

# **A Shuffle in Charlie: Technical Communications Among Improvising Musicians (version 2.1)**

By Mayne Smith

*This paper originally appeared in a collection of essays honoring Neil Rosenberg on the occasion of his retirement from the Department of Folklore at Memorial University in Newfoundland (see the appended list of references under Smith 2005). Revised and published as "A Shuffle in Charlie" on MayneSmith.com in October of 2009, the essay attracted comments from quite a few people. The present revision incorporates suggestions from Peter Wernick, Mitch Greenhill, Julian Smedley, Markie Sanders, and Herb Steiner — plus encouragement from others I'm too modest to name.*

*Based on my personal experience, I have tried to cover musical practices common among North American musicians who play without using written musical notation. (I myself can't sight-read for instruments.) There are technical and jargon words involved, and trying to define them in the essay itself would make it hard to follow. For this reason technical terms are italicized, referring you to a **Glossary** of definitions attached at the end. The glossary covers some tricky issues and includes words that don't appear in the essay. Finally, there's a list of written references cited.*

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Playing music with other people without written scores or memorized *arrangements* has an excitement all its own. To a large extent you're all depending on careful attention to what the others are playing, and you need to share a sizeable body of knowledge in order to do your part. It involves a unique kind of intimacy. Some say it's the most fun you can have with your clothes on, and the effect is amplified when you're sharing it with an attentive audience.

Improvising musicians in North America inevitably need to exchange technical information, often while they are actually playing together. For instance, with a group of jamming *country* or *rock* players onstage somewhere, you might hear one call to the others, "A blues *shuffle* in Charlie. Start with a *turn-around*. One, two, three, AND . . . ." They may be strangers to each other, but if the musicians are competent, the music will start in a properly organized manner and the performance may continue with alternating vocal and instrumental sections, climaxed with a strong ending, as if it had been rehearsed.

## **Fundamentals**

Consciously or not, when they improvise together all musicians rely on unspoken knowledge far beyond that needed to perform alone, or even to follow a conductor while reading from a musical score.

This essay focuses on *vernacular* music situations where written music is not supplied and is not commonly used in the learning process. Keep in mind, though, that the use of music notation does not preclude interpretation and

improvisation. The *jazz* world frequently uses *head arrangements* where specific notes are learned in rehearsal, based sometimes on *lead sheets* that consist of melody lines with chord-names added. In the sphere of *art* music, conductors and performers rely on written musical scores to determine which notes will be played and when. However musical notation's symbols are used and interpreted differently in different musical-cultural contexts. Written notes function in art music, theatrical, and jazz spheres in disparate ways.

In the country and rock worlds, various types of chord charts are often used as the infrastructure for improvising in recording sessions, in live performances, and sometimes in jam sessions. One type is just a step away from lead sheets, with chord names written on or above a musical staff marked with bar lines, sometimes with slashes showing the number of beats devoted to each chord. A second approach involves writing the chord names on plain paper, with vertical lines or boxes indicating separate measures.

A third type of chord chart is commonly referred to as the Nashville number system. This employs Arabic numerals to represent the scale notes on which the chords are based, and various other symbols to indicate rests, note durations, etc. The exclusive use of chord numbers rather than names makes it easy to transpose a complex arrangement from one key to another — very convenient when there's a *modulation* or when a singer needs to change to a more suitable key. The number system is very compact, so it can be written on note cards or scrap paper. A simple spoken language is derived from the system: musicians can be told that a song will begin with a "fifty-five eleven turn-around," meaning that there will be two bars of the dominant (5) chord followed by two bars of the tonic (1). On paper these four bars are represented by the numbers 5511. A 130-page book by Chas Williams covering many variations on this system is available on the Internet (Williams 2005). (The Nashville system doesn't work so well when there are multiple chords per measure, which is typical in swing and jazz.)

There are conventional formats that allow strangers to play coherent arrangements together without discussion. In most styles where improvised jamming occurs, *lead* players will trade solo *breaks* or *rides* backed up by the rest of the ensemble. (But the term "break" isn't universal, and could be interpreted to mean that the musician should stop playing.) Instrumental solos are allocated to individuals on some basis, perhaps alternating with leads by one or more vocalists. In pre-set arrangements performed in public, solo breaks are not necessarily given to all lead players, especially in a group numbering more than five. The more informal the jamming situation, the more likely it is that solo breaks will simply be sequenced in clockwise or counter-clockwise order among all musicians. In a non-public context, it's likely to be assumed that every player will get a solo break — including drummers and bassists in the *jazz* world, not necessarily in others. In some styles or contexts it's considered appropriate to improvise *backup* (contrasting responses to the lead) but not always. Another example: in the country scene, solo and backup roles are commonly traded off every eight

bars (two lines of a verse or chorus). In *bluegrass* or jazz, where instrumental virtuosity is especially valued, instrumentalists are more likely to trade off every sixteen or even thirty-two bars. The musicians have to know or deduce such varying and unspoken rules in order to participate fully.

There's also the question of how tunes are chosen in a jam. I frequently participate in jam sessions where the choice of songs or tunes passes among all the musicians around a circle as in a poker session, and the dealer calls the game. But in less familial contexts there will be a limited number of preeminent singers or players who feel free to suggest songs or tunes as vehicles for jamming. Musicians need to be careful in unfamiliar jam scenes and watch for cues that they are committing socio-musical errors.

