
The First 30 Days: Jazz

The first month of the Jazz Year, one week at a time.

Before week 1

Scales first, then standards

For jazz students there's no prerequisite, because I would like to encourage everyone, but if they don't have an instrument, they've never played and they're young, I'll tell them they're too young. Otherwise I'll take them on as instrumentalists, and I'll have them work with great focus on their major scales, explaining the larger goals that will bring them to the point of being able to have freedom of movement within the context of the group of notes that they need to focus on when they're on stage, which is often a major or a minor scale or a pentatonic scale.

The foundational technique has got to be the most important part of it, because jazz ultimately is about freedom of movement, and the example I would give is always: let's take any major scale and I'll play something, because I've got a lot of technique, I can do what I want, pretty much. Let's see if you can respond with any kind of maturity to what I'm saying. And yes, there are ... articulation, phrasing issues, a lot of issues ... related to that, but it's primarily, you know, if I just play a broken scale, for example, they can't follow me, or just fluently moving up and down the scale, straight up and [down], they can't follow me, so that has gotta be the major hurdle ...

Then beyond that, when you get on stage, yes, there is structure that you have to learn: 12-bar blues, rhythm changes. You have to learn ... the jazz standards that everyone plays. That means you have to learn the melodies extremely well and learn the [chord] changes ... but then it becomes a question of: OK, you know the changes, you know the melody, can you move around your horn? So we're back to the same thing.

So the development of a program for beginners and advance[d], it's just the pursuit of ... those primary goals, and in the first instance, it's just being able to play your [scales] one [octave] up and down, and then the full range of [the instrument], straight up and [down], and then just developing technique: broken scales, thirds, [fourths], fifths, [pentatonics], chromatics. It's all the stuff that's in ... The Whole Horn, but alongside that you need to learn ... [the tunes] that are always going to be called on stage, and [the] musical structures that are always going to be repeated, like the blues and like rhythm changes.

... Without that basic core ability to move with great wizardry around the instrument in the context of those 12 major [scales], and ... all the [tributaries] that come from that, then all the extemporaneous knowledge is not gonna matter a lot, because if you can't get on stage and play what you feel, it doesn't matter what other [skill sets] you bring to that magical moment.

... If you want to play, play. So you gotta get yourself to [a] place where you are strong enough to participate ...

Before week 1

Scales first, then standards

A student who has never played

... Jazz is the result: jazz is what happens when you have control of your instrument. It's that simple: when you have freedom [of movement] ... If ... you want to learn jazz, then I would say, before you get into jazz, you have to learn to control your instrument, at least to a certain extent; then we can start talking about chords and [scales] and chord–[scale] relationships, but if you can't play your scale[s] straight up and down your instrument, all 12, then you're not ready. You can come to my class and I will encourage you to do that, but effectively you haven't graduated to the point where we can start talking about being able to communicate on stage with other jazz and session musicians ... and it requires a development of a work ethic that is stronger than most of the people that [he or she] will ever meet. ... Jazz students must be able to play all 12 keys before we can talk about anything related to jazz, so if they want to enter into the class, then they have a lot of catching up to [do] ... and it has to be done very, very quickly.

The First 30 Days
For a student who has never played

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The Milestone

For jazz players that are playing the Milestone ... exercise, it's not like I'm gonna take [rank] beginners into the jazz program, but if I were to recommend that, I would say tongue every [note].

Before week 1

Scales first, then standards

All 12, straight up and down

... First one is just being able to play your major scale straight up and down, very fluidly ...

That's why I recommend taking each major scale and playing it up and down, articulating every note, with no pressure, so you don't blow your lip ... Play along with the app, or play with the metronome, or tap your foot, and do that for two hours in each scale. It's 24 hours of work that will probably take, you know, 'cause you need to stop and start, a couple weeks, maybe a couple months ...

... To suggest that the goal is to have freedom of movement within only a partial range of the instrument is not in fact the definition of freedom of movement ...

In the free app, the major scales stop at two octaves; the full range is in the Full Studio.

... In terms of preparing to go deeper into the jazz curriculum, that would be the first order of business: ... making sure that students can get every note to speak on the flute and a clarinet, and can play all their major [scales] fairly fluidly throughout the entire range of the instrument.

The first month

... A [jazz student] should spend at least 30% of their time in the first month, if not closer to 80% of their time, ... making sure they do focus heavily on very quickly achieving that ability to move around their horn when they're on stage with other musicians. If they get on stage with veteran [blues] musicians, then what's going to save the day is technique [and pentatonics], and if they have none, then they need to start working on a lot of the things that are in this app, [or] at least be introduced to them. That's what should happen in the first month, but ... a lot of discussion as well about what the steps are going forward. If they don't play piano, they should learn to play [scales] on piano, and they should start investigating what are [shell voicings], and what is the relationship between dominant [chords] and the tonic, and what are some of the basic substitutions, and what ... kind of [scale] do you play over these various chords, and I will simplify that for them, but those are all things that can and should happen in the first 30 days. ... If they have minimal ability to read music, I would very quickly try to get some of the students together to [play in] ensembles, even if they have minimal ability.

