10 Techniques to Help Developing Jazz Soloists

Presented by
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Fresno City College

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Overview

- Familiar scenario: inexperienced soloists, a wide range of abilities, not enough rehearsal time.
- Clinician/feedback comments can be vague *("gotta lock in the time, gotta dig into those changes").* Students may know what they're supposed to do, but not have any idea how to get there.
- Common challenges faced by developing soloists:
    - Rhythmic issues: solos don't groove, no drive. No connection to the rhythm section.
    - Melodic issues: no direction to lines, no arc to the solo, just throwing notes at the wall.
    - Harmonic issues: lines don't mesh with changes, wrong chord qualities, sometime wrong key!
    - Vocabulary: incomplete or immature jazz language, little sense of context or tradition.

I've had success in rehearsals, clinics, and workshops using these techniques. I've tried to make them
- Specific
- Easy to remember
- Easy to incorporate into rehearsals
- Entertaining *(some of my favorite goofy sayings are included.)*

Rhythmic Issues

1. Think like a **bass player** (quarter note lines) to focus on the pulse. [Ex. 1]
    - I suggest ending with 2 eighth noes

2. Think like a **drummer** (eighth note lines) [Ex. 2]
    - Vary the ride rhythm, move the accents around.
    - Move from shorter to longer "sentences"

3. Rhythmic displacement ("**slides**"), **ties**, and **triplets** *("Slide over!")* [Ex. 3]
    - Start (end?) on the "and"
    - Articulations are super important!

Melodic Issues

4. **Motifs** *("Show me some ID")* [Ex. 4]
    - Look for examples that really define the tune (e.g. Autumn Leaves, Blue 7.) Describe in non-technical terms (shape, number of notes...not specific intervals.) *("What's the melo-DNA?")*
    - Let the melody guide the solo. Memorize the melody by ear *("screen crawl")* Then vary a couple of notes or rhythms in each phrase. Add more variation as comfort level increases.

5. **Sequences** *("Easy as 1 – 2 – 3...")* [Ex. 5]
    - Best to start: 1 – 2 – 3, then later 1 – 2 – 3 – 5. Vary the order (important! Keeps them engaged)
    - Works for major and dominant chord (as no 7 is included.)
    - For minor chords, simply lower the 3rd.
    - Beginners, start diatonically. More advanced, use the Circle of 5ths.

6. **Repeats** and **space** [Ex. 6]
   - When you play something you like, repeat it! Them repeat again, but with something different. *("The Rule of 3")*
   - Try waiting an extra beat (or two, or three) before introducing your next idea. It can make that idea seem more meaningful. Plus, people will think you are deep. (*"Wait for it…")*

BONUS: "Better" Blues Scale

BONUS BONUS: I have iReal Pro tracks for sequence practice, both diatonic and Circle of 5ths. Email me for the link: mike.dana@fresnocitycollege.edu.

Harmonic Issues

7. ID the **tonal center** *("The umbrella").* [see "Diatonic Harmony" sheet]
   - Learn to ID common chord sequences: ii – V^7 – I, iii – vi – ii – V^7 etc.
   - **All 12 keys**, not just the top ones! *("Northern/southern hemisphere")* [see "Circle of 5ths" sheet]
     - Practice sequences diatonically (iReal is great for this! Email me for links.)

8. ID the **chord quality** *("Three families")*
   - Most important chord tones: 3 and 7 *("Know 2 things about 12 things")* [Ex. 8]
     - More advanced: the 3 – 7 – 3 rule
   - Know the extension/alteration
   - Emphasize the above *("Chord tones are stepping stones")*
   - Practice long note solos (Every new chord; whole notes, half notes)

Building Jazz Vocabulary/The Big Picture

9. **Navigate** the chart
   - FORM!!!
     - Rhythm section can really help here (drum fills, groove change, comp change)
   - How does the solo section fit into the chart?
     - What just happened? (Big brass sendoff?) What happens next? (soft sax soli?)
   - The "architecture" of the solo section (backgrounds etc.) *("Walls, windows, steps, furniture…")*
   - How can a soloist control the arc/intensity of their solo?
     - Range, volume, density, timbre, repetition, rhythmic/harmonic tension…
   - Multiple soloists in "open" section: special role of first and last soloist *("Birth order")*

10. What **Clark Terry** said:
    - Imitate
      - C & R, transcribe (start w/ short phrases, sing first, then on instrument.) Get the nuance, not just the notes. And, not just on YOUR instrument.
    - Assimilate
      - Make phrases your own (change tonality, rhythm…in all 12 keys, always by ear.)
      - Use these in other tunes, other keys. Listen to how the greats do this.
    - Innovate
      - What do you LOVE about that artist, that solo?
      - How can you make that a part of your voice?

