

Methods For Fighting The Epidemic Of Tune Illiteracy

For the past 20-plus years, I've had the honor of teaching in a wide variety of didactic situations, from jazz camps and performing arts high schools to universities and prestigious jazz institutes. If you were to approach each of the incredible jazz masters and pedagogues I've taught alongside and ask them, "What's the best way to learn how to play jazz?" you're sure to get many, many different answers: go to school, don't go to school, go to New York, go to New Orleans, transcription books are a great tool, using transcription books is cheating, look at your bandmates, close your eyes, and the contradictions go on and on.



However, while professional jazz musicians might disagree on just about everything else, I've found there are two areas in which just about everyone is in accord, and vehemently so. Whether their specialty is traditional, bebop, contemporary, or anything in between, it's been my experience that most great jazz players advocate that in order to play this music you must 1) listen to it constantly, and 2) memorize a whole lot of tunes—at least a couple hundred. Since virtually everyone's favorite players agree that these two activities are vital to becoming a jazz musician, it never ceases to amaze me that so many students have to run to a fakebook to play "What Is This Thing Called Love" or even "Billie's Bounce"! Tune illiteracy among young up-and-coming jazz players is far too rampant.

To help fight this malady, I've put together a systematic method for memorizing and, equally important, retaining the essential standard jazz repertoire (there's nothing worse than finding yourself on a gig and having a tune called that you "used to know"). Also equally if not more important is thoroughly listening to the definitive recordings; that is, learning the intros, rhythmic hits, harmony parts, backgrounds, endings and whatever else those in the know, know. And, of course, transcribing at least a phrase or two from your favorite solo on each tune provides you with additional vocabulary and insight, not to mention credibility when you quote it, indicating to your peers that you, too, are in the know.

Following is a list of nine sequential steps for learning any tune:

- 1) Listen to the definitive recording numerous times.
- 2) Memorize the form.

Common forms include:

- 12-bar blues (e.g., "Tenor Madness," "Now's The Time," "Mr. PC," "Footprints," "Blues For Alice")
- 16-bar tune (e.g., "Watermelon Man," "Cantaloupe Island," "Blue Bossa," "Summertime," "Doxy")
- AABA (e.g., "I Got Rhythm," "Impressions," "Maiden Voyage," "Satin Doll," "Body And Soul")
- ABAC (e.g., "All Of Me," "All Of You," "On Green Dolphin Street")

Uncommon forms include:

- AAB (e.g., "Song For My Father")
- AABC (e.g., "Autumn Leaves")

Be on the lookout for tunes with other odd forms, for example:

- "Alone Together": AABA' (14-bar first A, 14-bar second A,

8-bar bridge and 8-bar last A)

- "Moment's Notice": ABAB'V (8-bar first A, 8-bar first B, 8-bar second A, 6-bar second B, 8-bar vamp with B-flat pedal)
- "Peace": 10-bar tune
- "Stablemates": ABA (14-bar first A, 8-bar bridge, 14-bar last A)
- "Yes Or No": AABA (14-bar A sections with a 16-bar bridge)

3) Memorize the root movement; play roots with definitive or play-along recording.

4) Memorize the chord qualities; play chords (arpeggios in quarter notes) with play-along recording as follows:

- 1-3-5-7-9 for chords lasting two bars (have the 9th sustain for the second bar)
- 1-3-5-7 for chords lasting one bar
- 1-3 for chords lasting two beats
- For II-V-I progressions in major, play:



- For II-V-I progressions in minor, play:



Also practice having the final 7th in the penultimate measure resolve to the 6th (instead of the 9th) in the last measure.

- 5) Play related scales in eighth notes (if the chord lasts for two bars, have the 9th sustain for the second bar; for chords lasting two beats, just play 1-2-3-4).
- 6) Memorize the head; play with definitive and play-along recordings while thinking of the changes.
- 7) Improvise with play-along recording.
- 8) Transcribe phrases from definitive recording.
- 9) Improvise with play-along recording, incorporating phrases transcribed from the definitive recording.

By executing these basic steps, you will not only thoroughly know the root movement, chord qualities and head of each new tune you learn, you will have internalized their definitive recordings, one of the most important aspects of becoming a good jazz player. And, through this process, you will also learn how chords progress, understand substitutions, have hundreds of quotable phrases for improvisation, develop your ear and time feel, have credibility and be employable.

The list of "must-know" tunes can be found in the book *Pocket Changes* along with their most common chord progressions. I also recommend David Baker's book *How to Learn Tunes* (both available through jazzbooks.com). Please stay tuned for my methodic procedure for memorizing, reviewing and retaining all the tunes on the list in part 2 of this article in an upcoming issue. **DB**

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