

JAZZ IMPROVISATION FOR TEACHERS

The “10 Essential Elements” of Jazz Improvisation

UMEA Conference 2010

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Jazz Improvisation is not a required class at most universities. Many times jazz courses are only offered as optional courses in college. Yet, most music teachers will teach a jazz band in Jr. High, or High School. As a result many teachers who teach jazz band teach it in a “concert band” context, meaning, only issues of style, balance, blend, tone, and intonation are taught. This is all very good, but it misses the essential element of Jazz... improvisation. So unless a teacher is a veteran improviser, or has taken it on themselves to master the art, students are left without this essential tool. The primary mission of any teacher of any jazz performance class is improvisation. Jazz improv is such a broad topic many teachers may just get lost in the amount of information. Even though the topic is broad, there are basics that every teacher must know. These are the “essential elements” of Jazz Improvisation. These are the things that anyone who wants to teach jazz improvisation MUST understand, and understand well.

Below are the “essential elements” of jazz improvisation and the recommended order that they should be learned, and taught.

Sequential Order of Developing Improvisational Skills

Essential Element #1: Ear Training

Essential Element #2: Chord Terminology

Essential Element #3: Beginning Scales, Modes, and Blues

Essential Element #4: Patterns Development

Essential Element #5: The II7-V7-I7 Chord Progression

Essential Element #6: Listening; Finding good role-models.

Essential Element #7: Form and Standards

Essential Element #8: Diminished Scales

Essential Element #9 Intermediate Scales and Patterns

Essential Element #10: Minor II7-V7-I Chord Progression

Essential Element #1: Ear Training

Before a sound understanding of the elements of jazz improvisation can be presented it is crucial for the concept to ear training to be stressed. Many times as teachers we begin working on concepts, exercises, and the “theory” of things, then fail to develop the ear. A Jazz Improviser’s biggest asset is the ability to “audiate” what is to come. Audiation is the process by which we hear inside our heads when no physical sound is present; it is our inner-ear. It is the process by which we can discern what is to come musically. For example, if a V7 chord is played most, musician’s inner-ear will predict a “I” chord to follow. This is largely due to the fact that we have been exposed to V-I chord progression our whole life. It is natural for us to expect this “tonic” key area to follow the “dominant.”

In this same way, jazz improvisers predict the outcome of chord progressions. This is done by years of exposure to these chord progressions, and the ability to hear them inside ones head. If they can be heard by means of the inner-ear, and then utilize scales, patterns, and other technical skills built into muscle memory, jazz improvisation becomes as easy as any menial task. If jazz improvisation seems hard to a teacher or student, it is always due to a failing in ear training. Exercises must be developed and repeated to develop dominant to tonic familiarity.

Essential Element #2: Chord Terminology

Major 7, Minor 7, Dominant 7, Half-Diminished, Minor/Major 7, Altered chords.

In theory classes we learn that triads built off of scale degrees of a major scale have inherent tonalities and qualities about them. Chord progressions in jazz music is almost always made up of 7th chords and often 9th chords. These are simply triads with the 7th and 9th on top. The quality of the triad determines the position of the 7th degree. For example (and purposes of review; key of C):

Key area quality arpeggiations:

- I – Major (C,E,G,B,D)
- ii – minor (D,F,A,C,E)
- iii – minor (E,G,B,D,F#)
- IV – Major (F,A,C,E,G)
- V – Dominant (G,B,D,F,A)
- vi – minor (A,C,E,G,B)
- vii – Diminished (B,D,F,Ab, B, minor 3rds, no 9th)

If we analyze how each scale degree differs from it’s parallel major we see that minor seventh chords (ii7) have a lowered 3rd and 7th. Dominant (V7) has a lowered 7th only. Diminished (vii7) has lowered 3rd,5th, and twice-lowered 7th. Chords are notated as follows: (*most common)

Major Chords: DMaj7*, DM7, D(triangle)7....(sorry don’t have a triangle font.)

Minor Chords: Dmin7, Dm7, D-7*.

