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**Article 22:
Keeping Your
Rhythmic Balance**

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Keeping Your Rhythmic Balance

by Bob Taylor – ©2006 Visual Jazz Publications

How high can you climb without getting dizzy? (And I don't mean Gillespie ...)
How far can you take an unusual rhythm before it unravels? The secret lies in keeping your “rhythmic balance.”

Photo courtesy [Scott Liddell](#)

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About Rhythmic Balance

I suppose you could look at “balance” two ways – one is keeping the right proportion of rhythms, kind of like a balanced diet. The most common problem here is the overuse of eighth-notes, which tends to shut out other rhythmic possibilities in your mind. (Eighth-notes are certainly not bad; they just need to be kept in perspective.)

The other meaning for balance is “not tipping over” – and that's the definition we'll be working on in this article. A good sense of balance is an obvious plus in gymnastics, skateboarding, basketball and dancing; it's also essential in jazz improvisation.

► What is rhythmic balance?

Balance Points

The most common sources of “rhythmic dizziness” are unbalanced repetitions. By that I mean repeated rhythmic patterns that go against the basic rhythmic flow. When you play these patterns, it can feel (musically) a bit like hopping on one foot or spinning yourself around. Because they are also some of the more interesting ones you can play, it's important that you feel comfortable with them – and that takes practice. Strong improvisers will master all these balance points.

Here are some of the essential balance points you'll need in order to create interesting rhythmic tension:

- 1) Consecutive offbeat quarters
- 2) Consecutive offbeat half-notes
- 3) Consecutive dotted quarters
- 4) Playing 3/4 in 4/4 time
- 5) Uneven contours
- 6) Offset patterns

There are other, more complicated, rhythmic devices that can also cause dizziness – we'll examine those another time.

The following examples are taken from **The Art of Improvisation**. You can adapt them and practice them with a metronome or play-along CD. Work for accuracy and increased speed as you go, and be sure to practice them in both latin style (even eighths) and swing style (uneven eighths).

1. Consecutive offbeat quarters

It takes practice to play offbeat quarter-note values cleanly, but they provide lots of rhythmic energy. Below are C Major scales with consecutive offbeats:



* C Major scale, offbeats starting *before* beat one



* C Major scale, offbeats starting *after* beat one

You can play consecutive offbeat quarter-note values in the flexible scales or arpeggios that you practice. Here is an example of a flexible scale built on offbeat quarter notes:



* C Major flexible scale based on offbeat quarter-notes

2. Consecutive offbeat half-notes

Offbeat half-note values can be used in faster tunes for variety. The example below uses consecutive offbeat half-notes on beats 2 and 4, with ties across bars. In the third bar it returns to downbeats.

(1) 2 (3) 4 (1) 2 (3) 4



* Consecutive half-note offbeats

If you shift the half-note values one eighth-note sooner, then the values fall just before beats 3 and 1, written as eighth-notes tied to dotted quarter-notes. These rhythms also work well in medium-tempo tunes:

3 1 3 1



* Consecutive half-note offbeats (8th-notes tied to dotted quarters)

Or you can start the half-note values just after beat 1 and on beat 2½:

3 1 3 1



* Consecutive half-note offbeats, starting on 1 1/2

3. Consecutive dotted quarters

A useful 3-against-4 idea is to play consecutive dotted quarter-note values; each contains three eighth-notes.



* Consecutive dotted quarter values

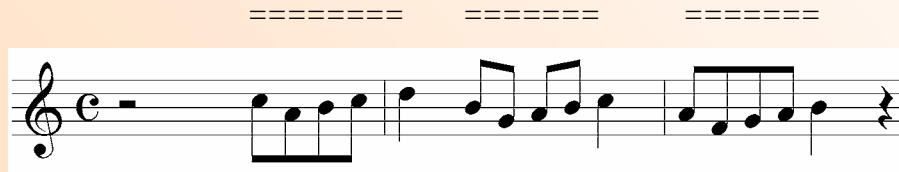
4. Playing 3/4 rhythms in 4/4 time

When you play a 3/4 rhythm in a 4/4 tune, you can repeat the 3/4 rhythm so the feeling of 3-against-4 is strong. Each time you play the 3/4 rhythm, the melody seems to repeat one beat earlier, compared to the 4/4 background. After three bars (or four 3/4 rhythms) the 3/4 melody repeats on its original beat.

The examples below repeat a 3/4 rhythm in a 4/4 meter. The first example starts on beat 1 of bar 1; the second starts the 3/4 rhythm in the *middle* of bar 1. Each 3/4 rhythm is double-underlined.



* 4/4 Melody with 3/4 rhythm (beat 1)



* Same, but start in middle of bar

You can use rests, offbeats, and triplets in the 3/4 rhythm. Here are some sample rhythms:



5. Uneven contours

Another way to use-3 against-4 is to play *three-note contours* or *six-note contours* of eighth-notes. A contour is a group of notes that all head in the same direction – all up or all down. After each new three-note group, the rhythm shifts to the downbeat or to the offbeat. For easy recognition, repeat the same contour several times.

Below are examples of 3-note contours of eighth-notes that ascend, descend, or both. Each contour is double-underlined.

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* Ascending 3-note contours

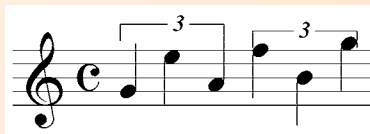
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* Descending 3-note contours

In 4/4 tunes, you can fit quarter-note triplets or 8th-note triplets into contour-groups of 2. To do this, repeat the contour every two notes. For example:

==== ==== =====



* Quarter-note triplets, groups of 2

* 8th-note triplets, groups of 2

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