

Lesson 1: Stretching Time and Space

Here's a little exercise to demonstrate the flexibility of time and space in West African music.

a) x x x x > b) x - x x - x > c) x - - x x - - x

We start with a) four straight notes, evenly spaced . . . or rather, struck without a sense of much space between them: toc toc toc toc.

In b) we stretch them a little, inserting a small bit of space/time between each pair. The result is "swing," in which we play those four notes of straight 4/4 time more like four notes out of six in 6/8 time. The extra two unplayed "beats" are rests.

In c) we simply stretch a little further, inserting extra space - in fact an extra rest - between each of the original pairs of struck notes. We're back to the binary format of 4/4, but still with the swung feel of space between the notes. We've gone through "swing" and arrived at "samba."

x		x		x		x	
x	-	x	-	x	-	x	-
x	-	-	x	x	-	-	x

Lesson 2: Downbeats and Upbeats

	1	.	*	.	2	.	*	.	3	.	*	.	4	.	*	.
1. basic downbeat	O															
2. basic downbeats	O								O							
3. double time	O				O				O				O			
4. upbeat/reggae 1	O				o				O				o			
5. upbeat/reggae 2					o								o			
6. upbeat/reggae 3					x	x							x	x		
7. double time	O		x	x	O		x	x	O		x	x	O		x	x

Lesson Notes:

Line 1. In this example we start with one downbeat in the full measure, on the **1**.

Line 2. Here the downbeat is doubled, to come at the **1** and the **3**. Alternatively, we could refer to the 3 as an upbeat, giving more weight or stress to the **1**'s downbeat.

Line 3. Doubling the downbeats again. Here the pattern is consistent with the basic timing of the 4/4 measure, with primary downbeats at **1, 2, 3,** and **4,** and primary upbeats in between (*).

Line 4. Here we notate clearly with smaller o's (higher-pitched beats) that the 2 and 4 are upbeats rather than downbeats. This is the basic feel of reggae.

Line 5. Here the downbeat is left out altogether, unplayed; or as in much reggae music, the downbeat bass is so low as to be felt rather than heard, while the upbeat is the sharp "chuck" of the rhythm guitar or "tak" of percussion.

Line 6. More of the distinctive reggae feel of the upbeat rhythm guitar. This can also be swung or stretched to a more laid-back feel: [x - x] instead of the straight [x x].

Line 7. Doubling the time and reinserting the downbeats gives us a steady downbeat-upbeat pulse. The doubled upbeats [x x] provide momentum directly into each following downbeat.