

# The Art of Jazz Singing: Working With The Band

## 1. Introduction

Listening and responding are the responsibilities of every jazz musician, and some of our brightest musical moments are collective reactions to the unexpected. But the individual freedom and group interaction that are essential in jazz take place in a context of some structure and leadership.

*The purpose of this paper is to help musicians who sing prepare for some key responsibilities they will assume when they become band leaders.*

Whether you are singing with longtime collaborators, sitting-in at an “open mike”, or hiring a group of freelance musicians, you must be able to *decide* upon and *communicate* your musical intentions and preferences to the rest of the band to get the performances you are after. Clear, well-annotated charts go a long way to capturing and communicating your arrangement ideas; rehearsals and steady gigs will certainly help. But these are not always possible or necessary. Moreover, changes in venues, musicians, moods, instrumentation, and many other issues will always call for different approaches—sometimes on the fly.

Admittedly, there are countless factors that go into a performance that is rewarding for both the audience and the musicians. This paper is written from the point of view of the rhythm section. It identifies some basic direction accompanists expect from the leader, and suggests some vocabulary to clearly convey these musical ideas.

Specifically, this article focuses on:

- Setting up a groove
- Navigating a song form

Why settle for what you get when you can ask for what you want? By anticipating the responsibilities and acting as a band leader, your accompanists will be better able to support your performances.

## 2. Getting Into The Groove

Consider some of the choices and decisions your rhythm section faces before starting each tune: the pianist or guitarist must choose voicings and comping styles; the bassist must decide in what register to play or how to rhythmically construct the bass lines; the drummer must choose the right patterns, cymbals and sticks. If each musician has a different idea of what the song should sound like, the band is unlikely to “lock” or “settle” quickly and is less likely to support the soloist well.

### ***What’s the Groove?***

*Groove* is a common term among jazz musicians and is often used to describe how a tune is performed. Though musicians may differ on specific definitions, most would agree that groove combines:

- Style
- Feel
- Tempo

*Style* is the distinctive and identifiable manner in which the song is performed. Common examples include swing, ballad, and bossa nova. Styles can have specific names with very specific rhythms. Some—not all—songs can be played in different styles; some songs are strongly associated with a specific style. By knowing and communicating the style you want, your band members will know how to play their individual parts in the ways that, when combined, make the style identifiable.

*Feel* refers to the emotional content or mood of the song. Singers often invest time understanding the story, place, and characters behind the lyrics of a song. Accompanists can also benefit from this understanding, and can then make choices for their own parts which support the soloist.

*Tempo* is the rhythmic pace at which a piece is performed, often defined in beats per minute (“bpm”). In jazz, informal terms such as medium, up, bop, are terms commonly used to generally indicate an intended tempo. Finding the tempos that are right for your material will come from listening to recordings and trial and error. Sometimes even small differences in tempo can have a big effect on the groove.

### ***About Latin Jazz Grooves***

Jazz has been richly influenced by music from the Caribbean and Latin America—notably Cuba and Brazil. Most Latin grooves are characterized by a “straight” (not swung) eighth-note feel, and an underlying, two-measure rhythmic pattern.

Latin styles have specific names (e.g. *mambo*, *cha-cha-cha*, *samba*, *bolero*, *bossa nova*, etc.) and are made up of specific individual patterns—sometimes strictly enforced by the players. But in a jazz setting, musicians may take liberties, and will often create a Latin feel without striving for authenticity. If you have a specific Latin style in mind, use the right term, and your rhythm section will know what to do.

### ***Count It Off!***

The bandleader counts off each tune to assure that the musicians start together and at the same tempo. The musician counting off that tune must have the tempo internalized, and be able to accurately recall and convey it to the rest of the band. (Sometimes, one section of a song is better than another for recalling the right tempo.)

But the count-off can convey much more than just the tempo. Body language, facial expressions, finger snaps, softly singing or humming the melody—each could convey to the band the *feel* the singer has in mind. Should the tune’s story feel aggressive or defiant? Then count it off strong and with some attitude. A melancholy ballad should be counted off in a mood that suggests meditation or reflection.

When audiences or musicians remark that a group is “in the groove” or “grooving hard”, they are often sensing that the *style*, *feel*, and *tempo* have come together—well-chosen and well-played—for that tune on that night.

### ***Terms to Know and Use***

Here are some terms commonly used to describe styles, tempos, and feels. Work with your teacher and colleagues to know the meanings of these; learn to recognize them when listening:

medium	up	walking ballad	ballad
rubato	bluesy	open feel	swing
in 2	2 feel	in 4	shuffle
bossa nova	samba	rumba	cha cha cha
jazz waltz	straight eighth	funky	12/8 feel
“latin”	double time	double time feel	half time

### **3. The Path Through the Chart**

Typical jazz charts simply include the melody, chords, and lyrics for one time through the form of the song. This kind of chart is sometimes called a lead sheet. In performance, though, we repeat the tune several times allowing for more than one chorus of lyrics to be sung and to feature instrumental soloists. Moreover, performances will include introductions endings, and perhaps interludes, verses, codas, or other special sections which are often not written in the lead sheet.

