

Jazz Essentials (Rev. Jan. 2012)

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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? Here are my thoughts on how to understand and organize the central elements of authoritative Jazz expression.

Listen as much as possible to Jazz Masters on great Jazz recordings and live performances.

Only through listening can you achieve the most important aspect of good practice: **developing a clear vision of how you want to sound**. Listen in two general ways:

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;

The use of **blues-influenced** phrases;

How the musicians **interact**;

The "shape" of the improvised solos, and the overall shape of the performance.

Learn about the Genesis and History of Jazz

One of the keys to really understanding Jazz is to acknowledge the spiritual roots of this music. Jazz has great power because the African American people who created it were powerful, spiritually deep people. Their ancestors survived one of the most horrific ages in mankind's history – American Slavery. The fathers and mothers of the American slaves survived the Middle Passage. That alone indicates that they had to be amazingly strong, tough, creative and smart; the situation was basic survival of the fittest. That strength – that power – is an essential part of the magic of the blues, gospel and Jazz music, which have in turn profoundly influenced all American music (and all current Western music). In Jazz performance, that power is manifested in the sound, rhythm, emotion, phrasing nuance and of course creativity. We in Jazz education teach mostly about the notes and perhaps basic rhythm, but there is a LOT more to the sound of Jazz.

There are a number of decent books on basic Jazz history, such as James Lincoln Collier's "A History of Jazz", Mark C. Gridley's "Jazz Styles" and Gunther Schuller's "Early Jazz". There are also beautiful books about important Jazz legends, such as Quincy Troupe's Miles Davis, C.O. Simpkins' biography of John Coltrane, or the recent book about Wayne Shorter, "Footprints" by Michelle Mercer. The Ken Burns Jazz video/DVD series is also very informative.

Practice Daily to attain Solid Instrumental Proficiency.

Consistent practice is essential to make good progress. For example, 45 minutes of well planned and focused practice each day is more effective than 3 hours on the weekends. Always practice with a full, clear tone and with strong, solid rhythm. Activate your imagination and practice everything musically!

Obtain and use the six essential tools:

Metronome

Mirror

Piano/Keyboard

Tuner

Recording device

Play a long CDs

Practice Priorities:

- Develop a great sound (with great control) over the full chromatic range of your instrument.
- Develop strong control of rhythm, syncopation and swing. Good articulation is essential for this.
- Learn all applicable scales (see below) fluently in all keys.
- **Very important:** practice improvisation and "flow". Imagine you're on a gig!
- Practice sightreading, but seek to memorize tunes as quickly as possible.

Learn the Jazz Music Building Blocks -- Many of the primary elements of Jazz are listed below

Basic musical concepts such as music notation, cycle of 4ths, etc

Scales and Chords (in Keys Eb, Bb, F, C, G -- at first, then all 12 keys)

- Major (Ionian) Scales
- Minor and Major Pentatonic Scales
- Blues Scales
- Modes of the Major Scale (Ionian), esp. Dominant 7th (Mixolydian) and Minor (Dorian) Scales
- Modes of the Ascending Melodic Minor, esp. the Altered, Locrian #2, and Lydian Dominant Scales
- Symmetrical Diminished Scales
- The Minor ii V7 I Progression (for example: C-7b5 F7Alt Bb-)

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!

Ear training skills – Identifying intervals, melodies, chords and rhythms by ear

The Twelve-bar Blues – Fundamental to all American music, especially Jazz

Basic composition (start by composing a simple melody over the blues)

American Song Book Tunes – Teaches us about fundamental melodic, harmonic and form concepts, and also provide a common ground for spontaneous playing (i.e. Jam Sessions!)

Modern Jazz Tunes – Teaches us about more advanced musical concepts such as non-diatonic harmony, unusual forms, etc.

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 (besides the notes), such as the sound, rhythmic feel, emotion, articulation, nuances, etc. Transcription books are good as time savers (for the notes and basic rhythm only) or sight reading practice.

Learn (memorize) basic Jazz tunes. Almost all serious players know these tunes, which increases the possibility of jamming with them. Start with:

Watermelon Man, Blues tunes (Bag's Groove, Sonnymoon For Two, Billie's Bounce, Blue Monk), Perdido, Summertime, Lady Bird, Impressions (So What), Autumn Leaves

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

LISTEN – LISTEN – LISTEN !!!!