

Fundamental Rhythm Section Performance Concepts

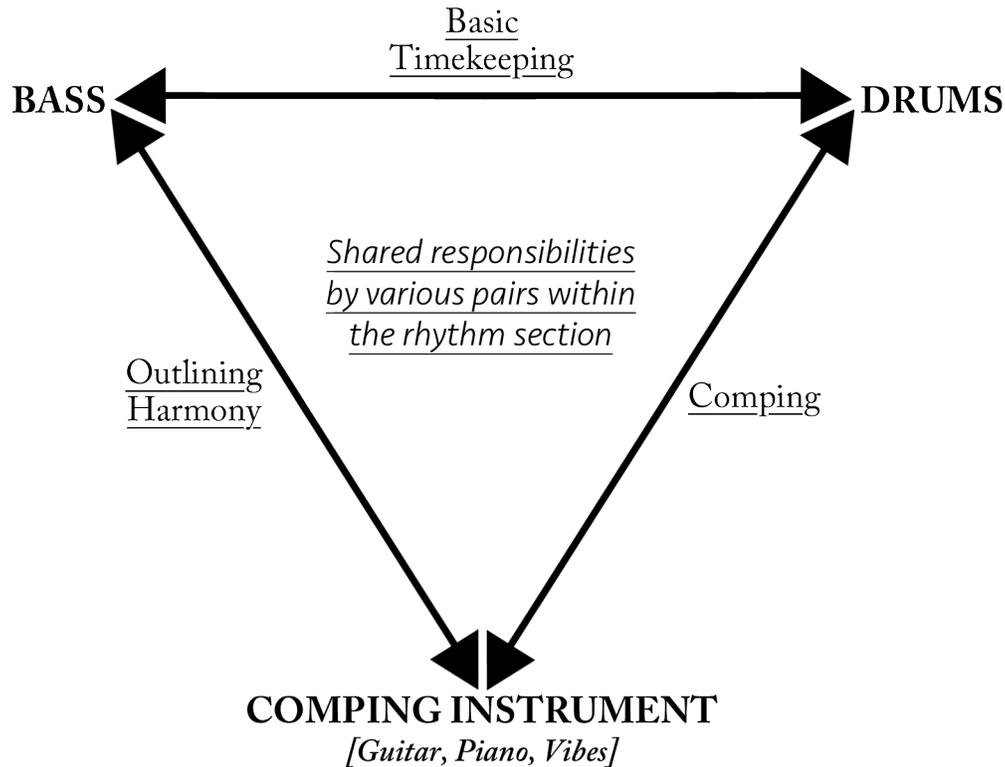
Two Foundational Elements for Junior High & High School Jazz Ensemble Directors and Their Rhythm Sections to Explore Together to Ensure a More Unified Performance

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This resource is intended to bring to light two basic components of rhythm section performance practice that are rarely discussed: **fulfilling one's interlocking roles within the rhythm section** and **unifying the feel of the swing 8th note**. When giving more attention to these two subjects in rehearsals (perhaps during a section rehearsal), junior high and high school jazz ensemble directors will find their rhythm sections more able to effectively perform together. At the end of these materials, a brief list of additional, instrument-specific resources helpful in developing young rhythm section performers is provided.

When working to develop the rhythm section of a jazz ensemble, one needs to understand the unique interconnectedness that exists within rhythm sections. Younger rhythm section players do not always understand the fundamental duties they should fulfill within their section. But it is critical that these players (and those who direct them) understand *and honor* these interlocking roles within the jazz rhythm section.

Let's look at a diagram (top of the next page) which clearly outlines these interconnected relationships between rhythm section performers:



As the diagram indicates, each performer in the rhythm section has a pair of important responsibilities shared with another rhythm section partner. To restate the diagram contents:

- It is the shared job of the bassist and the drummer to maintain basic timekeeping.
- It is the shared job of the bassist and the pianist/guitarist/vibraphonist to clearly outline the harmony of the piece.
- It is the shared job of the drummer and the pianist/guitarist/vibraphonist to “comp”, to create an improvised accompaniment that has a (stylistically-appropriate) rhythmic vitality to it.

Of course, these duties are shared to an extent throughout *all* performers in a jazz group. As an example, awareness of and adherence to the pulse—which might fall under the heading of “basic timekeeping”—should be a priority for every musician playing jazz. But particularly in the case of the jazz rhythm section, ensemble directors and their student musicians must agree on what is expected from each player, and what their specific, primary responsibilities are to the rest of the

group. When those duties are understood, diagnosing problems and addressing concerns within a rhythm section becomes much easier.

Another foundational point that sometimes escapes the notice of younger rhythm section players is the true nature of the swing 8th note. Swing 8ths are not some fixed ratio, but are tempo- and (to a lesser extent) style-dependent. Here's a visual that has proven helpful to many of my students in the past:



Swing 8ths *ON* or
Swing 8ths *OFF*?

No, not really.



Swing 8th concepts are more complex, more like a gradual shift from a triplet-based (12/8) conception at slow swing tempos to virtually even 8th notes (with more syncopated-*sounding* phrasing and articulations) at fast tempos. And medium swing? It's *neither* of these two extremes. That challenges young rhythm sections.

If not everyone in a rhythm section plays with the same *quality* of swing 8ths, the groove will not gel. Even if everyone *does* play with the same swing 8th conception, if it's the *wrong* conception (i.e., too "triplet-y" for a chosen tempo), then things *still* aren't going to groove very well. And it is important to present this concept to *all* younger jazz students—not just the members of the rhythm section—as early as possible in their development.

How does one figure out *how much* to swing the 8th notes on a certain piece (if unsure)? By listening to various recordings of that piece (or other pieces in that same style, at that same tempo) by *historically significant* jazz groups. Don't simply listen to the first version that shows up in a Google search, particularly if it is by an unknown (or amateur) group.

Fundamental Rhythm Section Performance Concepts - Pg. 4

Regarding instrument-specific resources for the continued development of junior high and high school rhythm sections, here are some options worthy of your consideration (as recommended by various members of the VJC team, including Dwight Kilian and Rob Moore):

- *Teaching School Jazz: Perspectives, Principles and Strategies* (various authors, edited by Michael Titlebaum and Chad West), which features individual chapters on each rhythm section instrument, including a jazz piano chapter I've authored.
- The educational resources portion of the Valley Jazz Cooperative web site offers free handouts including some that focus on harmonic materials useful to compers. (www.valleyjazz.org/educational)
- *Modern Walking Bass Technique* by Mike Richmond is a fantastic book. [*Dwight Kilian recommends it and feels it is best suited for use by high school jazz bassists.*]
- *Essential Styles for the Drummer & Bassist* by Steve Houghton & Tom Warrington is another helpful resource. [*While all of the book has great value, the drumming portion is particularly recommended by Rob Moore.*]
- Rob has also started (and continues to build) a Drum Tutorial Series of videos for the **MIDI Fortress** YouTube channel.

Author's Note: These materials were originally created as a supplement to an educational session I co-presented, with bassist Dwight Kilian and drummer Rob Moore, during the 2018 AMEA In-Service Conference (Mesa, AZ). The session, entitled "Developing JHS & HS Jazz Rhythm Sections" was offered on February 2, 2018.

Following an examination of the concepts found in this hand-out, the session proceeded with individual and trio demonstrations (with myself at the piano), showing specific techniques and rhythm section performance practices intended to help junior high school and high school jazz ensemble directors develop stronger rhythm sections. *This* handout has been edited for clarity (in the absence of live presenters), but aspires to offer similar assistance to ensemble directors.

---Russell Schmidt (May 2018)