The purpose of this section is to outline the decisions you must make and communicate to the other musicians to bridge the gap between the lead sheet and your performance.

Some of these decisions can be made before-hand and be clearly reflected in your charts or discussed rehearsal. On the bandstand, you may need to quickly and clearly guide the band.

#### ***Forms and Sections***

Jazz tunes generally have recognizable structures or forms which are made up of several sections. The 32 bar “AABA” form and the 12 bar blues form are early and very common examples. More modern compositions may have sections that are 10, 14 or some other number of measures. Among bass players’ responsibilities is the job of harmonically outlining the form of the tune so that the sections are recognizable.

Lead sheets may also include notation such as repeats, first and second endings, DC, DS or coda to indicate the path through the chart. (Codas are sometimes used as short-cuts to limit the chart to one page; they are then said to be “part of the form” rather than a true ending.)

By knowing the form and marking the names of the sections on your charts, you will be better able to communicate with your accompanists—who are unlikely to know the lyrics to your music. This can be especially important when rehearsing or navigating vocal entrances after instrumental solos.

#### ***Introductions and Endings***

Great song performances develop through a beginning, middle and ending. The middle of the performance—including any improvised solos—is usually based on the song form and is likely to be clearly spelled-out in the lead sheet. But very often, no written introduction or ending is on the chart, and the rhythm section and vocalist must agree on what the what the group will do to get into and out of the song. A messy introduction can result in musicians starting in different places or keys. Clumsy endings are what audiences remember about an otherwise fine performance. Intros and endings are so important, they are often the focus of rehearsals.

*Introductions* set the mood, establish the groove and tonal center, and prepare the audience and soloist for the melody. Intros might be created out of a fragment of the tune (such as the last four bars of the tune), an open vamp on a simple chord progression, or are they sometimes borrowed from famous recordings.

If you have an intro that you prefer—or that you need to be guided to your entrance—annotate your charts or be prepared to specifically and concisely explain your musical idea to the band. Two musicians might have very different ideas of what an “eight bar intro” will be.

*Endings* provide the chance to restate the theme or emphasize the emotions of the piece, and to resolve the song rhythmically and harmonically. Like introductions, endings can be based on repeated fragments of the melody, a vamp on a chord progression or borrowed from revered recording or artists. Endings may also include tempo changes. If there is to be a ritard, hold, or a return to tempo, this will need to be directed either through the deliberate delivery of melody or gestures.

## **Solos**

Jazz audiences and performers expect improvised solos and vocalists will usually share the spotlight with their instrumental bandmates. Over time, some protocols and courtesies have developed among musicians.

Solos are typically improvised on the form of the song, though occasionally an arrangement calls for a special section for this purpose (sometimes called "solo changes" or "blowing changes"). Not every musician will solo on every tune, but over a set or gig, every musician will appreciate the chance to be featured.

A soloist will generally take one or more complete choruses, and provide a musical or visible cue to the next soloist, or to indicate a return to the melody. It is also common to return to the melody at the bridge or other appropriate section—especially if the form is long. But no musician appreciates having a solo cut short by a surprise entrance. Similarly, it can be frustrating being forced into taking an additional chorus because someone missed their entrance. Whether singing, accompanying, soloing, or laying out, each musician must know where the band is in the song form, and must be anticipating the transitions between introductions, melody, solos, and endings.

You might decide before the gig how you want to handle the solos for each tune, or a quick discussion before each count-off might be adequate. Maybe you and your group are ready to just see what happens. But in every case, the communication among the musicians needs to be decisive and clear.

## ***Terms to Know and Use***

Here are some terms commonly used to describe sections, forms, and transitions. Work with your teacher and colleagues to know the meanings of these; learn to recognize them when listening:

head	changes	chorus	form
in-head	out-head	bridge	A-section
B-section	turnaround	tag	top
AABA	12 bar blues	through-composed	backgrounds
“right on it”	vamp	cue	one-up tag
trading fours	verse	the sign	coda
button	Basie ending	Ellington ending	Blackbird ending

## **4. Summary: Decide and Guide**

Accompanists expect to receive some guidance or direction from the band leader. This direction might be conveyed in detailed written arrangements, through rehearsals or “talk-throughs”, or on the bandstand and “in the moment”.

As you begin leading groups, know that your band is going to look to you, starting with questions such as:

- What kind of groove is this going to be?
- How are we going to get into this?
- Who's going to solo?
- Where will you come back in?
- How are we going to end this?

By getting some of these basics out of the way, you and the band can focus your talents and energies on delivering an emotional performance that is rewarding for the audience and the musicians.

### ***About the Author***

Bassist Dean Muench—the son of a jazz drummer—works regularly in Bay Area clubs and cafes, often accompanying vocalists. This article is based on his varied experiences on the bandstand, and is drawn from a recent three-year stint as a volunteer accompanist at The Jazzschool in Berkeley, California. He and his family live in Albany, California.