

GOT RHYTHM?

A creative approach with rhythm adds life to the phrasing of improvised lines.

by Professor Ed Saindon '76

Many improvisers work on developing their improvisational skills primarily by exploring techniques related to note selection. While note choices, level of harmonic sophistication, and technical facility contribute greatly to a player's overall sound and voice, rhythm is an often overlooked component in the study of improvisation. Rhythm is usually last on the list of priorities of a player seeking to develop an identifiable personal style, yet the world of rhythm offers improvisers and composers many untapped possibilities.

More often than not, improvisers resort to playing lines made up predominantly of eighth notes. Additionally, when a player lacks awareness of phrasing and/or chooses phrase lengths that are repetitive and constricted by the chord progression, his lines tend to be monotonous, predictable, and hemmed in by the bar lines. Considering rhythmic phrasing offers the improviser freedom from the bar line. The goal of this article is to help you integrate concepts of rhythmic phrasing into your playing so that introducing rhythmic variety becomes part of your natural vocabulary in the improvisational or composing process.

Further, working on rhythmic concepts improves your time feel, ability to hear longer phrases, and overall sense of form. And better time feel helps you hear more interesting rhythms that float over the bar lines without restriction.

The term *rhythmic phrasing* refers to a grouping of notes or rhythmic unit based on a specific rhythmic pulse such as eighth notes, triplets, or sixteenth notes. Depending on the time signature, rhythmic pulse, and rhythmic unit, the phrasing generally crosses the bar line and obscures the overall sense of time.

You can use several techniques to create a rhythmic unit. As shown in the examples on page 21, the rhythmic unit is shaped through the use of accents, rests, partial subdivision, and pitch. In all the examples, the initial rhythmic unit will be indicated with a bracket. Expressions such as "triplets phrased in four" and "triplets grouped in four" are inter-

changeable; both are correct.

The term *cycle* indicates the time it takes for a rhythmic unit to play from beginning to end and begin again on the downbeat of a succeeding measure. For example, eighth notes phrased in four in 3/4 time require two measures before the rhythmic unit begins again on the downbeat of the third measure. This two-measure cycle will consist of three units of eighth notes phrased in groups of four (see example 1 on page 21).

Working with Rhythmic Phrasing

Try improvising using the rhythms of the various musical examples. At first, try playing the rhythms using a specific scale. The more you practice and hear these rhythmic groupings, the more they will naturally appear in your improvisations. The ultimate goal is to play these rhythmic units over the chord progression of a composition.

The improviser is also encouraged to learn to start a rhythmic grouping on any beat or on any partial of any pulse in the measure as opposed to always beginning the cycle on beat one. As an improviser, you should always know where you are in the form of the song and where beat one is in every measure.

In addition, move freely between various rhythmic units based on rhythmic pulses such as eighth notes, triplets, and sixteenth notes without necessarily completing the cycle of each rhythmic unit.

The musical examples illustrate several ideas to develop rhythmic phrasing. Examples 2 through 4 show one-measure cycles of eighth notes phrased in three in 3/4 time with accented notes, rests, and rhythmic subdivisions. Examples 5 and 5a show a three-measure cycle of eighth notes phrased in three in 4/4. Examples 6 and 6a show a four-measure cycle using triplets phrased in four in 4/4. Example 7 has a five-measure cycle of triplets phrased in five in 4/4. Example 8 is another five-measure cycle employing sixteenth notes phrased in five in 4/4. Example 9 is a five-measure cycle of quarter-note triplets phrased in five in 4/4.

"Étude" combines some of the rhythmic

ideas discussed above (see example 10). The circled numbers indicate the number of notes and/or rests in each rhythmic grouping. The piece begins, for example, with triplets phrased in four (a one-measure cycle). Measure two begins with triplets phrased in five (a five-measure cycle), and so forth.

I encourage you to create your own variations based on the concept of rhythmic phrasing. While this article includes a random sampling of rhythmic units with various pulses in 3/4 and 4/4, other possibilities would include the use of different time signatures, polyrhythms, and rhythmic units with two to seven notes. An in-depth treatment of this subject can be found in my book *Exploration in Rhythm, Volume 1, Rhythmic Phrasing in Improvisation*.



Professor Ed Saindon is an active clinician and an editor for the Percussive Arts Society's magazine *Percussive Notes*. His latest recording, *Depth of Emotion*, is a quartet outing featuring Saindon on vibes, piano, and marimba and Dave Liebman on soprano sax. Visit www.edsaindon.com.

Examples of Rhythmic Phrasing

Eighth notes phrased in four in 3/4 time

EX. 1

(Brackets indicate the rhythmic unit.)

Examples 2 through 4 show ideas for phrasing eighth notes in three in 3/4.

EX. 2

Rhythm unit with accents **With accents and pitches**

EX. 3

With rests **With rests and pitches**

EX. 4

With partial subdivision, rests **With pitches**

Three-measure cycle of eighth notes phrased in three in 4/4 with rests

EX. 5

With pitches

EX. 5A

Four-measure cycle using triplets phrased in four in 4/4 with rests

EX. 6

With pitches

EX. 6A

Five-measure cycle of triplets phrased in five in 4/4 with pitches and rests

EX. 7

Five-measure cycle with sixteenth notes phrased in five in 4/4

EX. 8

Five-measure cycle of quarter-note triplets phrased in five in 4/4

EX. 9

ÉTUDE

EX. 10

*Circled numbers indicate the number of notes and/or rests in each rhythmic grouping.

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