

Jazz Theory: The Importance of Rhythm

By Dennis Winge

The two quotes that best describes the utmost importance of rhythm are both by all-time master Dizzy Gillespie: “You construct from a point of the rhythm. Melody conforms with what you have in your mind. How you want the rhythm to go. Then you put your notes to that. I think of rhythm first.” And also, “I fill my head with rhythm.”

Rhythm is king. You can have the greatest technique, the most killer licks, the most expressive phrasing, and the most adventurous harmonic sensibility, and all won't amount to anything without good rhythm. This article is not so much about how to develop your sense of rhythm or how to work with a metronome, for example; it is about simply becoming conscious of the rhythm in your improvised phrases so that you can have a wide array of rhythmic possibilities at your disposal.

A great many players, even advanced ones, have internalized a certain vocabulary of rhythms that they default to, and that is pretty much all they ever use. In the Western world we spend so much time learning music theory and scales, etc. that there isn't much time for discussion about the possibilities of rhythm. Becoming conscious of the rhythms you default to can be quite an exciting awakening, but patience is required because rhythmic exploration can quickly take you out of your comfort zone.

Below are some exercises that are designed to make you more conscious of the rhythm of your phrasing, and to give you a starting point for further exploration on your own. They are not, by any means, a comprehensive study of rhythmic possibilities.

The image shows seven examples of musical notation on a single staff, illustrating different rhythmic patterns in 4/4 time. Each example is numbered in a circle at the beginning of the staff.

- Example 1:** A simple rhythmic phrase starting on the first beat and ending on the fourth beat.
- Example 2:** A rhythmic phrase starting on the second beat and ending on the fourth beat.
- Example 3:** A rhythmic phrase starting on the first beat and ending on the second beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". This is followed by a phrase starting on the first beat and ending on the second beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". This is followed by a phrase starting on the second beat and ending on the fourth beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". Above the first phrase is the label "1", above the second phrase is "1+", and above the third phrase is "2".
- Example 4:** A rhythmic phrase starting on the first beat and ending on the second beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". This is followed by a phrase starting on the first beat and ending on the second beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". This is followed by a phrase starting on the second beat and ending on the fourth beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". Above the first phrase is the label "1", above the second phrase is "1+", and above the third phrase is "etc.". There is also a small 'A' above the second phrase.
- Example 5:** A rhythmic phrase starting on the first beat and ending on the second beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". This is followed by a phrase starting on the first beat and ending on the second beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". This is followed by a phrase starting on the second beat and ending on the fourth beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". Above the first phrase is the label "C-7", above the second phrase is "A-7", above the third phrase is "D-7", and above the fourth phrase is "G7".
- Example 6:** A rhythmic phrase starting on the first beat and ending on the second beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". This is followed by a phrase starting on the first beat and ending on the second beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". This is followed by a phrase starting on the second beat and ending on the fourth beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". Above the first phrase is the label "1", above the second phrase is "1+", and above the third phrase is "etc.". There is also a small 'A' above the second phrase.
- Example 7:** A rhythmic phrase starting on the first beat and ending on the second beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". This is followed by a phrase starting on the first beat and ending on the second beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". This is followed by a phrase starting on the second beat and ending on the fourth beat, followed by a double bar line and the text "etc.". Above the first phrase is the label "1", above the second phrase is "1+", and above the third phrase is "etc.". There is also a small 'A' above the second phrase.

- A. First, let's try something as simple (but effective) as starting the phrase on the beat and finishing off the beat, as in example 1. Then, start a phrase off the beat and end on the beat as in example 2.
- B. Next, try starting your phrases on each part of the beat, i.e. 1, the "and" of 1, 2, the "and of 2, etc. as in example 3.
- C. Then, try ending your phrases on each part of the beat, i.e. 1, the "and" of 1, 2, the "and" of 2, etc. as in example 4. These might seem easy enough in the key of C, but can you take each one (all 16 combinations – i.e. starting and ending on each eighth note) all the way through a tune?
- D. From there, we can take a rhythm and repeat it exactly, for any number of bars, as shown in example 5.

- E. In that case it was a 2 bar phrase, but try playing 1 bar phrases, 4 bar phrases, or even 3 bar phrases all the way through a tune. It can require quite a bit of concentration to keep the rhythm exact, especially through tricky changes.
- F. Of course, we can always take a rhythm and repeat most of it but vary the ending. Blues players are long familiar with this as it sets up a sort of question and answer technique as in example 6.
- G. Finally, just experiment with giving your phrases rhythmic variety. Can you make phrases that use all the range of note values from whole notes to 16th notes as in example 7?

By being conscious of your rhythmic usage and variety, your playing will start to take on a whole new meaning. I once attended a workshop in which it was pointed out that drummers can keep listeners engaged during a drum solo with only about 7 different tone-colors (i.e. an average configuration of 7 pieces to the drum set, and not counting different types of tones to gotten on the same drum or cymbal), whereas melodic instruments have 12 notes over several different octaves. The point was that if drummers could do it with 7, melodic instruments should easily be able to do with more. So many sources on improvisation say one of the big keys is to think like a drummer first.