Approaches to Building a Jazz Vocabulary
Glenn Kostur
Director of Jazz Studies
University of New Mexico

The process of developing a vocabulary for jazz improvisation is a lifelong project. We often use language analogies when talking about learning music and improvisation. I think that learning to improvise is not only like simply learning a language, but even more like learning to compose poetry in a language; the improviser must create phrases that follow specific forms, fulfill rhythmic expectations, and ideally take familiar phrases and use them in new and interesting ways. We say that an articulate person can make a good ‘turn of phrase’, manipulating words and phrases in such a way that the listener hears or perceives a concept a little differently. Likewise, a good improviser is not only able to put the ‘right’ pattern or Charlie Parker lick in the ‘right’ place, but he is able to manipulate that pattern or lick or cliché in such a way the a new musical idea is created.

By far, the best way to amass a jazz vocabulary is to listen to recordings of jazz masters, absorb their musical ideas, copy and learn their phrases and licks, and then apply them in your own way. This should be done in as natural and organic way as possible, using the ear without too much emphasis on lots of confusing theoretical information getting in the way. Not only that, but it would be great if that process could start at the age of four or five!

OK, now back to the real world. With students getting into jazz at the middle-school, high-school or adult level, it is still important to do as much listening and copying as possible. But it is also reasonable to have a more step-by-step process of learning jazz phrases and licks.

Let’s look at a couple of different approaches to building a vocabulary: the anatomy of a ‘good’ jazz phrase; what makes the phrase sound like it is ‘making the changes’, and some techniques for manipulating licks or phrases to make them more personal and more versatile.

We have different approaches because jazz improvisers don’t use jut one technique or principle to create a solo. From phrase to phrase, from chorus to chorus, from solo to solo, the jazz improviser chooses from among many
processes, techniques and ideas to get the job done. What I have for you today are certainly not the only techniques, but they are some good ones, and they may give you some ideas for building your own vocabulary, and helping your students build theirs.

**Anatomy of a Jazz Lick (7-3 Resolutions)**

Jazz musicians refer to players who ‘make the changes’ or ‘run the changes’. That means that the player is not only playing ideas that fit with the underlying harmony, but is doing so in some specific ways. The player is using phrases that highlight the precise moments when the harmonies shift from one to the next. Even more specifically, the improviser will often use very particular notes in the harmony to achieve that end. When done by the masters, you could listen to the improvised solo without the accompanying rhythm section and still be able to ‘hear’ the chord progression. This is a crucial step beyond simply playing the ‘correct’ scales or arpeggios with the chord progression.

Assuming that the bass player in the rhythm section is playing the roots of the chords, the notes that most clearly delineate the harmonies are the thirds and sevenths of the chords. These are the notes that tell us the quality of the chord. The third tells us major or minor, and the seventh tells us tonic (major seventh) or dominant (lowered seventh). We refer to the collection of thirds and sevenths in a chord progression as the **guide tones**, and they are strung together to create the **guide tone line**.

**Ex.1**

These lines move gracefully, often chromatically, and supply the ‘guts’ of the harmony. Note that the 3rds and 7ths are constantly changing their order. When dealing with jazz harmony in this application it doesn’t matter which chord member is above or below.
7-3 Resolutions
With each change to the next chord, notice that one of the guide tones stays constant while the other one moves. Notice also that the note staying constant is the 3rd of the first chord becoming the 7th of the next chord. The notes that change are the 7th of one chord moving to the 3rd of the next chord.

Ex. 2

This 7-3 movement is the crucial element that makes a ‘good’ jazz phrase sound like it is ‘making the changes’. When we look at the vocabulary of the jazz masters we find that the strongest musical phrases often highlight this motion.

One artist who is regarded as a masterful ‘change runner’ was the trumpeter Clifford Brown. The example below shows Brown making both of the 7-3 resolutions in this ii-V-I cadence.

Ex. 3 Clifford Brown

Certainly, the interesting and creative notes that fill the rest of the measures contribute greatly to the beauty of this phrase. But it is the execution of the 7-3 resolutions that supply the framework and make the phrase so strong.

