

# 10 Lessons In Jazz Improvisation

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## 10 Basic Lessons

*#1 - You Gotta Love It.*

*#2 - It's Gotta Dance*

*#3 – Understanding Improvisation (Memory and Melody Rule)*

*#4 – Let History of Jazz Be Your Guide*

*#5 – Reinventing the Melody*

*#6 – Using Riffs (Teach the blues not just the Blues Scale)*

*#7 – Ornamenting the Melody*

*#8 – Know the “jazzy scales”*

*#9 Use the “7 to 3”*

*#10 – Always Remember: “How” is more important than “What”*

## **You Gotta Love It ---- Find the “Way In”**

Students are all different and each find their own path to a love of jazz. Here are 6 great starting points for young jazz ears: Chet Baker, Horace Silver, Dexter Gordon, JJ Johnson, Paul Desmond, and Grant Green.

## **Answer the Big Question First: What Is Improvisation?**

**Musical Memory + Musical Imagination = Improvisation**

Musical creation (improvisation/composition) is very closely related to musical remembering. If we can remember a musical idea with some degree of accuracy (pitch, rhythm, expression) then we can usually quite easily imagine that same idea a bit differently. Musical Improvisation (in simple terms) combines two engines: Memory and Imagination. These are the improvisers most important tools.

## **There are three types of Musical Memory.**

**The memories we think (Intellectual)**

**The memories we hear (Aural)**

**The memories we feel (Kinesthetic)**

**For the improviser, aural memory is the most important.**

There are three types of musical memories: Melodic, Rhythmic and Harmonic. In jazz (and other music) melody and rhythm share a close partnership and are perceived as a whole. For most musicians and for nearly all beginners melody/rhythm forms a much stronger image in our mind's ear than harmony. From here on when we refer to melody we will be referring to melody with rhythm.

**Melody is the most memorable part of music and the basic fuel of improvisation.**

If improvisation is two engines (memory and imagination) working together, then melody is the fuel that propels them. There are many melodies at our disposal.

### Melodies used in improvisation

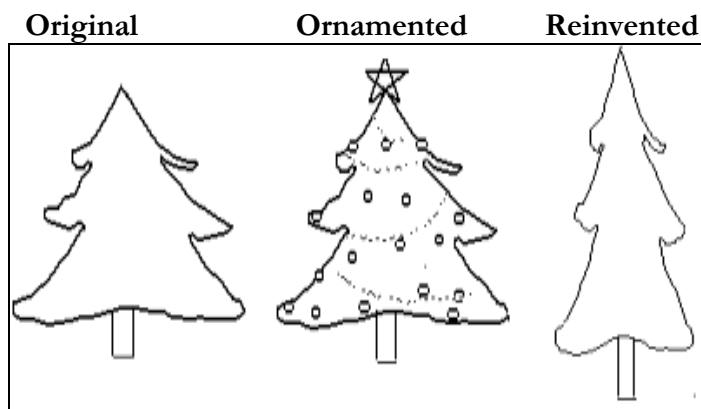
**Song** melody  
**Arpeggios** (the chords of the song)  
**Scales** (the scales that fit the chords of the song)  
**Riffs** (blues oriented melodies)  
**Slower Harmonically Related Melodies**  
The melody of the **Roots**  
The melody of the **Thirds**  
The melody of the **Thirds and Sevenths**  
**Seven to Three Resolutions**  
**Guide tone** melodies (stepwise melodies which connect color tones)  
Melodies from **Solos** on jazz recordings

### Jazz Improvisation Involves Two Skills

**Reinvention**  
**Ornamentation**

Jazz solos are generally melodic and contain Quotation, Reinvention and Ornamentation. Only the last two are improvisation however, quotation is an important part of many jazz solos.

To understand reinvention and ornamentation imagine that melodies are trees. Here are three trees. The one on the right is the original, the one in the middle is ornamented (extra stuff has been added), and the one on the left has been reinvented (changed but nothing extra has been added).



Don't confuse reinvention and ornamentation. They are both important and neither should be overlooked; yet they are profoundly different. **Reinvention** makes something new with existing material while **Ornamentation** makes something by adding new material.

### Three Melodies

The image shows three musical staves in treble clef with a common time signature (C).  
**Original Melody:** A simple sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.  
**Ornamented Melody:** The same sequence as the original, but with many grace notes and slurs added, making it more complex and rhythmic.  
**Reinvented Melody:** A completely new sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.

