WRITING and ARRANGING FOR THE RHYTHM SECTION

RHYTHM SECTION

The rhythm section is central command for accompaniment and harmonic setting. It is the continuo in the jazz setting. The continuo in Baroque music consisted of at least a chordal instrument (harpsichord, organ, guitar) and a bass instrument (cello, bass, viola da gamba, bassoon). The continuo accompaniment would be created or realized by reading short hand notation symbols, usually a figured bass line. The parts were improvised within the style. This is very similar to what a jazz band rhythm section does. In the right hands, the generic rhythm section part shown below will sound great. It tells them the tempo and the style. The bassist will know to walk a swinging bass line that connects the chords; the guitarist and pianist will play interesting voicings in well placed rhythmic spots and not get in each others or the arrangements way; the drummer will play a swinging beat with just the right amount of fill to make it interesting.

This is as far as many arrangers go in writing for the rhythm section. They spend time considering interesting lines and voicings for the horns and then scratch off a generic rhythm part. There will be parts of any arrangement that are this basic, but an arranger should consider what the rhythm section players can do individually, as a section, and how they interact with the rest of the band. The arranger should have some basic knowledge of voicings, bass lines, drum beats, and an understanding of accompaniment patterns in several styles.

GUITAR

Guitarists in the jazz band typically play a solid body electric (many rock guitars), an archtop hollow body jazz guitar (Freddie Green with the Count Basie Orchestra, or Wes Montgomery), or a semi-hollow body (John Scofield) (solid wood block runs through the center of its body, with hollow chambers on either side.) If you need the straight ahead jazz four-beat chord chunking, like you hear with Count Basie, only the archtop will get the authentic sound. The semi-hollow bodies are very versatile and can work with anything from screaming rock to dark subtle jazz. You may have access to a guitarist who plays a nylon string guitar. Nylon string guitars can be great with bossa novas or lighter pieces like ballads. Nylon string guitars may be acoustic only (a classical guitar that will need to be played through a microphone). Playing an acoustic guitar through a microphone creates some problems in live music settings. The microphone may pick up other louder instruments and there may be feedback issues or problems getting the guitar loud enough. There are several nylon string guitars that are acoustic-electric and run through guitar amplifiers or PA systems so the parts can be heard in a live setting.
Range and Transposition

Guitar is a transposing instrument. Written notes sound an octave below where they are written.

Roles

Guitar has a very large range of pitches and should be considered for playing single lines. Guitar sounds great doubling any other instrument in the band at unison or octave in many different styles. Guitar can add a nice texture doubling the top of a sax solo line. Guitar can be a nice sound in a mixed group with Flugelhorn, Alto sax and others. In a funk or fusion arrangement, try doubling a strong lead trumpet part with electric guitar with overdrive. Guitar can double lines an octave above the bass. Write the lines as you would for any instrument giving necessary details (style, tempo, dynamics, articulations).

Guitar can play chords in a variety of rhythmic styles. Guitarist and pianist share the responsibility of playing chords for the accompaniment of the arrangement and when backing an improviser. Sometimes, all that is necessary is to indicate the chord symbols and style. Some style markings may need more explanation. “Swing” might mean play like Freddie Green or with a more contemporary approach. Arrangers have used names of artists at the top of parts to indicate a particular approach. If the music is to be in the Basie tradition, put Swing (like Freddie Green) at the top of the page. If the arrangement is more contemporary, try using the names of some contemporary players whose styles are close to what your arrangement needs (Mike Stern, John Scofield, Adam Rogers, etc.), so your style and tempo marking may look like this: Swing ala Stern (combination swing and funk) $\rightarrow 104$.

The guitar plays mostly open position voicings. The guitar has six strings, but will rarely use all six when playing chords. Your guitarist probably will know best how to play the chords you want. If you have specific chord voicings that you need, check with a guitarist to see if they are practical. Be specific when labeling chords for the rhythm section. Do not give the rhythm section just a G7 when the arrangement needs a G7 with a b13 and #9.

The guitar part in an arrangement will include several notation styles. Slash notation tells the guitarist to improvise and accompaniment part in the indicated style. Rhythmic notation tells the guitarist to play the chords with the indicated rhythm. Traditional notation is also used. There is some truth to the old jokes about guitarists and reading. They will not typically be able to read notes as quickly and accurately as the woodwind and brass players. The rhythm section spends more time looking at slashes and chord symbols deciding what to play or even if to play. If you want your rhythm section to play a lot of written parts, make sure you know the reading abilities and consider letting them see the music ahead of time for best results for everyone.

When you trust your guitarist to make the right musical choices when accompanying the written or improvised part of the arrangement, write out the chord symbols with slashes. The guitarist will decide, based on the musical situation, which chords to play, which to leave out, and where to place them rhythmically relative to the location indicated.
When specific rhythms need to be played with the ensemble, write the chords symbols with a combination of slashes and rhythmic notation. Articulations, dynamics and any other musical directions should be indicated.

When you need the guitarist to play lines and specific voiced chords, write the part using conventional notation remembering that the written part will sound an octave lower.

When you need the guitarist to play chords and melody together, you may choose to write the melody and supply the chord symbol and let the guitarist make the specific choices. The wavy line indicates a rolled or strummed chord.

**PIANO & KEYBOARDS**

The piano has the widest range. Use similar considerations for piano that were discussed for guitar. Pianists can play chords, double any instrument in the band, and supply a great deal of accompaniment by themselves.

