

# The Recorder Player's Introduction to Jazz

by Joel Levine and Pete Rose

*Recorder players and early music enthusiasts have a basis upon which to explore the world of jazz improvisation. Here's how to build upon what you already know.*

<http://www.jazzrecorder.com/>

**T**HOUGH THERE IS CLEARLY no dearth of available material on the history, personalities, theory, and practice of jazz, no previous attempt seems to have been made to look at this music from the particular needs and backgrounds of recorder players. That is the essential focus of this article. It is intended to be purely introductory, and its authors hope that you, the readers, will have no unreasonable expectations. We wish to make clear that—as with virtually any art form—jazz cannot be learned from the reading of a single magazine article.

We have attempted to narrow the scope to five important areas. The first section, Understanding Jazz Style and Language, briefly covers the historical and ethnic origins of jazz and its stylistic and instrumental traditions, the special problems a recorder player faces in connecting with these traditions, and some hints on how to begin making this connection. Section two, The Modus Operandi of Jazz Improvisation, deals with the overall way in which a jazz musician functions within the context of performing a piece. This is done with a particular consideration for the information, and misinformation, a recorder player might be likely to know. Similarly, the third section, Swing, approaches its subject from the nearest equivalent in historical music performance (*notes inégales*). A cursory look at the language of jazz is presented in section four, Learning the Fundamentals of Jazz. Finally, in section five, we offer ten exercises for Developing Improvisational Skills.

In addition, this article will present a discussion of how to find books and recordings that can be used for follow-up, as well as a blues solo improvised by Joel Levine and transcribed by Pete Rose. We hope this material will interest and inspire both professional and amateur recorder players to pursue further the study and practice of jazz.

## Understanding Jazz Style and Language

This is a topic that can be approached in a variety of ways, since there is no single definition of jazz. Unlike Baroque music, for example, which is defined as much by a period of history as by a set of musical conventions, jazz, at least for now, is an evolving form. There is a wide breadth of opinion offered by academics, journalists, and performers about the definition of this music. Even the word “jazz” has been viewed as an inappropriate label. Although we will not enter this area of discussion, a few general points about the nature and cultural origins of this music might be useful to anyone who is getting started.

Jazz is a musical tradition that has its origins in the culture of American slavery. The slave trade that brought people from Africa to the Americas stimulated a mixture of cultures that produced musical traditions in many countries, including Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, and the United States. Although the experience of African slaves in the United States has affected many of the arts, its influence on American music, from the “field holler” through blues and gospel music to jazz, may be its most potent artistic legacy. Therefore, one way to enhance your personal appreciation of jazz is to learn more about the African-American experience and to consider the conditions that shaped the development of this music.

To return to the specifics of the music itself, it is important to realize that there are many styles covered by the term “jazz.” Dixieland, swing, bebop, hard-bop, free-jazz, avant-garde, jazz-rock (and more) are all different ways of referring to dialects of the language of jazz. Each has its own musical idioms and conventions; each may emphasize distinct aspects for the player; each is a fashion statement.

Within each general style and on each instrument there are strong individual personalities who can be recognized by their particular sound or manner of playing. For instance, you might learn to distinguish the saxophone styles of Sidney Bechet, Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Sonny Rollins, or the trumpet styles of Louis Armstrong, Roy Eldridge, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Clifford Brown, Freddie Hubbard, and Lee Morgan. (The differences between these players are not found just in the way they play the notes, as might be the case with classical virtuosi interpreting standard sonata or concerto literature, but in what notes they choose to play.) It will be useful to listen and then choose a style you like and begin to study or be influenced by that way of playing. Some players find it helpful to transcribe solos and analyze the phrases that great jazz artists employ. What notes go with what chords? What rhythmic devices are used? How is articulation used? How does the soloist interact with the other players? What makes the sound itself a dimension of individual expression?

