

Basic Jazz Improvisation

Once you've managed to play along with some pop tunes, you might as well try some jazz. Jazz chords are generally more complicated and change more frequently than pop chords. That means that a note or melody you play over one chord may not work over the next chord. Still, don't worry about the chords just yet. There are jazz tunes that are easy enough that you can improvise along with using your ears rather than trying to read the chords symbols. No band to play with? No problem! Jamey Aebersold is great to play along with. Each Aebersold volume includes a book and CD. The book shows you the melodies or "heads" of the jazz tunes, and the CD has backgrounds you can play along with.

How to play a simple jazz tune

Look at the chart for All of Me on the next page. You'll notice that there's not much there, only the melody and chords. This is the standard way of writing out unarranged jazz tunes. If you were to go to a jam session where people were reading charts, this is what the charts would look like.

The standard way to play one of these is this:

- 1) Play the head. The head is another name for the melody. Sometimes a musician will indicate that it's time to play the head by pointing at his head.
- 2) Solos over the chord changes. (You keep reading the chords from the top of the page to the bottom as if you were reading the melody over and over again, only now you're making up your own melody to go with the chords.)
- 3) Play the head again.

That's the most simple way you could possibly think about it, however there's a little more to it. If everyone played every tune exactly like that it would be very boring and predictable.

Continue reading on the page after the All of Me chart, and I'll tell you how to make the tune more interesting.

How to make the playing of a jazz tune more interesting:

First of all, most of the time there should be an **intro**. Usually Jamey Aebersold doesn't include an intro, but in a live jam session or performance situation there is usually an intro. An easy standard intro is to have the rhythm section play the last 8 bars of the tune. Someone in the rhythm section can either play the melody of the last 8 bars, or improvise something, or just play the chords in a melodic or rhythmic way. There are other ways to intro a piece, but this is usually the easiest and it's all I'll tell you about for now. If you want to hear more intros you should go listen to the local professionals play at one of the local public jam sessions.

When it comes to playing the **head**, you'll notice that if you were to play the head exactly as it's written it would be very boring and rigid sounding. Most jazz heads are meant to be played around with a bit. For example, you could play the first 4 bars of All of Me this way:



Because it's impossible to predict the way the other musicians will interpret the head in this situation, it's standard to have only one musician play the head. You can also split up the head - that is, have one person play the first half of the head and another person play the second half. There are jazz tunes that it is standard for all the melodic instruments to play the head together on. In general those are blues tunes or bop tunes (tunes with a lot of fast notes). You can often tell what sort of tune it is by looking at the melody. If the rhythms that are written out in the melody are very accurate - for example they have a lot of eighth notes - then the melodic instruments can play the melodies together exactly as written because they don't need you to interpret them to make them more interesting. If the rhythms are written out very simply like in All of Me - for example they have a lot of half notes and quarter notes - then they need you to spice them up a little in order to sound exciting.

When playing **solos**, it is common to just have everyone who wants a solo play one and then go back to the head. Remember that when you get to the bottom of the page or "form" to start reading at the top again. Unless the tune is a ballad (or very slow), usually the other musicians won't mind if you improvise a few choruses (improvise through the whole page a few times). There are common things to do during solos to make them more exciting. If the tune is a blues then the horns who aren't soloing at the time can make up a **background** and play it quietly while someone else is soloing. **Trading** 8's or 4's is very common to do after everyone's had their own solo to themselves. By trading 4's I mean that someone plays 4 bars of improvisation, then the drummer plays a solo for 4 bars (the chords keep going by even though no one is playing them), then the next soloing plays for 4 bars, then back to the drums, then the next soloist and so on. If you're in a jam session, the standard way for a musician to indicate trading 4's is to hold up 4 fingers. Sometimes horns can trade 4's or 8's between only two horns, leaving the drummer out. For example, the sax will play for 8 bars, then the

trombone will play for 8 bars, then the sax will play for 8 bars, then the bone.. And so on. To make it more exciting you can shorten the amount of bars each horn plays by half every few times, until eventually you're both playing at the same time!

Here's an example:

Bone - 8 Bars

Sax - 8 Bars

Bone - 8 Bars

Sax - 8 Bars

Bone - 4 Bars

Sax - 4 Bars

Bone - 4 Bars

Sax - 4 Bars

Bone - 2 Bars

Sax - 2 Bars

Bone - 2 Bars

Sax - 2 Bars

Both Bone and Sax improvise together....

Trading like that can be great for learning how to play off each other. You can try to play some of the melodies that the soloist you're trading with is playing.

When trading with the drummer it's common (though it doesn't happen every time) to have a drum solo after some trading with the horns. After the drum solo you play the head again.

During trading, a common way to indicate to the other musicians that trading (or the drum solo after trading with the drummer) has gone on long enough and it's time to play the head again is to point at your head.

