In looking at time in jazz, Wynton Marsalis’s words are a helpful starting point in thinking about the “time” of the music—to be together means to be together in time. Jazz performers cite a player’s “time,” more precisely, the individual awareness of time as the key element to be developed in the constitution of a jazz musician. A British drummer spoke to me of his period of study in New York and recalled the standard response when his peers (on all instruments) were asked what they had learned from their teacher;

to a man or a woman they would come back and say “need to work on my time” and [the great teachers] would hear you play unaccompanied, and hear you play a tune, the form, or hear saxophonists play a line and they would say, “Ok, you need to work on your time.”

(BA, drummer)

It is fair to say that the centrality accorded to time by jazz musicians is not fully reflected in the scholarly writing on the music. Over the course of this chapter, I hope that a modest re-balancing can be achieved, as I look at what “time” means in jazz—through the variety of ways in which the playing of time is understood as part of individual dispositions, in relation to the significance of temporal relations between players and the temporal roles that musicians occupy, and through the usage of temporal models that structure the music.

Playing in Time, Playing With Time

Jed Rasula has described jazz as an “exploration of the plasticity of time” (Rasula 1995, 146). He makes this point in relation to the sounds, history, and perhaps the very notion of jazz; the point is well made, but I want to nuance this plasticity, particularly in reference to the sounds of the music, by making the case for an equal imperative towards thinking of time as having a necessary solidity.

The distinction between playing in time and playing with time is important here in thinking about the time of the music as being solid and flexible, as functional and as expressive (Monson 1996). Both these ways of thinking about the playing of musical time also point to one of the
problems of jazz, which is the relationship between serving the group and self-expression. The capacity to play in time is a vital component in contributing to a coherent group feel, and playing with time is central to the expressive, communicative qualities of, for example, a great solo. Paying attention to both are prerequisites for musicians’ establishing their place in this practice community.

Jazz musicians devote a large amount of their practice to playing in time and achieving a stability and consistency in their placement of notes (Doffman 2013). At a local level, this means being consistent in relation to the preceding and subsequent phrases (horizontally), and also in relation to being synchronous with other players on a particular shared beat (vertically). At a global level, being in time points to the stability of the tempo across the performance of the piece. Bass players and drummers, in particular, are judged and celebrated for this stability and regularity in their playing, and musicians aspire to having “great time,” a shorthand for these qualities.

Broadly, to be in time, the phrasing of solo lines or the comping underneath a solo need to articulate rhythm in a way that is audible and comprehensible to other players in the group. Playing in time is related to but not to be confused with “playing time”—a phrase that musicians use to describe the functional characteristic of working as part of the rhythm section. Time here is a trope for the rhythm section playing a swung jazz feel, and often also carries with it the idea of a pared down, fundamental groove being played that is not too dense or complex.

Alongside the notion of playing in time, as an ideal in jazz performance, is the sense of playing with time. This facet of playing is the expressive, perhaps playful, shaping of rhythm that adds communicative value to a performance. For example, a bassist may push the walking bass line ahead of her/his normal playing position to add excitement or to respond to another member of the group. Musicians actively play with temporal difference and discrepancy in order to affect others and contribute to the temporal dialog of the group. This chimes with Gregory Bateson’s notion of information (in this case, temporal) being a “difference which makes a difference” (1972, 315). In a similar way, a number of jazz scholars have developed Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s notion of “signifyn(g)” in African American language as a model for thinking about repetition and quoting in jazz as a form of intertextuality (Floyd 1995; Monson 1996). This can appear in the temporal domain when players cite celebrated musicians (in music and discourse) and shape their timekeeping through reference to them—“play more like Elvin Jones on this number.” These sorts of namings and reference points are more tropic than literal, feels more than structures, that nevertheless have a solidity or iterability about them.

The distinction between playing in and with time can also be understood by the roles that musicians occupy as they play. Bassists and drummers are seen as carrying a foundational responsibility for the quality of the time in a group. They function as timekeepers and need to play in time. As bassist Phil Bowler comments in relation to the bassist’s role, “It’s like the earth—you walk on the earth. The bass is like the earth” (cited in Monson 1996, 30). Musicians in rhythm sections, particularly bassists and drummers, feel a very strong sense of role, perhaps being hailed into a role, which goes beyond the joint responsibility that all musicians might feel for playing competent time. Billy Higgins, the celebrated jazz drummer, pointed to his own sense of obligation to playing in time in helping other musicians sound good (ibid., 63).