In many contexts there are standard canonical pieces that journeyman musicians are expected to know, often including exact solos and *hooks* from famous recordings. In the bluegrass world, players are expected to be able to play (and maybe sing harmony with) almost everything Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers, and Flatt & Scruggs recorded before 1960. In the jazz world, the list of canonical pieces may cover Louis Armstrong's hits or Duke Ellington's or Miles Davis', depending on the sub-style involved. But Julian Smedley ([www.facebook.com/julian.smedley](http://www.facebook.com/julian.smedley)) reports that the trans-Atlantic acoustic Gypsy jazz scene has its own canon (based in Django Reinhardt's repertoire of course) and different signaling conventions.

### **Tuning and Calling the Key**

When people are getting ready to play together, they need to tune with one another. This used to be a time-consuming challenge with a large or diverse group, although most seasoned string musicians made a point of using tuning forks to stay at concert pitch. (The problem is not so great with horns and keyboards.) When electronic tuners first became available everybody had to be quiet and take turns with the machine. But nowadays small, inexpensive electronic tuners are very common, and they can be used regardless of background sound. Thus, everybody has their own tuner constantly ready, and getting dozens of strings in pitch has ceased to be a chore. We make jokes about how much more playing time there is in a three-hour session now that we don't have to wait around for everyone to tune.

In a jamming situation, another necessary preliminary is selecting what *key* the next piece will be in. Although there are usually standard keys for canonical pieces, whenever singers are involved the standard keys may need to be changed to suit their vocal ranges. Jazz musicians can call the next song's key, or signal key changes for *modulating*, with fingers held up or down to indicate the number of flats or sharps in the key signature (MacLeod 1993:74). This system would be lost on country and blues musicians, who (like me) are typically not used to musical notation and key signatures. Yet in both musical worlds, experienced musicians expect a modulation to occur by way of the dominant chord of the new key.

Among country musicians, especially when there's enough audience noise to make conversation difficult, the leader for a given tune will vocally call the next key out loud, but will use whole words to avoid confusion between B, C, D, E, and G, which share the same vowel sound. Onstage, I've heard words like Boy, Charlie, Dog, Echo, and George used to call the next key. There are also joking key-designators in use among folkies in informal settings: the Canadian key (A), the Mexican key (C), the key of love (F), and the people's key or God's key (G). I've proposed the Buddhist key (B).

A unique, simple, and subtle way of signaling the key was used by *bluegrass* bandleader Bill Monroe. He would lightly play a *chopped* chord on his mandolin in the desired key, enabling the guitar and banjo players to position their capos while he was speaking to the audience.

Incidentally, non-musicians may not be aware that the keys used in different musical styles are generally divided into two groups. Wind instruments are designed to play most comfortably in the "flat keys" (those with flats in their key signatures), so jazz and swing musicians are used to playing in the keys of F, Bb, Eb, and Ab major. For whatever reason, the way guitars are tuned makes the "sharp keys" most available; thus, folk, country, blues, and rock pieces are commonly played in G, D, A, and E major. The key of C major is used about equally in both worlds. (The pattern is more difficult with minor keys, which are less common in North American music anyhow, so let's stop here.)

### **Establishing the Rhythm**

In the *art music* world, a conductor typically raises his baton to prepare the ensemble and then makes an upward stroke in-tempo before bringing it down on the first beat to be played.

Starting an improvised ensemble performance in a jazz session is not very different. The leader will call the name of a tune and begin it by *stomping off* a bar or two of the *tempo*; for standard tunes the musicians are assumed to know the *meter*, the *key*, and any conventionalized melodic *head* that may be expected. Jazz players have used the stomp-off for something like a hundred years — no count, just four hammers of a heel on the floor. In public performances — particularly while the band was returning to the stand after an intermission, Duke Ellington would often improvise introductory material on the piano, ending up with a lead-in that set the tempo and cued the beginning of the next piece (Hasse 1993:315).

In a loud, rock-oriented context the drummer may click his crossed sticks together in front of his face, effectively providing both visual and audible information. In public performances, he may be fed a "click track" through ear phones.

Studio musicians and most pop-music performers must know how to *count off*, verbally establishing a beat so everybody can come in together. Increasingly since the 1970s, bluegrass and country players have also

learned to use an audible count-off — and it does take some practice to do this properly. One humorous but effective way of giving a verbal count for a moderate *shuffle* beat — I can't recall where I heard it first — went: "a-ONE and a-TWO (pause), YOU know what to DO." This is used mostly in non-public situations. (Note: Julian Smedley says that musicians in the Django Reinhardt–Stephane Grappelli jazz tradition mysteriously use no visible or audible count-off.)

Before the 1970s, blues, bluegrass, and country players seldom counted off; instead, an instrument had to play a few notes to *kick off* a tune. Often a piece would be started by the fiddle playing two bars of a simple rhythmic pattern on the *tonic* chord to kick off dance tunes. This is still a common fiddle device, and it is often used by other instruments. After a considerable e-mail discussion with four participants, I'm convinced that Pete Wernick ([www.DrBanjo.com](http://www.DrBanjo.com)) deliberately invented the use of the word "potato" for a two-bar pattern sometime between 1968 and 1970, and in string-band circles it spread from the East to the West Coast as common usage within a few years. The common fiddle potato pattern can be represented as "ONE `tater, TWO `tater, THREE `tater, FOUR `tater . . . ."

