

Louis Armstrong - "If you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know."

By Tom Kamp

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Here's How I Define **Swing Rhythm**:

The first thing you need to know is that it's kind of impossible to define. Look it up, you'll find any number of conflicting, confounding, and elusive attempts at defining "swing," or "groove." Just ask Louis! Nevertheless, here are a few thoughts that most folks agree upon:

- Swing typically only describes eighth notes.
- The first eighth note in each pair is a little longer, making the second eighth note shorter and later.
- Usually, the second eighth note, rather than the first, is accented.
- Swing rhythm is often described in a shortcut as a quarter-eighth triplet feel. In my experience, swing is closer to regular, even eighths than triplets or dotted eighths and sixteenths, another way it is sometimes described or notated.
- I count with "1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +" like regular, "straight" eighth note counting, but in a swinging rhythm. You can use any other counting method that works for you, but it must have the swing feel.
- The accents are on the "ands" to get a feeling of forward momentum and driving syncopation. Accenting on the downbeats can often lead to a sound that is described as "ricky-tick."
- The larger beat accents in the measure are on 2 and 4, rather than 1 and 3. (This "2 and 4" feel is also called the backbeat.)
- For wind players, use a lighter articulation- "Doo" rather than "Too."
- In my opinion, swing is a paradoxical combination of "laid back" and "driving forward."

- In his book “Total Trombone,” Mike Davis talks about "*allowing* yourself to swing."
- There are different degrees of swing, from light to medium to heavy. Which one is desirable depends on many factors: tempo, style, instrumentation, and whether or not the piece is representing a historic time period in jazz.
- Playing “in the pocket” or “in the groove” means that everyone in the band is locked into a particular swing feel, there is a rhythmic precision and agreement, and the music makes the listener “feel” the music and want to dance, tap their feet, or clap along. As Count Basie said: “I just think swing is a matter of some good things put together that you can really pat your foot by. I can’t define it beyond that.”
- To get into the pocket or groove, lock into the composite time feel of the rhythm section, especially the drums and bass.

Whew! That was a lot! By far the best way to learn what swing is is to listen, try it, listen some more, and keep trying it. Check out my book: [Rhythm First! A Beginner’s Guide to Jazz Improvisation](#) published by [Sher Music](#) to get an eyes, ears, and hands on lesson in swing rhythm.