Clearly, all forms of music involve playing in and with time and require a balance between putting oneself in the service of the group and self-expression. Where jazz appears to be rather different is in the weight given to this balancing of the intersubjective time feel and expression, and in the degree of reflexivity on the part of musicians about time and how it is shaped in performance.

One of my primary duties is to make sure that the music feels good, it’s grooving, it’s in time; it’s not slowing down speeding up whatever. To keep it feeling right, so I suppose
when I play, I'm always conscious of “How's my time? Does that work within the group? Does it feel good, does it sound good?” And if not I’ll try and hang back or I’ll try and push ahead.

*(LS, bassist)*

As implied in this quote, musicians conceive the underlying beat of the music as having a certain width (Berliner 1994, 151), and players spend a lot of practice time developing a feel for this expanse. Playing at the front of the beat or playing at the back generates certain affective dimensions in the music; a player who plays at the front or back may be associated with a particular sense of drive or relaxedness as they play. Musicians vary in their attitude towards the placement of notes. Pianist Fred Hersch, in Paul Berliner’s ethnography, speaks of the need to be able to play with these different placements to meet the demands of the music (ibid., 151). Other players that I have spoken with expressed a commitment to particular ways of playing in relation to the beat; a guitar player used a metaphor for beat placement as “sitting at the front or back of the bus” and spoke of how “invariably, people with good time sit towards the back of the bus. I think that’s pretty fair to say” (PN, guitarist).

Given the opaqueness of musical timing evident in the discourse of musicians, some scholars have attempted to provide greater precision in framing the ways in which jazz musicians manipulate timing. A study by Brian Wesolowski (2016) points to a tendency to phrase swung eighth notes more evenly than the archetypal swung triplet rhythm suggests—a very clear feature of jazz performance at most tempos; it is also a historical feature—the timing of pairs of eighth notes tends to be more even in contemporary playing (and indeed from bebop) among soloists. There are very few studies that have focused on the temporal profile of individual players, but Friberg and Sundström (2002) did examine the swing ratio of a small number of elite drummers; they found, in contrast to the stereotypical notion of swing ratios being tied to the triplet subdivision, that these players tended to play the skip beat more as a sixteenth note. Only at certain tempos did the playing conform to the triplet subdivision.

### Temporal Relations, Temporal Roles

The different approaches to the playing of time and timekeeping that musicians articulate in terms of their own note placement, and as an ideal, become three dimensional when they play together in performance. Charles Keil, in his framing of the way in which structurally simple music is meaningful or feelingful, put forward the idea that much of the pleasure derived from music lies, not in formal complexity, but in the human, expressive qualities that color the dynamics, timbre, pitch, and timing of performance (Keil and Feld 1994; Keil 1995). The *participatory discrepancies* that he viewed as essential to our being moved and socially engaged by music are spoken of by musicians in similar ways. Much of the discourse of time in jazz hinges on the way that musicians think about the time as relational and emergent; that is, the time of the group cannot be reduced to the time of the individuals comprising the group. As a drummer pointed out,

my primary focus is a collective sense of time . . . in a small band context, it comes back to collective time. If someone has a time that is very distinctive, it has to work for the band, it has to be reined in a bit.

*(BA, drummer)*

This idea of the joint time of a group is captured in the term “swing”—a temporal, collective effervescence.
Swing as a Temporal Relation

André Hodeir (1956) talked of the “vital drive” in jazz as a quality that marked the essential character of the music; the term “swing” is close to this idea, and also a powerful description of the motional qualities that musicians and commentators see in great jazz performance. Swing is a multidimensional term within the discourse of the music. It can appear to describe an era and style. The swing era lasted for about a decade from the mid-1930s, and the term marks out a style and organization of the music that was seen as juxtaposed to the term “jazz” at that time, “jazz” being used to describe small group music derived from New Orleans (Giddins and Deveaux 2009, 171).

Swing is also used in distinct ways with regard to time and rhythm, and it is these senses of the term that are of relevance to this chapter. Swing describes a quality in performance that is similar to the notion of groove, and the way in which music can move us bodily and affectively. It is the phenomenal feeling of musical time as played collectively by the musicians. As a thought experiment, one might imagine two rhythm sections playing the same number in the same sort of way at an identical tempo. One of these might engage the hand, heads, and feet of an audience, while the other may fail to do this. There is nothing in the musical material, as notated, that swings—it is the way in which the players combine that accomplishes this. But swing, as more or less synonymous with groove, is not simply about the music’s drive or its motional qualities. Musicians’ descriptions of swing or groove are colored by a strongly social language, and by a sense of commitment to making the music feel right for other players and the audience. Most jazz musicians understand this, but it is in the rhythm section that the commitment to swing or groove is most pronounced as part of one’s role.

