Essential Jazz Chord Rhythms

Before you begin your study of easy jazz chords, take some time to learn these essential jazz rhythms.

These rhythms are used throughout this book, so having a basic understanding of them prepares you for future studies.

Because you work these rhythms over various sections of the book, you can return to this chapter as a reference when needed.

Rhythm is the most important aspect of jazz comping. Cool chords with boring rhythms aren't interesting.

But, even the simplest chords sound hip if played with interesting rhythms.

Don't overlook this aspect of comping in your studies, as many guitarists do, in favor of adding new chord shapes to your repertoire.

Instead, focus on getting basic chord shapes down, and then run them through each rhythm to take them further in your comping.

Quarter Notes – Freddy Green Comping

The first essential rhythm is one of the most famous in jazz, the Freddie Green pattern.

This pattern, made up entirely of quarter notes, is the rhythm that propelled Green's playing with the Count Basie Orchestra.

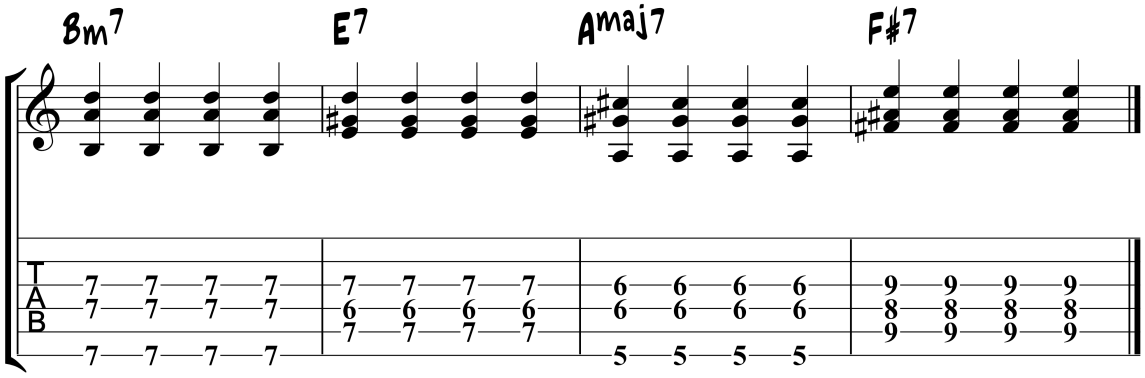
Though it's simple on paper, keeping this pattern over a whole song can be tiring, both mentally and physically.
Work this rhythm with a metronome, and later backing tracks, for 3-4 minutes at a time to build endurance.

To get the proper sound with this rhythm, place accents on the 2nd and 4th chords in each bar.

This means that beats 1 and 3 are quiet and beats 2 and 4 are louder.

Doing so gives you the strong groove and rhythmic drive that made Freddie one of the greatest jazz compers of all time.

Audio Example 4



Charleston Rhythm and Variations

You now bring syncopation into your comping with the Charleston.

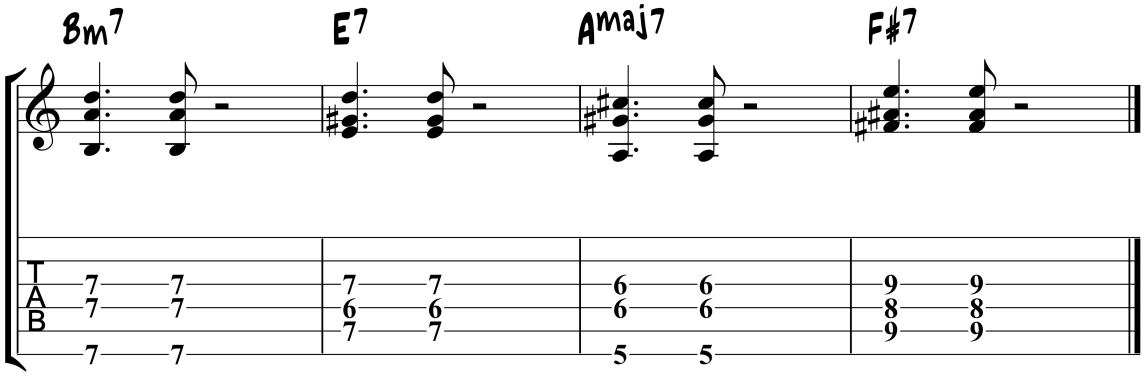
Syncopation is when you play chords on the up beats, the &'s of the beat, within a rhythmic pattern.

