

The Musician's Guide to Rhythm

Interview – Gerstin & Dalluge

What's this book about?

Julian: *Musician's Guide to Rhythm* is a practical guide to the most neglected area of music education: rhythm. It's written for working musicians and music students, and it develops a systematic understanding of rhythm with a step-by-step approach. Other books on rhythm are mainly about reading notes; ours is about playing—accuracy, understanding and creativity. Also, we pay particular attention to how rhythm works with melody in songs, and to improvising rhythmically on melody instruments.

What made you write this book?

Ken: Julian and I met in Seattle in 1980, as students of Gary Harding. We hit it off immediately and started playing in bands together, later teaching together. Over the years we developed a mutual understanding of teaching rhythm—not just hands-on instrumental techniques, but a larger perspective on what it all meant, and how to present it clearly. We taught summer courses together at Sonoma State College and at the International Music Seminar in Montpelier, France. Finally we felt we had a perspective that ought to be shared.

What's been the reaction to the book?

Among the most detailed descriptions of rhythm ever published, which simultaneously pays attention to mathematical aspects, aesthetics and stylistic contexts (world beats, jazz, funk, etc). Enough for a lifetime.

Dave Liebman, saxophonist, educator

Thanks for your superb teaching at the Vermont Jazz Center Workshop -- I can't believe how much my rhythm improved after spending a week in your class.

Gail Hunt Reeke, pianist

What was the writing process like?

Julian: In 2004 we spent a week at our friends Matt and Mary Sullivan's cabin in the Sierras, walking and talking. It was peripatetic, in the Socratic sense—the Greeks believed you do your best thinking when walking. (We also had coffee, which the Greeks didn't.) We'd walk and talk, then go back to the cabin and talk again, taping everything. Later we transcribed the tapes, put outlines on huge sheets of paper, and started writing drafts.

The process was also dialectical, in the Greek sense. Writing together was painful—every line, every word in this book has been debated back and forth, multiple times. Personally, I love to write and have a lot of pride in my writing, so it was hard to have someone else question it. But I'm convinced the book's ideas are far more complete, and their presentation far better, than I could have possibly done on my own.

Who is the book for?

Ken: *The Musician's Guide to Rhythm* is for all musicians who want to explore the joy and passion of rhythm. It's not just for drummers! To be a complete musician on any instrument, you need to master rhythm just as you do melody and harmony. Rhythm is their equal musical partner, and its principles are just as logical and complex. Whatever instrument you play, whether guitar, flute, or voice, bring rhythm to it.

Julian: You do need a little background for this book. We use standard music notation, and didn't want to take up space explaining it—there are other books on how to read music. However, we start with very simple concepts like placing 8th and 16th notes accurately in relation to beats, and build progressively from there. If you can

read 4/4 time and know what 8^{ths} and 16^{ths} are, you'll be okay. Each chapter presents a rhythmic concept briefly, and is followed by lots of exercises to make it concrete.

Why study rhythm?

Ken: If you are like most musicians in the United States, you've had far more training in melody and harmony than in rhythm. College music departments offer many classes in harmony; most "theory" classes are really "theory of harmony." But how many schools offer even one class in rhythm? Rhythmic ear training and instrumental skills are often neglected or poorly organized.

Julian: If you're a working musician, or you want to become one, you need to be rhythmic. Name me three styles of music where rhythm isn't important. Elevator music, New Age meditation music, and ... ? I only get two. For anything else, you need to be rhythmically strong. Rock, jazz, funk, classical music—yes, white European classical music—not to mention salsa, reggae, bluegrass, Balkan brass bands, gamelan, or ten thousand other styles from around the world.

I don't have a sense of rhythm. Would this book be useful?

Ken: Many musicians complain that they don't have a sense of rhythm. They may be very skilled players with years of training and thousands of practice hours under their belt, but chances are that in all those years they've been taught almost nothing about rhythm. When they try to play complex rhythms they fail again and again, and end up blaming themselves. However, anyone can develop rhythmic accuracy and creativity. Like melody and harmony, rhythm has rules that you can learn and use.

Julian: In the popular mind, rhythm is a mystery—either you have it or you don't, and if you don't there's not much you can do about it. Nonsense! Rhythm can be learned. Our first few chapters feature ways of getting rhythm into your body, or more precisely integrating mind and body—understanding what you're doing, and physically doing it. For instance there are exercises involving voice, walking, and clapping, separately and together. If you start where you're at

rather than where you think you already ought to be, and take it slowly, step by step you'll get where you want to go.

Let's say I already know something about rhythm. I'm a professional musician. Would this book help me?

Julian: Nobody knows everything about rhythm, so the chances are that you know things I don't and could teach them to me. But this book does a couple of things. First, we build an overall picture of how rhythm works that applies to a lot of different styles. In that sense it's music theory, and since rhythm is the least developed aspect of music theory, you'll probably gain perspective on rhythm as a whole. We keep the theorizing brief and straightforward, and focus on its application, but it's there behind things.

