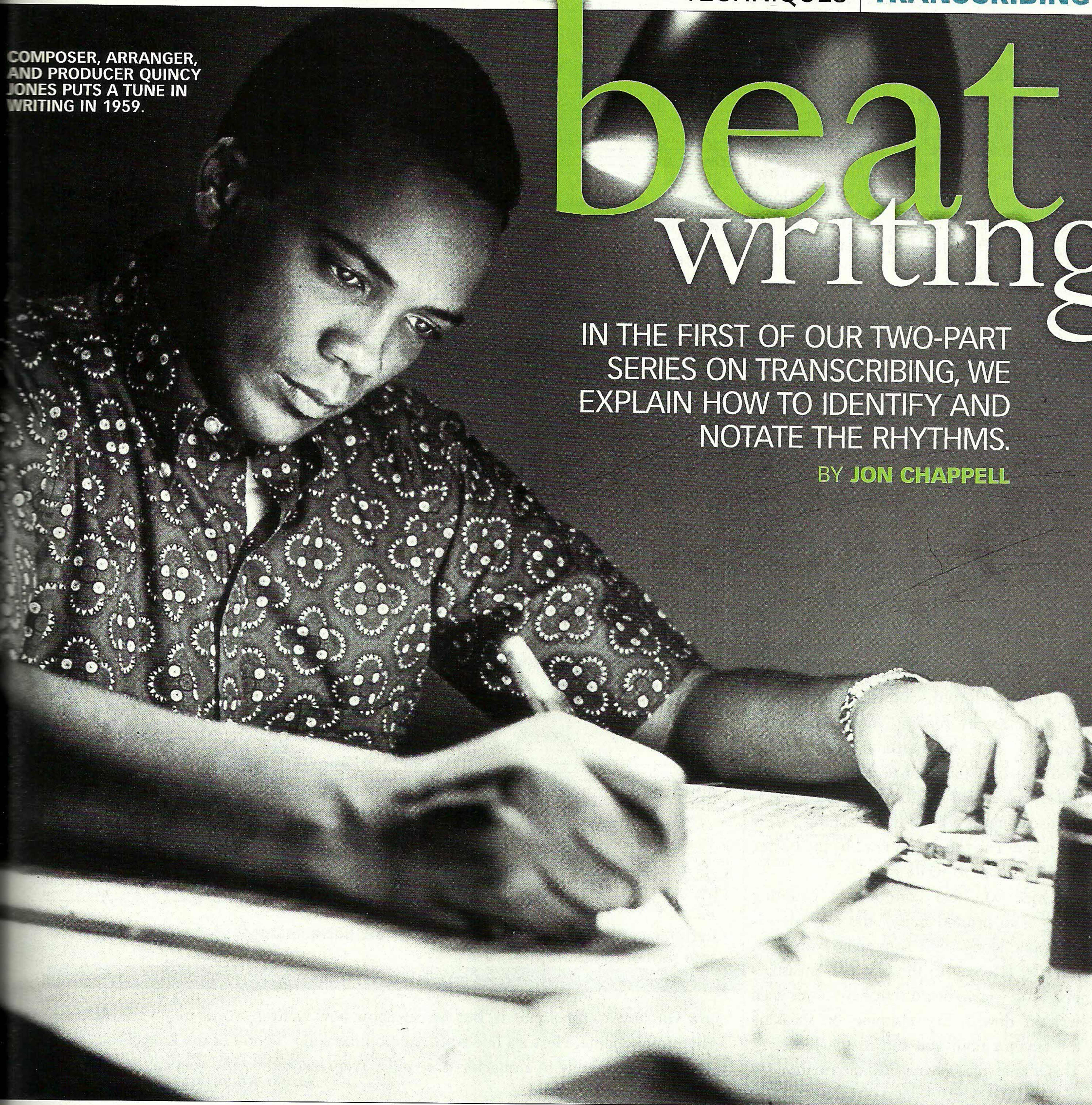


beat writing

IN THE FIRST OF OUR TWO-PART SERIES ON TRANSCRIBING, WE EXPLAIN HOW TO IDENTIFY AND NOTATE THE RHYTHMS.

