

then the next two, then the next two and so on around the circle in a wavelike motion, each waiting to turn until the people before them do. Shaking hands as you turn makes this even more concrete.

Changing Partners: For the children, this structure avoids the hurt feelings of “choose a partner.” For those ready to complain, “I don’t like my partner,” the circle provides another wonderful effortless possibility—simply by turning around, everyone automatically has a new partner. Changing partners gives the children the repetition they need to practice with the variety of interest—each partner is a whole new experience!

Often children who can’t succeed with one partner can with another. A fun variation in this game is to change partners in the middle of a verse, i.e. sing the first phrase with one partner, then turn and sing the second phrase with another partner.

Style: In children’s culture, the older children would impart the full body rhythmic bounce. Model that quality in your presentation and call attention to the children who have it. The repetition of practice alone is insufficient if the children don’t know what they’re aiming for—the bounce, strong singing, relaxed and gentle hand pats with the partner, eye contact and joyful energy.

New Lyrics: As with so many of the activities presented in this book, the invitation to make up something new keeps the creative urge well oiled. It also keeps the song contemporary. The given text came from a particular time and place that is markedly different from many people’s experience these days—very few of my students, children or adults, have ever milked a cow! Not only is it an interesting musical challenge to create a new text that fits the phrase length (“Eat, baby” is too short, “Eat a double-scoop vanilla chocolate fudge ice cream cone, baby” is too long), but it is also a fascinating cultural study. In my adult workshops, hygiene and driving tend to be the most popular themes. If you get a group of kids with verses like “play Nintendo,” “change the channel,” “hit the mall,” you’ll have your work cut out for you. Good luck!

Overview of Jazz Rhythm

The rhythmic elements characteristic of African-American folk music that later appear in jazz are all present in this clapping play. When children sing these songs, clap and move these games, they internalize these essential characteristics. Let’s look at some of these qualities as they appear in this song.

Offbeat: In most African-American music, the strong beats (in European terminology) are felt internally and the weak beats are accented. In 2/4 time, the *offbeat* is accented (1 and 2 and), in 4/4 time, beats 2 and 4, the *backbeat*, are stressed (1 2 3 4). (To keep it simple for the kids, I use the term *offbeat* for both experiences).*

Historically, the offbeat emphasis was a natural polyrhythmic response to European folk material in 2/4 and 4/4—the complex African drumming tradition couldn’t breathe in those metrical boxes. African sensibility shifted the European emphasis of beats 1 and 3 to a *complementary* texture—accents on beats 2 and 4.

Head and Shoulders, like virtually all African-American clapping plays, has claps on beats 2 and 4. They complement the text by filling in the intervals between the words “One, two, three.” Playing these games gets the sound in the ear and the feeling in the

*Some modern black pop music augments this feeling over two measures-1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4. From the 2/4 Ragtime and Dixieland to the 4/4 Swing and Be-bop to the 8/4 Funk and Rap, there is a progression of increased augmentation that leaves space for different styles of dancing and rhythmic improvisation. Though the offbeat changes from 1 *and* to 1 2 to 1 2 3, the *feeling* remains intact. Parenthetically, there also seems to be an increase in *volume* of the offbeat, from the subtle hi-hat to the ear-expanding synth-sound!

body. Clapping plays are more effective than the abstract counting of beats because they establish the rhythm in relation to a *text*. This is of utmost importance; rhythm is never abstract and isolated in the African sensibility—even drum pieces are called songs.

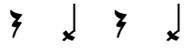
Syncopation: The Harvard Dictionary of Music defines syncopation as “a momentary contradiction of the prevailing meter or pulse” while Elson’s Pocket Music Dictionary describes it as “a temporary displacement of the natural accent in music...with attacks falling *between* the beats.” To give the children the feeling of this in their bodies, I have them walk to a beat and suddenly slip on an imaginary banana peel—the steady beat is interrupted through the release of weight, a sense of falling. This quality of momentary imbalance translates musically as well, creating rhythmic movement and dramatic tension.

Compare “1 2 3” ♩ ♪ ♩ ♪ | ♩

with “1 2 3” ♩ ♪ ♩ ♪ ♩

Syncopation in combination with the offbeat emphasis accounts for the rhythmic energy that catches the listener’s attention. To emphasize the difference, compare these three different interpretations of the last phrase from our song:

 <p>si - si - side</p>	The claps reinforce the strong beats and the texts falls squarely on the beat.
Clap: 	

 <p>si - si - side</p>	The text remains square, but the claps emphasize the “weak” beat and fill in the rest on the fourth.
Clap: 	

 <p>si - si - side—</p>	The text and clap never meet, creating complementary rhythms and a sense of movement.
Clap: 	

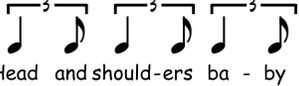
Swing Rhythm: “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing...”