*Tempo* equals speed, and it's easy to communicate a desired tempo by simply making a measure's worth of percussive beats with a foot or instrument. But in many contexts a count or stomp-off isn't enough to tell the musicians what the groove is supposed to be. Leaving aside the great variety of rhythms found in musical forms that originated elsewhere, a count-off in 4/4 time doesn't tell the drummer what he needs to know unless he has heard the piece before. In the American country, blues, and rock scenes, there is another critical distinction to be made: Is the meter going to be in *shuffle* or *straight* time?

Before the 1960s, this problem did not arise in country music. Then, as now, you could simply count off the major beats of a waltz or a peppy, two-beat rhythm (as in "Coming 'Round the Mountain"). If the meter was a medium or slow 4/4, the count-off would give four beats with the expectation that each beat would be subdivided into triplets, which theoretically should be transcribed as three linked eighth-notes with a 3 written above them. Presumably because it's easier, what is commonly notated on paper as two eighth-notes or a dotted eighth plus a sixteenth is actually played as two-thirds of a beat followed by a shorter pulse lasting one-third of a beat. That's essentially what a *shuffle* or *swing* beat is — in jazz, blues, and the rest of American *pop* music as well as country and Western Swing — four main beats to the bar, with a triplet rhythm underlying each beat. (The classic 1950s pop-blues song "Kansas City" by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller fits the pattern.) Jazz and blues bands habitually play with an ever-present tension between the underlying triplet-based rhythm and lead parts played the way the music is actually notated. I had been playing shuffles for years before I ever heard the term or recognized its distinction from a straight beat.

In the middle 1950s came a change, when the music of Mississippi bluesmen like Muddy Waters and early rockers like Chuck Berry popularized another kind of 4/4 rhythm in which each major (quarter note) beat was divisible by two eighth notes of equal duration (for instance Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" and later John Fogarty's "Proud Mary"). This is what's conventionally called a rock beat.

When I started playing mainstream country music in the early 1960s, you could count off a medium-tempo song without comment unless it was a rock beat — in which case you might have to warn the other players it was a rocker. But a significant change was brought about by Merle Haggard's early country hits like "The Fugitive" and "Sing Me Back Home." Now there were not only rock songs but gentler, medium-tempo songs played with the major beats divided by two, producing something like a Latin feeling. Since this happened, country players have often had to make the meter clear to the drummer before counting off slower *straight eight* (or easy eight) tunes.

In the commercial country world there is also the *double shuffle* (or "Texas shuffle") beat, which was made popular by Ray Price in the late 1950s and used extensively by other honky-tonk stylists like George Jones and Buck Owens. In standard country shuffles, for instance Hank Williams' "Your Cheating Heart," the bass plays on the one and three beats and the *off-beats* come evenly on the two and four. In a double shuffle (as in Price's "Heartaches by the Number") the bass plays all four major beats in the bar — a *walking bass* — but the beats are still subdivided as triplets and the off-beats now come on the third pulse of each triplet. Herb Steiner points out that a double shuffle beat works best when there's a piano playing the doubled off-beats. Jazz-pop artists like Cab Calaway and Louis Jordan ("Caldonia") used shuffles like this on some of their very popular 1940s recordings.

But the distinction between a shuffle groove and a straight beat is not always a black-or-white matter. Julian Smedley cites Elvis Presley's recording of "Jailhouse Rock" (another Leiber and Stoller song) as a striking instance where the drums are playing a fast shuffle but the lead guitar plays straight eighth notes. Markie Sanders, a broadly experienced bassist, points out that a relaxed straight beat or even a fast two-beat can have shuffle (triplet) elements. That kind of subtlety happens either by sheer luck — or through lots of *woodshedding* by a band.

The only other meter that is likely to occur in jam sessions is *waltz* time, with three beats to the bar (3/4). This meter occurs at various tempos, mostly in country and bluegrass, but the major stress is consistently on the one beat, sometimes with secondary emphasis on the third beat. However, Herb Steiner ([www.herbsteiner.com](http://www.herbsteiner.com)) reports that in Texas, country bands play a "walking waltz" with the bass giving equal stress to every major beat in the bar, and I've heard something similar from Cajun bands.

No discussion of rhythms in North American music should conclude without mentioning the fascinating mixture of metrical elements in New Orleans *R&B* music, with strong Caribbean and Latin flavors added to the basic straight-eight rhythm. Bo Diddley's famous "hambone" beat had similar stresses. And, of course, many musical styles from other continents and islands contribute a wealth of rhythms in different parts of North America.

### **Signaling in Midstream**

Signals between musicians while they are actively playing together can be fairly subtle, given that the instrumentalists usually have both hands (if not also their feet) committed to their instruments. Duke Ellington directed his band while playing the piano, using his body position and facial expressions to raise and reduce the volume and pace of the music. He thus approached the kind of control over his musicians that orchestral conductors exercise, although the people in his band (frequently over a dozen) were brilliant improvisers. This strikes me as a rare blend of art-music and jazz conditions, where improvisation was expected only in very specific situations but there were often no written parts although the *head arrangements* played were elaborate compositions with shifting and diverse textures, allowing little room for error. Surprisingly, it was only in the late 1930s that Ellington's band began using written arrangements (Hasse 1993:159-160).

