

Born Swinging

I wasn't.

My background was in classical music, which in retrospect was great – but I wish I had also been exposed to jazz at an earlier age. Still, when I heard my first live jazz concert (Don Ellis Big Band) I was hooked. Just two problems – I didn't know how to swing, and I didn't know how to improvise.

So I went off to college at Brigham Young University, made it into the jazz ensemble there, and still was fairly clueless about swing – other than knowing that eighth-notes were uneven (the doo-be-doo-be approach). The other trumpet players in the section would tell me “no, that's not right – it goes like this” and then would sing or play how it was supposed to go. When I asked them how they knew that, they would tell me “you just gotta feel it” – and that left me more frustrated. Eventually I got the hang of it, but it was long and too painful.

Years later as a grad assistant I was conducting that band and preparing Thad Jones' “Cherry Juice” for a performance at the Pacific Coast Collegiate Jazz Festival. There was one section that just wasn't swinging like it should. We listened to the recording over and over, but it just wasn't clicking. As I took the piece home and analyzed it further, I realized that Thad's band was playing consecutive dotted quarters *unevenly*. There was the answer.

But then I wondered how many other gems of swing were still hiding, waiting to be discovered? That's when I began writing *Sightreading Jazz*, to describe the guidelines of swing reading and phrasing. I was pleased to discover that players could learn and understand the principles of swing without a teacher having to demonstrate every rhythm and combination of rhythms.

Learning and Listening

So what's the importance of listening to swing – can we skip the listening and just “read the manual?” Definitely not – we need to reinforce and enjoy the nuances and feel of swing often in our favorite recordings. Some players can innately or quickly pick up the principles of swing by only listening to music (although explaining the principles would prove a lot more difficult). I believe most of us are not that adept – we need to understand the guidelines to accelerate our learning of swing, just like knowing the grammar of a foreign language speeds your ability to speak it.