Bass and Drums

The performance of time in jazz is deeply connected to the performance role that players inhabit, and certain roles are linked together more tightly in time than others. So it is for the bass and drums, whose work within a jazz group is proscribed rather more than for other players. Although pianists and guitar players function as a third member of the rhythm section, the bass-drums dyad operates in a unique way within the group, hence the focus here.

Bass players and drummers frame much of their musical practice in terms of the “hook-up,” in other words, the manner of their tuning into one another. Although there has been some skepticism expressed about the validity of Keil’s work in relation to audiences’ abilities to hear the subtle temporal maneuverings of musicians (Butterfield 2010), there is little doubt that players do strongly feel the nuances of time as they play (Doffman 2009). Musicians speak regularly of a conscious negotiation with the time of others,

It’s very hard; it all depends on who you are playing with so you kind of have to marry everyone’s own personal sense of time, into a group feel that works and feels good, you know. So if I’m playing with a drummer who plays quite behind the beat. . . . I’ll compensate. To kind of keep the mean, [to keep it] in the right pocket.

(LS, bassist)

Not all rhythm section players are known for their negotiating skills, however, and some musicians become known for their pronounced and quite fixed temporal characteristics as they play with others; Ray Brown, the legendary bass player, was famous for his playing walking bass lines that were well “ahead of the beat,” and drummer Elvin Jones was celebrated for his behind the beat phrasing, and with such performers, other musicians would generally fit in with their strongly marked sense of time. More often however, rhythm section players are working towards a certain
middle ground, particularly if they are not familiar with the other half of the pairing. Charli Persip, a revered jazz drummer who contributed his insights to Paul Berliner's ethnography of jazz, commented that “for things to happen beautifully in the ensemble . . . the drummer and the bass player must be married. When I listen to the drummer and the bass player together, I like to hear wedding bells” (Berliner 1994, 349). This sort of talk alludes to the correspondence between temporal congruence and social affiliation. While there are numerous well-known instances of musicians falling out on the bandstand and continuing to make great music, it would be hard to think of a pair of musical roles that are so invested in maintaining a social and musical bond as the bass and drums.

While it is the soloist who has dominated the discourse of jazz (Whyton 2010), there are a number of bass–drums pairings whose work over many performances and recordings comes to define a sound and time feel that are held up as examples of how to play as a rhythm section: Ron Carter and Tony Williams, Sam Jones and Billy Higgins, Paul Chambers and Elvin Jones, and Walter Page and Jo Jones. Each of these rhythm sections had quite distinct approaches to timekeeping and all appeared to contribute to a temporal environment that was more than the sum of its parts (see Hagberg 2017). The characteristics of these players as bass–drums pairings is clearly more than the quality of their timekeeping together; their combined and individual sound and their approach to the musical texture (the density of their playing, for example) also marks them out.

The Soloist

The temporal milieu of the soloist in jazz is rather different to that of the rhythm section, and this is reflected in the greater autonomy of expression that is accorded whoever is soloing at any particular time. While there is an almost infinite set of possibilities for how a soloist might interpret time when they play, it is more usual to hear horn players, for example, playing behind the rhythm section—phrasing behind the beat. A small number of studies have shown empirically that the asynchronies between performers in jazz have a tendency to follow an order in which the drums and bass are followed by the soloist (Prögler 1995; Rose 1989), and the recent study by Wesolowski (2016), which focused on the timing of one saxophonist, Chris Potter, showed similar sorts of findings—Potter’s note placement was found to be about 75 ms behind the average of the bass and drums. Other studies, however, have not shown a marked delay in the beat placement of the soloist. A study of Louis Armstrong’s note placement on downbeats suggested that there was no significant “behind the beat” approach in Armstrong’s playing, indicating that his placement of notes was more of a mechanical than intentional nature (Collier and Collier 2002). The authors of such studies would readily recognize the limitations of work featuring small number of musicians. Nevertheless, the majority of such studies suggest that the ways in which musicians discuss the relationship of the soloist’s time to the rhythm section has some support in the more empirical literature on jazz.