Dominant Chords: D7*, D13, D9. (not D6. D6 is a major chord)

In General All minor chords are “ii” chords regardless of key area position

If we look at all the minor seventh chords in the example above we see that they are all made up the same way, b3 and b7. Due to this, there is no reason to think of minor seventh chords as anything other than “ii” chords. Minor 7 chords should be considered ii chords no matter how they fall in the harmonic structure, even if “technically” they are a “vi” or a “iii”. This is because jazz music modulates frequently and most minor seventh chords become subdominant calling for the “dorian” mode. For simplicities sake we will consider ALL minor chords to be ii chords, all dominant chords to be V7’s, and All Major chords to be I’s. This is true 99% of the time, so it is good practice to learn this way. For now just forget that “iii” and “vi” chords exist. They do exist, but only in special circumstances.

The altered chord

Altered chords can sometimes be confusing. An altered chord is anything that deviates from the examples above. Usually altered chords are dominant V chords. The alterations add extra tension. So a “D7b9” is an altered “D7” chord with an included b9. Simply find a D7 chord and flat the 9th degree and you’re done. What about V+7? What does the “+” mean? Or what about “Valt7” or “V7alt”? In each of these cases “Alt” or “+” means to raise the 5th of the chord. Usually it also implies raising the 9th as well. So “V7alt” would be the equivalent of “V7#5#9”. CMaj7#11 is also common. One also might see C 6/9. These are major altered chords.

Essential Element #3: Beginning Scale Structures and Modes

Major Scales, Dorian, Mixolydian. The holy trinity of music scales. ☺

It is common to walk into a middle school jazz class and hear them working on blues scales. This is good. It is uncommon to walk into a middle school jazz class and hear them working on dorian and mixolydian scales. It is even more uncommon to hear them working through dorian and mixolydian scales through a sequential pattern in 4ths. This is really bad if our intent is to train students how to improvise, because blues doesn’t happen all the time. Dorian and Mixolydian happen almost ALL the time.

Modes are the essential element of developing step-wise phrasing in jazz. While all the modes are important, there are only three that are commonly used. Dorian, Mixolydian, and Ionian (major). Modes are created by playing an eight note step-wise sequence in any key starting on different notes within that key. For example (key of C):

A musical staff in treble clef showing an eight-note step-wise sequence in the key of C. The notes are C, D, E, F, G, A, B, and C. Brackets and labels identify the modes and their corresponding scale degrees: Ionian (major) 1-1 (C), Dorian (minor) 2-2 (D), Phrygian 3-3 (E), Lydian 4-4 (F), Mixolydian (dominant) 5-5 (G), Aeolian 6-6 (A), and Locrian 7-7 (B). The labels are positioned below the staff, with vertical lines connecting them to the corresponding notes on the staff.

Scale degree 1 to 1 results in **Ionian** (Major Scale)

Scale degree 2 to 2 results in **Dorian** (the jazz minor scale used over minor chords)

Scale degree 3 to 3 results in **Phrygian**

Scale degree 4 to 4 results in **Lydian**

Scale degree 5 to 5 results in **Mixolydian** (the jazz dominant scale used over dominant chords)

Scale degree 6 to 6 results in **Aeolian**

Scale degree 7 to 7 results in **Locrian**

It is important to note that you can think of modes in two ways. The above examples are taken from a “key specific/relative” way of thinking. All we are concerned with is the key signature and the starting pitch. You may also think of modes in a “pattern specific/parallel” way of thinking. For example:

For the Dorian Mode “key specific” you think D – D in the key of C. But for Dorian Mode “pattern specific” you would think D – D in D Major with a b3 and b7.

Which way the best way? Both. It is important to know how to derive modes in both directions. Beginning improvisers will see chord progressions one at a time, so it is helpful for them to think in terms of b3, b7. Advanced improvisers think more and more in relation to “key area”. For this reason, ear training should always be done in by key.

It’s ok to learn dorian as b3,b7 and mixolydian as b7, but when ear training resist the urge to do this.