An arranger may want to consider using an electric piano or synthesizer for certain styles. Indicate on the part if it is for electric piano and indicate specific sounds if it is a synthesizer part (i.e. *brass pad, clarinet, sawtooth solo patch*, etc.)
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BASS

The typical jazz double bass has four strings. Some acoustic and electric basses will have five strings with and additional low B. Some electric basses will have six stings with an additional low B and a high C. All of our discussion here will presume the traditional four strings. The bass is a transposing instrument—the notes sound an octave lower than written. The four open strings are shown below.

Open strings as written:

```
C: | E: | A: | D: |
---|---|---|---|
| | | |
```

Open strings as they sound:

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C: | E: | A: | D: |
---|---|---|---|
| | | |
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The bass part might be a mixture of written out bass lines and melodic material, or slash or rhythmic notation with chord symbols. The example below assumes the bassist will improvise a swing bass line where there are slashes, catch the rhythms where there is rhythmic notation, and play exactly as written where there is conventional notation.

```
SWING
C7
F7
D7
C7
Gm7
C7
F
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When a figure repeats, single measure or two-measure repeats may be used. Do not overuse the repeat measure. If the figure repeats several times, it might help the reader to have the written figure occur particularly at the beginnings of new phrases and at the top of new pages. Don’t make the reader constantly look back at a complicated figure and simultaneously watch the page and try to count how many times it must be played.

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Basic Bossa pattern with single measure repeat, two-measure repeat. Simili indicates to continue the basic pattern, but to follow the chords symbols.

BOSSA
C: |
---|
| |
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Basic funk pattern with two-measure repeat. A good rhythm section will usually have better ideas about playing accompaniment patterns. Sometimes the arranger needs to give them the basic ideas and let them apply their rhythm section expertise to make it better. (Of course, if it turns out great, the arranger will take the credit.)

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SWING FUNK (SWUNK) \( \text{\# C. 88} \)
Cm
(PLAY THIS OR BETTER)
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4— The Rhythm Section
A bass line can do a great deal for defining the rhythmic character of an arrangement. The arranger should know how to construct basic bass lines in different styles. Some things to consider:

1. Keep the bass line low—the bass is the foundation for the band. A good rule of thumb is to stay within the bass clef and maybe one ledger line above or below (a).
2. Place the roots on the downbeats
3. Step into roots. Steps can be diatonic or chromatic. Chromatic steps are often preceded by diatonic notes. Leaps are nice, but call attention to themselves. Leaping into downbeats underscores the downbeat and takes away from the linear aspects of the bass line.
4. Any leaps between roots should reflect the chord symbol
5. Always consider the primary line when composing a bass line. How does the bass line support the primary line? The primary line and the bass line can have three relationships: contrary motion (usually the most interesting as it emphasizes the independence of the lines), oblique motion (one is static and the other moves), and parallel (which can be powerful, but eliminates the sense of independence between the lines). Try keeping the lines as independent as possible when considering individual pitches. Avoid having the bass line and the melody land on the same pitch too often and the beginnings of measures or on strong beats within the measures.

Five basic walking bass lines are shown below. All follow the basic guidelines above. Chromatic passing tones (Ch.PT) are prepared with diatonic notes. All leaps within measures correspond to the chord symbol. Roots are on downbeats and approached by steps. (There is the old bass player joke: How many bass players does it take to change a light bulb? 1, 5, 1, 5, 1. Root – 5th – Root is still a great bass line.)

Working Range

1. Up the scale with a Ch.PT
2. Down the Scale

3. Down the arpeggio with Ch.PT
4. Up the arpeggio with Ch.PT
5. Root – 5th – Root
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DRUMS

Most of the rhythm section comes prepared to improvise much more interesting accompaniment than many arrangers put on the page. Try giving them the essence of the beat - the bare bones accents and notes and let them supply the magic. If they don't get what you initially had in mind, you may find you like what they do better. Let the rhythm section know specifics like the style, dynamics, hits and important rhythmic information beyond just slash notation.

The drum part is often the most intimidating part to write for a new arranger, but it will prove to be the easiest. Your drummer will probably already know how to play basic stylistic grooves. You will not have to write specific drum notation unless you are certain of what you want.

The drum part needs these things:

- Tempo marking
- Style (bossa, samba, swing, ballad, even 8th, funk, etc. Use names of drummers if it will help. Swing like Philly Joe Jones or Elvin Jones?)
- Slash notation when you need just the basic style
- Rhythmic figures from the ensemble where helpful (the drummer needs to know if it’s the big brass section or soft woodwinds)
- Bass lines rhythms where helpful
- Rhythmic notation for homorhythmic figures.

The passage below tells the drummer to play a swing beat at a specific tempo and dynamic ranges. Rhythms are shown above the slashes telling the drummer to continue playing the swing beat, but incorporating the saxophone rhythms. The drummer will play a fill that sets up the tutti measure. The slashes stop in the tutti measure telling the drummer to play with the ensemble exactly the rhythms shown. Trust your drummer to know what drums or cymbals to play in all of these circumstances. You might make a suggestion about whether to play on the hi-hats or the ride cymbal, and may even suggest a specific ride cymbal like a flat ride.

If there is a specific bass line for a funk tune or an ostinato in swing or latin, you may choose to show it on the bottom of the staff.

Make sure you give the drummer the rhythmic information including whether the notes are long or short. Drums can make the four trumpets in your shout section sound like ten. Take advantage of the fact that drummers can control extreme dynamics in the band including crescendos and sudden loud or soft passages.

Dynamics and articulations are just as important here. If the brass section plays a short note and the drums play a big cymbal splash, then your short note is lost on the audience.