After you play the head out, you usually should have some sort of **ending** instead of just playing the melody and stopping. A common ending is to repeat or “**tag**” the last few bars. On a tune with an ending like this (it’s a IImin V7 I ending in the chord progression, but don’t worry about that now. If you can play on the piano “Dmin7 G7 C” then you’ll know what it sounds like, and that’s all you need to know for now.) the rhythm section can play the 2 bars before the last 2 bars up a tone on the repeat, and then play them again as written. The horn who’s playing the melody can adjust the melody to go along with it. All this sounds very complicated, but it isn’t. It’s just hard to understand by explaining it this way. Once you hear it played you’ll know exactly what I mean. Here it is written out - if you can play it on the piano it will make a lot more sense:

LAST 3 BARS OF THE HEAD...

F Fmin Cmaj7 Emin7 A7

Dmin7 G7 Emin7 A7

PLAYED AGAIN AS WRITTEN:

Dmin7 G7 C

"DUKE ELLINGTON ENDING":

The notes I added after the tag (labelled “Duke Ellington ending”) are Duke’s ending from Take the A-Train. That is a common thing to add to the ending of simple jazz tunes, though the melody instruments don’t always play it - it can be played just by the bass and piano player. All this may seem complicated, but it’s really not. Just try playing it on a piano. Once you hear it, it’ll all make sense.

Now you know everything you need to know to play an easy jazz chart without knowing how to read chords (unless you play piano, bass, or guitar.. Then there’s no escaping it - you must know how to read chords before you can start jamming.)

Reading and Understanding 7th Chords

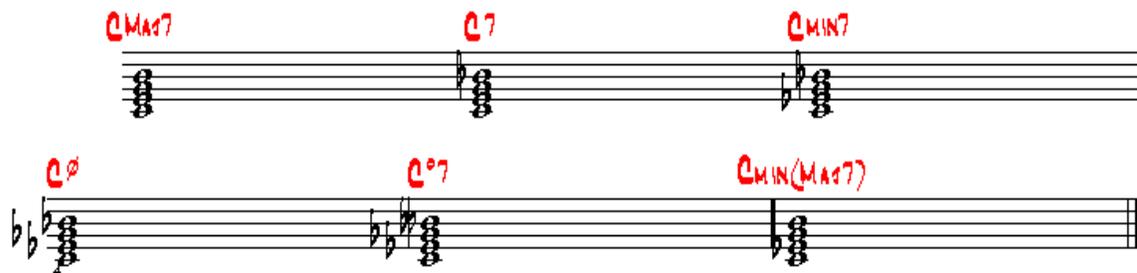
In order to be able to play jazz tunes without having to rely entirely on your ears, you need to be able to read chords. It's really not that hard once you get started on it. The easiest method to start learning is to use a piano.

Let's start with 3 note triads:



Play these examples on the piano. Those are easy enough to understand. A minor chord is sometimes written as a “-” sign instead of min, and a diminished chord is sometimes written as dim instead of o. Once you’ve played them in the key they’re in (C) on the piano, try playing them in other keys. You should try F next, because it only has one flat so it won’t be very hard to adapt this to that key. Remember as you’re playing these chords that you only need to move one note at a time. For example, you play the major chord (F, A, C in the key of F), then you move the middle note (or “3rd”) down a semitone to get the minor chord (F Ab C). Then you move the top note (or “5th”) down a semitone to get the diminished chord (F Ab Cb). Easy! Try that in every key.

And now for the 7th chords:



7th chords are the most common when reading a jazz tune from a “Real Book”. Sometimes a major 7th chord will be written with a triangle instead of the word Maj. Also, sometimes instead of writing \emptyset to indicate half diminished it will be written as “Min7b5”.

With the exception of the last chord (the min(Maj7) chord) you can play these on the piano by moving only one note a semitone down for each chord just like you did with the triads. The last chord you may recognize from old detective movies. That’s a good way to remember what the minor 3rd Major 7th chord sounds like. Once you’ve played through the chords in C, try them in F moving one semitone at a time. Start with F, A, C, E - FMaj7. Then move the 7th (top note) down a semitone and play F, A, C, Eb and you’ll have F7. Then move the 3rd down a semitone - F, Ab, C, Eb to get Fmin7. Then

move the 5th down a semitone - F, Ab, Cb, Eb - to get FØ (half diminished). Then move the 7th down a semitone again - F, Ab, Cb, Ebb (or D) to get Fo7 (diminished 7th). Finally, for the exception - the detective chord - just play Fmin (F, Ab, C) with a Major 7th on top (E). And it's as easy as that! Now play that in all 12 keys a few times, and you'll be on the right track to chord reading.

Once you've managed to play all that on the piano, you should play it on your instrument. The next step from there is to get an Aebersold going, play a simple tune like All of Me from the Aebersold CD, and instead of playing a solo just play the chord notes. From there, you're ready to start improvising and thinking about the chords. Once you have no problem reading the chords on simple tunes, you can move on to tunes that have more frequent chords changes.

Well, that's all you need to know to get a good head start on jazz improvisation! You should have some student jam sessions, and if you can make it out to the local jazz club you can check out their jam sessions as well. Listening to other musicians play standards (the common jazz tunes) will really help you with your own playing.