

The Footsteps Metronome: Counting while Walking.

One of the things many music students find challenging, is the ability to evenly perform rhythms combining odd and even subdivisions.

Music schools and teachers have a certain way of teaching how to do this, which runs contrary to the whole core nature of what rhythm is all about. Music teachers teach students about even and odd subdivisions, they give names to the subdivisions (triplets, eighth notes, 16th notes...) and they have students practice rhythms and subdivisions while conducting the beat with their arm, and/or with a metronome.

The main issue with all of this: is that all of this is cerebral activity. THINKING!
The core nature however of what rhythm is all about, is: Physical!

After all: it is called “time-**feel**” and “rhythmic **feel**” for a reason.

When was the last time you ever heard a musician say that you should “**think**” the groove?

Because rhythm is something you **feel**, the more physical you make the practice of rhythm, the lesser time it is going to take you to master it. However: the more cerebral the approach to learning rhythm, the more it alienates the student from the nature of rhythm, which is based on flow, motion, intuition, or in other words: physical activity.

There has to be a better way to practice this than sitting on your butt, listening to a beeping device (called a metronome), intellectually trying to estimate how to fit in 2, 3 or 4 notes within the space from one beep to the next beep.

Well... there IS a better way, and it incorporates something very natural... something we do all the time:

walking!

You see: one of the main difficulties when practicing with a metronome is that it is really challenging to “estimate” the distances between the beats. It is already hard enough trying to process the rhythmic subdivisions you’re trying to perform on each beat, let alone adding the difficulty of trying to estimate the distances in time between the beats on top of that.

However: you have been walking your entire life. It is safe to say that you know when your foot is going to hit the ground, before it happens.

Now unless you’re John Cleese, or you’re a member of Monty Python, or you have some medical condition that causes you to have 1 leg that is longer than the other, it is pretty safe to say that you probably also have an even step when you walk. (*Check out John Cleese in this Monty Python video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZIBUgIE6Hc> to see what I mean.*)

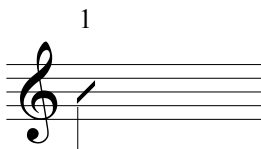
So what better way to practice rhythmic combinations, than during a walk, using your footsteps as your metronome? Your rhythmic practice cannot get much more physical than that.

Students who do this exercise, generally take much less time to accurately feel and perform combinations of odd and even subdivisions, than students who practice this with a metronome.

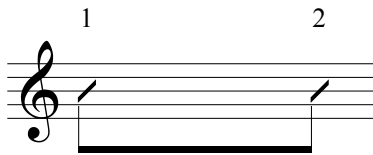
Here’s how this works:

When you have 1 sound that last for the entire beat, this is called a quarter note.

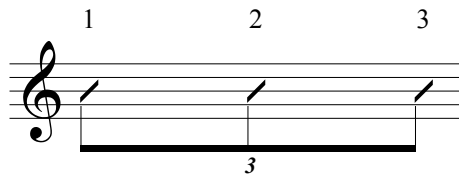
Since you only have 1 note filling the entire beat, you count this note as “1”. The numbers in this case, are representing sounds you would be playing on your guitar if you were to perform the rhythm on guitar. The sound that your voice produces when you say the number “one”, in other words, is like a note or chord you would be hitting on your guitar.



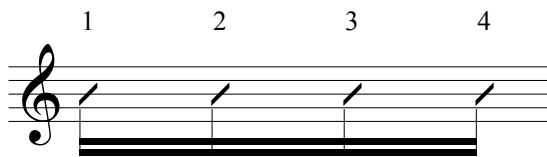
You can also have 2 sounds/notes, each evenly taking up half of the beat. Those 2 notes are called “eighth notes”, because given that there are always 4 beats in a bar, you would have 8 eighth notes to fill up the whole bar. An eighth note, in other words, is half of a quarter. It looks like this and you count those as “1 – 2”



When there are 3 notes to be played on the beat, which is called a “triplet”, you count this as “1 – 2 – 3”. Those 3 notes take up the same amount of space/length in time as 2 eighth notes and as 1 quarter note. In other words: 1 note in a triplet is 1/3rd of a quarter note.



You guessed it: four 16th notes are performed counting “1 – 2 – 3 – 4”.



The idea is that, while you’re walking, you improvise rhythms that you make up on the spot, by counting any of the above combinations on every step.

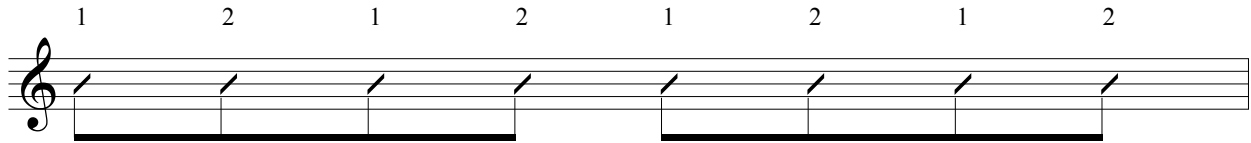
In following example, you count the number “1” on every footstep for 4 footsteps in a row.

