Playing Nice In The Sandbox

Teaching Jazz Pianists And Guitarists To Coexist

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Issues With 2+ Comping Instruments

- Differences in skill level
  - These can and should be accounted for
  - The balance will shift over time, and should even out
- Voicing Considerations
  - Dealing with different voicing issues between piano, guitar, possible vibes
  - In a big band arrangement, you’re also dealing with the voicing of the horns
  - We need to make sure players have the tools to play the correct voicings, or to play sounds that won’t create conflict

Possible Solutions

- Instruments play at the same time
  - Gives everyone something to do
  - Lets players work on different comping skills
  - Is risky - lots of ways this can go badly
- Instruments play separately
  - Each player has freedom to play in their own section(s) of the song
  - Gives both players a break periodically
  - Works best if both comping players are pretty solid on their own
  - Works best with mature, higher level players

Tactics (Plug And Play)

Primary/Secondary Comping Instruments

- Roles can change throughout a song
- Primary player should play freely, supporting melodies and soloists
- Secondary player should play
  - Static patterns
  - Pads/Alternating long and short
  - Simple voicings
  - Partial chord fills
- The goal for both players is always to support the bigger picture of what is going on musically

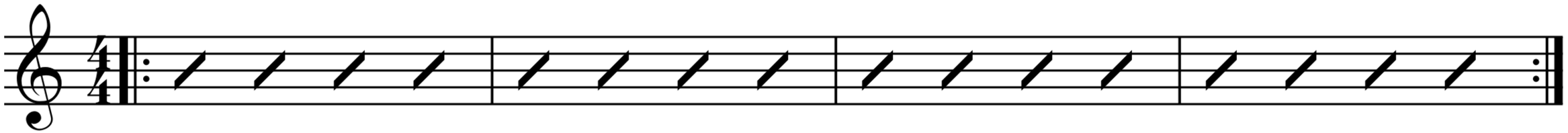
Traditional Styles

- Covers Basie-ish and Ellington-ish
  - In these cases the guitar should be playing Freddie Green style
  - 4 quarter notes per measure, staccato, and on the quiet side
  - If there are written figures, there might be some wiggle room here
    - I’ve had good luck both playing the figures, and sticking with Freddie Green through the figures

Rhythm Patterns

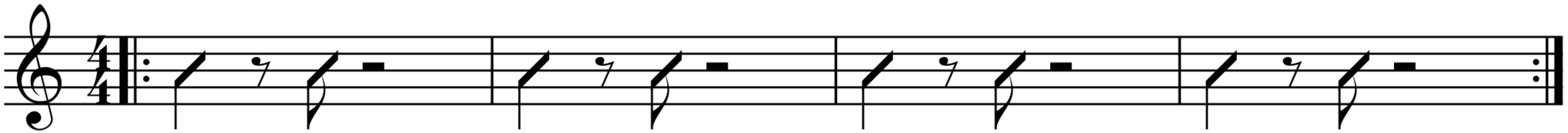
Freddie Green Style

- Should only be used when stylistically appropriate - it’s not always the answer
- Quarter notes should be short
- You can accent on 2 and 4 or not - even, staccato quarter notes will often get the job done



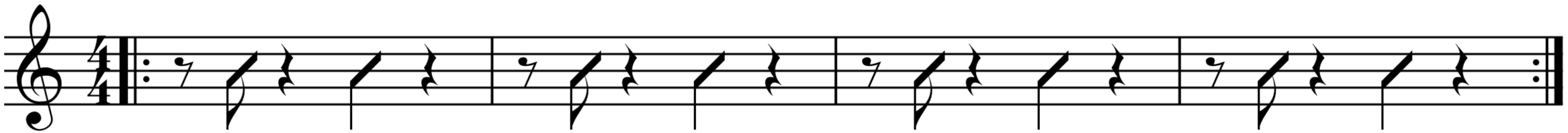
Charleston

- This rhythm is a little more flexible
- Experiment with leaving the first note long or short
- Either way might be the right answer depending on the tune, soloist, and situation
- I tend to like keeping both notes short