Playing in swing rhythm, like snapping on 2 and 4, is one of the gates that separates the jazzer from the non-jazzer. Singing these game songs is your admission ticket! Because swing rhythm is difficult to capture in notation, many speak of it as an elusive quality that defies explanation. That may make the musicians who “have it” feel good, but teachers are paid to *reveal* mystery, not perpetuate mystification. If we come in through the right door, we can all join the party.

Simply put, *the swingin’ is in the singin’*. This not only supports our choice of starting our study with these songs and games, but leads us to a principle developed in Chapter 5—

if we begin with songs that have a natural swing feel, *our subsequent improvisations are likely to swing.** Many a frustrated band teacher might rejoice to discover this simple truth—put down the instruments for a while, get into the dancing ring, return to the bandstand and listen to what happens. Voila!

Can we come up with a dictionary definition of swing? Even the Harvard Dictionary backs off—“*an intangible rhythmic momentum in jazz... swing defies analysis...*” Duke Ellington gives it a try: “*An extra lift above and beyond the basic beat.*”⁵ One route towards definition is through what it is *not*—8th notes performed evenly. In swing, the first note in the pair of 8th notes is slightly longer—most call it a triplet feel:

 This notation comes close to the feeling, but an oral tradi-

tion from one continent cannot be easily represented in a literate tradition from another. The notational compromise in jazz is to assume an aural understanding and notate tunes in normal eighth notes with the simple direction “Swing rhythm.” Our job here is to provide that aural foundation by *listening* and *imitating*—which of course, is how children naturally learn anyway.

One useful distinction between a swing triplet feel and a kind of swing you might find in an Irish reel or hornpipe is that in the latter, the quarter note is given a slight accent  whereas in jazz, the eighth note has a subtle emphasis . This makes

perfect sense given the Western European tendency to accent the beat and the West African tendency to emphasize the offbeats.

The above analysis is for the teachers. Children, prepared by nature to be perfect mimics, only need to hear genuine swing models to get the right feeling.

Pedagogical Pointers

The three rhythmic qualities introduced in *Head and Shoulders*—offbeat, syncopation and swing—are present in much of the music that led to jazz and in most of jazz itself. Each alone is not the exclusive property of jazz—polka music uses offbeats, Stravinsky and Balinese gamelan music abound with syncopation and some Baroque music has a kind of rhythmic swing. Rather, it is the unique *combination* of these three qualities that defines the jazz rhythmic style and sets it apart from any other.

Should we explain these concepts to the children? Two things will guide us here—our own understanding of developmental levels, pacing and age-appropriate information and the reaction of the children themselves. There are few things so gratifying as helping children learn things they’re eager to know and few things so disturbing as killing their curiosity by telling them too much at the wrong time. These games are complete in themselves—“the playing is the point”—while simultaneously helping children hear and feel the musical elements that they later will come to name and understand conceptually.

“Later” for me means the upper elementary years. When organizing a class or group of classes around specific concepts, the general rule is to concentrate on one concept at

* One of the most tragically amusing stories about swing rhythm is reported in a book titled *Jazz: A Century of Change*. Unwilling to accept that such a marvelous musical feeling could have originated in black culture, Dr. Smith Ely Jelliffe, a noted neurologist, gave a talk to the New York Society for Clinical Psychiatry in 1928 in which he claimed, “*I propose the idea that Irving Berlin may have been born with a talent for irregular rhythms of jazz by the possibility of his mother’s having had an irregular heart.*”⁶ The idea was that her heartbeat “swung” and had a prenatal influence on her son!

a time. For example, a 5th grade class plays the game one time and afterwards identifies and defines the *offbeat*. In another class, *syncopation* is the focus and the students try the examples given to compare and contrast accents on the beat and accents between the beats. In the next class, *swing* is at the center and the students try singing in both straight and swing rhythm. This one game can be played over six or seven classes with a shifting conceptual focus. Meanwhile, there might be a new *skill* goal in each class—smoother bounce, better singing, choreography, etc.

In the games that follow, these key rhythmic qualities will appear again and again with much variation—offbeats at different tempos, new combinations of syncopations, swing rhythm in body percussion as well as voice, each gradually moving from the body to the instrument. Let's see how these elements come together in our next game—*Soup, Soup*.



Playing *Head and Shoulders*.