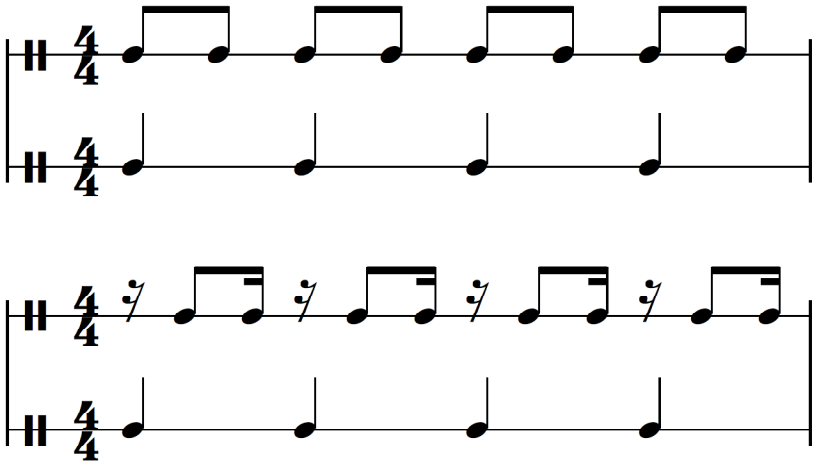
Chapter 4

RHYTHMIC SUSPENSION AND PLANES

Let's begin this chapter with an example: two lines of evenly spaced notes, one of them hitting the beats and the other not.



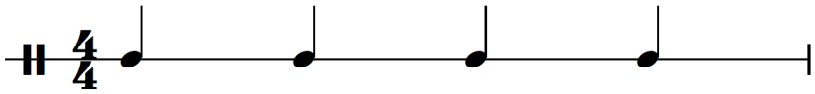
Try these, paying special attention to the relation of notes to main beats. Which is easier to play? Which feels more grounded? Which feels more unbalanced?

By *rhythmic grounding* we mean music that focuses on a rhythmic foundation and conveys a sense of solidity and ease. By *rhythmic suspension* we mean music emphasizing note placement off of that foundation, which in most cases feels edgy and unbalanced.

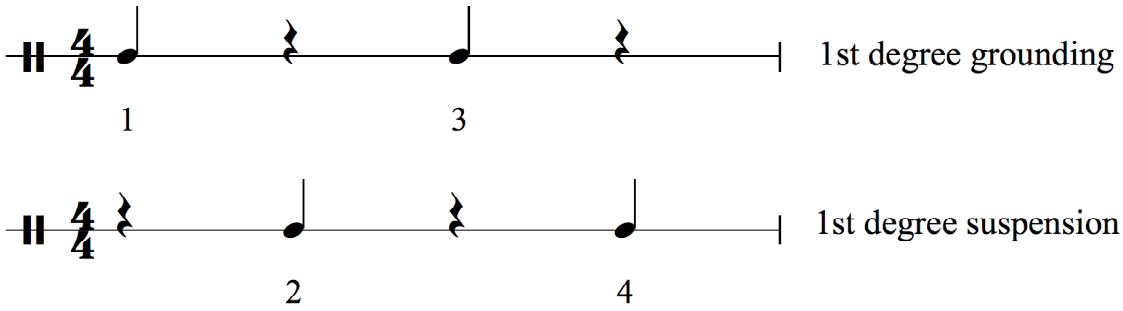
The usual term for off-beat playing, *syncopation*, is vague. People abuse it to mean "random notes off the beat." By contrast, the concept of suspension leads to a systematic understanding. At any given level of rhythm (whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, 8ths, 16ths, 32nds, etc.) some notes will feel more grounded, others more suspended. In practice, most music operates with just three levels of tempo, *1st*, *2nd*, and *3rd degree grounding and suspension*.

1st degree grounding and suspension

This level works with main beats. In most cases, main beats are represented as quarter notes. Let's take 4/4 as an example:



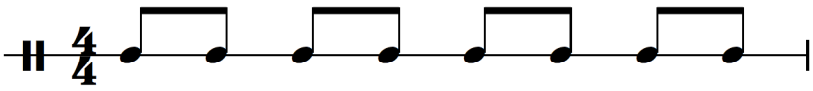
These beats do not all have the same feel. In 4/4, the downbeat ("the 1") is the most grounded note. Beat 3, halfway through the phrase, is a point of secondary repose and almost as grounded. But beats 2 and 4 are different. They pull away from the grounding of beats 1 and 3, setting up a counter-tension. They are suspended. We call beats 2 and 4 "first degree suspension."