Closing thoughts

- How best to implement these techniques
  - Keep your instructions clear, simple, specific, memorable.
  - Know your MO! Keep it fun, keep it moving.
  - Too many wrong notes? Simplify. Too few? Change it up!
  - Do these activities by ear (call & response, tag team (trading 2s or 4s.)
  - Encourage students to use a metronome (always) and iReal or playalong when appropriate.
  - These techniques work great as a warmup. Try to incorporate at least one of these in every rehearsal.
  - If possible, use these in the context of charts you are currently rehearsing.

- Improviser's Checklist (all my students do this)
  - Memorize the melody (by ear.)
  - Know the form.
  - Memorize chord changes (can you write them out?)
  - ID the tonal center, chord tones, extensions/alterations.
  - Long note solos are great preparation.
  - Check out (source, other important) recordings online.

- Growing a jazz culture
  - Small group experience is vital. Start (another) combo!
  - Organize weekly jam sessions or gigs at local coffee spots, restaurants, wherever.
  - Use social media to support your program.
  - Involve admin, parents, sponsors, local music stores if appropriate.
  - Participate in festivals.
  - Bring local performers in as a guest clinician or featured on an evening concert.
  - Keep the elementary-middle school-high school-college/university chain intact.
  - Check out jazzonthetube.com (great selection of jazz videos!)

Even after many years of teaching, writing, and playing, I still consider myself a student. I have learned so much, from so many colleagues, clinicians, and performers, and it would be impossible to thank everyone who deserves it. I certainly didn't invent most of the material here, but I do hope that the ways I present these ideas to students will work for you as well. Let me know how it's going!

Contact: mike.dana@fresnocitycollege.edu, cell (559) 289-3763.

Coming this spring: I'm happy to announce that my new web site, mikedanamusic.com, is nearing completion. You'll find instructional materials for improvisation, theory, and arranging, rhythm section tips, big band and small ensemble charts for all levels, and much more. I hope you'll check it out!

10 Techniques: Examples

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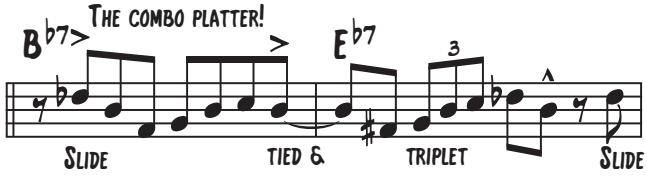
Ex. 1

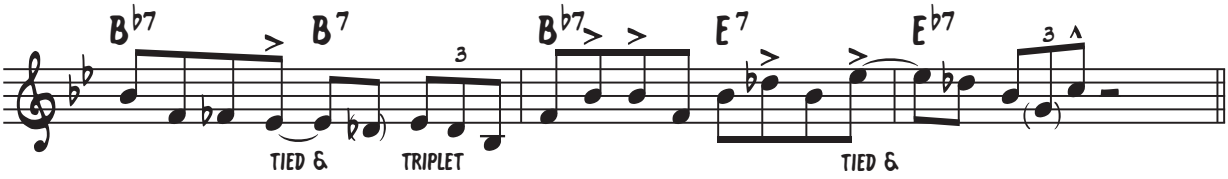
Strong quarter notes, ending w/ eighths.

Ex. 2

Students will often sing/play these without phrasing (no life.) Don't let them!