In more informal, relatively intimate situations, where musicians are more likely to be trying out tunes that are unfamiliar to some of the players, technical communications can be critical. If all the musicians can see and hear each other plainly, as in a studio or a small club, a simple nod or a look with raised eyebrows is sufficient to cue the next person to take a solo break. In the song-based genres (blues, country, bluegrass, folk) the lead singer will usually be the person calling the shots, and can simply start singing at the appropriate points between breaks. If microphones are in use, moving into singing position before the mic is a very effective way of signaling the intention to start or resume singing. A look or a motion of the head can call any additional singers into action for harmonized vocals.

Positioned in a circle or semi-circle, country and blues musicians frequently read the *chord changes* a rhythm guitarist plays simply by watching that player's left hand. The ability to "read" guitar chords is a widely-held skill in the guitar-based genres. Correspondingly, the guitarist may make a point of keeping his or her left-hand positions as simple as possible until it's clear everybody has caught on to the changes. Frequently even a simple nod to indicate that a chord change is coming up can be helpful. This approach will not work in situations (common in jazz and swing) where guitarists play strings of complex *passing chords*, changing too often for most others to follow.

In such contexts, where the improvisers may be hearing the tune for the first time, there are auditory musical tactics that can help prevent errors. Most experienced lead musicians know how to play licks that will fit any of several

logical chord changes at key points. They also know musical cues, both harmonic and rhythmic, that will help their fellow players anticipate the chord changes and other aspects of song or tune structure. *Runs* played on the guitar or bass frequently signal an impending chord change. Reliably, except in the blues, adding a flatted seventh tone to a chord will usually signal that the next chord will be based on the fourth note in the scale starting on the first chord's root tone. This cue is used most frequently with the change from the tonic chord to the subdominant (IV) chord of a piece. It is also integral to use of the famous cycle-of-fifths principle, which, for example, declares that when you are in the key of C and an A7 occurs, you are almost certainly going to continue with D7 and G7 before returning to the tonic chord. This sequence is called "Sears and Roebuck changes" in some circles.

Occasionally, where there are only a few chords but a tricky melody, people will hold up fingers to indicate changes among the I, II (or ii), III (or iii), IV, and V chords. However, one hand isn't enough if the VI (or vi) chord is needed, or if the chord is based on the flatted seventh of the tonic scale — Bb in the key of C. (This is sometimes called the *drop chord* in bluegrass and country circles.) In most cases, holding up even one hand's fingers will make it impossible for the signaler to play, so it isn't very practical to use before an audience, except by singers.

Jazz musicians use very different hand signals in jamming situations. Extended fingers can indicate not only a new key signature, but alternatively musicians can show that they want to *trade* two- or four-bar solos among band members by flashing two or four fingers.

In a public performance, hands or body may also indicate a desired change in loudness. For instance, after a climactic instrumental solo, the singer might want the band to quiet down for dramatic affect and to leave some auditory space for a later climax; he can signal this by briefly holding his hand out, palm down and parallel to the floor. You will often see similar signals with hands or fingers between a performer and the person who is controlling the volume level of the microphones.

## Ending

Cueing the end of a tune is easy in an informal country jam situation. You can lift a leg (a convention that apparently goes back at least to the 1930s), make a motion with your instrument or a hand, or play an indicative lick. Furthermore, in country music, songs often end with a *turn-around* (repetition of the last line); this is signaled with a circular motion of a finger or instrument. In a bluegrass jam, on the final note of the melody I will lift the peghead of my guitar, cueing the now-ubiquitous seven-beat pattern that ends so many pieces in North American music. (Has anybody studied the origin and meaning of this sort of ending, which coincides with the SHAVE-



and-a-HAIRCUT — SIX BITS motif and also approximates the classic Bo Diddley beat?)

Players in old-timey fiddle bands didn't always end simultaneously, much less use the seven-beat ending, but on some records you can hear someone call "goodbye" to get everybody to stop at the end of the section that's currently being played.

A jazz player can indicate it's time to reprise the *head* of the piece by pointing to his own head; this will lead automatically to ending. And as the closing bars come up, somebody might call "Ellington" or "Basie" so everybody can use one or the other characteristic pattern.

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A context calling for broad gestures can be illustrated with an example based on my own experiences as part of a band that hosted after-hours jam sessions in a very large club every Saturday and Sunday morning from 2 a.m. to 5 a.m. Musicians from all over the Seattle area would come to join us, and onstage the jammers frequently numbered eight or more. Not every musician could see everyone else, and there was often so much noise that we couldn't hear each other at a normal conversation level. In addition, the musicians' backgrounds were diverse, so some of us would frequently be ill-acquainted with the chosen tunes or common arrangements. Under these conditions, the subtle improvisational cues were often insufficient to get the job done. When I was singing and leading, my guitar chords could not be audible or visible to every musician. On the other hand, we could shout to each other, and it was perfectly appropriate to use big body motions for communication. This is the situation in which my opening example occurred.

At the Riverside Inn in Tukwila near Seattle, in the fall of 1975, it is about four o'clock on a Sunday morning. There are seven of us on the bandstand and maybe a hundred people still waiting to dance. The after-hours jam has mellowed out, and we have a strong rhythm section (bass, drums, keyboard), a good lead guitar player, a fiddler, and a cool tenor sax guy. It is my turn to lead some tunes to keep the jam going, and I feel like singing the blues, knowing that the twelve-bar structure will be familiar and comfortable for all.