Secondly, later chapters in the book cover specific, more advanced concepts. Some of these will surely be new to you and, hopefully, inspiring. Things like rhythmic wheels (starting patterns in new places), rhythmic heads (an approach to accompaniment), polyrhythms, an extensive breakdown of improvising both rhythmically and melodically, and other ideas—we're sure you'll find something new to work with.

You say there's a lot in this book about melody. Why? And what do you say about melody?

Ken: Melodies are pitches in time; they're 50 percent rhythm. Rhythm makes melody come alive. We look at many examples of song melodies, in many different musical styles, to see how rhythm and melody work together. For instance we look at rhythmic suspension in American popular tunes, or orientation in Latin American styles—these are all terms explained in the book—and demonstrate their melodic effects.

Julian: We also talk a lot about improvisation. In jazz, blues, and American popular styles, as well as many world styles, improvising means creating new melodies on the spot, in time. Most improvisation workbooks are jazz-oriented and focus on playing melodies over chord changes. This one emphasizes rhythmic ideas.

What styles of music do you cover?

Julian: There are a lot of books that teach you how to play a particular style, like salsa or samba or bebop—and this isn't one of them. Our range is broader. On the theoretical level, we've got concepts that apply to many styles of music, not just one or two—though we illustrate these concepts with specific examples from specific styles. On the practical level, we're helping you deal rhythmically with all the different styles you're likely to encounter as a working musician in the United States—whether rock, jazz, Sousa marches, country, polka, reggae, cajun, or the music of the Western classical tradition.

Ken: Because we've got backgrounds in Cuban and Brazilian music—both popular and folkloric—there are a lot of examples of salsa and samba. But we're not out to teach you to play salsa or samba. Rather, we pick and choose examples that illustrate larger concepts. And we both have experience in a lot of world styles, so there are examples from the Balkans, Martinique, West Africa, Indonesia, Turkey, Egypt, and other places.

How did you two get started in music? How did you get interested in rhythm in particular?

Julian: I began playing percussion as a teenager so I could hang out and play at parties, get girls to notice me, but not have to talk. That's a cliché, but it was true for me. I went to a very integrated school in Washington, D.C., so I was hearing and trying to play soul and Latin styles. Also, my after-school job was in a record and book store, and I got the employee's discount and spent most of it exploring jazz and the limited available recordings of world music. By the time I got to college I'd figured out that there was a lot to learn, and started meeting people who could show me. Over the years I've studied and played with musicians from Cuba, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, both popular and folkloric styles; jazz and American pop; choral and classical music; and forays into cajun, reggae, Mexican, Columbian, Balkan, and Indonesian music.

Also, since I started playing music late, I remember all my struggles developing a sense of rhythm. I understand what adult learners are going through as they do this.

What I've learned about teaching rhythm, developing skills step by step, starting with basics and working up, starting with the body and the voice and moving onto your instrument—all that, we've put in the book.

My life has also taken me to the academic field of ethnomusicology (the study of music in culture). I lived on the Caribbean island of Martinique for two years to study traditional music and dance there, and wrote a PhD and several scholarly publications based on that.

Also, eventually I learned enough keyboard and theory to start composing. Now I do all three—teaching, composing and performing. It all interests me. Music is huge. You'll never know enough.

Ken: I'm the son and grandson of trumpeters—my grandfather studied with the original "Music Man" in Mason City, Iowa. When I was six I begged my parents to switch me from accordion lessons to drums. I began gigging and paying union dues at 15, then attended the University of Minnesota, where I led the drum section of the marching band and studied with Dr. Frank Becriscutto, Paula Culp, and the man Elvin Jones called the "Father of Four-Way Coordination," Marvin Dahlgren. After that I went on the road with blues, R&B, funk, rock and show bands, working in Minneapolis, Chicago, Las Vegas and throughout the Midwest.

This was all very Midwest and American, but when I moved to Seattle I began exploring music from other sources—salsa, samba and more. For six years in the 1980s I lived in Paris and worked with French jazzmen and a remarkable Jewish-North African wedding band, and offered workshops in samba all over Europe. Since returning from France I've lived in Santa Cruz, teaching full-time but also, for nine years, serving as a lead drummer in the Brazilian religion Umbanda, with many trips to Brazil to partake and perform for ceremonies. I'm not directly involved with the religion these days, but living it from the inside gave me an indelible image of how powerful and *real* music can be.

Besides this book, what do you both do in your lives?

Julian: These days I'm split four ways: teaching, mainly at Keene State College in New Hampshire; composing for the various groups I'm in; performing, mainly with the Afro-Cuban traditional dance and music ensemble Iroko Nuevo, the experimental

jazz/world As Yet Quintet, Cuban son band De Lomas y Sones, and my own jazz sextet; and working with the wonderful non-profit Vermont Jazz Center, which gives community classes and produces high-quality, low-cost concerts. I teach there, and am on the Board of Directors.

Ken: It's been pretty solid teaching the past several years, 40+ hours a week. Teaching, trying to keep in shape, keeping up friendships, and learning how to be part of a couple—I got married a few years ago—is plenty, and incredibly rewarding.