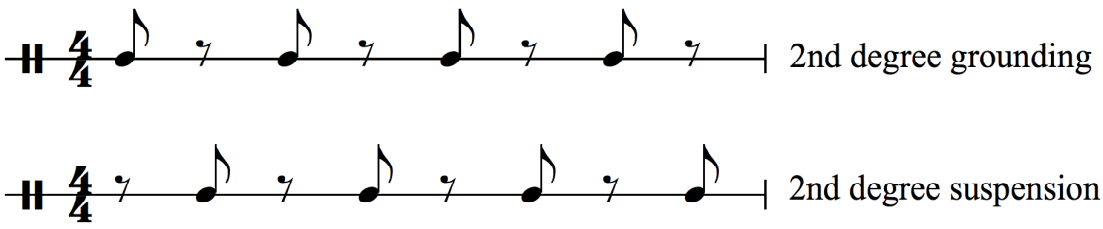
Traditional music theory calls beats 1 and 3 "strong," 2 and 4 "weak," but we disagree. Beats 2 and 4 are more exciting, and in that sense they are *stronger* than 1 and 3. This is a major reason why beats 2 and 4—the *backbeats*—form the basic groove of much U.S. popular music. Listen to virtually any soul, funk, country or hip-hop tune of the past fifty years: the drummer is smacking his snare on 2 and 4. (Jazz drummers click their high hat cymbals on 2 and 4.) Have you ever wondered *why* backbeats make people dance? Now you know.

2nd degree grounding and suspension

The next level of tempo, *2nd degree grounding and suspension*, deals with 8th notes.



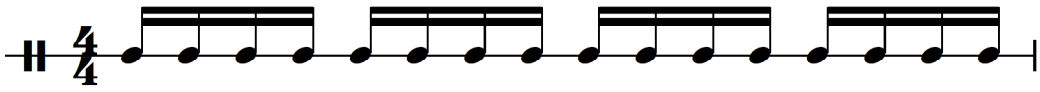
Again, not all these notes have the same feel. Notes on the main beats are more grounded, notes on "&" more suspended.



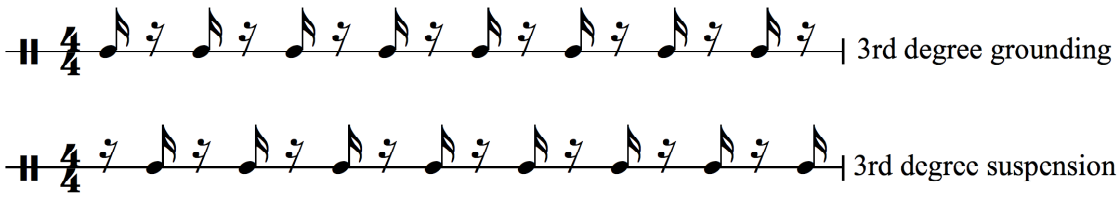
The suspended “&”s create a strong pull up and off the beat. The “skank” rhythm guitar of reggae or ska is a good example. Watch people dancing to this music, and you’ll see them physically suspend on those “&”s. This is how 2nd degree suspension works: a tension between beats and offbeats.

Binary 3rd degree grounding and suspension

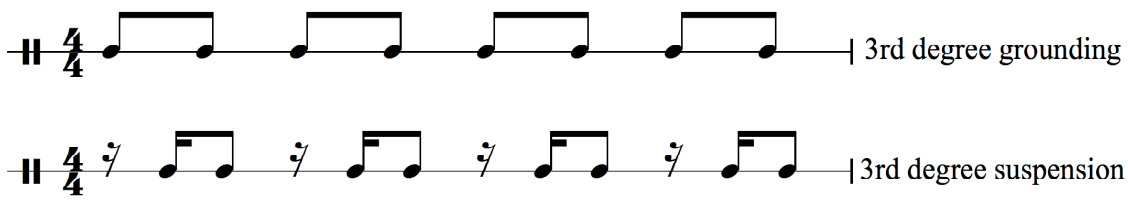
For 3rd degree grounding and suspension, we double the pace again, to 16th notes.



Now, beats and “&”s become the grounded notes, and the “e”s and “a”s are rhythmically suspended.



Here’s an easier-to-read version of the above:



This brings us back to the example at the beginning of the chapter. The contrast between third degree grounding and suspension is one of the strongest rhythmic ideas you’ll ever encounter.