

Learning Tunes

By John Cipolla ©2004

Learning repertoire is one of the most beneficial areas that a jazz player can develop. The more tunes a player knows, the more they are familiar with various styles and the more they will find themselves making connections between chord progressions and melodic figures. This article offers one method for practicing tunes. There are many ways to learn tunes and I encourage you to be creative when learning them. This approach is based on ideas from jazz musicians that I have played with and spoken with.

TOOLS

- Metronome
- Good quality tape recorder (I use a little mini-disc recorder with an external microphone and a set of headphones)
- Fake Book (I have found a handy book that is small, lists many jazz tunes, and is completely legal: *The REAL Little Ultimate Jazz Fake Book*, published by Hal Leonard Publishing Corporation, Compiled by Dr. Herb Wong, ©1992)

The essence of this method is to tape your self and play along with the recording many times until the tune is engrained from three different perspectives: melody, bass line, and countermelody (sometimes referred to as guidetones).

Choose a tune that you want to learn. Practice the melody exactly as it is written. Read the melody at a slow tempo until it feels comfortable. Use your metronome and play the melody with the metronome on beats two and four. This may take some time to get familiar with so start at a slow tempo. I find it helpful to count myself in by listening to the metronome's clicks and saying the numbers 2, 4, 2, 4, etc. Then I add the 1 and 3 on the silent implied beats.

Next is to create a bass line. A bass line should consist of mostly quarter notes with occasional eighth notes, which are often on beat four, leading back into beat one of the next bar. The bass line should focus on roots, thirds, fifths on the strong beats (beats one and three) and should be as stepwise as possible, though arpeggios are fine to play occasionally.

This step presumes that you know what each chord symbol of the tune means. For instance, if the symbol says: “Gm”, then it is a G minor chord. If the symbol says: “C7”, then it is a C dominant 7th chord. Start out without the metronome and try playing a bass line that fits the chords of the song. Don’t worry about keeping a steady tempo at first. Just concentrate on getting notes that are part of the chord and that move in a relatively step-wise fashion.

Since many jazz tunes are in 4/4, you will often only be able to play two or four quarter notes for each chord. Therefore try to make beats one and three land on a root, third, or fifth so the sound of the harmony comes through to the listener. When you feel comfortable playing the bass line, try playing it with the metronome on two and four as you did with the melody.

The next step is to play a counter melody. I like to keep this extremely simple, so I hold out my countermelody note for the same duration as the chord symbol beneath it. For example, if the chord is a C7 for four beats, I will choose a note within that chord and hold it for four full beats. The trick to creating countermelodies is to try to make them move be step and also to try to let to chords move logically from one to the next. For example, when you have a minor ii chord that moves to a V7 chord, try playing the 7th degree of the ii chord and then resolve this note down a half step to the third of the

dominant chord. As you go through the tune like this, you will find that there are many “right” ways to create counter melodies. The goal is to help yourself “hear” the movement of the chords rather than to focus on the chords as completely vertical sounds that have no relation to what is around them. Chords only have significance if they are in the context of other chords. Therefore, try to connect groups of chords by creating pretty lines that move mostly in half-steps or steps.

This will not always be possible. You may occasionally need to connect a chord by playing a note that is a third or sometimes more away from the note. When this is comfortable, put the metronome on two and four and play through the tune with just the guide tones. I have found that I sometimes tend towards certain notes in specific parts of a tune and then the guide tones become a sort of mini-preconceived improvisation on the tune. This is good. It helps us to hear the flow of the chords. When this happens try to expand upon it and force yourself to choose other notes, yet still strive for a smooth and melodic connection between notes. The absolute master at creating counter melodies is New Orleans jazz saxophonist and clarinetist, Sidney Bechet.

You have now practiced the tune three different ways: melody, chords, and counter melody/guidetones. As you spend time with each of these aspects of the tune, you will find that you are looking at the sheet music less and less. Your goal is to eventually play the tune by ear, but in order to learn the melody and chords properly, I think it is helpful to keep the music in front of you until it begins to become second nature.

Next, we use our tape recorder. We have learned the tune from three different perspectives. Now, put your metronome and tape recorder on and play through the chords with just a bass line. You are recording a bass line to the tune. Play the tune over and

over for as long as you can. The goal is to think and play the chords enough that they become second nature and you can feel rhythmically when the next chord should occur. Start out at a slow tempo and then gradually increase to the proper tempo of whatever tune you are playing.

When this is done, put on your headphones, and play back the bass line while you play the melody over and over against your recorded bass line. Play the melody with a confident full tone and make sure that you are playing the rhythms of the melody correctly. Do not embellish it. Just play it as it is written. As you play it chorus after chorus, it too will become second nature. You will develop a digital finger memory as well as an intervallic pitch memory for how the melody sounds. By the way, if there are words to the song, these should be learned as well. So, as the bass line is playing, you can sing the words of the song to get the proper feel of how to phrase the melody.

When the melody and bass line feel comfortable, practice playing your guide tones over the recorded bass line. This will also become second nature and you will find yourself simply hearing the guide tones as if they were another melody to the song.

Next, put on your metronome and record the melody over and over for as long as you can. Then play back the melody and make up a bass line under the melody. Continue to play the bass line chorus after chorus until you feel how the quarter notes and harmony fit in with the melody. This will also become somewhat second nature with enough practice. Then try playing the guide tones against the melody. If you find yourself playing the same or virtually the same guide tones chorus after chorus, that is alright. You are engraining the flow of the chords in your ears. When you feel relatively confident with the guide tones, try to vary them a bit one each subsequent chorus.

The last step is to record the guide tones. As with the bass line and the melody, record as many choruses of the guide tones as possible. Then play the melody against it and then the bass line against it. As you are practicing this, you may find yourself losing a beat occasionally or getting lost in the form of the song. That is OK. In fact, that is the point of all of this repetition. As you practice the tune over and over from these three perspectives, you will begin to feel the form and you will also find that your sense of rhythmic pulse improves.

There are many jazz education products on the market today and it is very confusing to choose the most helpful ones. I feel though, that we are lucky to live in a technological age when we can quickly and easily record ourselves. We are our best teachers. When learning jazz tunes, the most basic, yet most important elements are the melody, the harmony, and a countermelody. Practicing these three elements in these ways will engrain the tune both in your ears, fingers, and instinct.

Other thoughts:

Once you can play a tune well in this manner, start playing it in other keys. When you can do this, you can feel that you thoroughly “know” a tune.

Credits:

Gerry Neiwood-3 parts to a tune idea (melody, harmony, countermelody)

Mark Vince-playing the bass line to get familiar with the chords

Hal Galper/Dizzy Gillespie-“scream the melody.” In other words, play the melody confidently and correctly to engrain it properly.