The answers to these and related questions are useful as one attempts to learn to “speak” in the idiom of this music. However, the challenge to recorder players is further increased by the absence of an instrumental tradition within jazz. Musical devices that communicate effectively on the bass, piano, trombone, trumpet, saxophone, clarinet, or flute do not always translate well to other instruments (or even to each other), and the limited tessitura and dynamic range of the recorder make such adaptation especially difficult.

In other words, one creative aspect of playing jazz on the recorder involves discovering a technique for expression that allows this instrument to take its place among other already established instru-

mental partners. There is no right and wrong in this area. Even if you are overblowing and shrieking in ways that are inappropriate to the music of an earlier century, you could be on to something vital in the context of jazz. In this sense, the technique for the recorder in jazz is probably more similar to what is required for contemporary music than for music of the Baroque or Renaissance.

So how does one begin to approach playing jazz on recorder? Start by listening to a wide variety of recorded performances and develop an ear for what you like. Pay attention to live jazz performances, too, so you are not entirely taken in by hearing the same recorded performance again and again. Listen to the cocktail pianists and others who play in restaurants and bars to get a feeling for how different songs can be treated.

### The Modus Operandi of Jazz Improvisation

For anyone not well acquainted with the idiom, probably the most difficult concept to grasp is the way in which a jazz improvisation is structured. To put it in a single statement, jazz solos are as a rule based on a harmonic sequence, not on a melody. This is quite unlike the theme and variations form one commonly encounters in classical music, which is often, though erroneously, cited as a parallel. If we use the example of a theme and variation by van Eyck, a familiar source for recorder players, we can easily see the difference. Example A shows the first few measures of the tune "Malle Symen" (on which van Eyck wrote several variations) but with added chord symbols indicating a harmonic progression that a modern jazz musician might hear as being appropriate to the melody. Example B shows the corresponding bars of van Eyck's first variation, and it is clear that the 17th-century recorderist was relating to the melody as his point of departure, and only incidentally to an implied harmony. In Example C, we have a bebop styled solo line as might be improvised by a jazz musician. It is strictly based on the chord sequence given in example A but shows only a slight trace of the melody (in fact, it ironically quotes the tune "Pop Goes the Weasel"). The examples also show that van Eyck viewed the harmony as being determined by the notes in the melody and a natural and integrated outgrowth of the melodic contours. A jazz musician would view the melody of "Malle Symen" as a particular

horizontal creation fitting a given chord progression.

It would be incorrect, however, to conclude that jazz improvisations are never developed from melodies. A jazz musician may choose to incorporate the melody, but it would be a special case, not a general *modus operandi*. In fact, it took a while and the advent of some brilliantly gifted musicians for the tradition or jazz improvisation to develop along those lines. Prior to the middle 1920s the primary feature of a jazz performance was the collective ensemble improvisation executed by the usual "front line" of trumpet (or cornet), clarinet, and trombone. The trumpet player would usually stick close to the melody, while the clarinet improvised a lacy obbligato above and the trombonist contributed snappy lower counter-lines. There were occasional solos, but the instrumentalists usually modeled them in the manner of their ensemble roles. Trumpet solos therefore usually stuck pretty close to the tune, while clarinet and even saxophone solos had obbligato-like characteristics. These early solos were often low points in a performance, for they offered nothing that would replace the exciting density and interaction of the full ensemble. They were in a sense solos by default—ensemble lines rendered with the other players staying out for the moment.

More than any other musician, Louis Armstrong changed the main feature of jazz performance from the collective improvised ensemble to the virtuoso solo. Armstrong, who was born and raised in New Orleans at the turn of the century, was from the very beginning of his recording career (1923) an inheritor of both a musical and an instrumental tradi-

tion that had existed for a quarter century. But within a short period of time, he rapidly evolved and was able to extend that tradition to new horizons. By 1927, Armstrong had changed forever the technical, expressive, and creative expectations of jazz improvisation. He influenced virtually all jazz musicians of the time, no matter what instrument they played.

Armstrong could only have done this by giving up the role of the trumpet in the collective ensemble, thus abandoning melody-based improvisation as the general rule. His greatest solos during his peak period (the late 1920s) offer a free-flowing imagination that is unleashed yet structured through the harmonic content of the chosen material. They relegate the collective ensemble, with its contrapuntal limitations, to history.