Standing at the main vocal mic, front-and-center on the large bandstand, I turn to face the rest of the musicians. "A blues shuffle in Charlie. Start with a turn-around. One, two, three, AND ...." (Alternatively, I could have said "Off the five chord.") The drummer whacks the snare and a tom on the four-beat and everybody hits the following one-beat with a G7 chord. We all understand we're playing a turn-around, the last four-bar line of the blues structure in the key of C, but immediately there's a question: Is the second bar going to be a V or a IV chord? Still with my back to the audience and dancers, with exaggerated motions I play an F# chord on the final beat of the first bar; this gets all the jammers to watch me and listen to my guitar.

The F# chord creates a momentary dissonance, but it tells everyone that we're going to a IV chord (F) in the second bar; this also informs them how we will play this part of the blues structure throughout the rest of the song.

While the put-together band is playing the last two bars of the turn-around (I and V, C and G7), I turn around to face the crowd and get close to the main vocal mic. I hadn't been sure which set of blues lyrics I would sing to this groove we've started, but at the last second I decide to go with a sure thing, a song we're all certain to have played many times before and one that the crowds generally enjoy. So I lean in toward the mic and start, "I'm going to — Kansas City, Kansas City here I come."

The lead guitar player inserts some tasty *fills* between my words, and the sax and keyboard players are consulting each other about something — doubtless developing a *riff* pattern they can play together as the texture of the performance builds. My first sung verse is ending and I need to cue a soloist for the upcoming break. I want to save the sax for later, and the guitarist has already been busy behind my vocal, so I elect to point at the keyboard man as the soloist — and because it's late and we have plenty of time to fill and some enthusiastic dancers, and also because he's a strong player, I call out "Keep it up" several times and he takes two *choruses*. Then I point to the fiddler and say her name into the mic. She takes two choruses, with the sax and piano beginning to riff quietly behind her; their riffing will continue to build through the rest of the song, and the fiddle will join them.

I sing another verse and give the next solo to the guitar player — two choruses as before. Then comes the part of the song where the whole band stops on the next three one-beats to let the singer's words ("I MIGHT take a train ...") fill in the rest of the bars before the instruments resume the normal rhythm pattern. I raise my right arm into the air, make a fist, and pump it down to cue the stops. The fat texture and the drummer's style make this section sound great and give me an idea for the sax solo. When I've finished singing another complete verse, I turn and point to the sax man, at the same time raising my right fist again. Fortunately all the players are watching me so my gambit works fine; the sax player's break starts from the dramatic base of three stopped chords before launching into a gliding orbit. After the second sax chorus, I call in the guitarist for his climactic break with the sax, fiddle, and keyboard riffing strongly behind him. Then I return to the mic and sing a final verse.

Now it's time to end, and I have a choice of several signals here. If we were all country-based musicians and presenting ourselves in the typical laid-back C&W manner (remember this is 1975) I would bend my right knee and lift the heel. But since all are in boogie mode, as the final chorus ends I raise my right fist and bring it down to stop the band and sing "I'm going to get me one" over the resonant silence. As I sing the final word the entire band (without having to think about it) plays the conventional seven-beat ending pattern at full volume, closing with a sustained chord under which the

drummer bashes his cymbals and tom-toms until I once again use my arm to cue the final dead stop and the applause swells.

This fabricated example, close to many actual performances I have experienced, could occur in most parts of North America. Yet, like most aspects of culture, musical improvisation depends on knowledge and communication that look more complex the closer we examine them. I hope this paper has answered as many questions about musical behavior as it has exposed for future study.

## Glossary

*Included in this list are terms and usages that are not to be found in standard dictionaries of music. My sources of information include fifty years as a performing musician and a fair amount of discussion and reading. The definitions are intended to give a good idea of common usage, not to satisfy academic standards.*

**Accidentals** — In addition to the essential notes in a common *triadic* chord, other intervals called “accidentals” are often used, especially in *jazz*. Chords with altered or added notes, with names like “diminished” or “augmented” or “major seventh,” are used to add harmonic complexity. Markie Sanders says such chords are called “off chords” around Nashville. See *passing chord*.

**Arrangement** — The way a given musical performance is structured, as well as the instrumentation and the style of playing. See also *head arrangement*.

**Art music** — Music that is self-consciously created and presented as art, rather than as an economic commodity or a community tradition. The category is commonly called “classical” or “serious” music, but I don’t like either term. “Art music” logically fits a lot of jazz, but I don’t use it that way. Pete Wernick suggests “formal music,” and I could live with that but “art music” is already in common use. The tricky part is that Pete and I and lots of other *vernacular* musicians take their music very seriously as art, whether or not we try sell it; and many art musicians have to sell their music in order to live.

**Backup** — An instrumental part, generally improvised, that complements the main lead part (whether vocal or instrumental) without contesting its dominance. Usually consists of a mixture of *fills* and rhythmic elements.

**Baritone** — In *country* singing, the second part (after *tenor*) added to the melody line. The baritone part typically finishes the song below the *lead* on the fifth note of the scale, but is sometimes sung above the tenor (“high baritone”). See also *tenor*.

