

# Rhythmic Vocabulary: How to Develop Rhythm and Feel in Your Improvisations

Created for Clearwater Jazz Holiday Jazz Master  
“Virtual” Sessions - by Austin Vickrey



# Defining Terms - “Rhythm”

- Rhythm - The systematic arrangement of musical sounds, principally according to duration and periodic stress. - Oxford
  - Music’s patterns and actions over time.
  - Regular and irregular



# Defining Terms - “Vocabulary”

- Vocabulary - The body of words used in a particular language.
- Body of words used by a particular person
- Words used in a particular occasion or in a particular sphere



# Rhythmic Vocabulary

- The body of various rhythms used by a particular musician in particular styles.
  - Rhythmic possibilities are nearly endless!
  - Time is needed to develop rhythmic language.
  - One's bank of rhythmic knowledge can vary greatly from musician to musician and from style to style of music.
  - Rhythm gives context and interest to note choices for improvisations and compositions.



# Developing Vocabulary

- Transcriptions
- Learning Melodies
- Rhythm Exercises
- Understanding “feel,” style, and articulations
- Critical Listening



# Transcriptions

- Transcribing is one of the best ways to learn new and interesting vocabulary.
- Transcribe musicians that you like.
  - Try to emulate their style and feel as well (more on that later).
- Transcribe vocabulary from other than musicians who play your primary instrument.



# Transcriptions

- Most transcription should be done by ear with instrument.
- After having learned the transcription or partial transcription, attempt to write it down.
- Remember that improvisational ideas should flow naturally. Methodical practice of ideas and vocabulary will naturally seep into your playing over time.
- Transcribe multiple styles of music.



# Transcription Example

A musical score for a single melodic line in treble clef, spanning measures 10 to 16. The score is marked with a boxed 'A' at the beginning of measure 10. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and dynamic markings like accents (>) and slurs. Measure numbers 10, 12, 14, and 16 are indicated at the start of their respective staves. Small square icons with arrows are present in the right margin of each staff.

Chris Potter - "Rumples" from Ultrahang - 2009



# Extrapolated Rhythm - First 4 bars

The image displays two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled '10' and 'A' in a box. It contains a sequence of notes with stems and beams, representing a rhythmic pattern. The bottom staff is labeled '12' and contains a similar rhythmic pattern. Both staves use a treble clef and a common time signature. The notes are mostly quarter and eighth notes, with some rests and accents. The rhythm is consistent across both staves, illustrating the concept of extrapolating rhythm from a specific pitch.

- First 4 bars reduced to rhythm only on a “random” pitch.
- By taking the focus off of the pitches, we are able to concentrate and see the rhythm behind the line.



# Create a “new” melody using the extrapolated rhythm

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff is labeled '10' and contains a boxed letter 'A'. The second staff is labeled '12'. Both staves are in treble clef and contain a sequence of notes and rests. The first staff has a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature. The second staff has a key signature of one sharp (F-sharp) and a common time signature. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings like accents (>).

- Use the framework of a scale/key you like to create a new melody or phrase.
  - 4 bars of A minor



# Changing the style of the original transcription

**A**

10 C A7b9 Dm7 G7 Em7 A7b9 Dm7 G7

14 Gm7 C7 F7 F#o7 Em A7b9 Dm7 G7

- Swing interpretation
  - Reduced note values by half
  - Creates an 8 bar phrase
  - Used a different harmonic context (First 8 bars of Rhythm Changes, transposed for Bb tenor sax)
  - \*Note some rhythms here may not lie stylistically “correct,” so just feel free to tweak it to match the style.



# Learning Melodies

- A “good” melody is full of great rhythmic vocabulary.
- Learning to quote melodies in your improvisations can be fun and attention grabbing.
- Start with simple melodies: “Happy Birthday,” “Three Blind Mice,” etc.



# Learning Melodies

- Sources for jazz melodies
  - The New Real Book series - Cher Music
  - The Real Book series - Published by Hal Leonard
  - Transcription books like the Charlie Parker Omnibook, they make them for Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley, etc.
  - Even try learning popular melodies
  - Use the same method as transcription to vary the rhythms of the melodies you learn as well.



# Rhythm Exercises

- Sight-reading or reading music in general
- Recognizing typical rhythms and phrases that are idiomatic to the style you are playing.
- If you hear something you like, even if it's a small snippet, transcribe it, analyze it, memorize it, apply it. When you learn it well enough, make it your own.
- Create your own exercises!



# “Austin’s Rhythm Exercises”

## Part 1

- Start with a full measure of 8th notes, played in the swing style.
- Stick to one pitch at first.
- Practice playing the swing 8ths over an over at a comfortable tempo (use a metronome).



# “Austin’s Rhythm Exercises”

## Part 1

- Step 1: Remove ONE 8th note from the measure of 8th notes. (Example: Downbeat of 1)
- Step 2: Practice the new rhythm over and over at a comfortable tempo.
- Step 3: Replace the 8th note you removed and remove another 8th note. (Example: Downbeat of 2)
- Repeat Step 2. Continue this pattern of systematically removing notes to create new rhythms!