Make sure that you vocally sustain the number you’re saying, as “oooone”, till your next footstep touches the ground. This will help ensure that you give each note it’s full length. Especially when performing odd divisions (3 or 5 notes on a beat), you will never really be sure that you are counting all notes evenly unless you sustain the pronunciation of every number you’re saying.

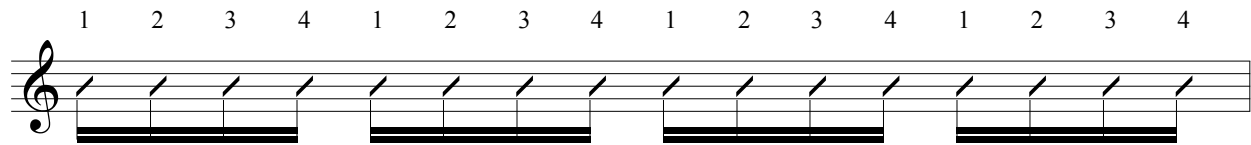


Performing following 8th-note rhythm, you count “1 – 2” on every footstep.

Same here: you are more likely to perform both notes evenly if you count “ooone – twoooo”, nicely and evenly spreading out the pronunciation of the numbers over the space starting from your footstep hitting the ground till your next footstep hits the floor. That length is called a beat, and you need to have 2 perfectly even-length 8th notes each taking up half of that space between the footsteps.



Following rhythm would be performed as: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 on every footstep.



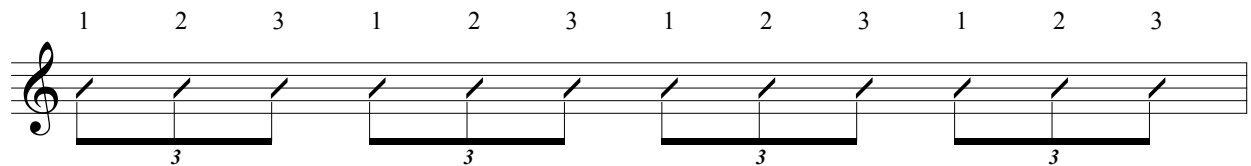
Not too hard, right?

However: the above even-numbered rhythms are fairly easy to pull off because we are used to dividing in 2's and 4's. We are after all born 2-legged creatures.

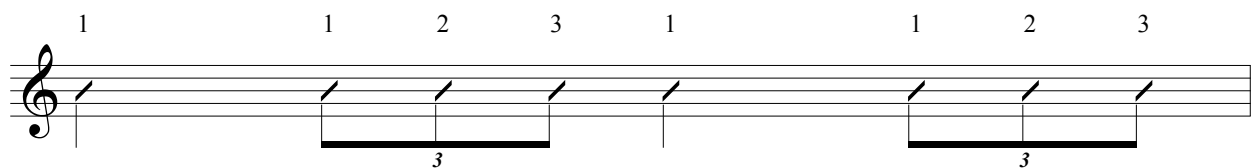
What this particular exercise specifically is designed for though, is training your ability to feel and evenly space out odd-numbered groupings. That's where the real challenge lies.

In following rhythm with triplets, for example, you would want to start off, just counting 1 – 2 – 3 on every footstep, till you get the feel for it. Even more than was the case with the above even-numbered divisions: it is important that you count “oooonneee – twooooo – threeeee”, making all the notes equally sustained length, to make sure that you perform all 3 notes evenly. (as opposed to “one twoooo three”, or “one two threeee”).

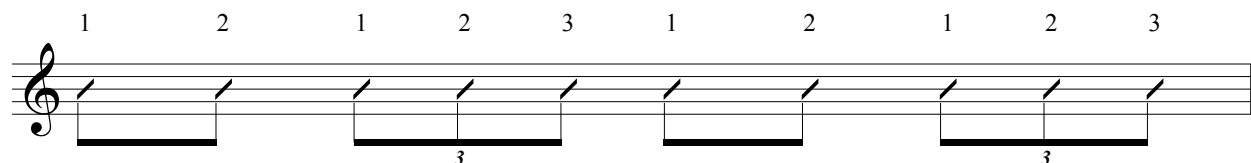
There is a certain “circular feel” to counting 3's. Count 1-2-3 (evenly) during your walk for as long as you need to and after a while you will start noticing the specific feel that comes with triplets.



When you get really comfortable and confident with your ability to count 3 numbers per footstep evenly, you are ready for the next step: combining quarter notes and triplets.



When this gets easier, you raise the bar and you start counting alternating 8th note and triplet rhythms.



The next level after that would be rhythmic combinations of triplets and 16th note rhythms.

As you keep getting better at evenly performing those rhythms, the next level after that would be following very fun rhythm, in which each beat has another rhythm grouping.

If you perform that rhythm backwards, you get:

The idea is that you come up with your own improvised rhythms while walking: combining the above rhythmic groupings, in any way you can come up with. The numbers that you count represent rhythmic grouping, and your footsteps represent beats as played by a metronome.

More advanced rhythms.

As this gets easier for you, you can always push the boundaries further and try to incorporate following more advanced rhythmic divisions.

