

Jazz Piano – Our Rhythmic Role(s) and Responsibilities in Comping

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What are our roles as jazz pianists in a big band?

- Support the band by:
 - Outlining the harmonic structure
 - Providing appropriate rhythmic interest
 - Supporting (and perhaps pushing) the soloist(s)

How do we fulfill these roles?

- The main goal is to provide support in a *musical* way
 - That means that you have discretion as to what to play, and when
 - This also means you have a responsibility to understand what else is happening across the band at any given moment
- You need to decide how much to vary from the part that is there. However, the three main types of jazz notation can help you decide the freedom you have:

- Typically, written or notated parts need to be played exactly as written:



from *Wide Angle* by Dan Cavanagh, ©2012

- Rhythmic notation indicates that the player should play exactly that rhythm, but may use whichever voicing is appropriate:



from *Thaw* by Dan Cavanagh, ©2016

- Slash notation indicates only the chord or sound that is occurring in the rest of the band; the pianist can determine the voicings, rhythms, and even whether or not to play at all:



from *Tunnel Vision* by Dan Cavanagh, ©2007

Best Practices – the Sea of Slashes

Much of the time, the fully notated and rhythmic notation sections will be fairly straightforward to understand. The most challenging part of our job as jazz pianists comes when we have the “sea of slashes:”

OPEN (HITS 1ST X ONLY) **MYSTIC CATS, Piano, p. 3**

WALK! **B^b7** **A⁷** **A^b7** **G⁷** **G^b7** **E⁷** **E^b7** **D^b7** **C⁷** **E⁷** **F⁷_{SUS}**

TENOR SOLO

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C⁷ **B^{MA}7** **B^b7** **(G) B^b7** **A⁷** **A^b7** **G⁷** **G^b7** **E⁷** **E^b7** **D^b7**

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What are the considerations we need to deal with when the “sea of slashes” rears its stormy visage? Remember, the most important rule is to make **musical** decisions. All is dependent on what is happening musically at the moment we make those decisions. But, generally:

1. We have to have a solid understanding of **each** chord, and its appropriate voicing, that we see in the chart in front of us. If we don’t know even one of them, we will disrupt the flow of the music both for the band or soloist we are supporting, and for the audience listening. **See the list of good voicing books for great suggestions on getting started here.**
2. We need to be rhythmically solid, and not reactionary. One of the most common non-musical ways of comping I often hear involves consistently playing the chord rhythmically **AFTER** the chord appears in the chart. This is a sure way to make you sound like you are reacting to the sounds you are hearing/seeing rather than creating those sounds in conjunction with your bandmates:

WHAT THE PART SAYS **E¹³** **F⁷**

WHAT THE PIANIST PLAYS

B^b7 **D^b7** **C⁷ALT**

from *Git 'R' Done* by Dan Cavanagh, ©2005

BAD EXAMPLE

3. We would be better off anticipating the chords with syncopation and/or playing them directly-on-the-beat:

E13 F7

WHAT THE PART SAYS

WHAT THE PIANIST PLAYS

B^b7 D^b7 C7^{alt}

GOOD EXAMPLE

from *Git 'R' Done* by Dan Cavanagh, ©2005

Here are some additional rhythmic notation examples of solid rhythmic comping figures that demonstrate playing chords on or before the beat:

There are, of course, so many great examples of pianists who do this well. While not a big band player, Red Garland used to play this type of rhythm behind Miles Davis' solos all the time (check out the *Walkin'*, *Cookin'*, *Workin'*, *Steamin' with the Miles Davis Quintet*, etc. records from the mid-1950's):

Note that the chord he plays always is a voicing pertaining to the chord on the *next beat*. So for example, the "and" of beat four would be a voicing for the chord that was on the downbeat of the next measure. This style of comping provides a really great forward propulsion and motion.

The best piece of advice for understanding rhythmically how pianists comp in an appropriate way is to LISTEN and LISTEN often. Find recordings and listen specifically and only to the pianist for the entire track. Transcribe the comping rhythms, even if you can't get the voicing notes.

Resources for the Jazz Pianist

Voicings for Jazz Keyboard by Frank Mantooth. Distributed by Hal Leonard.

- Great overview and method for developing modern, quartal (fourth-based) voicings. I recommend all pianists start here for basic comping voicings that will be applicable to almost any situation.

Jazz Piano Voicing Skills by Dan Haerle. Published by Jamey Aebersold.

- More of a course method, but can be used to learn basics of voicings

Jazz Keyboard Harmony by Phil DeGreg. Published by Jamey Aebersold.

- Step-by-step method to learn traditional voicings (often called “A-B voicings”)

The Art of Comping by Jim McNeeley. Published by Advance Music.

- This is an intermediate-to-advanced book but talks about comping in a really wonderful way, with lots of examples of voicings, etc.

Modern Jazz Voicings by Ken Pullig. Published by Berklee Press. *Not specifically directed at pianists, but covers lots of voicing styles that are applicable to piano.

The Jazz Piano Book by Mark Levine. Published by Sher Music.

- One of the jazz piano “bibles.” In addition to voicings, lots of other topics are covered in great detail

There are also some Jamey Aebersold Play-Along books that have the piano voicings transcribed, such as volume 1, volume 54, volume 30, etc.

Most of these books can be found on www.amazon.com, www.jazzbooks.com, etc.