There was also another force shaping jazz at the time. The increasing size of jazz bands was making collective improvisation an impractical vehicle, and big band arrangements with spots for virtuoso soloists were becoming the norm. The two musicians having the greatest impact on the evolution of the music from this direction were the band leader Fletcher Henderson and his chief arranger Don Redman.

### Swing!

What is it? Many have tried to define swing but it is perhaps one of those things that, like the taste of an orange, can only be fully understood through experience. Several words have been used to describe it; the best would be "dynamism" (energy, force), "visceral" (of the body, opposite of cerebral), and "propelling" (driving, moving forward).

**Example A**

**Example B**

**Example C**

Except for jazz that is influenced by the duple rhythms of rock music (fusion), Latin jazz, and avant-garde jazz when played in “free time,” the conventional manner of interpreting jazz so that it “swings” involves playing pairs of eighth-notes unequally, with the first note of each pair held slightly longer than the second. Recorderists will immediately relate this to the Baroque practice of “notes inégales,” and it may therefore be useful to examine swinging from that angle.

More often than not, when recorder players attempt to play jazz or even simply to interpret a jazz-oriented composition through their understanding of Baroque inequality, the results fall short of the mark. Given the written passage in Example D, a recorder player might try to swing it by “tripletizing” the eighths, thereby readjusting the passage to 12/8 time as in Example E. Many recorderists would also tend to interpret this passage

with a sharply accented staccato articulation, the end result being something like Example F. Both are inappropriate.

Except for some “Dixieland” styles, jazz is generally articulated in a legato (or “portato”) manner, the notes being tongued but connected. Though the rhythmic inequality of eighths is properly assigned in Examples E and F, the proportion or inequality is not accurately stated, and perhaps it cannot be adequately notated. It should be somewhat less than the previously given 12/8 examples, and while the version in Example G comes closer, it would probably be played stiffly by a classical musician, rather than in the relaxed manner of a jazz player. A jazz musician would also play certain notes stronger than others. A recorder player would probably do this as previously shown in Example F, but a jazz musician would approach it more in the manner of Example H (this example also contains tonguing strokes). The dif-

ference is largely a matter of how the classical recorder player and the jazz musician perceive the grouping of the notes in this passage (see Examples I and J). In viewing these written examples one must keep in mind that jazz is a living tradition and therefore an aural one. Listening is always the best way to learn.

### Learning the Fundamentals of Jazz

The ways to approach a song can be quite different depending on the idiom. For example, compare any jazz performance of the popular song “How High the Moon” with “Ornithology” by Charlie Parker or with “Satellite” by John Coltrane—these last two are based on the chord progression of “How High the Moon.” Although there have been many interesting experiments with musical form within the jazz tradition, there is a conventional approach to playing that involves learning “tunes.” Playing a song usually involves statement of the melody followed by improvised solos based on the harmonic structure of the song (the “chord changes”) and a restatement of the melody. (Of course, there may be an introduction and an ending, too.)

Recorderists wishing to learn “tunes,” should purchase a “fake book” (called that because it includes just enough information—the melody and chords—to allow you to “fake” your way through a tune). The best known of these is the ironically titled *Real Book*, which contains melodies and chords for many of the standard jazz melodies. Make sure that your fake book is intended for concert pitch and not for B-flat or E-flat instruments. Learn to play a melody as written, but do not restrict your treatment to a literal reading. Listen to recordings of singers and instrumentalists interpreting the same melody, noticing how they take liberties with the phrasing, the dynamics, and otherwise embellish the melody. Try different ways of interpreting the melody that suit you.

