

Questions for Deep Listening

Compiled by Jason Mingledorff

Piano/Guitar

- Is there a repetitive rhythm in the comping? Does it change from the head to the solos and/or between solos and sections?
- Are the voicings tight or open? Are in the high, middle, or low register? Are they thick or sparse?
- Are there tendencies to use the same voicings in the same spots, or do they change?
- Are there places where they drop out?
- Are there spots where they are specifically responding to the soloist or another rhythm section player?
- Do they fill in any open spaces in the melody and/or solos with fills or answers?
- Are there any interesting variations on the changes being played?
- Are there any tone changes during comping (guitar or organ)?
- Are the guitar and piano comping together or taking turns comping? If they are playing together, how are they interacting? Are they staying out of each other's way?
- Does it sound like they made any mistakes? They are human, after all!

Bass

- If it's *swing*, are they playing with a 2-feel or 4-feel? Does the feel change after the melody or between certain sections?
- If you know the changes, can you follow along with the walking bass line as it works its way from root to root? Can you tell if they are substituting chords? Can you hear when they might substitute a Dominant 5 with a Flat 2 (tritone sub)? Does it ever sound like they are not playing the changes correctly?
- Are there certain tendencies in the bass line? Maybe there are times they are not playing the root in the bass?
- Listen closely to the tone quality of each quarter note of the walking line and the timing of each one. Are they on top of the beat? Are they behind the beat? Are they locked in with the high hat or ride cymbal?
- Are there times when they stop playing quarter notes and use longer or shorter notes and/or syncopation? Are there times when it feels like they are totally not in time?
- If it's a *straight 8th* or some type of *Latin groove*, is there a set pattern? Can you figure out what it is? Since these usually just involve roots and fifths, these are often not too hard to figure out. Does the bass line change during the solos and/or different sections?
- Is the bass anticipating beat one? This is common in Cuban music (and New Orleans second line!). Can you hear syncopations (hemiolas especially) in the bass part?
- Are there times when the bass player has decided to play a pedal note to intensify or change things up?
- Can you hear times when the bass player is specifically reacting to something the soloist or another rhythm section member plays?
- Does the bass player ever use any special effects – like pops, slides, or tapping on the body?

Drums

- Can you tell what time signature they are playing in? Can you tell what the form is or how long the phrases are?

Questions for Deep Listening (cont'd)

- Is the drummer functioning mainly as a time keeper (just playing the groove), or are they interacting with the melody and/or soloist? These aren't mutually exclusive, by the way.
- Can you tell if they're using sticks or brushes? Listen to the tones of each of the parts of the drum set. Is the snare tight or loose? Is the bass drum boomy? Are the toms high or low? Are the cymbals dark or bright? How long do they ring? Can you hear them all equally?
- Is the time being clearly played, or is it sparse and open and hard to tell exactly where the beats are?
- If it's *swing*, zero in on the different parts of the drum set. Is the ride cymbal pattern a consistent ding-dinga-ding-dinga-ding swing pattern, or does it change up randomly? Is the high hat on 2 and 4? Does the bass drum play steady quarter notes, or whole notes, or occasional syncopated hits in response to the other players (you may need a good pair of headphones to hear this)? What is the role of the snare?
- Are they playing in a 2-feel or a 4-feel? Do they ever imply a double time feel?
- Are there any places you feel the time rush or drag? Do they play on top of the beat, behind it, or right in the pocket (or all of these!)? Are the drums locked in with the bass?
- Are they setting up certain hits in the melody or background parts? How so? Is the drummer delineating the different sections of the form? How so?
- If it's a *straight 8th* or some type of *Latin groove*, can you figure out the drum pattern? Is it consistent throughout the performance, or does it change between sections or soloists?
- Can you hear any prominent syncopations (especially hemiolas)? How do they affect what is going on in the other parts? Do they create moments of excitement or tension?
- How much control do you think the drummer has of the mood of the performance?
- Do you hear any instances where the drummer picks up on a particular rhythm that someone else plays and repeats it or incorporates it in their playing? Or vice versa?

Soloist

- Is the melody played cleanly and in tune?
- Are there any parts of the solo that stand out as particularly memorable? What is your favorite moment in each solo?
- Does it sound like they are "hitting the changes" or are they only slightly implying the chords?
- Is the soloist playing aggressively or in laid back manner? Is it "hot" or "cool"?
- Are they playing diatonically or are they adding dissonance with chromaticism and substitutions?
- Are there certain notes over certain chords that they seem to favor?
- Are they playing melodically (horizontally) or outlining the chords (vertically)?
- How are they using space? Do they fill it up with notes or let it breathe from time to time?
- Are they manipulating their sound in any way – growls, flutters, vibrato, mute...?
- Do they mostly use eighth notes, or do they use a variety of rhythms? Do they ever play in a double time feel? Do they ever play in a way where it's hard to tell what rhythm they are playing? Do they ever push or pull the time?
- Do you like their tone? Is it warm or bright, thin or full-bodied, soft or strident? Does it change in places to give different moods?
- Does the solo start right at the top of the chorus? Or do they come in early or wait a few bars to get going? Does it end before the chorus is over or trail into the next chorus?
- Are there places where it seems like the soloist messed up? It happens!
- Are there places where the soloist is clearly taking cues from something being played by someone else?
- Is there a clear climax in their solo? Is the rest of the band doing it with them or making it happen?
- How long is each solo (in terms of choruses)? Does any solo seem like it goes on longer than it should? Or maybe ends before it should? What is the order of the solos?