

# Tutorial 2C: Swing Rhythms



Welcome! In this tutorial you'll learn:

1. About swing
2. Basic swing rhythms and articulations
3. More swing rhythms and articulations
4. Playing swing accents
5. Using swing variations

Enjoy the learning, and watch for goats ...

Other Level 2 Tutorials

- 2A: More Scales
- 2B: Melodic Shapes
- 2D: Three and Four
- 2E: Embellishments
- 2F: Melodic Development
- 2H: Tune Forms
- 2K: Preparing Concert Material

- ▶ Playing authentic swing style is one of the most important skills you need as an improviser. These skills range from understanding triplets behind swing rhythms to the nuances of accents and variations in swing style.
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## Part 1 – About Swing

### A) What is swing?

\*Many jazz tunes use swing rhythms that combine a rhythmic feeling of three against a meter based in two. To successfully improvise on swing tunes, you need to understand how swing rhythms and phrasing work.

### B) Why is it sometimes challenging to learn?

\*Swing rhythms often *look* different on music paper from how they should sound; this causes “optical illusions” when you read and play them. For example, two consecutive swing 8th-notes are *not* equal in length – one is twice as long as the other. This tutorial teaches you how to handle these rhythmic illusions.

### C) How do I learn it?

MORE

\*A popular myth is that the *only* way to learn to swing is by listening to jazz recordings and concerts. True, this is how jazz players typically learn swing. However, most of the qualities of swing can be explained on paper with simple guidelines. You can then apply these guidelines when you read swing music or solo on swing tunes.



\*Of course, you still need to listen to soloists who swing so you can pick up on the subtleties of the style. But understanding the guidelines of swing can help you learn swing rhythms faster and easier.

### D) What about learning swing by rote?

\*Music teachers often teach swing rhythms by singing the rhythms to students. This is OK in the short run, but the students then depend on the teacher for figuring out the rhythms. When the *students* understand the principles of swing rhythms, they can correct their own rhythmic mistakes. Then the teacher can concentrate on other areas of music performance.

## Part 2 – Basic Swing

### A) How do I play swing quarter-notes and rests?

\*Mentally divide each quarter-note into three eighth-note triplets. Swing quarter-notes are usually played staccato, so they are about *one triplet of sound* and *two triplets of silence*.





### 3

#### (Part 2 – Basic Swing)

2 1 2 1 2 1 2 1

equals

2 1 2 1 2 1 2 1

To play swing eighth-notes, you alternate between “two-triplet” and “one-triplet” eighth-notes. When an eighth-note or rest is followed by some *other* rhythm, you need to correctly subdivide each note value into triplets to keep the correct swing feeling.

- ▶ **TRY IT** – Under each note and rest in the swing examples below, write the number of 8th-note triplets. Quarter-note values and rests get *three* triplets; downbeat 8th-notes and rests get *two* triplets; offbeat 8ths get *one* triplet.



#### Part 3 – More Swing

(For quarter-note articulations, see Part 1.)

##### A) How do I articulate eighth-notes?

\*Often, articulations for swing eighth-notes are not marked in the music. Even when they are, they might be marked wrong. The guidelines below help you assign legato or staccato articulations to eighth-notes.

\*An eighth-note is *legato* (full value) if it's directly followed by another note; it's *staccato* if it's directly followed by a rest. Important: The articulation for an eighth-note depends on what comes *directly after* it, *not* on whether it comes on or off the beat.

## (Part 3 – More Swing)

To make an offbeat (“one-triplet”) eighth-note staccato, you play it a little shorter than one triplet.



•      - - - - -      •



- - •      •      - - - - -      •

\*An eighth-note with nothing after it (at the end of the tune) is staccato. Now what about an 8th-note just before a page turn? That depends on what's at the beginning of the next page. If the next page starts on a note, the note before the page turn is legato; if the next page starts with a rest, the previous note is staccato. This same principle applies to 8th-notes at the end of a line; you need to see what's at the start of the next line.

\*That's a good reason to read ahead, because you won't know how to articulate the last eighth-note on a page or line until you see what's after it.

- **TRY IT** – In the examples below, put dashes under legato notes and dots under staccato notes. Quarter-notes are staccato; eighth-notes follow the rules above.



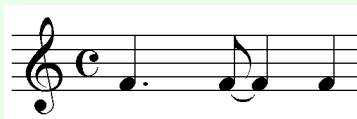
**B) How do I play swing dotted quarters?**

\*Dotted quarter-notes in swing are *not all the same value*, even when they are side-by-side.