The next step is to understand how jazz musicians write and use scales and chords. The shorthand jazz musicians employ operates in the same way as the figured bass used in Baroque music. The signs can be different, however, and many of the harmonies they describe are not found in Baroque music. Letters refer to the root or first degree of a scale or chord, and numbers refer to the respective degrees of the scale that starts on that note. In a chord built on C (in the

**Example D**

**Example E**

**Example F**

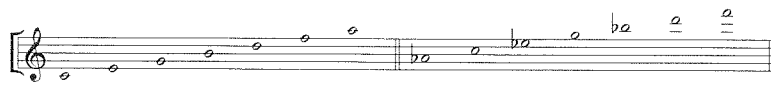
**Example G**

**Example H**

**Example I**

**Example J**

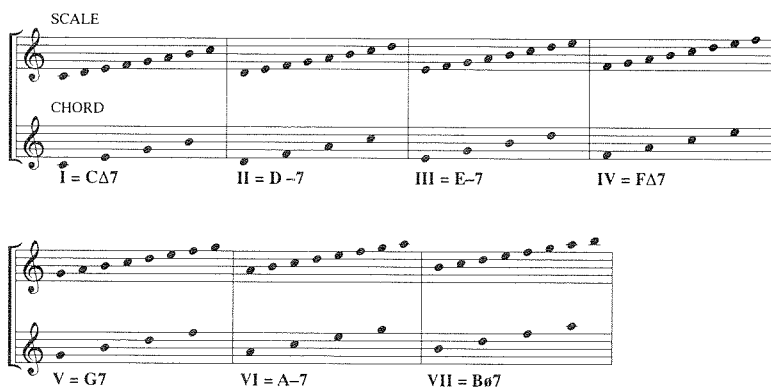
Example K



Example L



Example M



Example N



Example O



key of C), 1=C, 3=E, 5=G, 7=B, 9=D, 11=F, and 13=A. In a chord built on A-flat (in the key of A-flat), 1=A-flat, 3=C, 5=E-flat, 7=G-flat, 9=B-flat, 11=D-flat, 13=F (see Example K). In other words, chords are formed by stacking intervals of a third using notes of the parent scale (see Example L). When the number 7 immediately follows a letter, it refers to a dominant seventh chord. A higher number after a letter, as in D9, implies the thirds 3, 5, and 7, to fill out the chord. To describe the quality of a chord, jazz musicians use signs: a Δ means major, - means minor, + means augmented (or raised a half-step), ° means diminished, and a ∅ means half-diminished. (Don't confuse D7 with D-7, a D minor triad with a seventh.)

In any key, scales and chords may be built on each degree. (See Example M:

early musicians will recognize the four scales starting with the second measure as the church modes of Medieval and Renaissance music—Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, etc.) Jazz players use a great variety of scales: two typical jazz scales are the blues scale (for example, C, E-flat, F, F-sharp, G, and B-flat, in the key of C), and the double diminished scale of alternating half and whole steps (C, D-flat, E-flat, E, F-sharp, G, A, B-flat).

Of course, chords do not usually stand alone, but function in relation to other chords in a progression. The progression of chords associated with a tune forms its harmonic structure. One common harmonic device is the II/V/I progression. (The I defines the tonic of the key, in Roman numerals. For example, in the key of C, II/V/I would be D-7, G7,

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and CΔ). One way that jazz musicians have worked with basic progressions like the II/V/I progression involves the use of alternative or “substitute” chords. For example, it would not be unusual for a jazz soloist to improvise upon a “tritone substitution” for the II/V/I progression, replacing the V chord with a dominant seventh chord a tritone away. D-7/G7/CΔ would then become D-7/D-flat7/CΔ (see Examples N and O).

To further illustrate the use of substitute chords, we turn to the most basic and common form in jazz: the twelve-bar blues. Example P shows a simple solo for alto recorder on the fundamental blues chord progression. Both the Roman numerals (indicating the function of the chord) and the specific chords in the key of F are given. A more advanced blues solo with many substitute chords is offered in Example Q. (In playing through this example and Examples N and O, remember to “swing” the even eighth-notes.)

### Developing Improvisational Skills

Improvisation is essential to the jazz tradition, but it exists in other musical traditions as well. Spontaneous musical invention on the recorder was a part of

**Example P**

**Example Q**

the performance practice of Renaissance and Baroque music. The ability to improvise is worth developing even if you do not wish to play jazz, because it provides a way to relate intimately to the experience of making music, either alone or together with others.

