, the sense of propulsive rhythmic *feel* or *groove* created by the musical interaction between the performers is still referred to as the swing factor. Indeed, Mark Gridley uses this concept as one of the definitions of swing in his jazz history and styles text. As a performance technique, swing has been called *the most debated word in jazz*. *The Jazz In America glossary* defines it as “*when an individual player or ensemble performs in such a rhythmically coordinated way as to command a visceral response from the listener (to cause feet to tap and heads to nod)*”; *an irresistible gravitational buoyancy that defies mere verbal definition*. When jazz performer Cootie Williams was asked to define it, he joked “*Define it? I'd rather tackle Einstein's theory!*” Jeff Pressing defines it more academically in *Black Atlantic Rhythm: Its Computational and Transcultural Foundations* as “*a phenomenon of carefully aligned concurrent rhythmic patterns characterized by a subdivision structure relative to a perception of recurring pulses*”. Which is to say, it is a matter of how the beat is played and subdivided.

Traditionally, in swing style the eighth note is the underlying subdivision. Although tempo somewhat impacts the treatment of these eighth notes, the overriding principle is that *all eighth notes are not created equal*. Remembering this so called jazz *Bill of Rights* is effective in performing the music more authentically. Through the use of accents and an underlying subdivision that, depending on the tempo, lies somewhere between the eighth-note triplet feel of 4/4 meter, three eighth notes to the beat of 12/8 meter, and the exact even subdivision of rock music, the jazz performer can create that ever elusive swing groove. Also crucial to the groove is the importance of swinging the rests as well as the notes. A performance where the notes are swung, but the rests are not swung, is just as inadequate as one where the notes are not swung.

The swing feel in moderate to slower tempos is characterized by an underlying subdivision of the eighth notes into triplets as shown below. You will often see this indication at the beginning of a chart or in the conductor’s score to indicate that the eighth notes should be swung. Any or all of the following may be used to indicate swing eighth notes.



Practicing eighth notes with the middle syllable of the triplet silently articulated, but not verbalized will help develop your style.