Ear train by playing scales within keys. Don’t run down all Mixolydians or all Dorians. Always play them within a key. Example: In C, play D dorian, G mixolydian, C Major. This is to re-enforce the chord progression so students can audiate it. Expose students to blues scales, but do not work on them as the primary course of study.

Lydian is used when the #11 alteration is shown on a chord symbol.

See Essential #5 for more explanation on why we ear train by key area.

Using Patterns in Context:

The image displays a musical score for guitar, consisting of ten staves. The first four staves are organized into two pairs. Each pair begins with a melodic line in the bass clef, followed by a chordal line in the treble clef. The first pair features a Cmaj7 chord, and the second pair features an Fmaj7 chord. The third pair features a Cmaj7 chord, and the fourth pair features a Gmaj7 chord. The fifth staff is a melodic line in the bass clef, with a D-7 chord indicated above it. The sixth staff is a melodic line in the bass clef, with G-7 and D-7 chords indicated above it. The seventh staff is a melodic line in the bass clef, with A-7 and D-7 chords indicated above it. The eighth staff is a chordal line in the treble clef, with D-7 and G-7 chords indicated above it. The ninth staff is a chordal line in the treble clef, with D-7 and G-7 chords indicated above it. The tenth staff is a chordal line in the treble clef, with A-7 and D-7 chords indicated above it. The score concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Essential Element #5: THE II7 – V7 – I Chord progression

Subdominant to Dominant to Tonic relationships must be built into an improvisers ear. They must recognize them when they hear them. The II – V – I chord progression is probably the most common chord progression in jazz music. All of the ear training done should be designed to re-enforce the ability to audiate this chord progression. As stated in Element #3; when learning scales, learn them by “key area.” Don’t play “dorians in all twelve keys”, and “mixolydians in all twelve keys” etc. - Learn them in the II – V – I sequence, in fourths. Sequence: (play each scale to the 9th scale degree)

D Dorian - G Mixolydian – C Major (key of C) repeat this key area over and over, or move on...

Change the Major to Dorian and proceed with

C Dorian – F Mixolydian – Bb Major (key of Bb) repeat this key area over and over, or move on...

Change the Major to Dorian and proceed with

Bb Dorian – Eb Mixolydian – Ab Major (key of Ab)

AND SO ON....

You can do the II-V-I's in any sequence you wish, but always proceed II to V to I as a group.

II-V-I Patterns

The image displays a musical score for four instruments: Bass, Tenor, Alto, and Saxophone. The score is organized into four systems, each corresponding to an instrument. The first system (Bass) includes four measures with chord symbols: Dmin7, G7, Cmaj7, and Fmaj7. The second system (Tenor) has two measures. The third system (Alto) has two measures. The fourth system (Saxophone) has two measures. The notation includes eighth and quarter notes, rests, and slurs. The key signature is one flat (Bb), and the time signature is 4/4.

Essential Element #6: Listening

Listen not only in playing concept, tone and inflection, but also to “STEAL LICKS.” I’m probably going to get a lot of rolling eyes at this point. Some might be saying “yeah, but if you steal licks, that isn’t really improvising.” If we think of improvisation as learning a new language there are phrases and grammar that must be learned and copied in order to speak it coherently. Later, we put our own variation on these phrases, our own style, and maybe change them a little bit. Maybe once in a while we come up with something entirely original. We don’t steal to copy, but we must steal to learn. There is no original jazz lick, there is only reorganized variations on other things that have come before.

Transcribing

I do not recommend making written transcriptions of jazz solos common practice. Everyone should do it from time to time, but writing a solo down does not serve any immediate purpose. Transcribe by ear and learn them by rote. When you hear something you like learn it by ear. Find out how it is used (chord structure) and then place it in your lick library ready for use in your solos.

Essential Element #7: Form and Standards

It is good to learn to improvise on music that the band is working on. But this misses one of the most crucial things needed by a jazz improviser. The ability to know “Standard FORMS” and “Standard Songs.” Every “gig” a jazz musician will have will probably be comprised entirely of playing “Standard Songs.” These songs should be worked on and learned as early as possible. Students should begin becoming familiar with the chords, especially where the II-V-I’s occur. Students should also be familiar with “Standard Forms.” These forms are song forms that happen frequently. These include:

AABA – no specific chord progression

Rhythm Changes - a type of AABA with a standard chord progression

12 Bar Blues - specific chord progression

Rhythm changes and 12 bar blues always have the exact same chord progression, or at least they are always very, very similar. It should be part of the ear-training exercises to develop how these forms sound and flow harmonically.