BY JON CHAPPELL

COMPOSER, ARRANGER,
AND PRODUCER QUINCY
JONES PUTS A TUNE IN
WRITING IN 1959.



WANT TO BECOME A BETTER player, singer, or composer? Maybe you should put it (your music, that is) in writing. We're not talking about signing some kind of contract; in this case, "writing" refers to learning to *transcribe*—to translate the music you hear (or imagine in your mind) into notation.

Whether you're using the old fashioned method of writing the music by hand or taking advantage of modern computer software that helps you turn sound into print, the ability to listen to and analyze a melody, rhythmic pattern, or chord progression makes it easier to learn any song you hear. By writing a tune in standard music notation, you can: 1) adapt it to your own instrument, 2) share it with anyone who knows how to read music, or 3) preserve an idea for later study. Composers with

▼ PART 1 OF 2



strong transcribing skills can even write complete symphonies without touching an instrument; they transcribe what they hear in their minds the way you might write a letter or email.

But you don't have to be the next Mozart to transcribe. Just about anyone can learn to identify what they hear and write it down accurately on a music staff. In this two-part series, we'll help you get started transcribing music's two essential elements—rhythm and pitch. Rhythm's up first.



NOW HEAR THIS

Has anyone ever dictated information like an important phone number to you? I'll bet you said it back as you wrote it down to make sure you heard correctly. Transcribing music works the same way. Before you can start writing notation, you must first be able to identify exactly what you're hearing and be able to play or sing it back.

To do this, you must develop your "ear." And as with any instrumental technique, the best way to do so is by focusing on small, simple sections and phrases before moving on to the larger, more complex parts. Not all musicians with good ears can transcribe—but all transcribers have good ears!

Transcribers must also be familiar with the way different rhythms relate to one another. You probably already know that a half note is twice as long in duration as a quarter note, that an eighth note is half as long as a quarter note, etc. You should be able to clap, tap, or speak these notes, as well as more complex groupings such as triplets, dotted, and tied notes. You can practice by reading sheet music and counting out the rhythms using vocalized syllables (*one-and-two-and* for eighth notes, *one-ee-and-uh*, for 16th notes, etc.). Transcribing is a little like learning a new language: The more you read it, the better you'll be able to write it.

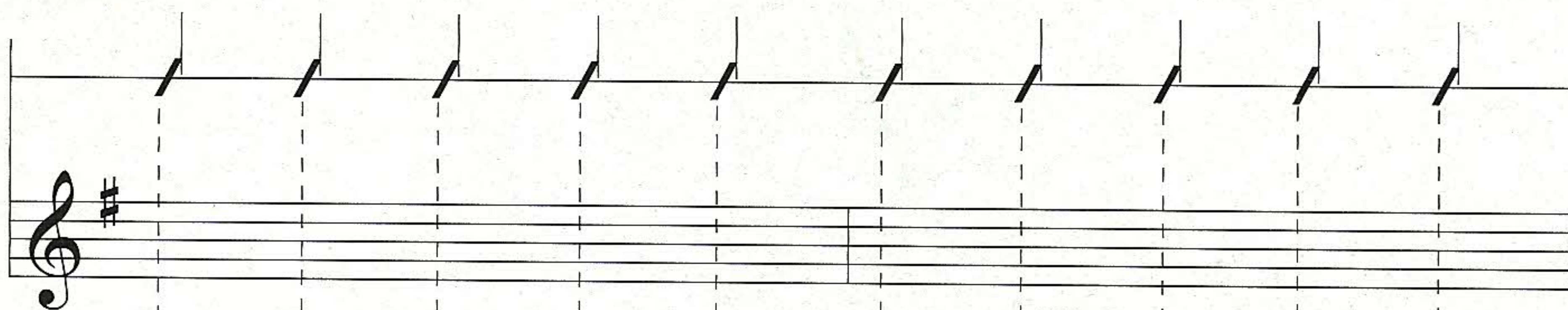
Once you feel comfortable counting along with printed music, the next step is to count along with something you hear. Start by listening to the first two measures of a song you've heard (but have never seen written down). Try clapping or speaking the rhythm until you can match the song. This is known as *internalizing* the rhythm.