**Beginners should probably begin improvising with reinvention.** Melodic reinvention in concept is easy. Great jazz musicians are masters at reinventing melodies. Reinvention gives great jazz its freshness.

**You can reinvent a melody seven different ways:** (1) Syncopation, (2) Displacement, (3) Augmentation, (4) Diminution, (5) Iteration, (6) Repetition and (7) Truncation.

**Seven Ways to Reinvent a Melody**  
 (In words a student might understand):

1. Jazz It Up (Syncopation)
2. Move It Around (Displacement)
3. Stretch It Out (Augmentation)
4. Push It Together (Diminution)
5. Fill It Up With Rhythm (Iteration)
6. Go Back And Play Parts Again (Repetition)
7. Leave Some Of It Out (Truncation)

**Give the Right Medicine at the Right Time.**

**Learn to improvise in the same way that jazz grew up.**

**History provides the model.**

Style Period	Rhythmic Emphasis (soloists)	Melodic Emphasis (soloists)
Early Jazz	Quarter notes	Melodic Reinvention
Swing Jazz	Quarter notes	Change Running, Riffs (blues)
Bebop Jazz	Eighth notes	Change Running, Chromaticism, II-Vs
Modal Jazz	Eighth notes	Modes (Scales)
Post- Modern Jazz	Variety of rhythms	Free elements (not tied to harmony)

**Opinion: Much jazz instruction begins in the wrong place.** Emphasizing chords and scales before building a foundation of song melody and riff reinvention can put young improvisers in a **thinking** mode rather than **hearing** mode. (Teach the language before the alphabet).

**Improvisation is best when  
we play what we hear  
not what we think.**

Start with **common melodies** which the students already know: tunes from band methods, seasonal songs, folk songs, pop tunes. Any tune that can be sung from start to finish with accurate rhythm and pitch will work. Sing first, then play. **Next go to the blues.** Use tunes that have simple riff based melodies. Here are ten great ones as a place to start.

**Ten simple blues melodies based  
on a repeated four bar riff.**

Bag's Groove  
Sonny Moon for Two  
That's What I'm Talkin About  
Night Train  
The Hucklebuck  
Centerpiece  
Birk's Works  
Splanky  
Bud's Blues  
Groovus Mentus

There are most likely thousands of blues melodies. Many of the easiest blues melodies are based on short riffs (one, two, three, or four bar melodies). Music from the Swing Era (30's and 40's) is loaded with tunes and solos that are excellent for beginners and intermediate players. In the beginning avoid the ornate blues melodies associated with the bebop era. For beginners they are too complicated, too difficult to hold in memory, and too ornate to reinvent with ease.

**Encourage good rhythm.** Rhythm is best felt and heard, not thought. It is far better that improvisers (particularly beginners) draw upon their musical memory and intuition when reinventing with rhythm.

**Reinvention is best learned through modeling (call and response).** Avoid any activity which removes students from "hearing" mode. Play with your students. Resist the temptation to teach theory too soon. Instead teach melodies (by rote if possible) which contain characteristic blues riffs. The theory (chords and scales) can be filled in later

**What About The Blues Scale?  
There are many different blues constructions.**

**Here are three:**

Minor Blues = 1 b3 4 b5 5 b7

Major Blues = 1 2 b3 3 5 6

Composite Blues = 1 2 b3 3 4 b5 5 6 b7

**Here is another one** (Mike's Favorite)

"The Blues/Bebop/Everything Scale" = 1 2 b3 3 4 b5 5 b6 6 b7 7 8

**What about Ornamentation? What melodies can be ornamented?** Simple melodies work the best. “slower harmonically related melodies” are most easily ornamented.

**Four Great Melodies To Ornament**

The Melody of the 3rd  
The Melody of the 3rds and 7ths  
Guide Tone Melody  
7 to 3 Resolutions

The melodies listed above move slowly and present a clear impression of a song’s harmony. By targeting these notes harmony can be implied to the listener.

**Start ornamenting by targeting the  
Melody of the 3<sup>rd</sup>**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> imparts more harmonic information to the listener than any other chord tone. The melodies of many songs such as *All The Things You Are* are little more than ornamentations of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of each chord. 3<sup>rd</sup>s and other notes are given aural prominence in a number of ways. The most common way is the placing of the targeted note on a metrically strong beat (beats one or three in common time).