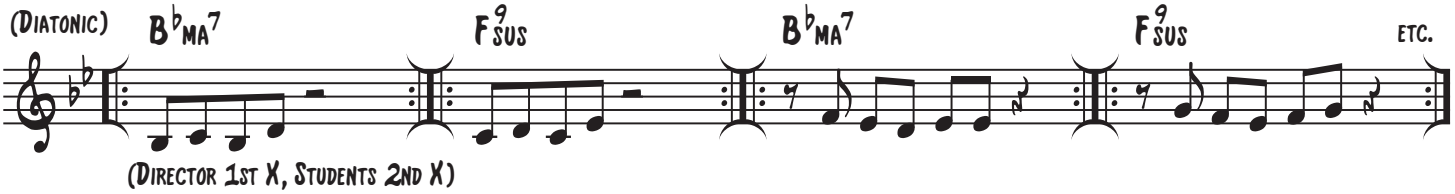
Ex. 3

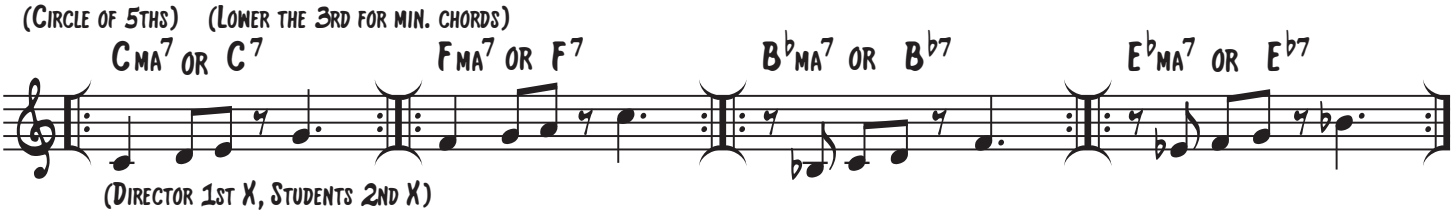




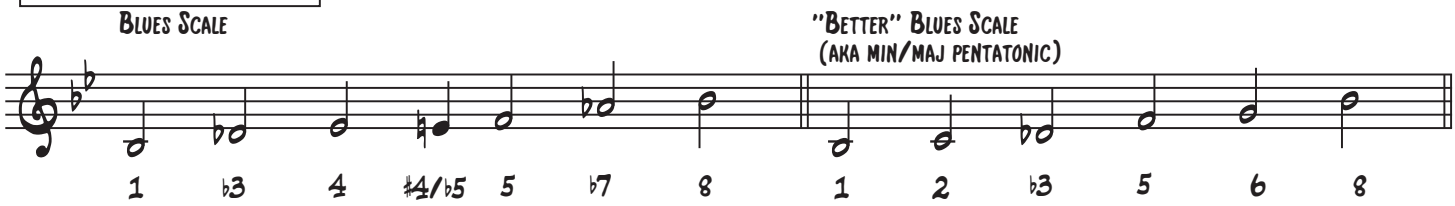
Ex. 4

Ex. 5





BONUS: "Better" Blues Scale

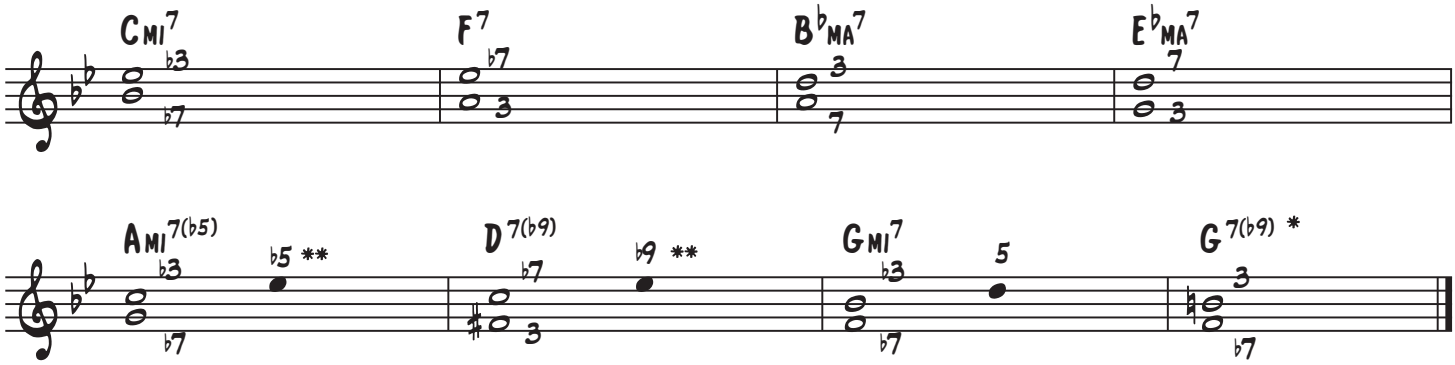


In the blues scale, the 4 can clash with the I^7 chord, and the ♭7 can clash with the IV^7.
In the "Better" version, all notes sound great against both I^7 and IV^7.

