

Practical Approaches to Teaching Improv In The Jazz Big Band

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Introduction

What is Improvisation? Creating a coherent statement “in the moment”

- What are the elements that make a musical statement coherent?
 - Time
 - Rhythm
 - Phrase construction
 - Phrase placement
 - Aural recognition and recall
 - Note choices
 - Melodic contour
 - Recognizable musical fragments, i.e. vocabulary

- What it is NOT: playing/doing whatever you want

Take the Steps!

These steps to developing improvising students can and should be concurrent, but must be separated contextually in order to concentrate on and develop them.

**Prerequisites: students can play all major scales and can manipulate articulations*

How long should it take? Some say a lifetime, but count on progress over months, not days or weeks

Step 1: the director must demonstrate and model the musical goals for students

Get your instrument out and play with your students daily!

Step 2: Develop phrase and rhythmic/stylistic concepts

Part 1: Learning rhythmic vocabulary

- Common jazz (swing) rhythms on single pitch *with a groove*
- Articulation, including note length
- Syncopation
- Hear spaces
- Call and response
- Place ideas in 2 or 4 bar spaces (what sounds good/right?)
- Follow the leader

Part 2: Phrase construction

- Ask a question, provide an answer (what is the next logical thing to play?)
- AABA form and repetition (hold original statement in mind)
- String together multiple phrases to create a statement

Step 3: Develop The Ear

- Recall simple melodies by ear, focus on scale steps/degrees
- Transposing simple tunes: cycle of 4ths, chromatic
- Tendency of scale tones: major scale, then dorian scale
- What notes sound correct/good?
- Cells: limiting choices in order to be creative
- Ask a question, provide an answer, based on pitch choices
- Drones
- Transcribing melodies and solos
- Neighbor tones and passing tones

Step 4: Combining Rhythm and Pitch

- Drones with grooves
- 3 note cells, as before
- More transcribing, with greater detail
- Ask a question, provide an answer (what is the next logical thing to play?)
- AABA form and repetition (hold original statement in mind)
- String together multiple phrases to create a statement

Step 5: Learn standard jazz tunes

- So What
- My Favorite Things
- Bye Bye Blackbird
- Bag's Groove

Step 6: Jazzifying a common tune

- Happy Birthday
- Amazing Grace
- Then move on to "standards" such as *Another You*, etc.

Step 7: Theory "talk" and application

- Nomenclature
- Scales: down, up, in thirds
- Chords: outlines up to 7th, root position, then inverted
- Extensions related to the scale in triad form
- Guide tones
- Whole note, half note, quarter note solos: hear the lines in the changes!
- *Avoid thinking too much!*
- *Don't worry about wrong notes, but do worry about resolving them*

The Creative Musician must do Creative practicing

- *You must practice being creative, in order to be creative. It won't just happen. Imagine and practice all of the possibilities so that you can play them when the time comes.*
- Scales in more creative ways: thirds, reverse direction, find triads within, etc.
- Personalizing familiar tunes: *Happy Birthday, Amazing Grace*, pop tunes, etc.
- Improvising on snippets of tunes from other styles (ex: concert band, symphonies, etc.)
- Play along with recordings, imitating snippets
- Transcribe (play by ear) melodies and improvised solos

In the end, it all comes down to an awareness of what it is supposed to sound like, then working on the techniques to make it sound "right"

Software used on an iPhone during this presentation

iTunes

Amazing Slow Downer

Pro Metronome

iReal Pro

Audio tracks from *The Living Jazz Tradition* by Steve Treseler

Common jazz rhythm pages from *The Living Jazz Tradition* by Steve Treseler

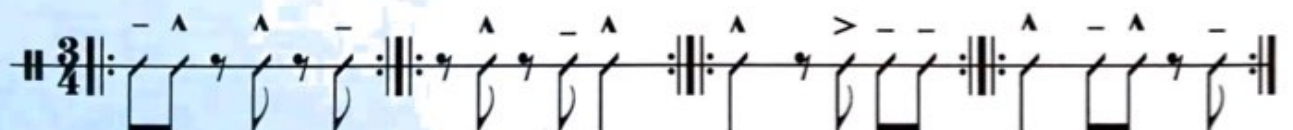
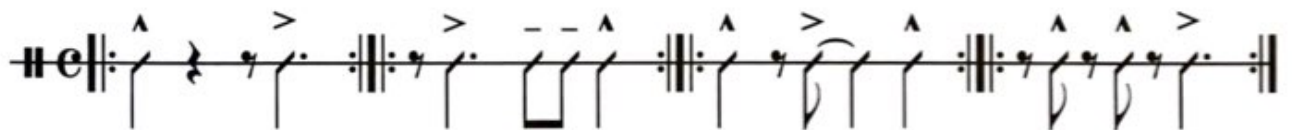
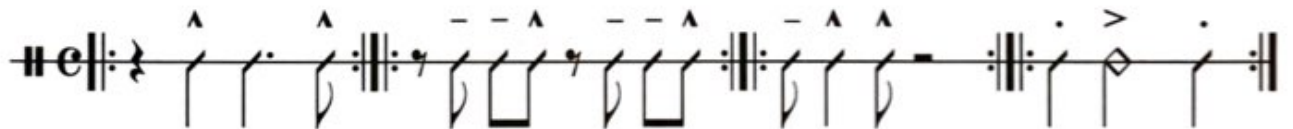
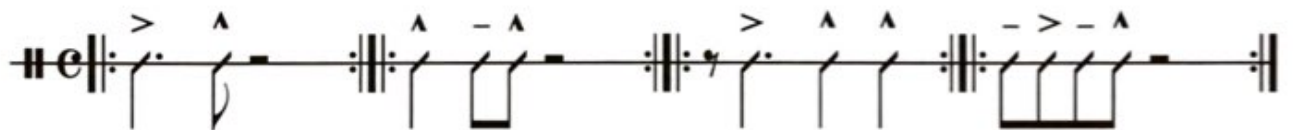
Improvising with Common Jazz Rhythms