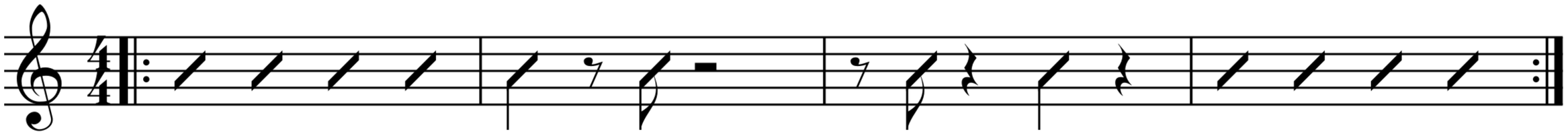
Reversed Charleston

- It’s like the Charleston, just offset by an eighth note
- This can be used on its own, or alternated with the Charleston



Mix And Match

- Unless you’re playing in the Basie style all the time, any static pattern will get old - quickly.
- Encourage your students to mix and match between these 3 static patterns, whether they alternate by section of the song, or every measure
- You’re still getting a solid, rhythmic back up pattern that won’t get boring for the student or the listener



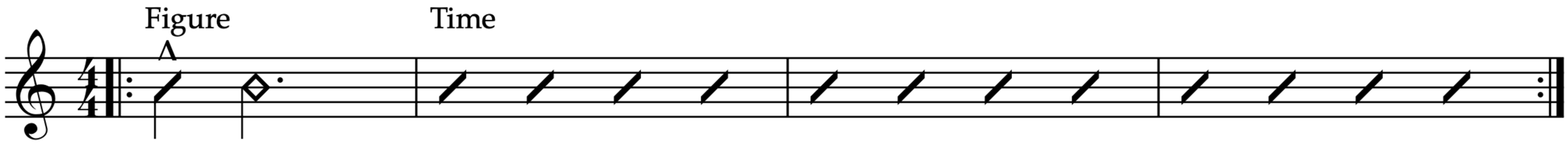
Doing More With Less

- Sometimes, an active rhythm isn’t the right answer for your secondary comping instrument
- If your primary comping instrument is playing actively and using a lot of rhythm themselves, your secondary player is likely to get in the way
- This is where pads (long chord sounds) can be a helpful strategy
- Whole notes and half notes give harmonic support, without cluttering up the rhythms that are already being played

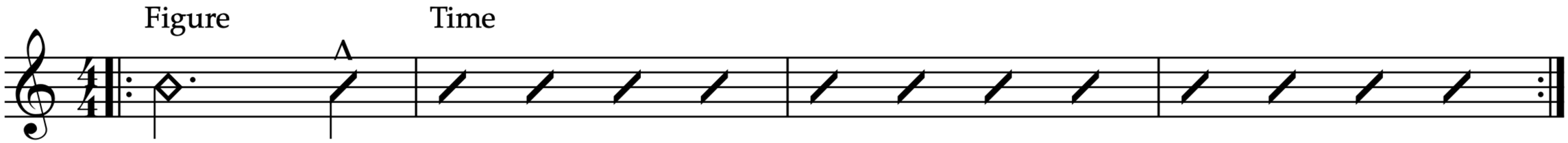
Alternating Long And Short

- Alternating between long and short sounds is a helpful strategy to split the difference between playing pads and rhythmic figures
- A short quarter note followed by a dotted half note, or a dotted half note followed by a short quarter note can provide a nice contrast to more active rhythmic playing

