

Guitar Comping Basics: Swing—Rhythmic Elements

By Mike Dana

- Voicings
 - 3- or 4-note voicings
 - Use caution w/ low bass note voicings
- “Don’ts”
 - Don’t use barre chords.
 - Don’t strum.
 - Don’t be too loud or too busy.
- Rhythms
 - Basic swing rhythms (pianistic not Freddie Green)
 - “**Charleston**” (On/Off. See ex. 1: two notes; basic = 1 2+)
 - Experiment with long/short, on/off (2 3+)
 - Start on other beats
 - “**Reverse Charleston**” (Off/On. See ex. 2: two notes; basic = 1+ 3)
 - Same variations!
 - “**3 Note Charleston**” (Insert an eighth note in the middle; see ex. 3)
 - Same variations!
 - “**Super Charleston**” (long “on” chord)
- Anticipation
 - Start on 4+ instead of 1 (see ex. 4)
- Big beats
 - Start 1 or 2 w/ long chord, sometimes accented. (see ex. 5.)
- Things to keep in mind
 - Listen to others (esp. ride cymbal) to establish where/how the swing 8ths are played.
 - All about contrasts: mix up on/off, short/long.
 - “Comp” is short for **accompany**, **compliment**, and **compose**.
 - Sometimes comping is conversational. Sometimes it’s punctuation. It should never dominate.
 - The top note of your chord voicing with “feel” like the melody.
 - Most important things: feeding the groove, making the soloist sound good.
 - Least important things: all the cool chords and polyrhythms you know.
 - Use repeating patterns only when you want to lock in a “signature” groove. (Killer Joe, Sidewinder are examples.)
 - It’s OK to lay out for a bit.
 - Think twice about guitar/piano (and/or vibes) comping at the same time. Things get very cluttered very fast. (Exception: Freddie Green guitar + piano comping is cool!)
 - If one player comps a repeating pattern (melts into the groove), the other can comp more freely.
 - Some bassists like comping behind their solos. Others don’t. It’s OK to ask them.
 - Be cautious about copying (mimicking) the soloist. Once a night. Maybe. 😊

COMPING: BASIC SWING RHYTHMS

2 CHORDS/BAR

EX. 1: ON-OFF

(STARTING ON 2)

(STARTING ON 3)

EX. 2: OFF-ON

3 CHORDS/BAR

EX. 3 *♩* AT THE BACK *♩* AT THE FRONT

EX. 4: "SUPER CHARLESON"

ANTICIPATION

EX. 4

BIG BEATS

EX. 5