Practicing off-beats

At several places in the VMS you are invited to limit the number of attention areas during practicing, in order to investigate a certain aspect thoroughly.

In this first exercise of the Rhythm gym this important study principle is applied too. We focus on only one aspect: the timing of your off-beats. You don't need to think about scales, or notes or chords, because they are given to you. The only thing you have to do is concentrate intensely on your timing.

Three types of groove are offered in various tempos for play-along:

• jazz swing tempos 80, 100, 120, 140, 160
• straight/bossa tempos 80, 100, 120, 140, 160
• salsa tempos 80, 100, 120, 140, 160

The comping lasts two bars, and then it stops for two bars. You are supposed to play a continuous line of off-beats over it and keep your timing strict, also during the gaps. When you come in (for instance after a breath) you are allowed to play a note on beat 1, but after that you must play off-beats.

The gaps are not left entirely blank, but every ten times the amount of supportive taps is decreased. This way you profoundly practice your internal pulse and rhythmic accuracy, especially when you apply it to extremely slow or fast tempos.

On the next page you find an easy melody for each of the three styles, shown for C-, Bb-, Eb- and bassclef instruments. After a while you may want to add one more attention area and change the notes (not the rhythm!), but you should only do so when you really master the timing of this single line in all tempo's.

The final goal of this exercise is that you can improvise with off-beats on your own in such a groovy way, that everyone could easily imagine a drumpattern to it. In fact, you could even try that by recording yourself and see if you can snap your fingers or play a cymbal pattern along with it.

When you can use sequencing software like Cubase, Logic, etc. you can even visualize your timing. Import one of the play-along mp3s, and make sure the tempo of your sequencer corresponds with it. Record yourself, and zoom in on the track. The position of the waveform tells you exactly whether your timing is late, early or irregular.

That last aspect is perhaps one of the most important things you should learn. Timing partly is a matter of taste. Lay-back timing definitely can sound great, but you should try to be consistent. If you want to sound like Dexter Gordon, all your notes should be a bit late, and in the same amount. When every now and then a note is relatively early, the groove is broken, and the effect is gone.

Virtual Music School - Rhythm gym
Off-beat exercise