

A method for learning tunes

Learning tunes is a must for all jazz musicians. Even if you don't intend to play very many "casual" gigs where many standard tunes may be called out, the skills you gain from learning many different types of tunes and chord progressions will make you a very sought-after player. While there are almost as many methods for learning tunes as there are jazz teachers, the following is what I generally use for myself and my students. It is by no means the only way, and may not even be the best way for you. It is a method that has proven to be successful with many students at many skill levels. Here are a few general notes:

- Skipping steps, except for step 1, is allowed. However, if a certain step is so difficult as to be frustrating, go back and do a few of the steps you skipped.
 - Play with a live rhythm section whenever possible. When not possible, use an Aebersold or other live instrument play-a-long (2nd choice), Band-in-the-box (3rd choice), or a metronome (4th choice). This assumes you're a beginning student. Advanced students should use a metronome as their first choice.
 - This method works best on tunes where the chords change at least every other bar, every bar, or twice a bar. It is not really a useful method for learning how to solo creatively over modal tunes.
 - When you get to triads and seventh chords, it's not always possible (or even advisable) in the beginning stages to do the steps for every permutation before moving on to another tune. What is possible, and very advisable, is to do at least one permutation starting from each chord tone before moving on. 1-3-7-5, 3-5-7-1, 5-1-7-3, and 7-5-3-1, for example. This prevents your playing from becoming too "root-based."
 - For the last 5-10 minutes of a given practice session, freely improvise over whatever tune you're learning. Do this with little regard for theory or the "correct" notes. This will balance my extremely left-brained approach with some right-brained thinking. Although I won't write it in the outline below, I call this "step E."
 - This approach is only a starting point. It makes no mention of enclosures, non-chord tones, licks, stylings, or any other of the myriad of possible topics to be studied. What it does help you to do is to not just memorize, but internalize any chord progression. Giant Steps becomes no more scary a tune than Satin Doll. Once the sound of the tune is internalized, the task of adding interesting lines and style becomes far less daunting.
- 1) First memorize the tune. If the tune lends itself to rhythmic or melodic embellishments, try out new ones every practice session.
 - 2) Roots only
 - a) Play as whole notes/half notes (depending on if the chords move at one per bar or two per bar).
 - b) Write out several rhythms, then play the roots with those rhythms. Use one at a time exclusively, then mix and match.
 - c) Write out a full chorus solo using only roots. Learn it, memorize it, and play it in time with your accompaniment.
 - d) Improvise rhythms in time on the roots of the chords.

- 3) Root-3rd
 - a) Play as half notes/quarter notes (depending on speed of changes).
 - b) Write out several rhythms. Play with one at a time exclusively (choose freely between root and third), then mix and match.
 - c) Write out a full chorus solo using only roots and thirds. Learn, memorize, and play in time with your accompaniment.
 - d) Improvise rhythms in time on roots and thirds.
- 4) 3rd-Root: sub-steps A-D still apply
- 5) 1-3-5
 - a) Play as quarter notes/eighth notes (depending on speed of changes).
 - b) Write out several rhythms. Play with one at a time exclusively (freely choosing between the three chord tones), then mix and match.
 - c) Write out a full chorus solo using only triads. Learn, memorize and play in time with the accompaniment.
 - d) Improvise, using only triads.
- 6) 1-5-3: sub-steps A-D apply
- 7) 3-1-5: sub-steps A-D apply
- 8) 3-5-1: sub-steps A-D apply
- 9) 5-1-3: sub-steps A-D apply
- 10) 5-3-1: sub-steps A-D apply
- 11) 1-3-5-7
 - a) Play as 8th notes.
 - b) Write out several rhythms. Play with one at a time exclusively (freely choosing between the four chord tones), then mix and match.
 - c) Write out a full chorus solo using only seventh chords. Learn, memorize, and play in time with your accompaniment.
 - d) Improvise, using only seventh chords.
- 12) 1-3-7-5: sub-steps A-D apply
- 13) 1-5-3-7: sub-steps A-D apply
- 14) 1-5-7-3: sub-steps A-D apply
- 15) 1-7-3-5: sub-steps A-D apply
- 16) 1-7-5-3: sub-steps A-D apply
- 17) 3-1-5-7: sub-steps A-D apply
- 18) 3-1-7-5: sub-steps A-D apply
- 19) 3-5-1-7: sub-steps A-D apply
- 20) 3-5-7-1: sub-steps A-D apply
- 21) 3-7-1-5: sub-steps A-D apply
- 22) 3-7-5-1: sub-steps A-D apply
- 23) 5-1-3-7: sub-steps A-D apply
- 24) 5-1-7-3: sub-steps A-D apply
- 25) 5-3-1-7: sub-steps A-D apply
- 26) 5-3-7-1: sub-steps A-D apply
- 27) 5-7-1-3: sub-steps A-D apply
- 28) 5-7-3-1: sub-steps A-D apply

- 29) 7-1-3-5: sub-steps A-D apply
- 30) 7-1-5-3: sub-steps A-D apply
- 31) 7-3-1-5: sub-steps A-D apply
- 32) 7-3-5-1: sub-steps A-D apply
- 33) 7-5-1-3: sub-steps A-D apply
- 34) 7-5-3-1: sub-steps A-D apply

This method is very exhaustive, and also probably exhausting. It can be successfully applied using any new concept as a way of internalizing on a deep level. For example, if you are practicing 1-2-3-5 patterns (a la Coltrane's "Giant Steps" solo), there are 24 different permutations of this pattern, just as there are for four-note chords. In a more general sense, let's say you are learning pentatonic scales. You could start with just one or two notes of each pentatonic per chord, working your way up to all five notes per chord. You could then play the scale ascending, descending, in broken 3rds, broken 4ths, starting on any of the five notes, or any other pattern of your choosing. These would be the numbered steps, and the A-E substeps would read as follows:

- A) Full scale ascending only, as 8th notes
- B) Write out several rhythms. Play with one at a time exclusively, first playing only the ascending scale, then freely choosing any of the five notes.
- C) Write out a full chorus of solo using exclusively pentatonic scales. Learn, memorize, and play in time with your accompaniment.
- D) Improvise, using only pentatonic scales.

Never forget that hidden "step E." It is important to balance this extremely left-brained approach with some freer improvising. The method is purposely restrictive, however. Many of my students have complained of this, but it is true that creativity actually flourishes under restrictions. While this may seem like a paradox, consider that without restrictions, most of us will gravitate towards what is comfortable to play. By imposing restrictions on ourselves, we are forced to come up with new material we would have otherwise never thought to play. So even if you ultimately choose not to use the improvisational method outlined above, I strongly encourage all players to impose restrictions on themselves whenever they practice. These restrictions can be melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, or timbral in nature. The sky's the limit – see what you can come up with.