TAKE THE PULSE

In order to write that rhythm down in a way that makes sense, you'll need to establish a reference *pulse*. Every rhythmic phrase you transcribe should be measured against this steady pulse, also known as the beat. Figure 1 shows the pulse as an imaginary quarter note appearing above a staff. All of the notes on that staff can be compared rhythmically to this pulse, falling to the left, right, or on top of the dotted lines.

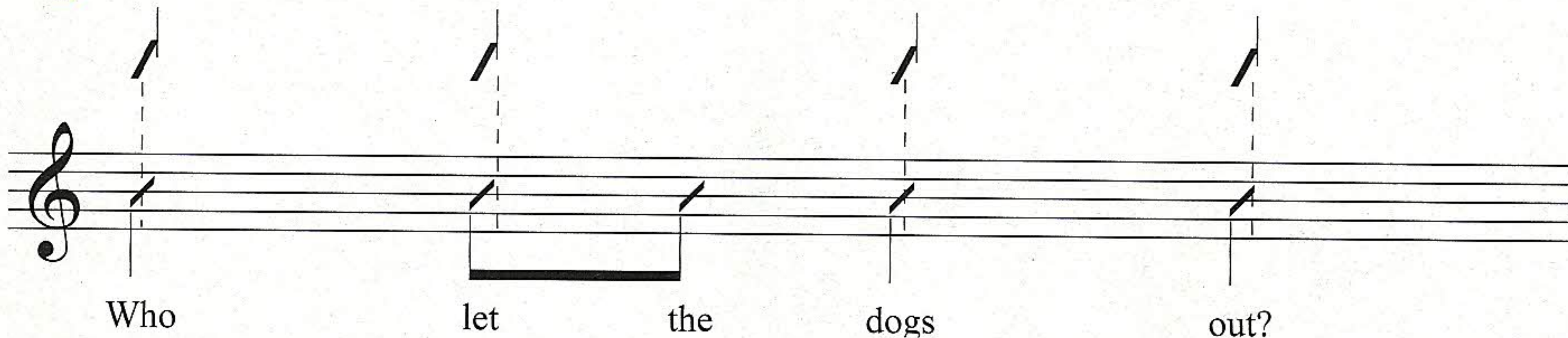
Since we're not in a classroom together, we can't exactly play you a rhythm and

Figure 1: THE IMAGINARY PULSE



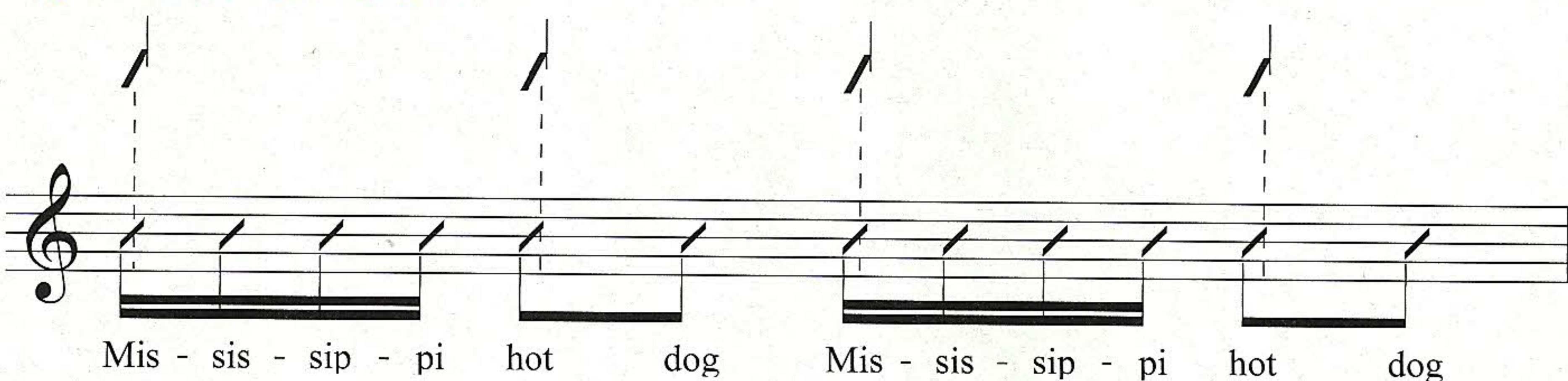
What ever music will eventually fill the staff, the imaginary pulse set by the transcriber will guide it.