# Sample Rhythm Variations

- Can be practiced in the following ways:
  - Using a single note
  - Using a scale
  - Using notes from a particular chord
  - Chromatically
  - Up and Down in whole steps
  - Arpeggios
  - Mix and match rhythms

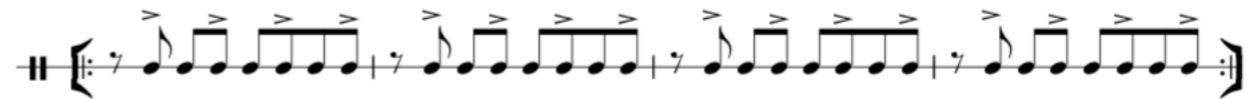
## Swing Rhythm Variations - 8th Notes

Part I - Creating variation by systematically removing a single downbeat or upbeat.  
Focus on smooth articulation and connecting the notes. Pay attention to articulations.

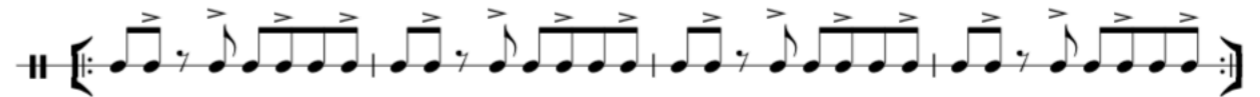
Swing 8ths - Fundamental Rhythm



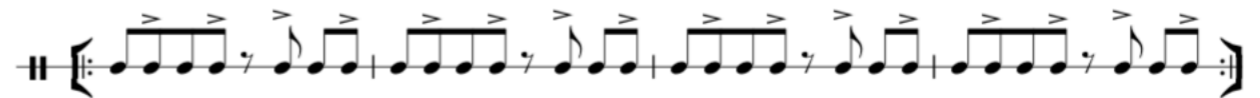
Variation #1 - Downbeat of beat 1 removed.



Variation #2 - Downbeat of beat 2 removed.



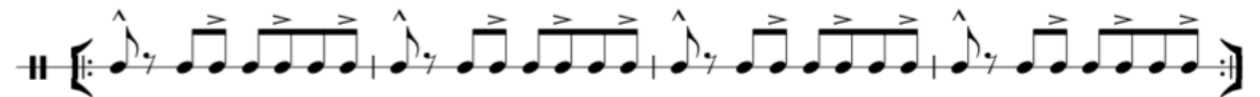
Variation #3 - Downbeat of beat 3 removed.



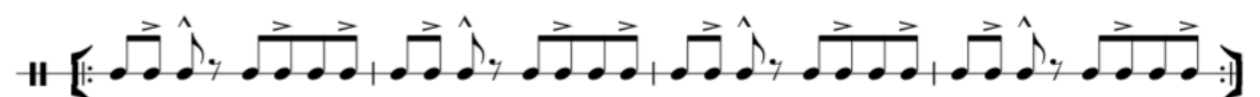
Variation #4 - Downbeat of beat 4 removed.



Variation #5 - Upbeat of beat 1 removed.



Variation #6 - Upbeat of beat 2 removed.



Variation #7 - Upbeat of beat 3 removed.



Variation #8 - Upbeat of beat 4 removed.





# “Austin’s Rhythm Exercises”

## Part 2

- Create your own jazz rhythm sheets!
- Use idiomatic phrases and rhythms.
- Pull from books, transcriptions, recordings.
- LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN!



# Sample Rhythm Sheet

- Can be practiced in the following ways:
  - Using a single note
  - Using a scale
  - Using notes from a particular chord
  - Chromatically
  - Up and Down in whole steps
  - Arpeggios
  - Mix and match rhythms

## Jazz Rhythm Sheet #1

Austin Vickrey  
John Hopkins Middle School

Tenuto ( - ) = "doo" Accents ( > ) = "bah" Marcato ( ^ ) = "dot"

**Swing**

**Rhythm #1**

**Rhythm #2**

**Rhythm #3**

**Rhythm #4**

**Rhythm #5**

**Rhythm #6**

**Rhythm #7**

**Rhythm #8**



# “Feel” and Style

- It's important to thoroughly study the feel and style of the music you are trying to improvise with.
- Swing style - playing in time vs playing behind the beat
  - Listen to “Tenor Madness” title track by Sonny Rollins - Coltrane vs Rollins styles
- Linear playing vs Vertical playing
  - Listen to Lester Young - more linear, melodic, rhythmic
  - Coleman Hawkins - more vertical, arpeggios and outlining harmony
- Inflections - bends, scoops, growls, timbre changes, etc.



# Articulations

- Articulations make a HUGE difference!
- “Dit” - Staccato (separated)
- “Doo” - Tenuto (connected)
- “Dot” - Marcato (accented, full value, separated)
- “Bah” - Accented notes
- Critical listening will help you identify certain tendencies of accents with certain stylistic rhythms. (This can also be applied to the rhythm sheets or your own rhythm exercises)



LISTEN, LISTEN,  
LISTEN! :)