

# Strategies for Developing Jazz Improvisation in Beginning Jazz Students

*Clinician:*

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## **Educating the Educators:**

As Jazz educators it is important for us to know some knowledge of Jazz if we are expected to educate our students.

- **Jazz History:** A brief timeline of sub genres of Jazz dating from 1900 - Present: Ragtime, Blues, Big Band, Bebop, Hardbop, Fusion, Modern
- Creating a **listening list** of artists on each instrument in your Jazz program: saxophone, trombone, trumpet, rhythm section
- **Simple Melodies** to learn, any simple melody will do!
- Basic understanding of **chord changes**: Major 7, Dominant 7, Minor 7, different 9s, extended harmony
- Basic understanding of **important scales** for improvisation: Major, minor, Blues, Pentatonic, whole tone, chromatic, diminished scales

## **Listening Lists:**

A major element of any genre of music is listening to examples of that genre to master style. If we are not listening to Jazz artists, how will we really learn about what Jazz is and what it's all about.

- **Saxes:** Cannonball Adderly, Charlie Parker, Sonny Stitt, John Coltrane, Pepper Adams, Phil Woods, Wayne Shorter, Michael Brecker, Kenny Garrett, Gerry Mulligan, Nick Brignola, Bradford Marsalis, Joshua Redman, Chris Potter, Melissa Aldana, Emmanuel Wilkins
- **Trombones:** Jack Teagarden, Tommy Dorsey, Kid Ory, Milt Woodman, JJ Johnson, Kai Winding, Curtis Fuller, Steve Turre, Robin Eubanks, Conrad Herwig, Carol Jarvis, Steve Davis, Michael Dease, Altin Senclar, Chris Glassman, Jennifer Wharton, Aubrey Logan, John Fedchock, Dave Taylor
- **Trumpets:** Louis Armstrong, Jimmy Dorsey, Cat Anderson, Dizzy Gillespe, Miles Davis, Freddie Hubbard, Clifford Brown, Lee Morgan, Wynton Marsalis, Maynard Ferguson, Ingrid Jensen, Andrea Motis, Summer Carmargo, Roy Hargrove
- **Guitar:** George Benson, Kenny Burrell, Charlie Christian, Freddie Green, Grant Green Jim Hall, John McLaughlin, Pat Metheny, Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass, Django Reinhardt, Russell Malone, Kurt Rosenwinkle

- **Bass:** Rufus Reid, Charles Mingus, Dave Holland, Charlie Haden, Christian McBride, Jaco Pastorius, Victor Wooten, Ray Brown, Scott LaFaro, Gary Peacock, Esperanza Spalding, Paul Chambers, Ron Carter, Marcus Miller, Stanley Clarke
- **Piano:** Fats Waller, Oscar Peterson, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Art Tatum, Marian McPartland, Stanley Turrentine, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, McCoy Tyner, Dave Brubeck, Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, Chic Corea, Keith Jarrett, Marcus Roberts, Brad Mehldau, Mary Lou Williams, Kenny Kirkland, Eddie Palmeri
- **Drums:** Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Art Blakey, Louie Bellson, Chic Webb, Elvin Jones, Philly Jo Jones, Lewis Nash, Paul Motion, Max Roach, Tony Williams, Jack DeJonett, Steve Gadd, Brian Blade, Billy Kilson, John Reilly, Butch Miles,
- **Latin Percussion:** Tito Puente, Pete Escovedo, Shelia E, Ray Barreto, Mongo Santamaria, Poncho Sanchez, Giovanni Hildalgo, Pedrito Martinez, John “Dandy” Rodriguez, George Delgado, Martin Cohen

### Simple Melodies to learn:

Here are some examples of melodies both casual/non jazz related that are easy to teach and get students playing, along with some Jazz standard melodies that are easy to teach and get your students in the “improv pool” faster to take more chances.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mary had a little lamb</li> <li>● Twinkle, Twinkle little Star</li> <li>● Row, Row your boat</li> <li>● Star Spangled Banner</li> <li>● Amazing Grace</li> <li>● Skip to My Lou</li> <li>● Jingle Bells</li> <li>● Silent Night</li> </ul> <p>*Any easy tune you can think of works!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Second Line</li> <li>● Autumn Leaves</li> <li>● There will never be another you</li> <li>● Now’s the Time</li> <li>● C Jam Blues</li> <li>● So What</li> <li>● Blue Bossa</li> <li>● Caravan</li> </ul>
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### Building your melodic vocabulary:

Something that is very helpful and a key element to any good soloist is their ability to be melodic during an improvised solo. In the beginning, I teach students just to literally play and play whatever comes to mind. We start with just notes, then add more notes, then add rhythm to those notes, then we learn to take our notes and build sentences with those notes. Learning melodies gives students a frame of reference to build their vocabulary, having something they can quote in a solo that builds their confidence in the heat of battle. Another couple of key elements learning melodies can do for your students is give them a basic understanding of how to hear a chord change, know what “the bridge” means in Jazz, develop flexibility with keys, and build range on their instruments.

### Understanding Basic Chords and Symbols in Jazz:

Our goal as educators is to help students understand knowledge that is unknown to them. Learning these basic chord concepts below will open doors to communicate the language of jazz to our young improvisers. Below is a chart that's worth having in your tools. I know it looks like Music Theory all over again but think of it as more of a reminder not a final exam. A great way to teach this is maybe focus on one type of chord per week with your jazz students. Teach them the chord members in Bb or F, maybe two other keys and another octave and they will start to feel like they can understand what chords are.