Essential Element 8: Diminished Scales

The diminished scale is the first scale that will make improvisation “hip.” Diminished scales are used over V7 chords in a major key. They can be used instead of Mixolydian and most times should be used. Diminished scales (alternatively known as the half-whole diminished, or octatonic) create more dominant tension and create more satisfying releases to the tonic.

The image displays two musical staves in treble clef with a common time signature. The first staff shows three scale patterns: 1) Dmin7 Dorian (D-F-A-B-C-E), 2) G7 Diminished (G-A-Bb-B-C), and 3) Cmaj7 Major (C-D-E-F-G-A-B). The second staff shows three scale patterns: 1) Dmin7 Dorian (D-F-A-B-C-E), 2) G7 Mixolydian (G-A-B-C-Bb), and 3) Cmaj7 Major (C-D-E-F-G-A-B). Each scale is written across three measures, with the first measure starting on the root of the chord.

Diminished scales proceed in the pattern: half, whole, half, whole, and so on. As such, there can be only three diminished scales. One diminished scale works over 4 different dominant key areas.

Patterns Using Diminished Scales:

Essential Element 9: Intermediate Scales and Patterns

Pentatonic, Whole Tone, Blues-Pentatonic.

We can now deviate from traditional modes and create more interesting scales to improvise with. Pentatonic scales can be used in Blues, Minor, and Major.

Pentatonic Scales

Pentatonic Scales are one of the best tools that can be learned. They are a variation of a major scale proceeding in the following order. 1,2,3,5,6. The 4 and 7 are left out. Pentatonic scales can be used in major, minor, and blues situations. A broad range of patterns can be created and employed as well. Pentatonics are extremely useful!

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1

1 2 3 5 6 1

SCALE STEP PATTERN

1

BROKEN FOURTHS PATTERN

2

3

4

Whole-Tone

Whole-tone is used over altered V chords or in minor II-V-I's (see essential element 10)

Pentatonic with ½ steps.

Blues-Pentatonic, sometimes called Pentatonic with half-steps, can be used almost anytime regular pentatonic is used, especially in minor keys and in blues. It is not used as often in major keys.

Essential Element 10: Minor II – V – I's

Locrian, or Dorian b2 b5. Altered 5's. Whole-tone.

After students have a firm grasp of II-V-I's in major keys, they can explore them in minor keys. II-V-I's in minor keys are really no different than major keys. As before ear-training is extremely important so that the ear will know how the chords will proceed naturally.

The concept is the same as major keys, the only differences are variations in the modes used one or two variations in arpeggios. Here are the differences:

The II in a minor two has a b5, making it half-diminished. Instead of using dorian most people use locrian. This is a little counter-intuitive as locrian is the 7th mode, but it is notated as a II chord. To make it more intuitive you might teach it as the dorian mode of a natural minor scale, which is the same thing.

The V7 in a minor II-V-I is usually altered (#5,#9). Whole-Tone is a great choice for this altered V chord. Super Locrian is another great choice. It is the 7th mode of an ascending melodic minor scale. This scale, like diminished in major dominant chords, creates a lot of dominant tension in minor keys.

For the I chord, you can think any minor scale, but remember any minor 7 chord can be thought of as dorian, for simplicities sake. Harmonic minor is used frequently.

The Next Step

These are the building blocks of Jazz Improvisation. To become more proficient and professional one must continue to listen and copy. One must constantly challenge themselves to take what they learn and make it harder. Kirk Whalum calls uses the acronym "AS TWO." Always Something To Work On. Create different patterns. Play scales in a structure you haven't done before. Take whatever you know well, and add a new level of complexity to it. Always make what you know harder. Always Something To Work On!