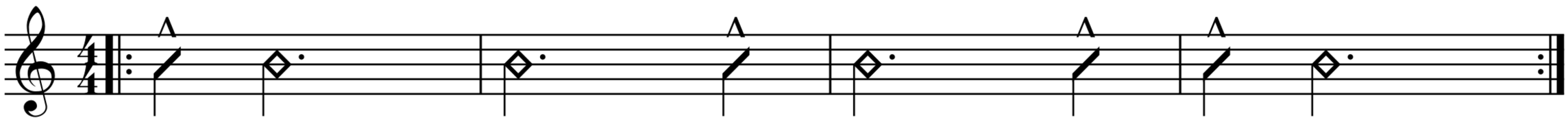
- Option #1



- Option #2



Mix And Match



- IMPORTANT - This is just an example
- Don’t just build 4 measure phrases of quarter notes and dotted half notes

Textures

Simple Voicings

- Specific voicings for guitar and piano are a topic on their own
- We won’t go into too much detail here
- The secondary comping instrument should stick to simple chord voicings that won’t conflict with any other sounds that might be happening
  - Shell voicings (Roots, 3rds, and 7ths)
  - Guide Tones (3rds and 7ths)
  - Stick exactly to the chord symbol (Eb7#11, Ab9, G7b9, etc)
- Shell voicings and guide tones are the safest, best choice for a secondary comping instrument

Partial Chord Fills

- A good technique for your more advanced compers to try is using partial chord fills
- This technique works with any of the rhythm patterns, and with any chord voicing
- It’s really simple - take the chord you were going to play, and then just play 2 notes of it
  - Guitar players play any 2 of the strings they would normally play
  - Piano players play any 2 of the notes they would have played in their usual voicing
- Works as a primary or secondary comping strategy

Half Step Approach

- Another comping strategy that can add some creativity is a half-step approach to a chord
- It’s exactly what it sounds like - play the chord 1/2 step below the chord that you want to play, and then play the correct chord
- These 1/2 step below chords should only last about an 8th note
- This texture should be used sparingly

Concepts (Future/Long Term Growth)

The Deep Stuff

- Improving comping skills is not really something you can fix quickly
- The earlier sections gave you some things you can use that will work, that will give your rhythm section some clear things to try
- The real path to improving comping involves more than just having some helpful tricks up your sleeve
- If your piano/guitar/vibes/harp players are serious about playing jazz, they will need to dig deeper into the style
- That means a lot of listening, trying things out, and experimenting to find what works for them

Listening Is The Key

- The most important part of improving your comping is listening
- It’s easy to say, and the advice gets thrown around a lot, but what does “listening” really mean?
- This is the stuff that is really simple, but difficult to work on
- It’s not a quick fix, or a fact you can remember that fixes something in your rhythm section
- Listening is an ongoing process that each member of your band needs to work on
- Over the next few slides, we’ll look at some different things to focus on as you work on your listening skills

Listening To Great Compers

- One of the best ways to get good comping sounds in your ears is to pay attention to great piano/guitar/vibes players when they are backing up other musicians
- Pick a player that you like and listen to them as they comp for someone
- Find one rhythm they used, and *try to play something kind of like that*
- Write it down so you can remember it
- The actual chords or chord changes being played don’t really matter at first
- Find a couple of rhythmic phrases to latch on to, and use those in your own comping

Listening To Yourself

- Does what you play actually sound good to you? Or is it just the first thing that you got under your fingers?
- Pay attention to your playing in real time - are you lining up with the rest of the rhythm section
- Record yourself comping with a metronome and listen back
- Record yourself accompanying a soloist in jazz ensemble or on your own as a duo
- Use a looper pedal to record yourself playing a solo - then accompany yourself (or the other way around)
- Always try to make sure that what you are playing really matches what you think it should sound like

Listening To The Band Around You

- Listening to the band around you is one of the most important parts of being in the rhythm section
- How is your volume in relation to the band?
- Are your chord voicings matching the band, clashing with the band, or blending in?
- Are your voicings in the same range as the soloist or melody?
- It is important to pay attention to what is going on around you in the ensemble so you can adjust your playing as the musical situation changes

Links

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www.practicalguitarsystem.com/omea2022

Presentation Slides

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