

Learning Tunes

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The benefits of learning tunes for an improviser can be profound. It will help your ear, knowledge of forms and help you become a more confident player. It is also essential for those who want to sit in at jam sessions and be able to swim in the waters of more advanced musicians. Here are some ways to get started!

- 1.) Choose a song to learn and stick with it. Resist the urge to do a little of this work and then move on to the next tune. If you master one tune first before moving on, mastering the next one will be easier! Give some thought to what you would like to learn and what sort of tune might contain some useful elements for your development.
- 2.) Find a “vault” recording of the song you want to learn. If lyrics exist for the song, try to locate something with a singer. Choosing a recording with the clearest and most correct examples of the melody and harmony is imperative. You should strive to learn every nuance of this recording. Listen to it many times, then try singing along. Avoid the urge to start singing along until you are certain you know it. Record yourself doing this. Note the areas of the song where your singing is less clear. Try to improve.
- 3.) Find a “vault” lead sheet that accurately reflects the harmony as it exists on the recording you choose. You will find that numerous harmonizations exist for most standard tunes. The good fake books will reference the recording they consulted in the lead sheet they have published. If your ear is in a place where you can deal with the process without a lead sheet – good for you! For most us, a lead will be necessary at some point, at least for certain tunes. One goal you should keep in mind is to get off the lead sheet as soon as possible and let your ears be your guide. Use the lead sheet to confirm what you are hearing.
- 4.) **Learn the melody.** If the song has words, learn the words. Words help us remember and assimilate long melodic lines more easily. Goal – Be able to sing the melody correctly, completely and with 100% adherence to the form (from memory).

- 5.) **Learn the bass melody/roots.** Bass melody refers to the melodic line created by the lowest tone in the harmony (usually roots, but not always). Use the harmonic rhythm of the tune to determine the rhythmic values of the bass melody. This is not a walking bass line which contains more information than we want at this stage. Goal – Be able to sing the bass melody correctly, completely and with 100% adherence to the form (from memory).
- 6.) **Sing and play exercise.** If you're a wind player, do this at the piano.
 - a. Play melody while you sing the roots.
 - b. Play roots while you sing the melody (usually the easier of these exercises)
- 7.) **Guide tone lines.** Connect the 3rds and 7ths through the tune. Do this on the piano and with your voice/instrument. In cyclical harmony you will notice that the 3rd of a particular chord will be closely adjacent to the 7th of the next chord and so on. Construct the smoothest line through the tune starting on the 3rd, then, starting on the 7th. Sing and play.
- 8.) Play chord **arpeggios** through the tune. Start with what you know; triads, then seventh chords, then 9th, 11th and 13th chords. Goal - be able to start on any pitch of the chord and play up or down through the chord tones with equal ease.
- 9.) Know and be able to play an appropriate scale associated with each chord. Start with continuous step-wise motion and progress to scale patterns; alternating thirds (and other intervals through the seventh and beyond), ascending, descending and alternating triad patterns (ex. alternating 1-3-5, 6-4-2, 3-5-7, 8(1)-6-4, 5, 7, 9(2), etc.). The possibilities are endless.
- 10.) Play **tetrachord licks** over the changes, (i.e. scale step sequences like 1-2-3-5, 3-4-5-7, 5-6-7-9. Goal – be able to play at least two sequences that start on a pitch other than the root over the changes of the tune. Keep in mind that you can combine these pitches in any order. For the tetrachord 1-2-3-5, you could play 2-5-3-1, 5-2-3-1, 3-1-2-5, etc. You may have to spend a bit of time starting on the roots to get your bearing before moving on to non-root sequences. If this is challenging, write out the sequences.
- 11.) Find an improvised solo on the tune you're learning and transcribe it. The choice of what recording to transcribe is very important. Here again, a good teacher is invaluable. Goal – Accurately transcribe then memorize and perform the transcribed solo. Note – you may have to start small; a short phrase or bass line, for example, before working up to a multi-chorus solo. Try to decode the compositional approach of the artist you're transcribing. Analyze the harmonic relationships and identify rhythmic patterns. Try to

draw some conclusions about the transcribed example. Pick your favorite moment from the transcribed solo and learn it in all keys. If you are able to understand why it works over a particular harmony, try to plug this idea into your own improvisations over other tunes that share a similar harmonic passage.

12.) Write a contrafact on the tune. Regardless of where you are in your development, this exercise will demonstrate what you know, or to be more precise *-how you hear things*. This is a great diagnostic tool for checking your knowledge of harmony and rhythmic phrasing. Write as you might improvise. If this proves to be too daunting a task, try some of the suggestions below. It can be helpful to use clichés and templates to limit the choices that exist.

a. Mimic qualities of the original melody of the song:

1. Follow the rhythms of the melody and “fill-in-the-blanks” with other correct harmonic choices.
2. Follow the line of the melody and transpose it. If the melody starts on the 3rd, then try starting on the 7th and do a harmonic (correct scale tone rather than exact) transposition.
3. Identify the underlying rhythmic structure and “write to” the accent pattern.
4. Displace the melody by 2 beats. 4 beats, etc. and adjust the pitches in the line to fit the harmony in a spot it wasn’t intended to be used over.

b. Write the new melody in the style of:

1. Charlie Parker
2. Wayne Shorter
3. Chick Corea
4. Thelonious Monk
5. Kenny Wheeler

Notes on the process and good practice habits

The process of learning tunes is a fun and ultimately empowering experience. The internalization of the material that the tradition requires of you also asks you to come to terms with many of the

major skill areas involved in learning and performing music. Keep in mind that learning music is a life-long process and is not a race to some imaginary finish line.

Danilo Perez, a superb pianist and composer stated that learning to be a good improviser is like building a three-legged stool. The first leg is everything you know intellectually about music theory. The second leg is your ear - aural skills and everything related to how you engage in music purely as sound. The third leg is your rhythmic skill set and everything related to groove, time-keeping and rhythmic independence. All of us have one leg that is shorter and another leg that is longer than the other on this imaginary stool. We all strive to level the stool and operate from a place of balance when we perform.

The teacher's role

Ultimately, we must each become our own teacher. Mastery only comes to those who are willing to “own” their process, the results and do the work it takes. The best thing you can get from a teacher is the time saved in not chasing down unproductive practices of one sort or another. There is an old saying, “I might not be the best teacher you ever had, but if I do my job right I’ll be the last teacher you will ever need.”