**Blues** — Most people know the blues as a song tradition developed among African-Americans that has permeated nearly all other *vernacular* styles. A typical blues verse has three four-bar segments to make a total of twelve bars with a standardized chord structure and a distinctive, haunting tonality. But most people don't recognize that the blues didn't emerge into public consciousness until after 1910. Despite the great variety of blues styles, something that could be called a blues tradition does exist. The Wikipedia article on W.C. Handy is recommended ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)).

**Bluegrass** — Music derived ultimately from the style of Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys in the 1940s. In the 1960s the variant bluegrass styles proliferated and music festivals devoted entirely to bluegrass gradually gave rise to a broad movement that has established a niche in mainstream consciousness.

**Break** — The portion of a musical piece in which an instrumentalist plays lead, supported by the rest of the ensemble. A musician is invited to play a break, or take a break, or he may be asked "Do you want some?" Different players will be expected to take breaks during the playing of a piece. The alternation of sung verses with instrumental breaks is the basic structural principle of most vernacular music styles. See also *ride* and *solo*.

**Bridge** — Most properly the B section, as in the 32-bar (AABA) song structure that is standard in *pop* music. Sometimes used in *folk* and *country* circles as a synonym for *chorus* (which is more properly designated as a refrain).

**C&W** — Stands for "country and western," the common term for the mainstream Nashville–Austin–Bakersfield–Hollywood music that dominated AM radio stations and record stores in the South and Southwest for decades after World War Two. See *country music*.

**Changes** — The sequence of chords used to accompany a given tune, as in "Run through the changes for me before we start to play."

**Chopping** — Chords played on the mandolin, banjo, or guitar and immediately damped by either hand for percussive effect; usually used to emphasize *off-beats* (like a snare drum in rock or jazz).

**Chart** — Used by itself, "chart" can mean either a complete musical score, a *lead sheet*, or a "chord chart" that diagrammatically represents the chord changes of a music piece and (usually) where they occur in relation to the bar lines. There are at least three basic formats for chord charts: chord names written on or above a musical staff, chord names arranged on plain paper in rows or boxes, and the Nashville number system.

**Chorus** — Used in *jazz* and *pop* to mean a complete iteration of the melody being played. As a striking example, at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival, tenor sax player Paul Gonsalves improvised twenty-seven choruses of "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue" egged on by bandleader Duke Ellington (Hasse

1993:320-321). (I happened to discover that this usage has also been used among French musicians [Bouchaux 1992:58].) In the world of *folk* and *country* music, the chorus is synonymous with what scholars call a “refrain”: that part of a song that is repeated after every verse (or two) of the lyrics and is most likely to be sung by more than one voice. See also *bridge*.

**Counting off** — Using a numerical count to establish the tempo of a tune and enable all players to start playing a piece at the same time.

**Country music** — Among musicians this term refers to music that is based in Euro-American traditions from the South and Southwest, including Nashville, Austin, Bakersfield, and Hollywood, even though the connection with fiddle bands and ballad singing may be hard to detect. It is sometimes contrasted with *bluegrass*, *Cajun*, *Western Swing*, *Old Time*, etc., but in many contexts such styles are meant to be included.

**Diamond** — A hollow diamond shape is used in Nashville-style chord charts to indicate when a note or chord is to be played and allowed to ring through the rest of the bar or phrase. It’s a very convenient symbol, roughly equivalent to a whole note, but it can be used the same way regardless of the meter.

**Double shuffle** — A *shuffle* beat with a *walking bass* (played on every major beat) and *off-beats* played on the third pulse of each eighth-note triplet. Also called the Texas shuffle.

**Double time** — When the meter is changed to twice the number of major beats per bar; typically the bass, bass drum, and snare shift from two beats per bar to four beats.

**Drop chord.** — The major *triad* based on the note two *semitones* below the tonic pitch, which is the flatted seventh step in the major scale.

**Easy eight** — See *straight beat*.

**Faking** — Improvising without the use of a musical score. Similarly, “Fake books,” containing only the melodies and chords for songs, are common in the pop and jazz worlds. This terminology is not much used among musicians who rarely play from written music.

**Fills** — Melodic elements played to fill in the gaps between *lead* phrases. Fills often begin on the last beat played by the lead voice and end on the beat where the lead part resumes.

**Flat keys** — See *keys*.

**Folk music** — Used here very broadly to mean musical styles that include everybody who applies the label to themselves, plus those to whom most folklorists would apply the term. The song or performing style, often mistakenly, is supposed to be derived from non-written, oral/aural musical traditions. Genuine folk music includes lullabies and songs sung at family gatherings or in the kitchen, which learned by being heard over and over and

are largely taken for granted by the actual tradition bearers.

**Groove** — As a noun, this word refers to the set of rhythmic traits that are appropriate to a given piece of music. It includes *tempo* and *meter*, but also refers to how the beats in the bar are to be stressed and subdivided. Some grooves are more complex than others and harder to achieve without rehearsal or past experience.

**Half time** — When the meter is changed to half the number of major beats; typically the bass, bass drum, and snare shift from playing four beats per bar to playing two beats per bar. See also *double time*.

**Head** — The first chorus or two of a jazz performance, played simply in unison or harmony to establish the melody before the freer improvisation begins. The head is likely to be repeated at the end of the piece, and may be signaled by pointing to one's own head.

**Head arrangement** — A setting previously agreed upon for musical piece, repeated by memory rather than a written score.