There are occasions when the temporal style of the soloist may seem at odds with the rhythm section. A pianist described her experience of playing with horn players who played “behind” as follows:

[I played in a] duo with [X, a well-known saxophonist], and he has got a fantastic sense of pulse and a great feel but he is quite behind and I find that hard. . . . You have got a few who play really behind the beat to the extent that I would say it is quite detrimental on the rhythm section and sometimes we really struggle. Sometimes it will get into that thing where the bass and drums start pulling in different directions, like one goes with [the horn] and one tries to compensate and I am in the middle!

(WK, pianist)

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Soloists are sometimes characterized by the way in which they are regarded as “loose” or “tight” in relation to the rhythm section. Horn players can be described along a continuum that ranges from floating over a rhythm section—a style that suggests being quite free with the time, to a way of playing that “digs in” or carries the time more strongly within the lines being played. In an interview, a guitar player reflected on this aspect of their soloing,

My natural thing is I like kind of floating over things and moving things round and I am sort of aware [that] it is a bit like a wave; that’s why I keep thinking of this [makes wave gesture] you know, it’s like a wave thing where, sometimes you just pull back and let it go again, pull back and then you just come forward and that’s actually what it feels like to me when I’m playing.

(CD cited in Doffman 2009, 142)

Cultural Models of Time in Jazz

The focus so far has been on the embodied practices of timing that form part of jazz performance; I now turn to the notion of cultural models (Shore 1996)—the readily nameable scripts or templates that underpin a cultural milieu—as a way of thinking about the temporal structure of jazz. In contrast to the practices outlined so far, the idea of a cultural model alludes to temporal features in jazz that acquire status as musical objects, can be deployed or not in the course of performance, acquire historical weight, and achieve discursive power—they can be represented, named, and argued over as musical facts. Without attempting to offer a full taxonomy here, I highlight a number of temporal models that are critical to the characterization of jazz.

Swing Rhythms: Shuffles and Ten-to-Ten

Swing has been discussed above as part of the emergent, temporal feeling of the music. A verb. In the final meaning of swing, I refer to the characteristic rhythmic template of much jazz—the uneven, long-short patterning of successive eighth notes. Swing as a noun. It is in this sense as a temporal model that swing contributes to the temporality of jazz. Swing, as an identifiable rhythmic shape with a specific architecture, consists of a long-short pairing of notes. This long-short pair of eighth notes is often described as being a triplet with the middle of the three notes tied to the first, thus creating the long-short effect. This unequal rhythmic division is the basis of a series of beats in blues, jazz, and R&B such as the shuffle and the characteristic “ten-to-ten” ride cymbal pattern in so much jazz performance. With the middle beat of a triplet added back into the pattern, then the shuffle or ten-to-ten pattern becomes a 12/8 feel, consisting of four groups of triplets—usually with a snare played on beats two and four. Monson (1996, 53) describes the archetypical ride cymbal pattern in jazz as just one within the shuffle “family of rhythms” which, although generally notated in 4/4, as a shorthand, are more appropriately thought of as 12/8 meter, although this is dependent on tempo (see Figure 16.1).

In shuffle patterns, the long-short ostinato is articulated directly in the surface features of the pattern (usually played on the ride cymbal or hi-hat of the drum kit). In the ten-to-ten ride cymbal patterns that we most associate with jazz performance, then the long-short pattern is implied on beats one and three and stated on beats two and four, but the swing feel persists.

The patterns that are outlined here are relatively stable but not unchanging over the course of the music. The introduction of the ten-to-ten pattern on the ride cymbal is associated with Kenny “Klook” Clarke (1914–1985), who was frustrated by the constraint of playing this pattern on the hi-hat with his right-hand, so constraining the ability of his left-hand to pick out rhythms on the snare drum. The performance of the ten-to-ten pattern on the hi-hat was in itself an innovation in
the late 1930s as Jo Jones, drummer with the Count Basie Band, moved away from the bass drum and snare supplying a regular pulse to the band (effectively reinforcing the walking bass line of the bassist). It is also important to note that the characteristic “swung eighth” note feel in jazz is more evident or not according to the period of the music, the instrument being played, and the tempo.

**Two and Four**

A further underpinning of jazz performance is the notion of “two and four” as the temporal focus. Beats two and four in common time (4/4 meter) are referred to in a number of ways as oppositional to beats one and three—as “offbeats,” “upbeats,” and, in the development of popular music styles, the “backbeat.” The roots of this temporal focus are sometimes traced to the African American ring shout ritual, and the repetitive “stomp-clap” that could characterize the ring shout can at least be reimagined as the bass/snare ostinato that underlies so much African American music (Floyd 1995; Iyer 2002).