Melody notes on prominent beats will have greater harmonic weight than those on weaker beats.

**Two Ways to Ornament 3rds**

Add notes **before (into 3rds)**  
Add notes **after (out of 3rds)**

**Ornaments can be quite varied.** They can be: **diatonic** or **chromatic**, composed of steps (**scales**), or leaps (**chords**). They can come from above (**descending**), from below (**ascending**) or from above and below (**enclosing**).

Ornaments Into 3rds			
Scales Down	Scales Up	Diatonic Enclosure	Chromatic
4 3	2 3	24 3	4b3 3
54 3	12 3	42 3	32 b3
654 3	712 3	724 3	2#2 3
7654 3	6712 3	642 3	43 b3

## Seven Steps to Ornamenting of the Melody of the 3<sup>rd</sup>

1. Make a study sheet showing chord symbols and their 3rds.
2. Memorize the 3rds. (Be able to sing them accurately).
3. Practice each ornament with music first (if needed).
4. Commit each new ornament to memory.
5. Practice each until you can execute it with ease.
6. Use reinvention and make music out of each ornament.
7. Fill in the space between the ornaments with scale and chord tones.

Work to keep the motion going, in quarters first then in eighths aiming your melody toward the next ornament. You will probably be surprised how quickly you will begin hear or feel your way through the chord changes. Play through the three choruses of blues below to get an idea of the process.

Melody of the 3rd

C7      F7      C7      G-      C7      F7

C7      A7      D-      G7      C7      G7

Melody of the 3rd Ornamented

C7      F7      C7      G-      C7      F7

C7      A7      D-      G7      C7

C7      F7      C7      G-      C7      F7

C7      A7      D-      G7      C7

The three other melodies listed earlier will work equally well although they are bit more complicated. They are : The **melody of the 3rds and 7ths**, **guidetone melodies** (stepwise melodies which link primarily the 3rds and 7ths of chords) and the **7 to 3 resolution**. The **7 to 3 resolution** works particularly with the **II-V or II-V-I progression**.

## Ornamenting the 7 to 3 Resolution

The 7 to 3 resolution is the most economical representation of the II-V-I progression. The six melodies below are common ways to ornament this resolution. Notice how each melody passes through the 7 of the II chord on its way to the 3 of the V chord. Jazz musicians have been using these melodies for over a half century. The basic patterns can be applied to II-Vs in major and minor keys and can be disguised through techniques such as: rhythmic displacement, diatonic and chromatic ornamentation, octave displacement and truncation.

The image shows six musical examples of 7 to 3 resolution ornaments in the key of D major, moving from D-7 to G7 to CMaj7. Each example is presented in two measures, with the first measure containing the ornamented melody and the second measure showing the final resolution to the tonic. The ornaments are labeled with their respective note sequences:

- Example 1: 1357 - 3579
- Example 2: 1357 - 3217
- Example 3: 3217 - 3579
- Example 4: 3217 - 3217
- Example 5: 5317 - 3579
- Example 6: 5317 - 3217

## *20 Things To Do* (How to learn a jazz song)

1. Listen to a great recording of the song (repeatedly).
2. Play along with the recording (without the leadsheet). Explore the song with your ear.
3. Memorize the song melody.
4. Practice reinventing that song melody
5. Learn simple blues riffs that fit the harmony.
6. Practice reinventing those riffs.
7. Memorize the “melody of the 3<sup>rd</sup>” (prepare a worksheet if needed)
8. Practice ornamenting the “melody of the 3<sup>rd</sup>”
9. Learn the arpeggios of the chords of the tune.
10. Learn the scales which fit the chords of the tune.
11. Practice the tunes other harmonic melodies (3rds and 7ths, Guidetones, 7 to 3 resolution).
12. Transcribe a great solo on the tune.
13. Practice recreating the solo (with the recording).
14. Memorize the transcription.
15. Practice reinventing that transcription.
16. Analyze that transcription looking for the melodic materials (scales, riffs, chords, pentatonics)
17. Practice selected material from the transcription in all twelve keys.
18. Analyze that transcription looking for the “implied harmony” (3rds, 7 to 3s, Guidetones, etc.)
19. Build your own solos on the “skeletal harmonic melodies” which have been identified.
20. Play the song for people.