**Hook** — A short musical motif that is used to lend a unique identity to a given song; hooks are commonly created in the recording studio and are carefully incorporated in live performance. A hook is more distinctive than a *tag*, and may consist of just two or three notes played distinctively.

**Ink** — Mitch Greenhill introduced me to the phrase "play the ink," meaning to play the melody or arrangement the way it is notated on paper.

**Intro** — An instrumental passage, generally less than eight bars in length, that is used to begin a musical piece. It may consist of nothing more than a set of chords, but frequently has specific melodic content, in which case it may equate to a *tag* and contain a song's *hook*. An *outro* is a similar closing passage that may be identical to the intro; and both may consist of nothing more than a *turn-around*.

**Jazz** — Any of the performing styles that stem from the improvised music that began in nineteenth-century New Orleans brass bands, traveled upstream through Kansas City to Chicago, and then became centered in New York City. Most contemporary jazz musicians are highly trained and make use of written scores routinely, although improvisation is still a defining characteristic.

**Keys** — Except in the most abstract kinds of music, every musical piece is played or sung in a key (sometimes several in sequence). A key is named for the root note in the *scale* on which the melody and chords are based. "Key signatures" tell the number of sharps or flats (the black keys on a piano keyboard) that occur in the scale. Thus, a key can be indicated by holding up (or down) a number of fingers that correspond to the number of sharps (or flats) in a specific key signature. Even some musicians who don't read music know, for instance, that one finger pointed up can refer to the key of G major (or E minor), which has one sharp in its key signature. And one finger

pointed down can refer to the key of F (or D minor), which has one flat. Guitar-based styles commonly use “sharp keys,” whereas styles centered on horns are mostly played in “flat keys.” The keys of C and Am, which entail no sharps or flats, are common in both worlds.

**Kick off** — In *bluegrass* and *country*, a verb or noun referring to the use of an instrumental passage to start performance of a piece. Kick-offs are assigned to specific players.

**Lead** — As a noun, the lead voice(s) or instrument(s) is the one that is articulating the melody or predominant voice at any given time, supported by the other members of an ensemble playing *backup* and rhythm. In roots-music harmony singing, the lead sings melody with the *tenor* above and the *baritone* typically below.

**Lead sheet** — A simple score that contains only the melody and lyrics of a tune or song, along with the names of the chords used in accompaniment.

**Lick** — A short musical pattern played usually by one instrument and based on distinctive elements in the player’s style or the characteristics of the instrument. A lick becomes a *riff* if it’s used repeatedly in a piece and played by more than one person.

**Medley** — A medley is a set of several songs or tunes performed as one continuous musical piece. Fiddle bands often use medleys, and some famous singers will sing medleys of their biggest hit songs.

**Meter** — The number of beats in a measure (bar) and the pattern of duration and stress given to each beat.

**Modulation** — Changing *keys* in the middle of a musical piece. Sometimes the players will modulate to a new key because they’re going to play another tune or song as part of a *medley*. Modulation can also be used as an intensifier within a single song.

**Off-beats** — Between the major beats in a given *meter* come the off-beats, or back-beats, which receive different emphasis. In a standard *shuffle*, the emphasis comes on the first and third beats in each measure and the off-beats come on two and four. In a *double shuffle*, the major beats are one, two, three, and four, each divided into triplets; the off-beats come on the third eighth note of each triplet. In a *waltz*, the major beat is usually on the one and the off-beats come on two and three.

**Off chords** — See *accidentals*.

**Old Time or old-timey music** — Refers to the styles captured by the earliest recordings of *country* music up through the 1930s. The original recordings were made by musicians, professional or amateur, who had grown up hearing mostly local *folk* music and traveling medicine shows. The two primary styles were fiddle bands like those of Charley Pool or Gid Tanner, and duet acts like the Monroe Brothers and the Blue Sky Boys.

**Outro** — See *intro*.

**Passing chord** — In jazz, swing, and some pop styles, chords containing *accidental* notes are used to transition between the pivotal *triadic* chords in a piece of music. Augmented and diminished chords are used in this way, but so are many other chord forms.

**Pop or popular music** — Broadly speaking this can refer to anything that doesn't belong in the *folk* or *art* music categories. More narrowly it applies to Euro-American "Tin Pan Alley" songs and Broadway musicals that dominated urban white radio stations until Bill Haley and Elvis Presley seemed to change everything.

**Potatoes or 'taters** — Simple rhythmic patterns used by an instrumentalist (commonly fiddle or banjo) to establish the tempo and starting point of a piece in string band music, where *counting off* was not practiced. This term was coined in the New York bluegrass scene in the late 1960s by Pete Wernick. "Potatoes" and "'taters" are both in common usage now in the old-timey and bluegrass worlds.

**Push** — This very useful verb applies where a given beat is played a half-beat early for emphasis. It's a potent device used frequently in country and rock music. A common usage would be "push the first beat in the last bar." There are symbols that can be used in chord charts to indicate pushed beats.

**R&B** — "Rhythm and blues" is the phrase applied to the music of black musicians beginning in the 1940s who built on the straight-ahead electrified *blues* of people like Muddy Waters and Jimmy Reed. R&B incorporated jazz, country, and pop ideas to reach increasingly urban (and youthful and white) audiences. Examples are the Spiders, Coasters, and Drifters, Bo Diddley, and Ray Charles. Chuck Berry is in this category too, but drew more heavily on country music.