Figure 2: RHYTHMIC SPEECH



The words above produce a phrase of quarter and eighth notes.

Figure 3: SWEET 16THS



This phrase produces 16th and eighth notes against a quarter-note pulse.

Figure 4: THREE SPEEDS



Rhythmic activity, bar by bar: slower than the pulse, faster than the pulse, the same rate of the pulse.

show you how to transcribe it. But we can show how written words might translate into a rhythmic scheme. Here's a line from the popular song "Who Let the Dogs Out?" First, tap your foot steadily in a quarter-note pulse (represented by the vertical lines below), and read the words aloud:

| | | |
Who let the dogs out?

Note that although each word has one syllable, some of the words move faster than others when you read them—it takes half the time to say "let the" as it does to say "dogs out." Yet the pulse doesn't change! If you were to transcribe the rhythm, the words "who," "dogs," and "out" would be written as quarter notes; "let the" would be eighth notes (see Fig. 2). Now, let's apply a pulse or a beat to another example. Tap your feet or clap your hands according to the vertical lines above the words:

| | | |
Mississippi hot dog Mississippi hot dog

Figure 5: "GOD BLESS AMERICA"

God bless A - mer - i - ca. Land that I
love. Stand be - side her and guide her through the

A slow song using rhythmic values slower than the pulse.

Figure 6: "SIMPLE GIFTS"

'Tis the gift to be simp - le, 'tis the gift to be free, 'tis the gift to come down
where we ought to be. And when we find our - selves in the

Slightly more active than the pulse using a common feel of mixed eighths and quarters.

Figure 7: "ICE, ICE BABY"

Some-thing grabs a-hold of me tight-ly. Flow like a har-poon dai-ly and night-ly.
(Will it ev-er stop?) Yo! I don't know. Turn off the lights and I'll glow.

Rap and hip-hop feature eighth and 16th notes in a highly syncopated scheme.

There are four syllables per beat in "Mississippi," and two evenly spaced syllables in "hot dog" before the phrase repeats. If you can match up the syllables to the pulse above, you'll be producing four 16th notes (Mississippi) and two eighth notes (hot dog) each time you say the phrase (Fig. 3).

At this stage, it doesn't matter if your pulse matches the time signature of the song; as long as you understand the notes relate to one another rhythmically (for example, that some notes are twice as long as others), you can adapt your transcription to any time signature.

Next, ask yourself if the duration of each note is longer or shorter than the pulse. If the answer is "shorter" then your notes will come more rapidly than the pulse in *subdivisions*—eighth notes, 16th notes, and combinations thereof. If the music is longer, you'll be dealing with half notes, whole notes, and dotted and tied versions of those values. If it's the same, then you're hearing quarter notes. You might find that there are gaps in the rhythm where no note plays but the pulse continues; you have to count these too, and assign them *rests*—which indicate musical silence. Rests have the same rhythmic values as notes (whole, half, quarter, eighth, etc.). Keeping a steady pulse helps you hear the rests as well as sounded or sustained notes.

While some musical parts consist of consistent rhythmic patterns, most songs

include a variety of different rhythms. Still, you can basically group the rhythmic component of your music into three categories compared to the pulse: slower, faster, or about the same. Figure 4 shows examples of all three.

