

Playing with the Right Feel – Finding “Fix”!

In Western music, there is a clear distinction between various types of subdivisions. Specifically, divisions of the beat into two, three, or four subdivisions (eighths, triples, and sixteenths, respectively) are clearly labeled as different kinds of rhythms. But a major difficulty for those of us raised in Western cultures is that in Afro-centric musics the rhythmic distinction between three subdivisions per beat and four subdivisions per beat (triple vs. duple), is frequently blurred. In several cases, the difference does not exist at all - there is a completely “new” kind of subdivision at work. This is what gives Rumba from Cuba, Samba from Brazil, and even certain kinds of Be-bop their unique characters. It is what my compadre Dave Garibaldi tends to refer to as “that slinky stuff.” For example, listen to a sambista from Rio de Janeiro playing 16th notes on a snare drum and see if you can imitate it. Odds are, you will have great difficulty! Instead of being evenly spaced, certain subdivisions are pushed closer together, which makes the time feel blurry. Half the time you can’t tell if you’re in a duple feel or a triple feel, and we’re just not used to that ambiguity. Sometimes it even upsets us! I call this “averaging” of rhythm between a four and a six feel, “fix,” (**F**our and **S**ix), and it is an **essential** component of learning to swing in these styles. Fix is a concept we must acquire, manipulate and finally, internalize.

So how do we learn to do it? Obviously, if you can take a trip to a place in the African diaspora, you can start to experience fix in context. Short of that, it can be absorbed most naturally by listening to and playing along with the countless recordings of Afro-Cuban, Brazilian, Haitian, and other forms of music in which it occurs. Participating from birth, not notating, is of course the method by which fix is learned by its actual practitioners. However, those of us who have not grown up with this music may need a few visual, as well as aural, representations of fix. (Note: When all is said and done, almost all the rhythms in this book are played in fix!)

To begin to blur the difference between four and six, and intentionally create the ambiguity within fix, let’s start with the following comparison: (Remember, we’re in Spirology so we’re starting on the upbeat.)

EXAMPLE 1, 2

The image shows two musical staves, labeled 1 and 2, illustrating rhythmic patterns. Staff 1 contains a quarter rest followed by a quarter note, then a triplet of eighth notes labeled 'A', and finally another quarter note. Staff 2 contains a quarter note followed by a triplet of eighth notes labeled 'B'. The notation is in a 4/4 time signature, starting on the upbeat.

Normally, we would say that example 1 ends before example 2. Specifically, the second note of a triplet should end before the “and” of the beat (the third 16th note). When playing in fix, however, both of these examples occupy exactly the same amount of time. That is to say, the note I’ve labeled “A” and the note I’ve labeled “B”, occur at the **same** moment in time. Therefore, something must be different about the subdivisions which happen before this point. Look at examples 3 and 4. In fix, the second and third subdivisions of the beat (labeled C and D) are played closer together. We might express the fix effect on the 16th note like this:

CD track 10

EXAMPLE 3, 4

16ths, as usually notated and heard in Western notation

3

16ths, "fixed"

4

In example #3, all four notes are evenly spaced. Now remember we’re in Spirology, so the first of the four notes is the anticipation. In example #4 (fix), there are still four notes, but the last two (C and D) occur closer together. In fact, their spacing would be between that of sextuplets and 16th notes. The first 16th note (the anticipation) is also changed, as it is played **slightly** earlier than the conventionally notated placement. Although the downbeats in fix land in the same place as traditional Western subdivision, all the other notes have moved forward in the time a little bit, which is what creates the “lilt” within this style of playing. The anticipation therefore is closer to the placement of the first note of a group of triplets phrased in Spirology. So when you are playing in fix, the anticipated note and the downbeat fall in the same place whether you’re in a triplet or duple feel. This is precisely what suggests the ambiguity in so much of this music, since one can change the feel almost instantaneously, not only from bar to bar but even from beat to beat. Look at example #5. When playing in fix, notes E and F are exactly the same rhythm as notes G and H:

EXAMPLE 5

5

SECTION

9

Now remember, fix is like an Art Blakey ride cymbal pattern. It's a feeling, not an intellectual exercise. Nevertheless, here are some actual musical parts as they would look in fix to help you to understand the concept. After you've tried them, put on a Los Munequitos de Matanzas record or an Escola de Samba CD and see if you can match their feel.

Let's start with a different gua-gua pattern (Note that the duple in this case is eighth notes, not sixteenths):

CD track 11

EXAMPLE 6a, 6b

Played exactly as written:

Played in "fix". Notice that several notes are moved up in the time to demonstrate their altered placement in "fix". The dashes indicate these changes.

Now, a Segundo part from a Matanzas Rumba Guaguanco.

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EXAMPLE 7a, 7b

As written:

Adjusted for "fix".

Lastly, let's look at a snare drum pattern from Rio.

EXAMPLE 8a, 8b

As written:

8a

R R L L R R L R L R L R L R R L R

8b

R R L L R R L R L R L R L R R L R

Adjusted for "fix":

Now I should mention that my brother Mark Lamson has another way to conceptualize fix which I think is valuable and demands consideration. With the same phrasing from the upbeat, he imagines fix as a triplet in which the second note of the triplet is a very wide flam, as in example 9. (While his description of the inside notes might differ, be clear that the placement of the pick-up note and the downbeat in both our minds remains the same as in example 5 above).

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EXAMPLE 9

Mark Lamson's conception of "fix". The inside flams should be played wider than normal and occupy the same rhythmic space as points C and D in example 4, above.

L R LR L R LR L etc.

I find this to be a very effective way of expressing this concept, though it can be difficult to execute, particularly at faster tempi. Because of the "inside flam" it does require a higher degree of stick control, but it is an excellent way of describing the idea. However you think of fix, however you write it, however you want to conceptualize it, the goal remains the same—to make the music groove properly.