

Playing In Half-Time

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"The faster you play, the slower you count." - Dizzy Gillespie

Excessive physical and emotional excitement are pleasurable and rewarding but have a negative effect on instrumental technique, endurance and emotional control. They reduce a player's ability to perform at the highest level. Performers mistakenly assume that these low-level rewards are an essential element of the playing experience. This over-emotional approach is also used as feedback to insure that they are "into" the music, that they are playing with passion. Paradoxically, the reverse is true: one achieves the highest levels of performance by developing a dispassionate and uninvolved approach. Notice how physically "quiet" most professional performers are.

This overly excited approach to performance is caused by two factors: feeling time and tempo as 1/4 notes and stage fright. (To gain a more complete understanding of the psychological problems of performance anxiety, see my article "Stage Fright and Relaxation" in the Articles section of my web site.)

Quarter-note time has a dynamic, propulsive quality that makes it difficult to play by choice and with control. It induces tension and creates over-excitement, compulsive 8th. note playing, literally reducing instrumental facility by 50%. Eighth-notes played with a 1/4 note feeling have a forced, over-articulated quality. These difficulties occur for one reason only: 1/4 note tempos occur at a rate of speed too fast to conceive and execute 8th. note ideas! Reconditioning your attitude and conception of playing 1/4 note time can eliminate this effect.

Use of 1/4 note time is a hold-over from childhood musical experience. All young music students must develop an internal "clock" and learn how to count tempo in steady 1/4 notes. This concept is then mistakenly carried over into adult musical behaviour. Although most childhood behaviour becomes modified when reaching adulthood, somehow we think this is not true of many early musical concepts. Most of us feel our tempo "clock" in one of four ways: as steady quarter-notes, on 2 & 4 of the bar, on 1 & 3 of the bar or in a steady stream of syncopated rhythms. Defined as "Swing beats", 1/4 note time and 2 & 4 of the bar are emotionally charged beats. Note that when you listen to jazz you snap your fingers on 2 & 4 because they swing. They are often used by a player as a "crutch" for keeping place and imparting a false feeling of swing to their ideas. Those who count using these beats have yet to reach rhythmic maturity. Learning to play in half-time is adult rhythmic behaviour.

The half-time approach to playing time can be applied to most tempos, except ballads. By altering your subjective perception of playing 1/4 note time to playing in half-time, you'll feel the tempo as being half as fast. You'll therefore be twice as relaxed, have twice as much time to conceive ideas and double your technical facility. In effect, you will be conceiving every tune as a ballad! It's impossible to become over-excited playing a ballad tempo.

You can experience the feeling of playing in half-time by trying the following experiment; tapping your foot on beats 1 & 3 of a 4/4 tempo (counting every two beats as one beat at 1/2 the tempo) and counting over two bar phrases, you are tapping out 1/4 notes of a ballad (1/2 time) tempo.

Play this example of an 8 note, C Major "Bebop" scale, in the following manner: Begin by tapping your foot on every 1/4 note at a medium-up, 4/4 tempo. Repeat the scale ascending and descending without stopping at the top or bottom of the scale.

[Example 1]



After four or more bars, without stopping, change your foot-tapping from each 1/4 note to 1 & 3 of the bar, and continue play the scale. You'll be tapping your foot on every two beats of the two bar phrase.

[Example 2]



Switch back and forth a few times. Notice the over-articulated quality of the scale while tapping 1/4 notes and how, when tapping on 1 & 3, it changes to a legato phrasing and is easier to execute. What has occurred is that by tapping on 1 & 3 you are now playing the 8th. notes that were in 4/4 as 16th. notes in 2/2 and are, in effect, playing a ballad tempo.

[Example 3]



You may have experienced the feeling of playing in half-time without realizing it. Have you noticed how easy it is to improvise 8th. note ideas while playing a samba or bossa nova? Brazilian music is written and played in 2/2 and is based on the clave beat which is a two bar phrase. Have you noticed how easy it is to improvise double-time, 16th. note ideas on a ballad? That's the half-time feeling at work.

Playing in 1/2 time has a particular feeling and quality of sound that many of the masters have achieved. This effect can be most clearly recognized when listening to their recordings of up-tempo tunes. The 1/2 time technique is most clearly demonstrated by a "stride" pianist's left hand. It is the only way to successfully execute the "stride".

As when learning anything new, it will take time and practice to get used to this new and unfamiliar perception of time. You'll have to retrain years of conditioning of playing with 1/4 note time. It will be especially difficult to resist slipping back into 1/4 note time while playing with drums and bass who must play with a 1/4 note feeling. From time to time, you may switch back to 1/4 note time playing for the sake of rhythmic variety and add extra propulsiveness to a line.

Be aware of two potential hazards of playing in 1/2 time. First, you must be able to hear the passage of chord changes as they progress through a tune without switching the time values of the chord changes from 4/4 to 1/2 time, making the tune a virtual ballad. Secondly, you must avoid the tendency to play too far behind the beat.

Review and relearn your repertoire and play all your songs with a ballad concept; i.e., a 12 bar blues becomes a six bar ballad, a 32 bar tune becomes a 16 bar ballad, etc. You can also alter your perception of time by selecting a ballad you know well enough you that don't have to think about it while playing. After few bars begin to improvise double-time melodies. At the end of 16 bars, switch to a blues in another key at twice the tempo, attempting to retain the legato, over-the-barline feeling of the 16th. notes in the faster 1/4 note tempo. If you loose the feeling, return to the ballad and start again until you can make the switch with out reverting back to 1/4 note time.

From this point on you will try to eliminate feeling tempo in 1/4 note time and 8th. note playing from your conception of music. Listen to music while counting in 1/2 time. All practicing of 8th. notes lines will now be translated into 16th. note lines in 1/2 time.

Improvising should be fun. It can't be fun if it's not easy to do. Most of us have been conditioned into believing that jazz improvising should be hard work and feel that if it becomes easy we are somehow "cheating". It may seem surprising but when you have become used to working hard it will be difficult getting used to playing being easy. When first learning how to play in 1/2 time, students often complain that they "don't feel like they're doing anything." That's the way it's supposed to feel.

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