Ex. 6

Ex. 7: See Diantonic Harmony and Circle of 5ths sheets

Ex. 8 Autumn Leaves



* Sometimes used at the end of the 1st A section or the last bar of the form

The correct 3 and/or 7 illuminate the quality of the chord. Young improvisers should be aware of this, and be able to target these notes. Remind them that their ear will tell them if they've made a wrong choice :)

The "3 - 7 - 3" Rule: When the roots follow the circle of 5ths, the 3 of one chord connects smoothly (same note, half-, or whole step) to the 7 of the next chord, to the 3 of the next, etc. They resolve downwards (like gravity.) This creates a smooth guide tone line that is very useful for navigating through changes. Great foundation for long note solos.

** Alterations also provide a lot of color, and can lead to interesting resolutions (here, to the 5.)

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The Circle of Descending Fifths*

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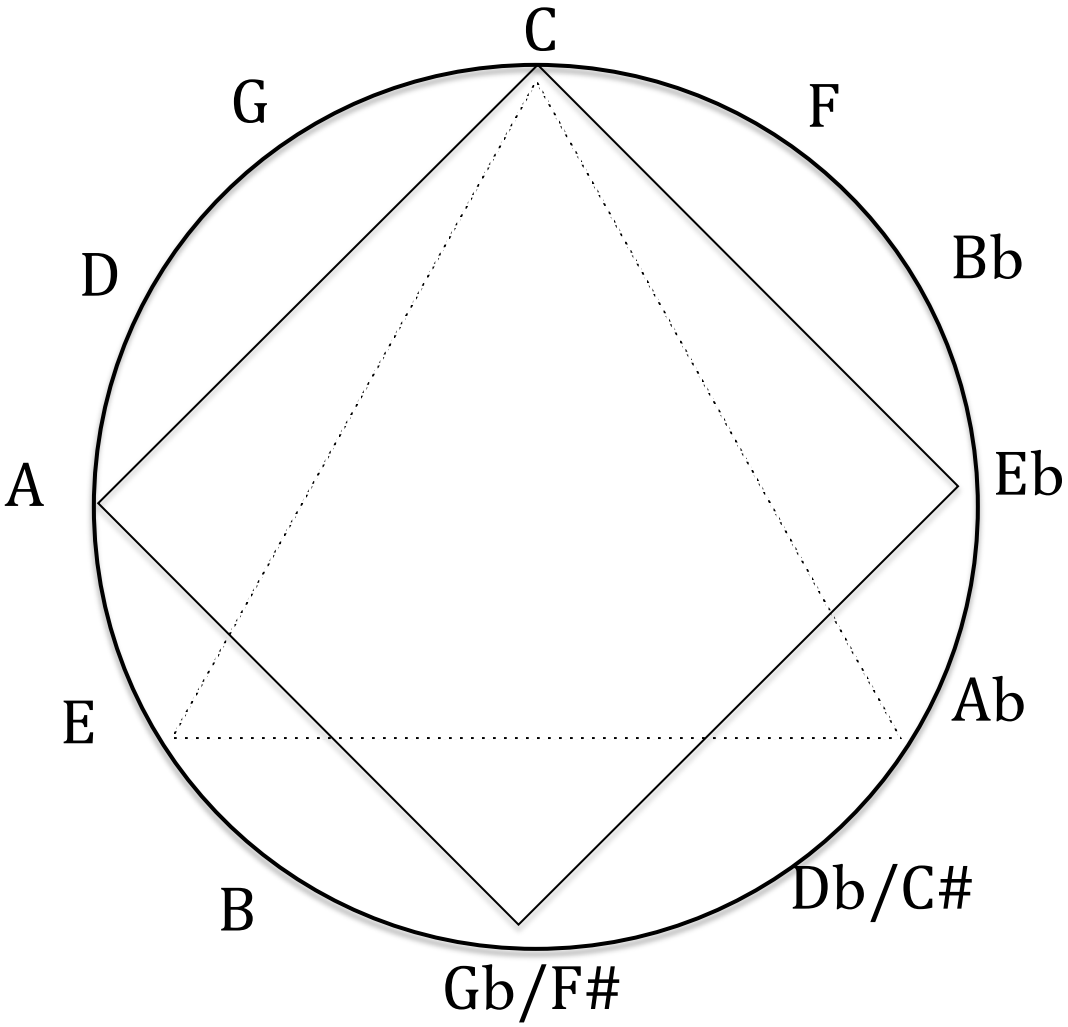