Symbol Description	Chord Quality	Examples
Chord with just a "7"	Dominant 7th	"C7"
Chord with capitalized "M"	Major 7th	"CM", "CM7"
Chord with lowercase "m"	Minor 7th	"Cm", "Cm7"
Chord with a dash	Minor 7th	"C-", "C-7"
Chord with a triangle	Major 7th	"C△"
Chord with a circle	Diminished 7th	"C°"
Chord with a circle with a line through it	Half-Diminished	"Cø"
Chord with a plus	Augmented Chord	"C+"
Chord with a "dim"	Diminished Chord	"Cdim"
Chord with a "sus"	Suspended Chord	"Csus", "Csus4"
Chord with m7 b 5	Half-Diminished	"Cm7 b 5"
Chord with extra numbers	Dominant with extensions	"C7 b 9", "C7#11", "C7 b 9 b 13"
Chord with "alt"	Altered Chord	"Calt", "C7alt"
Chord with numbers larger than 7	Dominant chord with natural extensions	"C9", "C11", "C13"
Chord with numbers smaller than 7	Major chord with extra notes	"C6", "C2", "C4"
Chord with a forward slash	Slash chord	"D/C", "Bb/F"

### Building your harmonic Vocabulary:

This area of improvisation is typically the hardest to develop in a majority of your young improvisers. You might have those students who are super stars and will pick it up quickly, but most of your students will have trouble understanding how to implement this side of the coin. I always say in concert band that arpeggios are the key to knowing harmony, the more we

understand 1, 3, 5, the more we can grasp 7, 9, 11, and 13ths. Steady and consistent practice will yield good results.

### **Key scales that are important to Jazz Improvisation:**

If arpeggios are the key to understanding harmony, then scales of any kind are the keys to understanding melody. Not just melody! But also lining up melody with your understanding of harmony. The bonus in this category is that you can teach and focus on Major and Minor scales in concert band classes to develop this concept of scales so students can already have prior knowledge of how scales influence their soloing.

### **Beginning/Basic scales to work on:**

Major scales and their modes:

- Ionian (1st degree): The standard major scale (e.g., C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C).
- Dorian (2nd degree): A minor sound with a raised 6th (e.g., D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D from C Major).
- Phrygian (3rd degree): A minor sound with a flattened 2nd (e.g., E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E).
- Lydian (4th degree): A major sound with a raised 4th (e.g., F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F).
- Mixolydian (5th degree): A major sound with a flattened 7th, giving a dominant or bluesy feel (e.g., G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G).
- Aeolian (6th degree): The natural minor scale (e.g., A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A).
- Locrian (7th degree): A diminished sound with flattened 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 6th (e.g., B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B).

Minor scales:

- Harmonic Minor: Raises the 7th degree of the natural minor scale, creating a strong leading tone (1, 2, b3, 4, 5, b6, 7).
- Melodic Minor: Raises both the 6th and 7th degrees when ascending (1, 2, b3, 4, 5, 6, 7) but reverts to the natural minor when descending (1, 2, b3, 4, 5, b6, b7).

Blues Scales

- The basic Jazz scales that give students their first real taste of Jazz improvisation. two blues scales, the major and the minor. The major blues scale is 1, 2, b 3, 3, 5, 6 and the minor is 1, b 3, 4, b 5, 5, b 7.

Pentatonic Scales

- One of the most versatile scales that teach students to play over chord changes. The major pentatonic scale may be thought of as an incomplete major scale, using scale degrees 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 of the major scale.
- Minor Pentatonic - the term is most commonly applied to the relative minor pentatonic derived from the major pentatonic, using scale tones 1, b 3, 4, 5, and b 7 of the natural minor scale.

Whole Tone/Chromatic/Diminished Scales

- The following scales can be easy to teach from the point that they are all symmetrical scales, meaning no weird intervals; it's the same distance between notes up and down.
- Whole Tone Scale: Each note is a whole step apart: C, D, E, F# (#4), G#(#5), A#/Bb, C
- Chromatic scale: Each note is a half step apart and this scale focuses on every note we use in music. 12 notes and really only 1 scale to learn.
- Diminished Scales: combinations of whole step/half step, and half step/whole step. These scales would be good for your improvisers down the road but give them time to absorb the information above.

### **Call and Response/Rhythm Games:**

Taking the time in class to work on these two concepts will give your beginning jazz students the opportunity to create and understand the larger concept of transcription. Doing “call and response” with your band is a big thing for our improvisers, whether you’re playing on your instrument, piano, or singing helps them work their ears. KEEP IT SIMPLE! A couple of notes, and easy rhythms will yield great results.

Rhythm games are fun, teaching basic rhythms with the rhythm section backing you up will make learning rhythm more enjoyable than in concert band class. Have the students sing parts of their music back to you, focusing on the style of swing, funk, latin, or blues whatever the tune calls for.

### **Final thoughts...**

No matter what you choose to focus on in your class, the end goal is always to yield student success. I will say that when it comes to the idea of class management in Jazz band class, while we’re focusing heavily on perfecting the competition tunes and assigning solos to those students that can already solo well... are we giving time to those students who are musically shy and have never taken a solo? Are we giving even our best soloists more knowledge so they can grow? Are we taking time to do a jam session on an easy tune every couple of weeks? Are we creating a healthy Jazz culture in our band halls that encourages listening to Jazz, learning standards, and giving every student the opportunity to solo? And I mean EVERY student in that band has an opportunity to solo? How about you? Do you play with your students, have they heard you solo? Don’t worry about sounding bad in front of your kids because you’re teaching them to creatively take chances and step out of your comfort zone. The more they see you invested in all aspects of Jazz, especially improvisation, the more they will want to buy into your teaching. If there is something you don’t know about improv or Jazz in general, bring a clinician in to help and listen to your students. I hope through this presentation you are able to build up some good knowledge to pass along to your students. Give time in rehearsals to focus on improv and improv will get better, more students will want to solo because you are their gateway to playing Jazz!

Thank you!

Robert Soto

