

CHAPTER SIX: TIME FEEL

The issue of “feel” is more subjective than the other rhythmic concepts in this book. This chapter should serve as inspiration to fine-tune your own awareness of time, using both practical and abstract concepts.

In the area of time, there is much that can be said about how to measure and count it. However, all these mathematical abstractions are a means not an end: Time is a parameter of music that will remain to be illusive if such theoretical concepts are not experienced. You’ve just got to spend many hours on your instrument playing with time to teach yourself how to harmonize with this musical dimension. Just like learning harmony, over the years your aural awareness of time becomes more refined, and there are deeper and more sensitive levels which you can begin to control. Remember: there are always deeper levels for all of us to learn about!

The Six Aspects of Time Feel

Musicians with good time feel possess the following skills:

1. an ability to **recognize a tempo** and communicate it effectively and with stability;
2. an ability to **strongly define the beat** and pulse regardless of what is going on around them;
3. flexibility with **musical motives**, their development and rhythmic placement;
4. flexibility with **subdivision** and mixtures of subdivision;
5. stability of tempo and pulse during **syncopated passages**;
6. an overall **innate “feel”** for time and the way it flows.

All the above are interrelated, but are broken down in order for us to focus on the different aspects of time feel, and to generate exercises to improve our abilities. The Practice Plan section at the end of this chapter offers some strategies to tackle these aspects. You may also refer back to Chapter 3, which contains related work with the metronome.

LOCK AND GROOVE

Firstly, I’d like to offer definitions of terms which are casually used at gigs and in rehearsals:

Groove - An innate sense of time which gives the musician independent strength in the area of time and rhythm. Usually characterized by a steady tempo and a precise ability to render subdivisions and their groupings. Articulation and dynamics are integral to rendering a “groovy” musical line. Musicians that can groove are said to be playing “In the pocket”.

Lock - An ability for one musician to be able to synchronize their internal clock with other musicians to create a homogeneous and communal time feel. This does not necessarily mean the exact copying of another’s time feel, but the ability to perceive the prevailing time feel and compliment it musically.

So it can be seen that a good “groove”-player might sound great on their own but could be a nightmare to play with if they stubbornly refuse to cooperate with other musicians’ time feels. A player who has a good time feel and an ability to “lock in” to other musicians is a type of player who would be a good freelance and studio player, because they may be better at creating different ensemble sounds and harmonizing with diverse players.

Regardless of all this, you are not going to have a good time feel if you don’t listen with open ears and have a technique that will allow you to relax and flow. Listen to the legendary bassists for their time feel. I especially recommend the genres of Motown and Rhythm ‘n’ Blues (R&B), as the role of the bassist in this music was such that it exposed and featured their groove in a harmonically clear and melodic setting.

PUSHING AND DRAGGING

Though we do a lot of practice with the metronome, and generally try to model its perfection in its stability of time, humans will always produce some amount of microscopic tempo fluctuations within a bar or phrase. These fluctuations are largely responsible for the type of time feel which distinguishes humans from machines, and in the case of advanced musicians, are actually considered beautiful temporal colourations. Many sequencers and drum machines these days have a “humanizing” function which allow some degree of randomization or complex quantization to be applied to otherwise mechanically-perfect time. In some cases we can learn from these machines - to see how they try to imitate what comes naturally to us!

One method is by pushing and/or dragging certain beats in a bar.

Pushing - Sounding a beat/s slightly earlier than their correct placement. Builds excitement as the tempo feels like it is increasing slightly.

Dragging - Sounding a beat/s slightly later than their correct placement. Creates relaxation as the tempo feels like it is decreasing slightly.

Note that by pushing a beat, the correct placement of the next beat will seem relatively late. Also realize that at slower tempos, a smaller amount of time fluctuation is required to create a discernible push or drag of beats. This is why it is actually easier to perform rhythmically precisely at fast tempos, as the margin for error is less. (All the more reason to practice more ballads!) Just like using chromaticism in functional harmony only after chord-scale tones are learnt, it is best to firmly establish what is on the beat before messing too much with time feel in this way.