**Ride** — Used in some country circles as a synonym to *break*, as in "Take a ride, Don." See also *solo*.

**Riff** — A short musical pattern played by one or more instruments and used repetitiously through a piece, often in support of soloists. See also *lick*.

**Rock beat** — See *straight beat*.

**Rock music** — This term is most commonly used to identify music made by white musicians whose styles are based on electrified blues, *R&B*, and *rockabilly*.

**Rockabilly music** — This is the current term applied to the kind of thing that Carl Perkins, Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash started doing in Memphis in the middle 1950s — white guys paying sincere homage to African-American blues, R&B musicians, and country.

**Roots music** — Refers to folk songs and other styles that rely heavily on *vernacular* sources. To my mind, the term includes traditional jazz, blues,



R&B, rock (mostly), Old Time, bluegrass, honky-tonk, Western Swing, Cajun, Zydeco, TexMex, white and black gospel. Visit Down Home Music in El Cerrito, California ([www.downhomemusic.com](http://www.downhomemusic.com)) and you'll get an idea what a long list of styles qualify.

**Run** — A short series of notes typically leading from one chord into another, used especially by rhythm guitarists and bassists.

**Scale** — The different pitches in any melody can be arranged in an ascending sequence that constitutes a scale. There are different terms to describe the number of notes in a scale and the intervals between them, as in "major," "minor," "pentatonic," etc. The pitch on which a scale begins determines its *key*.

**Semitone** — The pitch interval between keys on a piano or frets on a guitar. Also called a "half step."

**Sharp keys** — See *key*.

**Shuffle beat** — The most common 4/4 meter in jazz, swing, blues, country, and general pop music. Each beat of the measure is subdivided into triplets. When played slowly, this rhythm can be notated in 12/8. See also *straight beat* and *double shuffle*.

**Solo** — The portion of a song performance in which attention is focused on a single player or singer. (Not used, as sometimes in *art* music, to indicate an unaccompanied performance.) See also *break*.

**Stomping off** — Using the heel of a foot to establish a *tempo* and set the beginning of a performed piece; used mostly in jazz.

**Straight beat** — Distinguished from a *shuffle* in that the major beats of the measure are subdivided into two eighth notes instead of the shuffle's eighth-note triplets. Also called a straight eight, easy eight, or rock beat depending on the speed and intensity of the rhythm. Most music from outside North America is based on straight beats.

**Swing** — This category of music began as a successor to the New Orleans and Chicago jazz styles in the 1920s. In the 1930s it developed branches in mainstream *pop* music as well as southwestern bands that included fiddles and steel guitars, as well as horns, piano, and drums. *Western Swing* is enjoying a renaissance today, whereas jazz swing is a dwindling category.

**Tag** — A special riff or melodic and rhythmic motif used as an *intro* or *outro*, often based on the *turn-around*. See also *hook*.

**'Taters** — See *potatoes*.

**Tempo** — Quite simply, tempo is the speed at which the beats move. The tempo of a song is measured by a metronome and expressed as the number of quarter-note beats that occur per minute.

**Tenor** — In *country* singing, the first harmony part added to the melody,

typically staying just above the *lead* and finishing on the third above the tonic note. See also *baritone*. In mainstream harmony singing, the top part is called soprano and below it come (in order) the alto, tenor, and bass parts; baritones are basses who can reach up into the tenor range.

**Time** — Can refer to any rhythmic feature of music (as in, “He keeps good time”) but usually pertains to *tempo*.

**Tonic note, tonic chord** — The tonic note is the first note in the *scale* on which the melody is based, and it gives the *key* its name; in North American *vernacular* music, most melodies end on the tonic note. The tonic chord is a *triad* based on this note.

**Trading twos (or fours)** — This refers to a practice especially common in jazz whereby the improvised *lead* moves from one instrument or voice to another every two or four bars. It’s often signaled by holding up two or four fingers.

**Triad** — A triad or triadic chord is made up of three notes: the root note that gives the chord its name, plus the third (major or minor), and the fifth above the root. A great deal of North American *roots* music can be played with just two or three triadic chords.

**Turn-around** — The last line of the song’s melody, played as an *intro* or concluding pattern and sometimes between verses as a minimal structure for *breaks*.

**Vamp** — A rhythm pattern repeated ad lib as the basis for improvisation.

**Vernacular music** — Musical styles that are familiar to ordinary members of some cultural group and require little formal training to appreciate. Vernacular music is mostly *roots* music, but may also include popular styles like military marches or songs from movies and stage shows that are not easy for ordinary people to play.

**Walking bass** — Usually a *shuffle* rhythm with the bass playing all major beats in arpeggio patterns. But there is also a walking waltz groove. (See below.)

**Waltz** — A meter with three beats to a bar, usually with primary stress on the one beat, or on the one and three. Herb Steiner reports that Texas country bands use the term “walking waltz” when the bass plays three beats to the bar with equal stress, and I’ve heard something similar from Cajun bands. Waltzes are much more common in country and bluegrass than in blues and rock.

**Western Swing** — See *swing*.

**Woodshedding** — This refers to the era when diligent musicians would practice in the woodshed out behind the main house to avoid disturbing the other people they were living with. (Pianists were just out of luck, I guess.)

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