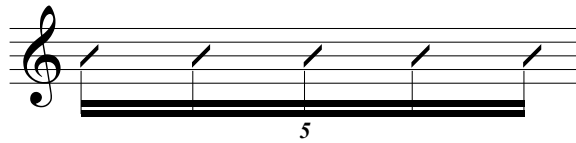
Following rhythm is a triplet over 2 beats. What this means is that you count “1 – 2 – 3” every **two** footsteps. On your 3rd footstep you would count “1” again. Especially with this rhythm, it really is essential that you vocally spread out your pronunciation of the numbers as “oooone – twoooo – threeee” to make sure you make all 3 notes equally long.

That one will definitely take you some time.

Though, for reasons explained earlier, it would take you much longer to master the feel of this rhythmic grouping with a metronome than it will take you if you just count the rhythm over your footsteps while walking.

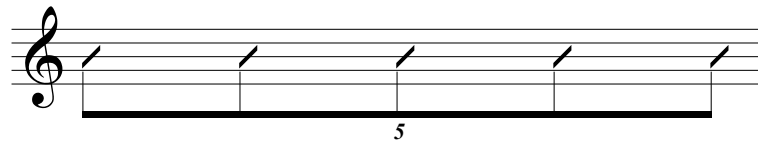
Then there is also the quintuplet: rhythms where 5 sounds are played over 1 beat.

1 2 3 4 5



And following rhythm is a quintuplet over 2 beats, which is even more challenging. Every 2 footsteps you count "1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5", having "1" again on the 3rd footstep.


1 2 3 4 5



Yet, just like anything: mastering this is merely a matter of constant repetition till you start getting the feel.

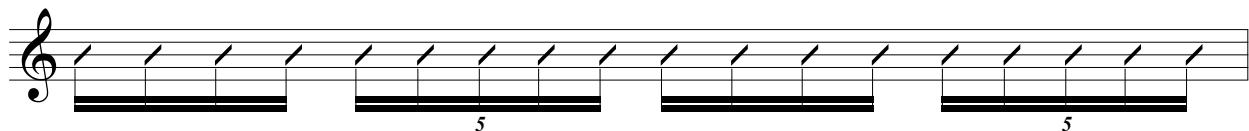
And then of course you can come up with rhythms where you combine even groupings and quintuplets, as in following rhythm.

1 2 1 2 3 4 5 1 2 1 2 3 4 5



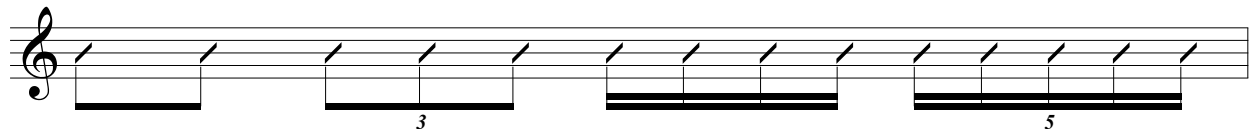
Or the next one, which is slightly more challenging:

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 5



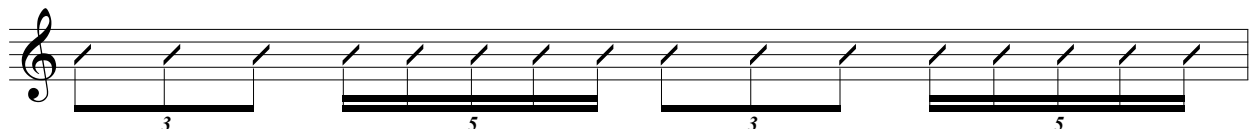
Once you get following rhythm down, you have certainly raised your rhythmic awareness tremendously.

1 2 1 2 3 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 5

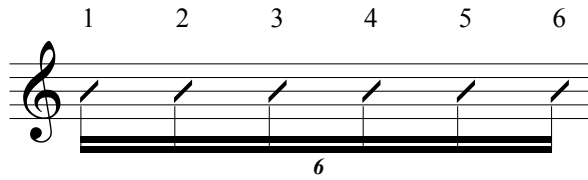


And the next one is a bit of a challenge too: combining nothing but odd groupings.

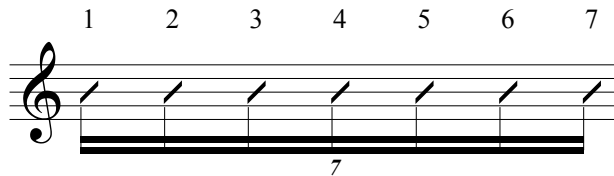
1 2 3 1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 1 2 3 4 5



Then there are of course also sextuplets.



Or septuplets: which you can incorporate in any combination with any of the above groupings.



The fantastic thing about those drills is that you can do them anywhere. You don't have to carve out practice time, you don't need your guitar, you don't need to be home; yet, your playing and musicianship will sky rocket to higher levels in a reasonably short amount of time through those drills. Meanwhile you're engaging into healthy activity that is really good for you. Now go for a walk and become a better rhythm guitarist in the process. ☺