

Beginning Improvisation Tips – Rhythm!

Steve Shanley, Coe College (ssh Shanley@coe.edu)

Rhythm & articulation define jazz more strongly than melody & harmony do. But when teaching students to improvise, teachers tend to emphasize the melody/harmony. Why?

Jazz, like all music, relates perfectly to language. First learn small chunks, then experiment with different combinations for those chunks. For most people, imitation of experienced speakers/performers is the most efficient way to develop a convincing approach.

Most students do not listen to swing/jazz. Until then, they will only have YOU to imitate.

Many teachers do not listen to swing/jazz. Until then, cheat by finding rhythms in the music you are playing. Start with:

- One-measure patterns. In some cases, you might leave out notes that occur on count 4. Then:
- Two-measure rhythms. Again, consider omitting notes that occur on count 4 of the second measure. These should be simple and use relatively few 8th notes.
- Find rhythms that (a) start on both downbeats and upbeats and (b) end with both long and short notes.
- In most cases, it is safe to use the written articulation. In general: slur 8th notes, play quarter/8th notes short if they are followed by a rest, play consecutive quarter notes short.

Create a rhythm cheat sheet for yourself, but do NOT give it to the students. They are learning by ear, remember? (See back of this page for a sample rhythm cheat sheet.)

What makes a piece good for improvising? The 12-bar blues has pros and cons. Cons: harmonically active, long form, utilizes three-phrases (most music uses two), and blues scales have dissonant pitches with many of the chords. Pros: It is perhaps the most important form in the development of jazz. Oh, and there are thousands of published blues charts (clue: often with the word “Blues” in the title), so it’s one of the safer bets. Otherwise, if it’s a piece you know (a jazz standard), it’s probably too hard. Look for a solo section with very few chord changes—ideally the same two repeated over and over. Modal music might seem easy (Look: only one chord!), but it can create its own set of challenges.

Use two pitches, especially when rhythms involve consecutive 8th notes. When rhythms involve consecutive 8th notes, alternate between the two pitches and slur them. *Slurring/connecting 8th notes is a defining characteristic of jazz, yet most novice jazz musicians (including teachers) will erroneously tend to separate and/or tongue 8th notes too harshly.* Fix this by slurring everything at first. For blues, try the following combinations: (1) root/lowered 3rd, (2) root/lowered 7th (under the root), or (3) root/major 6th (under the root).

After plenty of call-and-copy, try one- and two-measure call-and-improvise.

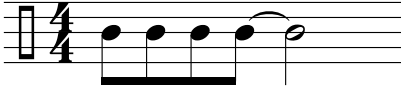
Don’t forget the rhythm section. Consider making a play-a-long and have all rhythm section students copy/improvise (percussionists all on mallet instruments). R.S. can also fulfill traditional rolls of time keeping, bass line, and comping (in this scenario, the piano/guitar can also alternate between copying/improvising and comping). Consider using other sections/choruses of the chart—not just the solo section (assuming they follow the same chords/form)—to get additional practice/variety. FYI: Keeping swing time on ride/hi-hat while copying/improvising on the snare is a somewhat advanced concept, so please don’t expect that beginning drummers can do this.

It Had to Be Blues

Paul Clark, Barnhouse (*copied with permission*)

One-Measure Ideas

m. 9 brass



m. 16 saxes



m. 23



m. 24



m. 25 bones



m. 49 saxes



m. 56 saxes



m. 57 saxes



m. 59 saxes



Two-Measure Ideas

m. 9 brass



m. 13 saxes



m. 23



m. 25 bones



m. 31 trp



m. 33



m. 49 saxes



m. 73 trp