In the case of the Charleston, you play the first chord on the downbeat of each bar, then you play the second chord on the & of 2.

This creates a syncopated rhythm that's one of the most important in jazz comping.
To get this rhythm smooth, count each bar 1-2-3-4 as you play the Charleston.

Counting helps you learn any rhythm quickly, and keeps the rhythm locked into the groove of the progression.

Audio Example 5



After you've worked the Charleston rhythm on the downbeat of each bar, you can start it on other 8th notes.

Here's an example of the Charleston rhythm starting on the & of 1, with the second chord on beat 3 of each bar.

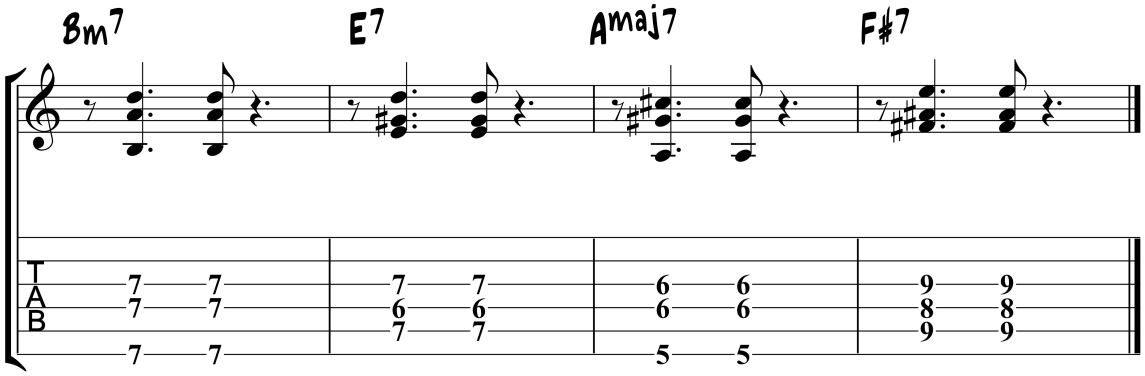
After you've worked out this variation, put on a metronome and play the Charleston on other beats of the bar.

You keep the same formula, dotted quarter note plus an 8th note, but play that grouping anywhere within the bar.

Give it a try, if it's too challenging at this point, move on to the next rhythm in your studies.

Then, when you're more comfortable with rhythms, come back and see if you can explore the Charleston rhythm further in your playing.

Audio Example 6



& of 1 and 3

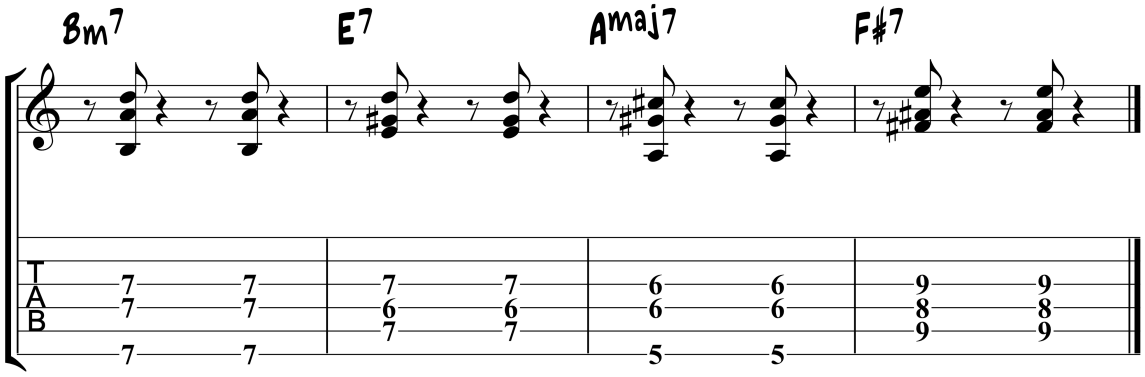
Next you learn a rhythm that only plays up beats, here on the & of 1 and 3, to create a syncopated comping pattern.

