**Teaching Jazz Improvisation to Grade 8 students**

**A review of three approaches**

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## Introduction

Coming from a culture where music, including calypso, soca, reggae and jazz, were mostly performed memorized, and lent themselves to an improvisatory approach, my ears have already been attuned to an improvisatory / free style of playing. The original music and songs were composed around lyrics and had more meaning than just the relationship between notes and rhythms, but included mental images, feelings and emotions. As an instrumentalist, it was not, then, uncommon to modify a melody to suit the changing lyrics of subsequent verses: Add a note here or change the rhythm there to suit the lyrics. Nor was it uncommon to do some sort of word painting to help describe what was being said through the non-verbal musical art form: Play an octave higher when the words sang about the sky, e.g. What about the fusion or blending of calypso with jazz, where verses two, three and four are turned into improvisational episodes for the brass players who were primarily accustomed to punching responses to the singer’s words and chants? What does the player do to “get away” from the strict melody and play something fun and unique for those coveted four to eight measures? I will explore this question in this paper.

So, as music teachers in Canada, where learning music tends to be more structured and formal process, what should we do when we find ourselves in front of a group of eager grade 8 band students bursting with enthusiasm to learn to play jazz because it seems to be fun, easy and accessible? How do we approach the task in a way that is pedagogical, yet not too academic; structured, yet not…improvised?

Although there are many approaches to teaching improvisation, I will look at the following three which are being used in schools in North America: One note jams; Licks, phrases and patterns; and Start with the basic melody.

## Pre-requisites

In my research, most jazz music teachers agree that the first steps in teaching jazz music is to emphasize the following four elements: The need for basic instrumental skills; lots of exposure to listening to recordings or performances; the ability to memorize a melody; and the willingness to perform an improvised/unprepared solo.

More specifically, like classical music, jazz music is based on scales. However, a jazz musician uses his/her knowledge of the scales for both the playing of the basic melody as well as the composition of improvised melodies. In this introductory approach, the following scales and modes will be required learning. These are based on the parent scale of C.

**Ionian** (major scale): C D E F G A B C  
**Dorian** (based on the 2nd scale degree of the major scale): D E F G A B C D  
**Phrygian** (based on the 4th scale degree of the major scale): F G A B C D E F **Mixolydian** (based on the 5th scale degree of the major scale): G A B C D E F G  
**Aeolian** (natural minor): A B C D E F G A  
**Blues scale**: C Eb F F# G Bb C

As well, it must be assumed that some students have never been exposed to jazz music. Therefore, the teacher must insist on either required listening for homework or, better yet, regular listening as part of class time. Similar to learning a language, a person will best succeed when immersed in the sounds, inflections and rhythms of the language.

Also, much of jazz performance is done from memory – that is, by memorizing the melody to a song, as well as its chords or chord progression, the performer can more easily keep track of where they are melodically and harmonically. The reason being, that since the jazz musician embellishes on the basic melody, they are expected to “compose” or ornament or embellish on the spot. This expectation requires an intimate knowledge of the melody, the chords, and the related scales and modes of the song. And most popularly, jazz musicians improvise for at least one verse during the performance of a song. This will require the shy or insecure students to try new things in the presence of their classmates or potentially a small public.

## One note jams

Both West (2010) and Rose (1998) get their students to start by making up their own rhythms using only the tonic – One Note. This method of limiting the number of notes forces the student to improvise only rhythm, articulation, accents and dynamics, leaving some mental room to think about phrasing and song structure. Rose says “Strange as it may seem, setting up limitations for yourself will force you to be more creative.” The student then goes on to add other notes, a second note to include the third scale degree, a third note to include the fifth scale degree and so on, but only using the notes that will eventually make up the blues scale. In the beginning, all of this is done over a recording of the most popular jazz form, the 12-bar blues. See *Appendix A* for a list of songs based on the 12-bar blues.