## (Part 3 – More Swing)

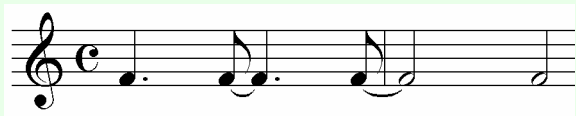
\**Downbeat* dotted quarter-notes get five triplets; *offbeat* dotted quarters get four triplets. Like eighth-notes, side-by-side dotted quarters vary in length. The quarter-note part always gets three triplets; the dot (which represents an eighth-note) gets two if on the beat, or one if off the beat, just like a swing eighth-note. For example:

3+2      1+3      3



Longer notes (half-notes, etc.) get the correct triplets:

3+2      1+ 3+2      1 + 6      6



## C) How do I articulate dotted quarters &amp; longer notes?

\*Dotted quarter-notes, and longer notes, are legato. Notice the legato marks in the example above.

## C) How do written triplets work in swing?

\*Each written eighth-note triplet gets one triplet.

\*8th-note triplets use the same articulation rules as 8th-notes: they're legato if directly followed by a note, or staccato if directly followed by a rest.

\*Quarter-note triplets get two triplets each.

\*Quarter-note triplets are legato if directly followed by a note. If followed by a rest, they can be legato *or* staccato.

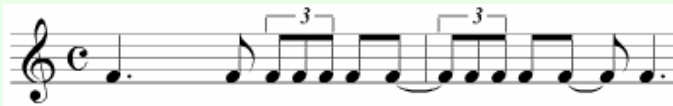
\*Half-note triplets are 4 triplets each and legato.

1 1 1+3      1 1 1 (3)      (2) 1 1 2 1 2 2 2



(or -)

► **TRY IT** – Under each note below, write a dash for legato or dot for staccato. Mark triplets above each note.





## (Part 5 – Swing Variations)

\*In “cool style” swing (e.g. some Miles Davis solos), 8th-notes are played evenly, even at medium tempos.

\*For variety, you can blur the line between even eighth-notes and swing eighth-notes:

1) Play some 8th-notes as cool (even) and some as swing. You may want to gently articulate the even eighths (instead of slurring them) so they stand out.

2) Gradually slow down a line of cool eighth-notes until you are dangerously close to being a quarter-note behind the beat; then stop the phrase.

3) Use the slowing technique of method 2, but snap back to tempo with exaggerated swing 8th-notes.

- ▶ **TRY IT** – At quarter-note = 120, improvise eighth-notes up and down any scale, mixing cool and swing styles. Then do the same at 150. Practice Pages

### C) What is “laid back” swing?

\*In medium and slower tunes, you can play *all* your swing rhythms slightly slower, creating lines that are “laid back” behind the tempo. Most good jazz soloists lay back a little on swing rhythms; some soloists lay back more.



\*As you experiment with laid back swing phrases, don’t slow down so much that you’re a beat behind, and don’t let your rhythm section slow down with you.

### D) How do I use other swing variations?


- Play some quarter-notes legato instead of staccato.
  - Occasionally, play the first (downbeat) 8th-note of a pair staccato. This is like the “shuffle” style.
  - Alternate between legato and staccato on any triplets.
  - Try backwards eight-note pairs (1 triplet-2 triplets).
- ▶ **TRY IT** – Basic: Play a long flexible scale of 8ths, laying back on them slightly. Medium: Play legato quarters, staccato downbeat 8ths, mixed legato/staccato triplets, or backwards 8ths. Practice Pages

That’s all for Tutorial 2C!

Next is the Quiz – to get started, go to the next page.



## QUIZ - 2C: Swing Rhythms

Click on the letter for the best answer for each question. You'll hear a C Major arpeggio if you're right. If you miss 2 or less, you pass the Tutorial!  
Or, click  to review the Tutorial before taking the Quiz.

1) Cool eighth-notes are

A) even B) slightly ahead of the beat C) softer D) all of these

2) Dotted quarters get how many triplets?

A) 3 B) 4 C) 5 D) it depends

3) Which notes are usually accented?

A) downbeat eighths B) low notes of contours C) quarter-notes D) beginning notes of triplet groups

4) An eighth-note is staccato if

A) it's on the beat B) it's off the beat C) it's followed by another note D) it's at the end of the song

5) A quarter-note triplet tied to a dotted quarter would get how many triplets?

A) 5 B) 6 C) 7 D) 8

6) Tied eighth-notes that start on the offbeat are usually

A) legato B) staccato C) worth 4 triplets D) laid back

7) Eighth-notes in tempos faster than about 200 are

A) legato B) staccato C) even D) 2 triplets vs. 1 triplet

8) Which has the least amount of sound?

A) quarter note B) legato eighth-note C) quarter-note triplet D) tied eighth-note triplets



Mountain Goats, Utah  
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