

# ARTICULATION - The Jazz Musician's Best Friend

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From Digging Deeper video #55

Jazz is tricky business, to be sure. That said, it is entirely learnable and accessible to ANY student, independent of age, past experience or innate ability level. After 30 plus years of teaching experience ranging from public school and university students to all-state bands and professional horn sections, I can confidently say that one crucial element in teaching music is often overlooked, despite its great value – articulation.

Articulation (the art of how and when one begins and ends a note) is the exact same thing that makes a Brooklyn accent sound different than an Australian accent. Each accent has a distinct feel, lilt, and group of connotations and associations with it. Articulation in music serves the same purpose. It can be a central elements of what makes one band swing while another doesn't, why one jazz solo sounds legitimate, while another just doesn't cut it. Swing, feel and style all come from accurate articulation.

The frustrating part for many teachers is that each instrument has it's own individual technique for articulation. Horns use tongue and air, while drummers and pianists use finger and hand control; guitarists are concerned with picking and muting, while jazz vocalists are dealing with the scat syllables and vocables they choose. While we may not be masters of all these instruments and techniques, the general approach and logic is the same from one instrument to the other.

One of the best tools for working on articulation is using jazz solo transcriptions and "composed solos" like the ones included in many jazz etude books on the market. In these, the student plays well-constructed jazz solos, with proper articulations (sometimes) included on the written music. Most importantly, they should also *listen to* and *mimic* a professional musician playing the part. Some of us learn most naturally from a more intellectual/reading/visual stance, while others learn best by absorbing/listening. Both approaches are important.

### The Rules of Jazz Articulation –

1) **Jazz is LEGATO music.** After years of adjudicating bands and leading thousands of master classes, I am comfortable in saying that 90% of players articulate TOO MUCH, and thus break up the groove and swing of the line. *No articulation at all* is far better than too much of it.

2) **Play The Shape of the Line.** If you play “connect the dots” with the note heads on a piece of music, you will create a graph with distinct peaks and valleys. When the line goes up, you should play louder. When it goes down, you play softer. When it creates a peak that is where you hit the note hardest and loudest. It is a very easy concept to understand, but takes a good deal of practice time to internalize and realize on an instrument. Playing the shape of the line creates and emphasizes the syncopations inherent in a great jazz line.

3) **End Phrases With “Be-Bop”.** Many jazz phrases end with two eighth notes before a rest. When this happens, play them as if you are saying the words “be bop”. This onomatopoeic phrase perfectly illustrates how those two notes should sound - a) long-short b) more accented-less accented, c) both tongued (picked, etc), and d) legato between the two notes. This articulation creates a snappy, syncopated, rhythmically percussive sound.

4) **Off Beat Quarter Notes Are Generally Short.** Detached might be a better word. Think “duht.” Jazz often looks different on the page than it sounds to the ear. An eighth note followed by a quarter note would actually be played long - short most often. The eighth note would literally be longer than the quarter note (which explains why great classical musicians have a hard time sounding legitimate playing jazz – they are being too literal with the notes on the page). Remember to leave actual *silence* after an offbeat quarter note. This gives the syncopation more impact, and gives the line bounce and lightness.

On the totem pole of musical/jazz importance, I actually place good rhythms and articulations ABOVE correct notes. The history of jazz (as well as blues, country, R&B, rock and soul) is *full of wrong or questionable notes*, played or sung with fabulous style, groove and intention. Consider rethinking or retooling your personal hierarchy of musical elements to move articulation up a notch or two – you’ll be glad you did!

Contact me with any questions.  
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# ANTHROPOLOGY

**A**

C AM7 DM7 G7 EM7 AM7 DM7 G7

C7 F7 FM7 1. EM7 A7 DM7 G7 || 2. DM7 G7 C7

**B**

E7 E7 A7 A7

D7 D7 G7 G7

**A**

C AM7 DM7 G7 EM7 AM7 DM7 G7

C7 F7 FM7 DM7 G7 C