- *The name issue
  - Series of descending 5ths.
  - C is the dominant (V) of F, F is the V of Bb, etc.
- ii - V^7 – I progression follow the circle (m7 – dom7 – Maj)
- Time moves forward in a clockwise direction. **So does music**.
  - See "All The Things You Are", bridge of rhythm changes
- Clockwise to add flats
- Counterclockwise to add sharps
- "Squares" = minor thirds = diminished chords
- "Triangles = major thirds = augmented chords
- "Opposites" = tritones (aug. 4 or dim. 5)
- Transposition: this is a great tool for learning to transpose
- Modes: this will help you keep your modal relationships organized in your head
- I first learned it "the other way" too. People can change. ☺

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Diatonic Harmony/Major Tonal Centers

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	I	ii	iii	IV	V7	vi	viiø7
C	C Ma7	D m7	E m7	F Ma7	G 7	A m7	B ø7
F	F Ma7	G m7	A m7	Bb Ma7	C 7	D m7	Eø7
Bb	Bb Ma7	C m7	D m7	Eb Ma7	F 7	G m7	A ø7
Eb	Eb Ma7	F m7	G m7	Ab Ma7	Bb 7	C m7	D ø7
Ab	Ab Ma7	Bb m7	C m7	Db Ma7	Eb 7	F m7	G ø7
Db	Db Ma7	Eb m7	F m7	Gb Ma7	Ab 7	Bb m7	C ø7
C#	C# Ma7	D# m7	E# m7	F# Ma7	G# 7	A# m7	B# ø7
Gb	Gb Ma7	Ab m7	Bb m7	Cb Ma7	Db 7	Eb m7	F ø7
F#	F# Ma7	G# m7	A# m7	B Ma7	C# 7	D# m7	E# ø7
Cb	Cb Ma7	Db m7	Eb m7	Fb Ma7	Gb 7	Ab m7	Bb ø7
B	B Ma7	C# m7	D# m7	E Ma7	F# 7	G# m7	A# ø7
E	E Ma7	F# m7	G# m7	A Ma7	B 7	C# m7	D# ø7
A	A Ma7	B m7	C# m7	D Ma7	E 7	F# m7	G# ø7
D	D Ma7	E m7	F# m7	G Ma7	A 7	B m7	C# ø7
G	G Ma7	A m7	B m7	C Ma7	D 7	E m7	F# ø7

Using The "Tonal Center" Approach

- **What it means**: when you have several chords from one key (example: ii-V^7-I, or iii-vi-ii- V^7) you can use the scale of the "tonal center" (the "I" key) over the entire progression.
    - **Pros**: Easy, less to think about. One size fits all. Solid approach for beginning improvisers.
    - **Cons**: Doesn't always "nail" the individual chord/sound. Can be a little "scale-y" or "floaty."
- **Use for**: Standards, up-tempo tunes, or tunes with quick chord changes. To create a modal feeling. For smooth jazz (kidding.)
- **Learn these in all keys, and recognize them by ear**:
    - ii-V^7 (I) — maybe the most common jazz progression
    - iii-vi-ii- V^7 — common "turnaround." Follows circle of 5ths.
    - ii-iii — common on modal tunes, vamps, Latin tunes
    - vi-iii — also common on modal tunes, vamps, Latin tunes
    - I-vi-ii- (IV) V^7 — lots of standards use this
    - iii-IV — for those flamenco-jazz gigs
- **Words of wisdom**: always make sure you know what the "key of the moment" is! (Hint: look for the V^7.) What is the "current" key signature?
- **More words of wisdom**: Understanding tonal centers is a great start (and it's essential) but it's not the end of the road.

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