

Saxophone Section Techniques: Articulation Styles for the Big Band

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Swing Style

The definitive saxophone section of swing style articulation was that of the Count Basie Orchestra, with lead altoist Marshal Royal. The lack of markings in a chart such as Sammy Nestico's "Basic, Straight Ahead" meant that Royal articulated as he found fit.

- When a line ends with two eighth notes, Royal always ends with a half-tongue on the penultimate note and a stop-tongued short final eighth-note, giving a "doo-dat" sound to end the line.

"Basic, Straight Ahead"
a. Original notation by Nestico

b. Edited part reflecting Royal's articulation

- In longer eighth-note passages Royal slurs or half-tongues in accordance with the contours of the phrase, keeping a flowing and connected line. Notice the HT-ST to end each phrase.

"Basic, Straight Ahead"
a. Original notation by Nestico

b. Edited part reflecting Royal's articulation

These practices are simple, yet vital to the swing style. The use of more modern articulation patterns on swing-style charts would be uncharacteristic. However, some practices will be retained in later styles, particularly the HT-ST of two-eighth-note phrase endings.

Introduction

Articulation is one of the fundamental aspects of playing in a big band saxophone section that gives a distinct "jazz" sound. Many saxophone parts lack the specific articulation markings found in classical music manuscript. While some constants apply, such as most quarter notes in swing rhythms being played short, different jazz compositional styles require unique articulation patterns, often influenced by soloist practices. I have categorized three major stylistic approaches of saxophone articulation schemes: Swing, Bop-Influenced, and Contemporary. The examples presented are from lead alto parts/performers, but apply to all saxophones in the section.

In the following examples ST= stop tongue, HT=half tongue or jazz legato, Diaphragm push=an unarticulated accent with air.

Bop-Influenced Style

When Charlie Parker revolutionized jazz in the 1940s he likewise transformed sax articulation patterns. Adopted by big band saxophonists in the 1950s/60s, such as Jerome Richardson of the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra, bop-influenced style eighth-note articulation is based on a tongued or half-tongued accent of the upbeat. This gives the illusion of "swinging" in a style in which the eighth notes reach a 1:1 ratio, particularly at faster tempos.

- When phrases begin on upbeats, the performer usually begins tonguing every other eighth note

- If the phrase begins on a downbeat, it is common to slur three eighth notes before beginning the off-beat articulation pattern

- When phrases contain natural three-note groupings, such as lower neighbors, bop-influenced players will often break the pattern to accommodate. The longer the chain of eighth-notes, the more likely that half-tongue articulation will be used for successive upbeats

- Much like big-band charts, the Omnibook transcriptions lack articulation markings

Charlie Parker Omnibook- "Ko Ko"
a. Original notation

b. Edited reflecting Parker's articulation

- Richardson adopted this type of articulation for use in the Jones/Lewis Orchestra, as seen in the "Fingers" sax soli. Note the influence of Royal's HT-ST to end the phrases.

"Fingers" sax soli
a. Original notation by Thad Jones

Contemporary Style

Contemporary style is an extension of the bop-influenced style, while incorporating non-jazz sources: Afro-Cuban music, rock/funk fusion, and Brazilian music. Articulation practices from soloist such as Michael Brecker and David Sanborn are utilized by sax sections such as Bob Mintzer's Big Band.

- While bop-style off beat articulation continues to be the principal technique, Latin jazz and funk rhythms call for specific articulation. Cut-time eighth notes tied across the beat, or common time sixteenth notes tied across the beat or mid-beat, are usually played short unless specifically marked otherwise

Tied note articulations chart

Written:

Played:

Written:

Played:

- If the rhythmic figures above appear in isolation, the final note value is played short. When leading into another note, long. In Mintzer's "The Heart of the Matter," lead altoist Lawrence Feldman demonstrates the implied articulation.

"The Heart of the Matter"
a. Original notation by Bob Mintzer