

Rehearsal Strategies: Walkin' and Swingin'

Essentially Ellington 2009-10

We sometimes tend to treat “dance band” music with a great deal of indifference. We will offer dinner dances for fun, but don't always treat the music with the same respect as our more “serious” music. We often think that it is easy to play; so, we don't spend rehearsal time on that repertoire. We pull it out a couple of days before the performance while devoting weeks of rehearsal time to contest and concert music. Or maybe that has just been my experience. I was always taught, though, that anything worth doing is worth doing well. Shouldn't this apply to dance band music as well? And why is it that we don't take this music seriously? Why do we sometimes look down on dance band? I believe it is because we don't always play it well. So, if we can find in this music what makes it groove, what made it popular, then we will bring the same level of seriousness to it.

Walkin' and Swingin'. That is a great description of this Mary Lou Williams gem - “*walkin*” representing the easygoing nature of this feel and “*swingin*” representing the strong dance feel inherent throughout. This chart gives us a great opportunity to explore the depth of groove in dance music. Though this music is thought of as simplistic, this piece offers deceptive difficulty. As Wynton Marsalis points out in the online rehearsal video [available at: <http://jalc.org/jazzED/ec/videos.html>], accomplishing this bouncy feel as bands of the time did is no easy task. Still, I think it is a challenge worth taking. As with all groove-based music, we will start our exploration with the rhythm section.

Rhythm Section

The challenge for the rhythm section is to create a good dance 2-feel. Though this is a very simple concept, it is not always easy to do. Young rhythm sections many times will tend to overplay, not realizing that a simplistic approach is all that is needed to create an appropriate groove. Even when trying to keep the groove simple, it can be a challenge to create a good *dance* groove. It is important to keep in mind that even though the groove being created is a 2-feel, ***all four quarter notes*** of the measure be felt. A common mistake is for the bass and drums to play too heavy on beats 1 and 3. This will create a very uneven sounding feel. This can be particularly bothersome for the drummer because there is a tendency to play the bass drum too heavily and to accentuate beats 1 and 3 on

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the ride cymbal. The drummer may consider starting on brushes to help alleviate that problem.

The feel of the guitar is vital to creating this feel with the bass and drums. The consistency of the guitarist's quarter note pulse will help everyone feel all of the quarter notes. The guitarist can give a little (not too much!) emphasis on beats 2 and 4. This in balance with the bass and drum feel can create a nice, comfortable foxtrot groove. This is also a case where the pianist can play quarter notes and fit quite nicely; Charleston rhythms or a 2/3 Brazilian clave also make appropriate comping rhythms. It is important to remember that Mary Lou Williams was also a stride pianist so the feel of the rhythm section should very much reflect the sound of the left hand of a stride pianist. If the 2-feel is solid it will be an easy transition to the walking 4-feel. Remember to keep the parts simple; there should not be too many extraneous drum fills or a lot of upbeat comping.

Articulating the Feel and Chart Direction

Once the rhythm section groove is established, the band has a bed on top of which to "dance". We often equate that dance feel to the subdivision of the music. In swing music we approximate the feel by singing 8th note triplets with emphasis on the third triplet:



This is still going to be true to an extent; however, this is a music that will not *always* rely on such a heavy accent on that third triplet. There will be places where it is appropriate and places where it is not. We see an example of this at the very beginning of the chart. Observing the saxophone melody, you will notice that the phrases are generally downbeat oriented:



The subdivision of the pulse is still the 8th note triplet but the phrases begin and end on downbeats *without* a lot of emphasis on the upbeats. It is also common for melodies to be

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played with a slightly laid back feel; however, in this case, it is vital for the melody to be right on the time. Saxophones often play connected lines by slurring the line rather than using the tongue, but in this case a slight “doo” tongue may help keep the melody right on the time and give it more of a bounce. This feel on top of the rhythm section groove will create our *Walkin'* time/feel.

The brass section gets to play the counter to the sax line by creating our *Swingin'* feel. This will be accomplished by accenting this more upbeat oriented riff:



It is still important for the brass not to let this figure drag but to be right on the time. The brass figures throughout this chart retain that same *swingin'* character and really propel the feel of the band. Take care that figures with repeated upbeat quarter notes don't drag; be sure to think of them as 8th notes:



The tutti passages at letter B should retain the same quality. The saxes should follow the lead of the brass regarding feel. Balance will be tricky in the 3rd, 5th and 7th bars. There is call and response between the tutti and the saxophones. The brass should back off slightly on the hits in those measures while the saxes bring out the response:



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The harmonic language is different from that of bebop. We learn (especially in studying bebop) to follow and outline the chords in the progression. During this period, however, the solos more reflected the overall tonality rather than each specific chord change. This can be seen in the beginning of the transcribed tenor solo at letter H:

The solo basically centers around the tonality of Eb and does not necessarily try to “spell” every chord. A good approach to this could be to start with ideas based around pentatonic scales:

Make sure students remember that it is not necessary to start on the first note of the scale. Encourage them to start other places such as the 5th of the scale. Note the example below, which also uses a flatted 3rd rather than the natural 3rd:

The point is to make melodies rather than simply spell chords. Pay attention to the feel of the tune so that rhythms and articulations match.

Letter G is written as a stride piano solo, which may cause trepidation for some pianists. It is more important that the solo fits style than it is that it be stride. If your pianist can not keep a stride feel in the left hand, that's okay; just make the solo swing. The left hand will come. If you are going to make this chart your own, you may want to open it up for more solos. It does not have to remain just piano and tenor. Be creative and decide how much you want to extend the solo section and how you want to insert the background figures at letter H.

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Taking It Home!

Be sure that the last solo includes the break for the brass two measures before letter J. Once the brass hit that figure, it is time for the rhythm section to help guide the energy to the end providing a strong pulse and creating transitions. At letter J we are no longer *walkin'*, we're just *swingin'*. The saxes take on the role of playing the riff that the brass carried at letter A. The brass start with the same riff but lead into other melodic upbeats until we get into a call and response in the 6th bar. The saxes again are the response. The rest of the chart is then based around the use of call and response with the biggest climactic moment being letter K, the bridge of the form. The rhythm section should really be driving here but I would not necessarily have the drums play a backbeat on the snare. Instead try having the drummer chop wood (2 and 4 with a cross-stick on the snare) or even play with the brass hits. However your band does it, make this section feel like the climax of the entire arrangement. Though letter L is not soft, it is of slightly lesser volume than letter K allowing the energy to taper for the ending. Still keep that driving feel, though, and make it dance all the way home!

I hope these tips help you and your band find the groove of this music. It is such a challenge to make this feel happen. We look forward to seeing you accept that challenge. Have fun!

Contributed by:
Reginald Thomas
Professor of Music
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
JALC Consultant