Filling It In

When devising your own jazz vocabulary, one way to start would be to lay out the 7-3 resolutions that you want to make, and then ‘connect the dots’ to create a full phrase. With the 7-3 in mind, there are three very common melodic shapes or outlines which help set up the resolutions. Outline No. 1 is a simple stepwise line, and Nos. 2 and 3 are simple arpeggios placed to set up the 7th as the final note of the arpeggio.
Ex. 4

We could start by laying out a phrase using some of these outlines:
Ex. 5

Then fill in the rest of the measure with simple diatonic material:
Ex. 6

Adding Approach Tones
While the clearest way to execute the 7-3 resolution is to have it occur precisely when the chord changes, a more sophisticated technique is to add one or more notes between the 7 and 3. Further, the resolution can be anticipated (happening before the chord changes) or delayed (happening after the chord changes).

Ex. 7 Approach Tones
Ex. 8 Anticipating or Delaying Resolution

Once again, we can turn to Clifford Brown for great examples of the techniques of approach tones and anticipated/delayed resolutions:

Ex. 9 Clifford Brown Delayed Resolutions

Ex. 10 Clifford Brown Anticipated Resolutions

These examples of 7-3 resolutions demonstrate a very important component in one’s jazz vocabulary. It is not necessary to make every one of these resolutions, but having a certain ‘batting average’ of hits establishes the improviser as one who ‘makes the changes’.

Developing Melodic Flexibility (Improvisation Calisthenics)

In addition to practicing pieces of jazz vocabulary as illustrated above, good improvisers spend time developing flexibility by taking basic technical exercises and manipulating them for variety and interest. The resulting material may be used as ‘filler’ between specific change-running patterns, or it may provide motivic material for a more ‘compositional’ approach to improvising.

One typical technique exercise is playing scales in thirds. In order to take this pattern apart and find what else we can do with it, let’s think about it as a series of two-note chunks:
Ex.11

Each chunk is moving upwards, so let’s call it an ‘up’ chunk, and the overall exercise is moving up through the instrument, so let’s call it an ‘ascending’ pattern.

We can take each chunk and invert it, making it a ‘down’ chunk:

Ex.11a

Now that we have ‘up’ and ‘down’ chunks, we can vary how we use them. If we alternate, we can start with ‘up’:

Ex.12

I would label this pattern as Thirds, Up/Down, Ascending. If I reverse the Up/Down arrangement to Down/Up I get a different pattern:

Ex.13 Down/Up, Ascending

Because we so often practice scale and arpeggio exercises starting at the bottom of the instrument, it is important, for the sake of improvisational flexibility, to break that habit and practice from top to bottom as well. We can take the two patterns above and make them into Descending patterns:
Of course, this is just the tip if the iceberg. This same principle can be applied to other scales: Harmonic minor, Melodic minor, Whole-Tone, Diminished. And it can be applied to larger intervals: 4ths, 5ths, 6ths and 7ths.

**But Wait!!! There’s More!!!** We can also apply some of the techniques of approach tones to these exercises. We can take each chunk and approach the first note in the chunk from below by a half-step. We get triplet patterns that look like this:

Ex.15 Up/Up Ascending and Down/Down Ascending with approaches.

If we keep the same arrangement of pitches, but play them as eighth-notes instead of triplets, we get a cool sounding, loopy, hemiola kind of lick:

Ex.16 Up/Up Ascending, chromatic approaches, eighth-notes.

Another expansion of this concept is adding more notes to the original pattern. Instead of two-note chunks (diads), let’s make three-note chunks (triads). The same labels of Up and Down, Ascending and Descending apply. And we can also insert chromatic approaches.
Ex.17 Triadic exercises with variations.

Yes, these ideas generate a mountain of material to practice. So, to break it up into smaller pieces, you can either limit yourself to practicing many of these variations in just one key at a time, or you can take just one, two or three of the variations through many keys (maybe even all twelve!). Which brings us to:

**Some Suggestions for Practicing**

- **Go Slow**
  When we listen to jazz recordings, those guys play FAST! So, of course we want to play that way, too. But the best way to be able to play fast is to spend extra time practicing slowly. I advocate tension-free practicing. When I am working on a new piece of material, I want to play it slowly enough that I have no tension in my hands and body, and none of that mental tension that can sometimes creep in (where my mind feels like it’s scrambling to get to the next note in time). When I have played the pattern or lick or phrase so many times that I can’t make any mistakes, then I GRADUALLY speed up the metronome. If I start to feel physical or mental tension, or if I find myself stumbling (even a little), then I’m going too fast, and I slow the metronome down. Eventually, I will reach a speed that I call “pattern tempo.” That is the point at which I can no longer think of each note as it goes by, but I think of groups of notes (or the entire phrase) as a pattern. Most of us can play scales faster than we can think of the individual notes. We know those groups of notes as patterned information.
• Practice for 100% Success in Getting the Right Lick at the Right Time
  – All The Time
Now that I know the new lick that I want to work into my solos, I need to practice in such a way that I am always successful in getting the lick in the right spot at the right time. Again, I want to avoid physical and mental tension. The approach I use is this:

1. I find a tune I’m comfortable with (‘Autumn Leaves’ is a favorite of mine), and a play-along at a comfortable tempo.
2. I find all of the places in the progression of the tune where my new lick will fit.
3. I start the play-along and WAIT. I don’t play anything until the progression gets to the spot(s) where my new lick will fit. I play the lick and then stop playing. I’m resting, following along with the progression in my mind until another spot for my lick comes around. I want to get many, many repetitions of putting the lick perfectly in the right spot, at the right time, without any wrong notes, fumbling or tension.
4. When I have done that A LOT, I start to gradually add very simple stuff in between the spots where I play my lick. I play whole-note and half-note things, maybe using guide tones or just playing the roots of the other chords, until I get to the spot for my lick. If necessary, I will force myself to rest for a beat or two or three before the spot, so that I can continue to be 100% successful with my new lick.
5. When I’ve done that for many choruses, I start to play some pick-up notes to lead into my new lick. And I’ll also try to play a few notes after the lick, to get the phrase to feel a little more conversational. My priority is still on executing the lick perfectly. So if I get too fancy and mess up the lick, I will take a step backward and play more simply around the lick.
6. As I reach the ability to lead into and out of the lick gracefully, I can start playing more and more in between the lick spots. I will also experiment with variations of the lick: adding rhythmic variety, changing the rhythmic placement (on purpose, not because I didn’t get there in time!).
7. I can also start to experiment, finding other places that the lick or a variation can work. With a tune like ‘Autumn Leaves’ I might be working on a lick that is a ii-V-I pattern in a major key, and I’ll see if I can alter it and move it to the relative minor, and use the variant on the ii-V-i in the minor key.
8. Throughout this process I will have been performing the lick in just one or two keys. That’s OK for now, because a huge part of becoming comfortable with a new lick is really hearing how it fits with the harmony. Unless you
have debilitating perfect pitch, the lick is going to sound the same, regardless of what key you’re in. I spend a substantial amount of time drilling the lick in one key, and that allows me to more efficiently move it to other keys.

**Write Down As Little As Possible**
The more you can practice by ear, and by figuring out the variations and other keys in your head, the more likely you are to be able to incorporate new material into your playing. For example, throughout this handout there are several musical examples. You might play them initially by reading them from this sheet, but try to learn them in other keys without writing them out. When you start putting your own ideas and patterns together, put them in a notebook, but write out just enough information to serve as a reference. Don’t write it out in all keys, but DO play it in as many keys as you can.

**Resources- here are some great books and play-alongs to check out:**

“Comprehensive Technique for Jazz Musicians” by Bert Ligon, Houston Publishing/ Hal Leonard. Tons of useful stuff, including a detailed presentation of the “outlines” mentioned earlier.

“How to Improvise” by Hal Crook, Advance Music. With play-along CD. Another book with great ideas about how to organize your musical material, and how to organize your practice time.

“Essential Jazz Lines of Charlie Parker”, “Essential Jazz Lines of Cannonball Adderley” Mel Bay publishing. With play-along CDs. Both of these books have good, concise explanations of the 7-3 resolution concepts. And they both have lots of good licks to steal!

“The Jazz Style of Clifford Brown”, David Baker. This is a book of transcribed solos, with analysis by David Baker. Also includes a catalog if ii-V-I licks from the solos.

Jamey Aebersold Vol. 3 ii-V-I. The play-along tracks on the CD are not songs, per se, but they take you through all twelve keys. Hugely valuable is a tremendous catalog of ii-V-I licks in Major and minor. From very simple to very chromatic, altered.
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