Restricting yourself to common jazz rhythms is a great way to build confidence as an improviser.

WOODSHED

- Choose a one-measure rhythm below and play it repeatedly with a single note. Play along with a drum groove track or metronome.
- Add other pitches once the rhythm feels good.
- Repeat this with other rhythms.
- Combine two or more rhythms.
- Compose your own rhythms.

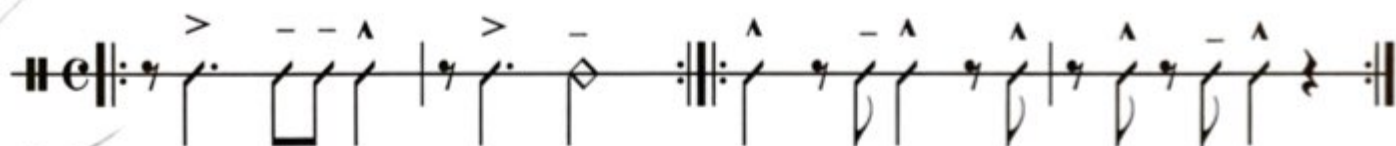
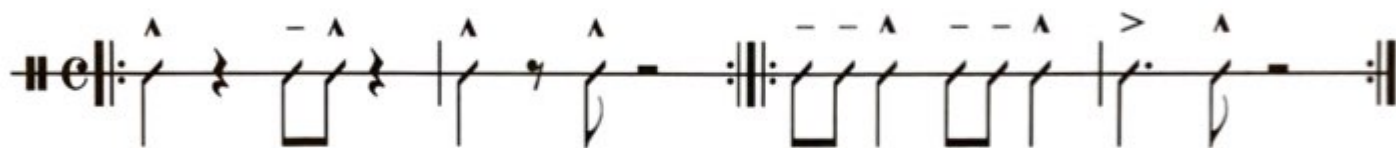
One-Measure Rhythms



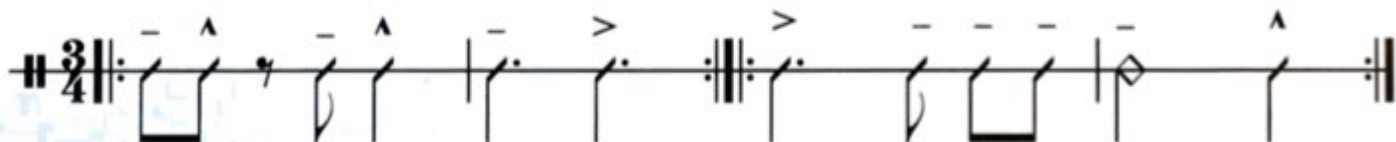
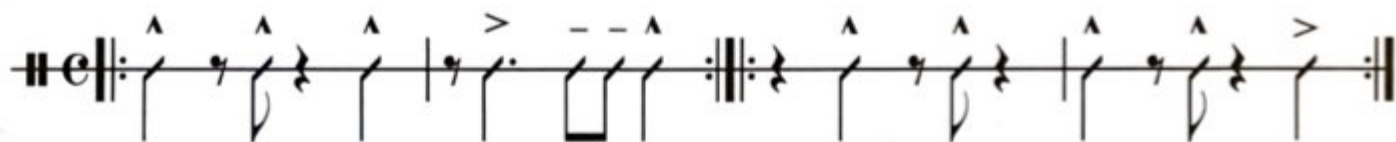
WOODSHED

- Repeat the same "Woodshed" exercises from the previous page with these two-measure rhythms:

Two-Measure Rhythms



*halsa
samba*



Happy Birthday

(Medium Swing)

|| F₁₃ | C₉ | G⁻⁹ | C₉ | F₉ | C⁻⁷ | F₉ | B^b_{Δ7}

E^b₉ | D⁻⁷ | G⁻⁷ | C₉ | F₉ | C₉ ||

Amazing Grace

(Medium Swing)

Bruya Chart

|| C₉ | G₋₉ F_{7#9} | F₉ | C₉ |

| C₉ B₉^b | A₋₇ | D₋₉ | G_{7b9} |

| G₋₇ | C₉ | F₉ F_{7#9} | C₉ /_G | G_{7#9} |

| A₋₇ | E_{7#9} D₋₇ | G_{7#9} | F₉ | C₇ | G_{7#9} ||