As more notes are added, the teacher guides the students in techniques using repeated notes and rhythms, rests and long versus short notes, and the formation of reusable patterns. This process augments the student’s personal repertoire of ideas. As well, the students will learn various terms, including safe and unsafe notes, tension and release, chord tones, scales degrees, blues scale, binary and ternary rhythms, staccato, slides, bends and fall offs.

## Licks, phrases and patterns

From another perspective, Kane (2005) and Berle (1987) believe that like language, music is made up of licks, phrases and patterns. According to Berle, “a lick is a short melodic fragment based on a particular chord; a phrase is a connected series of licks; and a pattern is a model of either of these to be copied or imitated.” Since this system is based largely on the reading of printed music, and not necessarily understanding the relationship between chords and chord tones, the young jazz musician will learn to associate a sequence of notes with a specific chord symbol. This requires only a bit of memorization and mental referencing, which gets the student off to a quick start. However, it will become more complicated when songs in other keys with different chord symbols are introduced. The student’s knowledge of the relationships of notes to chord symbols will have to be addressed. On the positive side, the student will have developed a solid repertoire of improvisational material for all songs written in the initial key.

## Start with the basic melody

What I believe to be the most effective method for the grade 8 student, begins simply with the memorization of the basic melody. In this approach Titlebaum (2012) and Leisch (2011) show how the process of learning and memorizing a melody develops the valuable skills necessary for further study in jazz interpretation. These skills include developing the memory, internalization of rhythm and feel, listening and intonation.

Titlebaum’s (2012) next step is to “distill” the melody. Here he simplifies the melody down to half notes and whole notes. The students are expected to write out their own music. In the distillation process, the overall contour of the melody is respected as well as the associated chord tones. Here basic understanding of chords is introduced (root, third, fifth, seventh). To further embellish the melody, he then, in sequence, adds passing tones (diatonic or chromatic tones between melody notes), diatonic neighbour tones (diatonic tones above or below the second of two melody notes), double neighbours (two tones, a diatonic over-neighbour and a chromatic under-neighbour, or vice-versa, before a melody note), and approaching chromatic tones.

Leisch (2011) uses a somewhat similar approach but he calls it “encircling”. Encircling involves approaching a melody note from above and leaving it from below, or vice-versa. While his approach is not executed in steps as small as that of Titlebaum’s, they both reach the same goal of filling in the intervallic gaps between melody notes with passing tones. I would suggest here that a teacher can use Leisch’s method for a group of quicker learners, and Titlebaum’s for learners requiring a more step-by-step approach.

## Conclusion

One aspect of this exercise to which I alluded is the knowledge of the lyrics to the songs to be improvised. There was little to no mention of this in any of the above approaches, as they were speaking almost exclusively to instrumentalists, and that they likely wanted to keep it short and underwhelming. However, I would like to suggest that while a student can do a decent job at embellishing a melody based solely on its notes and rhythms, that digging deeper into the music itself can only intensify and improve his/her interpretation of any given song. By digging deeper, I refer specifically to knowing the chords, the form and the lyrics. Knowing the chords will give more creative direction. Knowing the form of the song will help with phrasing. Knowing the lyrics will allow us to connect emotionally with the notes and the spirit of the song.

Without a doubt, I will use Titlebaum’s (2012) method as I believe it to be gradual, clear and teachable to visual, verbal, musical, logical, and intrapersonal learners. However, if I had a class where the majority of the players had never heard jazz, I would default to the One Note Jams approach, which is a very gradually and safe process. Finally I would reserve the Lick, Phrases and Patterns approach for the more experienced jazz students.

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## Appendix A

Some songs based on the 12-bar blues

* Sonnymoon for Two, Sonny Rollins
* Now’s the Time, Charlie Parker
* Watermelon Man, Herbie Hancock
* Train fair blues, Muddy Waters
* The thrill is gone, B.B.King
* Stormy Monday, T-Bone Walker
* Who’d been talkin, Howlin’ Wolf
* Onion Rings, Freddie King