The key to this rhythm, and any syncopated rhythm, is that you don't rush the chords.

Rhythms such as this have a tendency to speed up.

So, use a metronome and count to make sure you're right in the pocket when comping this cool-sounding jazz rhythm.

Audio Example 7



& of 2 and 4

The next rhythm is a variation of the previous one, except you place the chords on the & of 2 and 4 instead of 1 and 3.

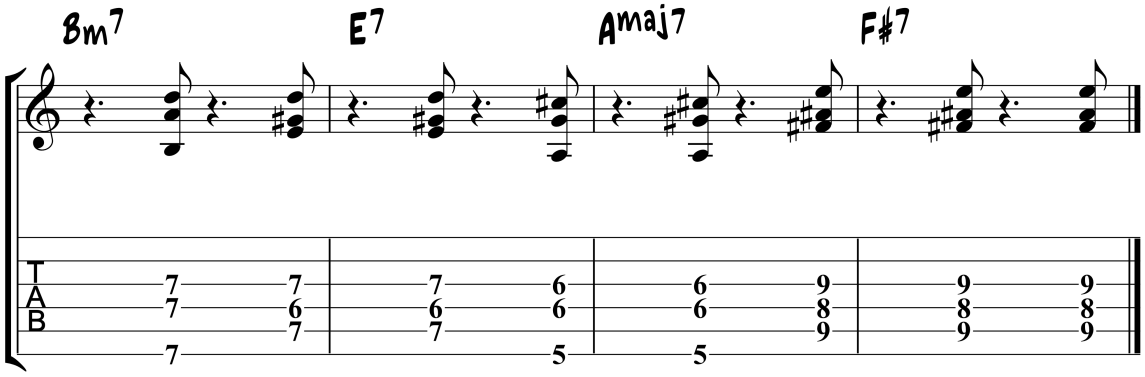
When doing so, you anticipate the next chord in each bar, meaning you play the chord in bar two on the & of 4 in bar one.

This is what makes this rhythm sound hip, but also makes it hard to play.

Work this rhythm slowly, counting each bar, and then bring a metronome into play when you're ready.

It's a tough, but essential, rhythm, so taking the time to work it into your playing pays dividends for years to come.

Audio Example 8



Baião – 3+3+2

The final rhythm is the toughest out of the bunch, as it involves breaking up the bar into an uneven group of 8th notes.

Normally there are eight 8th-notes in a bar, hence their name, that you count 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8.

These 8th notes are usually broken up into 4 notes (half notes) or 2 notes (quarter notes).

But, if you want to create a syncopated rhythm, where you play 8th notes but hide make them less obvious, you can use the baião rhythm.

The term baião comes from Brazil, but the rhythm is used in every musical style around the world.

With baião, you play 8th notes, but you break them up into three different groupings, 3+3+2, rather than groups of 2 and 4.

When doing so, you play a dotted quarter note (three 8th-notes), an 8th tied to a quarter note (three 8th-notes), and a quarter note (two 8ths).
This rhythm fools the listener into thinking you're playing a complex time signature, but you're still in 4/4.

Because of this, it can be hard to count the baião, so take your time, work slowly, count 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2 if needed, and go from there.

If you can't get this rhythm down right now, no worries.

Start by working the other rhythms in your playing and come back to the baião at a later date.

Audio Example 9