Because the music in bar 1 goes slower than the pulse, the rhythm is fairly easy to hear without repeated listenings. The notes in bar 2 go quite a bit faster than the pulse, and are more difficult to grasp—not only because they're faster, but because the rhythmic groupings are varied too. Bar 3 has music that travels at roughly the same speed as the pulse. It's fairly easy to pick out after one or two listenings. Note that some notes are longer than the pulse (the tied quarter note and the dotted quarter note) and some are shorter (the eighth notes), but averaged out, the melody, taken from the New Year's Eve song "Auld Lang Syne," is the same rate as the pulse.

SPEED WRITING

A song's overall speed will influence the way we identify and write rhythms. Let's look at three examples that we might classify as slow, medium, and fast. If you know the song, try humming or listening and counting along before looking at the music example. (You can find audio for each example at InTuneMonthly.com.) When you do read it, count along with the notation while tapping your foot to the pulse.

Because "God Bless America" (Fig. 5) is a well-known slow song, its rhythms are relatively easy to transcribe. Even when eighth notes are present, they're infrequent, occurring only every other bar in this excerpt.

"Simple Gifts" (Fig. 6) features a relatively common rhythm scheme for medium-activity songs. Many musicians refer to this feel by the non-technical term "eighthy-quarterly" music. Here, the melody's rhythm is quite easy to grasp because there is no *syncopation*—no dots and ties across the beat. All the pulse notes are sounded.

Most rap and hip-hop songs feature a medium to slow tempo, but have lots of subdivisions to provide rhythmic excitement (see Fig. 7). The slow tempo makes it easier to understand the words. Since the lyrics are typically spoken, there are no melody notes to consider, so rap and hip-



hop make for great transcribing exercises!

Transcribing phrases built on basic rhythmic values such as quarters, eighths, 16ths, etc., may be relatively easy, but things get tougher when syncopation enters the picture. Take a look at the melody for "Eleanor Rigby" in Fig. 8. It's mostly eighth notes. But the ties make it a challenge to transcribe. While syncopation is exciting because it specifically goes against the pulse, it requires you to keep two schemes going in your head when transcribing—the pulse and the actual music you're transcribing!

A transcriber must also decide whether it's better to subdivide the pulse by divisions of two or three (the most common subdivisions) or some other number. Figure 9 shows an example of a song where the subdivision is a unit of three, clearly heard in the first two bars, but perhaps not so obvious in bars 3 and 4. You can interpret music with subdivisions of three as either triplets against a quarter note (that is, three notes per beat), or use a pulse that is naturally divisible by three, in this case a dotted quarter note (three eighth notes long) in 6/8 time.

MAKING THE CONVERSION

Sometimes, you may use one pulse as you're writing a first draft, and change it for the final version of your transcription. For example, if the pulse is producing eighth-note triplets on every beat, you can make the music easier to read by changing meters to 6/8, 9/8, or 12/8, as shown in Fig. 9. Figure 10 shows an example of a rhythmically tricky passage in 2/4; changing it to 4/4 makes it much easier to read. Composer Scott Joplin, actually wrote the piece in 2/4, but there's nothing wrong with transcribing it in the easier 4/4 and converting it later. Assuming you captured the rhythms correctly, playing both versions should produce the same sound.

TAPPED OUT

Transcribing is like a puzzle. And how do you solve a puzzle? By breaking it down into smaller parts that are easier to understand before filling in the big picture. In the same way, learning to pick out and write down rhythms makes it easier to get to the next step of adding in the pitches. And that's what we'll tackle next month. **T**

Figure 8: "ELEANOR RIGBY"

The melody is largely running eighth notes, but it's syncopated—going against the pulse.

Figure 9: "FOLLOW THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD"

Sometimes your pulse is subdivided into three, even when there are only two notes to the bar.

Figure 10a: "THE ENTERTAINER"

Figure 10b: "THE ENTERTAINER"

Rewriting complex rhythms in a different meter is sometimes helpful. Here, the syncopated 16th and eighth notes in 2/4 become much easier when recast in 4/4.