

# Piano Comping Basics: Swing—Rhythmic Elements

By Mike Dana

- Voicings
  - 3-, 4-, or 5-note voicings
  - Use caution w/ low bass register voicings. Usually wider intervals at the bottom.
  - Rootless voicings are a great idea!
  - Block (1 3 5 7) voicings are not the best choice. See my Piano Voicings lesson for more info.
- “Don’ts”
  - Don’t play low roots in voicings when there’s a bass player.
  - Don’t routinely double the bass line, unless it’s for effect. Never double a walking bass line.
  - Don’t be too loud or too busy.
- Rhythms
  - “**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. Give this some thought.
  - 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

♪s AT THE BACK

♪s AT THE FRONT

EX. 4: "SUPER CHARLESON"

## ANTICIPATION

EX. 4

## BIG BEATS

EX. 5