For the first 30 days for a beginner jazz player, I think one standard is good [and] a lot of technique, but ... this is really about meeting the students [where they are], because they're coming from very different ... backgrounds, and they all possess very different levels of ability, etc., etc., so that can change, but that sounds reasonable.

Before week 1

Scales first, then standards

How long each day

... Like I said, you're not really playing jazz until you [can] move around your horn anyway, so if [they're] serious about jazz, it should be at least a couple hours a day.

The daily check

For the jazz class, ... the daily check should be on the part of the students, ... on a daily basis and weekly basis, and they [should] make ... every effort to ensure that their own personal goals, as well as the goals of the class, are [maintained]. They can also send records of their practice via WhatsApp, using the internal recordkeeping that's in the app.

Transcription

Jazz musicians are very much going to develop their skill set through a lot of repetition. Transcription is really about repetitive listening, and that's the only way that you can start to hear all the delicate subtleties that are coming out of a jazz performance, or any musical performance for that matter: rhythmic [phrasing] subtleties, articulation subtleties ... and nuance with relation to bending pitches and tone, and all that projection, the actual shape of the tone. All of this can be transferred ... only through repetitive [listening], whether it's playing along with the album and ... trying to decipher a phrase or two ... and making that your own, or, even better, ... by writing things down. That process, regardless, ... usually [takes] a lot of time and effort, blood, sweat and tears, for a simple phrase; even if it's an easy one, it's going to take a fair amount of time ... of repetitive listening in order to start to hear a lot of the detail that simply cannot be written down. So that is a great benefit of transcription: ... a deeper listening, repetitive [listening]. This translates into being able to hear and respond to things that are happening on the bandstand that a young musician would never be able [to] connect with, because [they're] stuck in their own horns and in their own universe on stage, because there's just too many ... metaphorical balls to juggle. Transcription will help them get past that.

Week 1 • Days 1–7

A musical mentorship

... The first week should be trying to find a musical mentorship. There's so many great artists online. I would ask [them] to go find at least 25 artists from the past or the present that they admire and that they would like to emulate, and give me some kind of an essay, hopefully fairly wordy, ... on what they've discovered and what they like and what they don't like. That could take a week.

Week 2 • Days 8–14

Basic technique based on scales

... Then we would probably spend another week working on a basic technique based on scales, so, depending on where they're at, I probably would ask [them] to start working on broken scales and diatonic [chords] and diatonic thirds in all 12 major keys, and then we would expand beyond that.

Practice link

Broken scales and 3rds
All twelve keys

Open in the app

The first time a student opens a link, the app asks what they play; the week is waiting underneath.

Week 3 • Days 15–21

Choosing the repertoire • the blues bass line

The third week I would talk probably about choosing repertoire that they're going to learn this year, and asking them to take a melody from that list and just drill the melody ... over and over and over and over again, hundreds of times.

The blues bass line

I would say possibly in that third week or fourth week, depending on what else is happening, ... they should attempt to learn the [blues bass line] in all 12 keys. I think that's gonna be incredibly helpful going forward, and will greatly [boost] confidence in their ability to play [chord] changes and play jazz. ... You probably start early on working on being able to play from memory, and repeat often, ... the blues [bass line] that I'm prescribing, or something similar ...

Practice link

The blues bass line
The 12-bar line, in all 12 keys

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When to start the bass line, and how often

The [blues bass line] should be played once they've gotten through some rudimentary [scale] work and [are] fluid around the 12 major [scales]. Then the [bass line] should be something they work on every day. You can go through all 12 ... quite quickly. It ends up being a skeletal framework they can ... always start from and return to in their improvising over a 12-bar blues, anywhere they go, in any key.

Week 4 • Days 22–30

The standards: the melody, then the chords

... In the fourth week, I would ask [them] to make a list of [jazz standards they] would like to learn, and explain how they should go about doing that. Number one is learning the melody; the melody is king. Number two is learning to [arpeggiate] the chords in the harmonic structure that is associated with that melody, so they should work through playing those chords on their instrument of choice, [arpeggiating] the chords over and over and over again, so the melody is recognizable and playable, but so is [the] harmony.

Days 29 and 30

Days 29 and 30, from my perspective, should be about review and record and ... personal accountability for what they have learned, but it should also be the moment where there's supposed to be an ability to use the achieved skills as a warm-up for whatever performance might come later.

After day 30

Scales first, then standards. Standards are learned by learning the melody extremely well, and then learning the harmony after the fact by [arpeggiating] the chords ... and, if they want, they can go into the extended notes. Doing that, that's gonna help enormously, because once they have developed muscle memory for those arpeggios, they can bounce around those arpeggios and sound like a [virtuoso] playing that standard.

The year

I would consider the whole endeavor ... a success if students will have learned 10 jazz standards by heart and prepared performances, maybe inside the class (we could call it a performance class), and demonstrate their knowledge and ability and achieved skills ... The number that I would give is 10 jazz standards for the entire year, which is a very small number indeed.

The Jazz Year
The year continues week by week

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