

Essentials of Learning to Play Jazz Well

By Don Braden

Description:

Learning to play Jazz well is a long process -- a LOT of fun -- but long, because Jazz is a diverse, powerful and sophisticated music form. Listening for and practicing the essential elements (usually over a number of years) are key, but how does one prioritize this process? Below is an outline that will help the student understand and organize the central elements of authoritative Jazz expression.

Listen as much as possible to great jazz recordings and live jazz performances

Listen casually, without "thinking" too much.
Get into the "feel" of the rhythm and the phrasing.
Flow with the "journey" of the music - embrace the spirit and emotion.

Listen critically; pay particular attention to:
The sound of each player;
The rhythmic feel of each player;
The melody of the song, the chords, and the form of the song;
How the musicians interact;
The "shape" of the solos, and the overall shape of the performance.

Learn about the history of Jazz

Practice daily to attain solid instrumental proficiency.

Make a practice plan, and keep a practice log.
Obtain and use the four essential tools:
Metronome
Tuner
Mirror
Recording device
Develop a great sound over the full chromatic range of your instrument, and learn to control it. Always practice with a full, clear tone.
Always practice with strong, solid rhythm.
Develop control over your articulation.

Learn the jazz building blocks.

Basic scales and chords (in Keys Eb, Bb, F, C, G -- at least)
Major (Ionian) Scales
Minor and Major Pentatonic Scales
Blues Scales
Dominant 7th Scales
Minor (Dorian) Scales

Jazz Nomenclature (chord symbols, etc)

The II V7 I Progression (for example: C- F7 Bb Maj)

Basic piano skills:

Either: Left hand - Root note of chord

Right hand - 3-5-7-9 or 7-9-3-5

OR Left hand - 1-3-7

Right hand - melody

* Learn to play any tune you're working on!

Ability to identify intervals and chords by ear

The twelve-bar blues

Basic composition (compose a simple melody over the blues)

More scales and chords (All twelve keys)

The modes of the Major Scale (Ionian)

The Diminished Whole-Tone Scale

The Diminished Scale

The Minor II V7 I Progression (for example: C-7b5 F7+9 Bb-)

Learn the jazz vocabulary

Transcribe (learn) great jazz solos.

The student should always learn solos from recordings. It's much better for the ears, plus they get all the other crucial information, such as the sound, rhythmic feel, emotion, articulation, nuances, etc.

Learn (memorize) jazz tunes. Start with

Watermelon Man

Bag's Groove, Sonnymoon For Two, Billie's Bounce, Blue Monk
and other blues tunes

Perdido

Lady Bird

Impressions (So What)

Autumn Leaves

Develop jazz nuance: vibrato, bends, scoops, tonal colorations, dynamics, etc.