The feeling of two and four is frequently set up without a note being played. If there is an image that is emblematic of jazz, it might be the finger click on the two and the four that musicians routinely use to bring a band in. Much of jazz temporality seems distilled in that sound, and in the moments before the band begins a number, it is the precise isochronic character of the clicks from the bandleader’s fingers that signals the insistent pull of two and four in the architecture of the music. Furthermore, a poor count-in that contains an erratic set of clicks may not augur well for the head that follows.

It is possible to conceive of the second and fourth beats of the bar in jazz as simply agogic accents, but the idea of two and four in jazz is more than this; it is a simple but extremely important model in the construction of a jazz sensibility. Lawrence Zbikowski (2004) focuses on the two and four in an analysis of the Miles Davis recording “If I Were A Bell” (Davis, 1958). Davis clicks his fingers eight times in the manner of a hi-hat before Red Garland, his pianist for that session, enters on piano. Zbikowski points to the disruption that we feel on hearing the entry of the piano on beats one and three and so highlights an important point about temporal models within a musical culture, which is that for audience and players, it cannot be assumed that both will be working from the same temporal construct. For non-literate listeners, the finger click sets up an expectation that the click lies on beats one and three (simply because for most listeners, the first sound will tend to be heard as the downbeat; anacrusis or a similarly displaced beat will only become clear as the piece develops and we metricize the piece).
If there is a disruption here or not, the significance lies in having cultural knowledge of beats two and four—similar to the distinction that Geertz understands between a “wink” and a “twitch” (1973, 6–8). The two and four for musicians are not just points in time but part of their sense of themselves as jazz players. Most jazz musicians will have had the experience of a bandleader, who may not be a jazz musician but wants to incorporate the music in his set, counting off a standard on beats one and three. It is significant how musicians’ embodied behaviors and identity can be so intertwined at those moments. As an aural cue into a song, the finger clicks on two and four and one and three provide the same timing information, but each provides an entirely different cultural resonance for the players.

The Walking Bass

Equally characteristic of the temporal structuring of jazz is the “walking bass” line. The sound of the bass on all four beats of each measure was something that only began in the late 1920s and is often credited to Walter Page, bassist in the Count Basie Band at that period. The earliest incarnations of the music used brass instruments as much as string basses to play bass parts; the emphasis in the early period of the music lay on producing the harmonic outline, usually in terms of firsts and fifths, on beats one and three, not least because it is hard to continue to play four beats to every bar on a tuba (Crow 2000, 669).

In summarizing this small number of paradigmatic temporal patterns, it is important to recognize that these operate as relatively loose scripts that are deployed by musicians in very different ways. While they are the classic exemplars of jazz temporality, these are fluid templates for performance rather than immutable rhythmic forms. The ten-to-ten cymbal pattern that emerges out of 1920s developments on the snare drum (perhaps Warren “Baby” Dodds being the earliest exponent of a buzz roll on beats two and four, which appears to be the precursor to the cymbal pattern) has always been subject to variation. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, drummers such as Elvin Jones, Max Roach, and latterly Tony Williams are constantly shifting the skip beat of the pattern. Similarly, the sense of two and four in the music generally moves towards a more even emphasis of accent across all four beats from bebop and beyond—a move no doubt associated with the shift from jazz as a music for dancing to one that is listened to.

Concluding Remarks

While other facets of the music, its harmonic structures and improvisational practices, in large measure, seem to define the image and value of jazz within the larger public sphere, time and timing within the field itself are often held to be the most significant elements of what it means to be a valued player or to produce a great performance. Without a strong awareness of time, then players are unlikely to achieve a significant profile as a great improviser within the community of practice.

I end with a few thoughts on the paradoxical aspects of time that highlight its complexity as part of jazz practice. First is the relationship between the expressive and the functional character of time in the music, and the tension between them, which contributes strongly to the individual and collective understanding of jazz performance. Temporal practice also speaks to the changing sameness of the music—the paradox that LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) articulated in understanding the complex threads that make up the tradition (1998, 180–211). There is a temporal component in the “changing same”; that is the synchronic attunement of in the moment performance, surely an unchanging aspiration for musicians, and the diachronic temporal models—the musical scripts that modulate over time. And finally, time is the constituent of the music, par excellence, that entrains bodies and glues musicians together by a matter of milliseconds, and yet is, at the same time, the symbolic capital that identifies, distinguishes, and ultimately separates players one from the other.
**References**


