

Jazz or Swing Eighths

The evolution of the "jazz" eighth is shown in these five samples.

1 & a 2 & a 3 & a 4 & a

The jazz eighth rhythm is born from the the three-way subdivision of the beat as in eighth note triplets.

1 & a 2 & a 3 & a 4 & a

When you tie the first two notes in the eighth note triplet the rhythmic result is as shown. The first part of the beat is two thirds of the time followed by one third of the total time of that beat.

1 & a 2 & a 3 & a 4 & a

This same rhythm can be expressed in this manner. The quarter note is two thirds of the beat followed by the single eighth being one third of the beat. (two eighths tied is expressed by the quarter note)

1 e & a 2 e & a 3 e & a 4 e & a

This rhythm is not quite the same but is often used to represent the jazz eight. In effect, the dotted eighth is three quarters of the beat and the sixteenth note is the last quarter of the beat. At a fast tempo, most players would probably not be able to make an appreciable difference in the sound of this line in comparison to the two previous lines. At a slower tempo, one can more easily perform the different "feel" of these examples.

"With a swing"

1 & a 2 & a 3 & a 4 & a

The "jazz" eighth is very often written as a pair of ordinary eighth notes but a suggestion is given at the start of the music, to play the eighths with a "swing."

1 & a 2 & a 3 & a 4 & a

Finally, a compound time signature might also be used to represent the "jazz eighth" notes. My experience shows that this is rarely used in modern music.

Because the jazz eighth is played with a "skipping" or "lilting" feel, it is easy to count the beats in a rather curious manner as if with a strong Italian accent. Because you only play a note on the first and last thirds of the beat, count: "wun-na, tuu-a, tree-a, for-ra!" I am not trying to make fun of all Italians but this works very well for developing the jazz eighth feel.

A typical example of the "jazz" or "swing" eighth can be found in the song, "In The Mood" or "Satin Doll." There are of course thousands of other examples. For the sake of practice, you might try any previously learned study that contains regular eighth notes and transform the music into a "jazz eighth feel." (Some scale studies will sound rather stilted when you do this.)