

Fundamentals of Swing 8th Notes in Jazz

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One of the main distinguishing elements of jazz is swing feel. Swing is a feeling more than anything, and it is actually fairly useless to even try to put it into words. However, we can work on a couple of things to help us get close and rely on our ears to do the rest. To that end, I want to strongly emphasize that we listen intently and frequently to master jazz musicians, and imitate what we hear. Authentic swing feel cannot be exclusively learned from a book or a set of exercises. In this handout, I am trying to provide a practical starting point for students and teachers, but there are many, many exceptions to what I illustrate here.

Basic Rhythmic Feel

When writing swing 8th notes, composers and arrangers typically write 8th notes as they normally appear:



However, jazz musicians will interpret them as uneven triplets, like this:



8th Note Articulation

The first objective is to get accustomed to seeing one rhythm and playing it as a different rhythm. Rhythm alone doesn't necessarily make the music swing, however. In most cases, again with numerous notable exceptions, instrumentalists will articulate swing 8th note passages using an every-other-note articulation pattern, like this one:



The notes that are tongued (upbeats) are typically accented, and the ends of the slurred notes (downbeats) are played with a smooth legato release, as in a “Doo-VA-oo-VA-oo-VA-oo....” pattern.

Doo VA oo VA oo VA oo VA oo VA oo VA oo VA oo VA oo VA oo VA

The image shows a single staff of music in treble clef. The melody consists of a sequence of notes: D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4. The notes are grouped into pairs of eighth notes, with a 'Doo' syllable under the first note of each pair. The syllables 'VA' and 'oo' are placed under the second notes of the pairs. There are slurs over the first four pairs, the fifth and sixth pairs, and the last two pairs. There are also accents (>) above the notes G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4. The staff ends with a double bar line.

It is common for us to struggle the first time we attempt this articulation, because it feels “opposite” of what we are accustomed to in our classical music studies, where we are often tonguing downbeats, not upbeats. However, with patience and diligence, this articulation helps the swing feel of any 8th note line.

Articulation Exercise

In addition to trying this using jazz etudes and solo transcriptions, the exercise below really helps us learn this articulation. The repeated notes more or less force us to play it correctly.



This articulation concept is particularly effective for saxophone and trumpet players. Trombonists typically modify this approach using a concept known as “doodle tonguing.” Other musicians adapt it as appropriate for their instrument. As always, we should follow up with our private instructors.

The Continuum of Tempo

All elements of swing – uneven 8th notes, swing articulation, accents, and more – exist on the continuum of tempo. The slower the music, the more dramatic the swing feel. As tempo increases, the music smooths out, and all of the elements diminish. At the fastest tempos, the 8th notes are even (or “straight”), and the only thing that makes the line “swing” is the 8th note articulation and how you contour and accent the line.

This articulation concept is meant to be a starting point. Take some time to listen to great players and focus on how **they** articulate to hear the many unique and hip exceptions to this concept. How you choose to articulate will have as much to do with developing your personal sound as your tone will!