

Getting the Most Out of Combo Class

By Don Braden (Version 1a)

In addition to having fun playing tunes and taking solos, Combo Class is a great chance to hone many skills. There are always things to work on in addition to the obvious musical basics such as ensemble playing, sightreading, improvisation, etc. If you're looking for more challenges, below are some ideas that should help. In addition to the obvious benefits to yourself, if you implement some of these ideas, you will appear more focused. This will inspire at least some of your fellow students to follow suit (and will impress the instructor of the class, too!), which will improve the experience for everyone.

- 1) Stay Engaged. The professional Jazz musician always knows where he is in the tune. **Keep your place** in the tune you're playing at all times, even when it's not the head (the melody) or your solo. Develop the skill of playing along in your mind. This is a critical skill in Jazz performance, and will definitely improve with practice. You can practice this skill the entire time the group is playing.
- 2) Use every opportunity to reinforce your knowledge of the melody of the tune. While listening to the other soloists, hum or finger it during each repeated chorus.
- 3) Ditto for the chords (aka harmony): become more facile with the chord changes by mentally fingering or singing through the chordal arpeggios (1-3-5-7, 1-3-5-7-9, 3-5-7-9, 1-2-3-5, etc., ascending or descending) of each chord as it's played during the tune (while you're listening to the other soloists). If there are scales or chords you don't know yet, skip them and come back to them later. Try to keep your place and do this in "real time".
- 4) If you're a drummer and don't yet know anything about chord changes, try to pick up what you can. It will be very useful to understand the basics of chords, such as the difference between major and minor, or what a ii- V7 I is. At the very least, this learning to hear these harmonic elements can help you maintain the form of a piece. During melody or harmony drills with other members of the ensemble, ask the instructor if you may use the opportunity to practice (at a low volume) a groove or pattern that you may need work on.
- 5) When the group is not playing, pay attention to what the instructor says to other members of the ensemble. In many cases, the information may apply to you as well, or you may learn something about how to communicate with your fellow musicians, or how certain instruments work (or don't work). If you think you have gotten all you can get, use the opportunity to QUIETLY work through scales, chords or rhythms that need more work. This is a form of **mental practice**, which is an essential skill for musicians.
- 6) If there are two drummers in the group and you're not the primary one on a given tune, play along all the time on percussion or at least your practice pad, either with sticks or brushes.
- 7) If there are two pianists (or keyboardists or guitarists), one should be the primary on a tune, but both can play chords, or one can play chords and the other focus on melody. Same for guitar. Pianists and guitarists can use time when they're not primary as to follow the advice above, or as an opportunity to explore other kinds of voicings for the chord progression of the tune.
- 8) Most importantly: **BE CREATIVE!** The Jazz Combo is a very flexible and agile situation, and there are many wonderful possibilities for fun musical exploration.