Here are some exercises for getting started:

**1) Just play:** Clear your mind of distractions and play a note, then another and another, any way you want to. Create your own melodies or musical fragments. Listen to your sound and work with it. Just play and find sounds that you like at any tempo. Use your imagination and try to experience the fundamental joy of

making music. This exercise is intended to help you feel more connected with the act of making music.

**2) Make variations on a theme:** Take any simple melody you like from a folk song, a popular song, or a nursery rhyme and play it without altering it at all. Then maintain the phrasing but add notes or subtract notes to make spontaneous variations on the melody.

**3) Take a few notes and permute them:** Use only a few notes, such as G, A, C, D, and E. Restrict yourself to those notes but play them in any order, any register, any rhythm. Practice this with any fixed combination of notes and force yourself to play combinations you like.

This solo by Joel Levine is based on the twelve-bar blues in the key of F. Idiomatically, it shows the influence of the middle period of John Coltrane and style of Miles Davis in the mid-1960s, though Levine has clearly made an original synthesis of their styles. His thinking is more horizontal (modal or scale-oriented) than vertical (chord-oriented) and, at least in this particular solo, he emphasizes an urgently hard-swinging and non-lyrical rhythmic dynamism. In many places Levine merely touches base with the harmonic structure of the blues. At these places his accompanists, particularly the pianist, are responding with abstract harmonies based on fourths.

It is obvious from this example that Levine possesses an outstanding command of his instrument, but there are many features of this solo that point to a spontaneous artistic intelligence to which that technique is applied. Notice, for example, how he instantly announces his uniqueness in the very first phrase by superimposing a polytonal key. He then lays back with short off-hand phrases until the rhythm section hits its stride. Beginning in measure B-11 he lets loose with full urgency in a long burst of notes.

Another interesting aspect of this solo is its high degree of variety within a clearly unified approach. Few players on any instrument could achieve this as well, and it shows that Levine is exceptional beyond the fact that he plays jazz on the recorder.

Note these special fingerings.

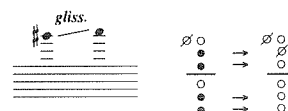
Alternate color fingering:



Half-flat (quartertone)



Glissando on notes above the normal range:



# The Blues in F

A Jazz Improvisation for alto recorder by Joel Levine, transcribed and annotated by Pete Rose

(A)  $\text{♩} = 138$

(B)

(C)

(D)

(E)

(F)

(G)

Write down the 12 tones, one each on 12 cards, shuffle them and take 4, 5, 6, of them randomly and see what you can do.

**4) Take rhythms and vary notes:** Choose a rhythm, any rhythm (quarter followed by two eighths followed by a quarter, then an eighth-note triplet, then two quarters, for example; it doesn't matter). Now repeat the rhythm but vary the notes and the tempo as you wish.

**5) Transpose motives:** Take a simple combination of notes you like and transpose them by minor thirds, major thirds, fourths, etc., to develop a sense of motivic development.

**6) Play with scales:** Take a scale (major, minor, whole tone, diminished, blues, pentatonic, etc.) and limit yourself to these notes. Practice altering the direction up and down between intervals and try to hear the quality of the scale (this is #3 again).

**7) Create a dialogue:** Decide upon two separate areas of notes (say, low C to the G a fifth above it on the soprano and

C up to B an octave higher). Now play phrases that form a question and answer ("call and response") that mimics a conversation or dialogue between these two areas.

**8) Converse in music:** Get together with another player and trade phrases back and forth. You play one phrase and your friend plays another. Can you mimic the quality of real conversations (the phrasing of words, the emotional qualities of happiness or sadness or silliness, etc.)? Can you two play simultaneously? Try to remember that part of what it means to play is to be silent; it is therefore essential always to listen.

**9) Sing and play:** Create a dialogue between something you sing and something you play. If you feel embarrassed, try talking and playing. You are learning to respond to yourself and others. Try hearing the sounds in your environment (crickets, cars, trains, airplanes) as a question, and then play back a musical answer on the recorder.

**10) Play along with your favorite recordings and the radio:** Sometimes you will find yourself in awkward keys. Just do the best you can to fill in sounds that you find pleasing. Of course, you should seek out jazz teachers and players where you live and ask them to work with you as a recorder player. When you feel ready to play with other players (especially drummers), you will probably need to buy a microphone to amplify your sound.

*Pete Rose, who writes regularly for American Recorder, began his musical life as a jazz reed player before discovering the recorder and establishing a reputation as an avant-garde composer and performer on that instrument. Joel Levine, who now works in the field of medical research in Worcester, Massachusetts, studied recorder with Charlotte Rosenberg and Bernard Krainis while honing his skills as a jazz recorderist in the local jazz clubs of Philadelphia.*

## FOLLOW-UP MATERIALS

For a concise history of jazz, recorder players might turn reflexively to the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*. But over the years, editions of *Grove* have had only spotty success in the accuracy of their jazz history. The 1950s edition, for example, declared that bebop was not true jazz, claiming that its major exponents, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, received their training in a conservatory (actually, they were both high school dropouts). The jazz profile in the current edition of *Grove* seems to be peculiarly slanted toward a compositional orientation. In defining the main characteristics of jazz performance, it states that improvisation is not an essential aspect, making the very rare exception seem almost the rule. The section on the origins of jazz favors the primacy of European over African elements, a conjectural conclusion not based on hard evidence. The sections on the 1920s and 1930s are strongest, but while the commentary on composers Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington shows considerable depth and insight, the unique significance of Armstrong's role in converting jazz to a soloistic art is not made clear. Similarly, the far weaker sections that deal with jazz from the 1940s on emphasize the contributions of composer-musicians like Thelonious Monk, Tad Dameron, Gill Evans, and Charles Mingus. These artists were very important, but the lineage of jazz passed not through them, but via Parker, Coltrane, and Coleman—the great jazz improvisors.

*Grove*, however, does have a massive and thorough bibliography that is most useful. A smaller but more up-to-date bibliography can be found in an advertisement that appears in *Down Beat* magazine called "Jazz Aids." Leonard Feather's *Encyclopedia of Jazz*, in its various updates, is perhaps the best source for biographical

information on jazz musicians. Gunther Schuller's *Early Jazz* remains the most scholarly study on the evolution of the music in its first decades of existence.

For performance practice material, *Patterns for Jazz* by Jerry Coker is outstanding and widely used. Jamey Aebersold's "Play-a-Long" series of sixty volumes, including printed music and recorded accompaniments on CD, is also popular. Beginners might start out with Volume I, *Jazz: How to Play and Improvise*, and Volume 3, *The II/V7/I Progression* (subtitled "probably the most important musical sequence in modern jazz") and progress from there. (For information, write: Jamey Aebersold, Box 1244, New Albany, IN 47151.)

*The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD, LP and Cassette* by Richard Cook and Brian Morton (new edition, 1994) is available in many bookstores. It contains a fairly extensive discography with some descriptions and history about the recordings listed there. The following list of wind instrument jazz soloists is intended as a necessarily incomplete checklist for recorder players who want to make sure that they are seeking out recordings of the most influential artists.

**Trumpet:** Louis Armstrong, Roy Eldridge, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Clifford Brown, Freddie Hubbard, Wynton Marsalis.

**Alto Saxophone:** Johnny Hodges, Benny Carter, Charlie Parker, Lee Konitz, Cannonball Adderly, Jackie Maclean, Ornette Coleman, Eric Dolphy.

**Tenor Saxophone:** Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Dexter Gordon, Stan Getz, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, Joe Henderson.

**Flute:** Herbie Mann, Frank Wess, James Moody, Yusef Lateef, Eric Dolphy, Rahsaan Roland Kirk (clarinet and African reeds), Charles Lloyd, Sam Rivers, Hubert Laws.