

Five Keys to Unlocking Better Jazz Solos

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1: Rhythm

- 2 notes per bar, then, 3, then 4... [ex. 1a-e]
- One pitch per bar, then 2, then 3...
 - Later, try some variations
 - Combine 2 rhythms, change direction etc. [ex. 1f-j]
 - Rhythmic displacement (start on 4+ or 1+) [ex. 1l-m]
 - 4 bar phrases to start...then 2
- TIP: starting and/or ending on the & helps swing feel 😊
- TIP: ending phrases with too many long notes weighs things down 😞

2: Harmony

- Build on diatonic triads (1 3 5 of key to start) [ex. 2a]
 - Rhythmic displacement is always fun 😊 [ex. 2b-d]
 - Down the road, mix up the 1 3 5 (try 3 1 5 and later, 5 3 1) [ex. 2e-f]
- More advanced:
 - Add pickup half step below the 1 of the chord [ex. 2g]
 - Try the 1 2 3 5 of the chord (also 3 2 1 5 and 5 3 2 1) [ex. 2h-j]
- Next milestone: diatonic 7th chords (see my Diatonic Harmony handout)
 - Start simply, 4 bar warmup [ex. 2k].
 - Then, work on variations that move a bit quicker, and go up and down [ex. 2l-m]
 - Adding triplets enhances the jazz swing feel [ex. 2n]

For the above

- All winds play the melody notes (octave shifts when needed)
- Piano, octaves (or doble octaves) in 2 hands
- Guitar and bass, play lines w/ winds, but try different octaves
- At home, practice with iReal “Diatonic” tracks (2- or 4 bars, as needed)

3: Melody

- **For New Improvisors**
 1. Memorize the **melody of the song** (learn by ear!)
 - Quote (or allude to) it during your solo once or twice.
 2. Develop some cool musical **motifs/ideas/themes**
 - Keep it simple... 3 – 5 notes in plenty.
 - 2 repeats max before you change it up.
 3. Target the **chord tones** (they’re like stepping stones)
 - 3rd and 7th have most color; 5th is cool, root = “lifeline” (but kinda boring)
 - I think it’s fine to let students write out some note selections here

- **For Developing Improvisors**
 4. Practice **long note solos**
 - A whole or half note for each new chord, each new measure
 - Later, play cool rhythms on the original (long) note
 5. **Nail the changes:** outline chords with **chord tones**
 - But, “cover your tracks” (play ideas, not arpeggios)
 - Try not to start, end lines on the root
 6. Get super comfortable with **basic modes**
 - Dorian, for minor 7 chords, esp. ii chords (1 2 b3 4 5 6 b7 8)
 - Mixolydian, for dominant 7 chords, esp. V chords (1 2 3 4 5 6 b7 8)
 - Aeolian, for “tonic” minor chords, minor blues (1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7 8)
 - Save the blues scale for color (and of course, the blues!)

- **For Confident Improvisors**
 7. Learn to identify **tonal centers** (*see my Diatonic Harmony handout*)
 - What’s the key (signature) of the moment?
 - Focus on the notes that change (from F to G, change Bb to B, F to F#)
 8. Recognize **common chord progressions**
 - In Major: ii m7 - V⁷ - I Ma, and also in minor: ii m7(b5) = V⁷(alt.) - i mi
 - Secondary dominants (i.e. bridge of rhythm changes)
 - Guide tones implied by the chords
 9. Really think about the **structure of the solo**
 - Leaving space is great (lets your brilliance soak in, lets rhythm section contribute)
 - Use sequences, patterns (tastefully please)
 - Effective use of range, timbre, rhythm, density to shape “arc” of solo
 - Consider the “architecture” of your solo: sendoff? How many choruses? Backgrounds?

- **EVERYBODY!!**
 10. Make sure you ALWAYS
 - Play with great time, jazz feel
 - Lock into the rhythm section
 - Play your solo like it’s the most important thing (at the time, it IS!)

4: Style

- **Clark Terry: Imitation, Assimilation, Innovation**
 - **Imitate:** Inflection, timbre, articulation, vibrato, rhythmic feel
 - THE most important at this stage!
 - Don’t have just one “hero”
 - Listen to all styles and eras
 - Listen to instruments other than your own
 - Instrumentalists should check out singers (and vice versa)
 - **Assimilate:** Connect ear, mind, and body
 - Transcribe phrases, by ear. Learn in all keys, ranges.
 - Sing it first, then play it. I believe in this 1000%!
 - No substitute for focused practice
 - **Innovate:**
 - Modify licks, patterns etc., make them your own

Refer to the “Listen and Transcribe...” handout for ideas on where to begin!

5: Authenticity

- Great improvisers **think like players, not like students.**
- They are **fearless**, and **play with authority.**
- They intergrate theory, aural skills, technique, and emotion. **Brain, ears, hands, and soul.**
- They understand **their role in the jazz tradition**...respect for the past, responsibility to move the music forward.
- They absorb the “isms” of their instrument.
- They often assume broader roles (bandleader, composer, arranger, booking agent...) How can *your* students do these things?

Closing Thoughts

There is never enough rehearsal time! So...we multi-task!

- Incorporate these rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic drills into daily warmups.
 - Start w/common keys; eventually, all 12!
- Work on ear training: **SING IT, THEN PLAY IT!**
 - (4 bar warmups) You play, they sing back, you play again, they play. Then later,
 - (2 bar warmups) You play, they play.
- Students are working on improvisation, scales, rhythm, technique, and jazz style with every warmup!

Keep the jazz fresh. 😊

- Students (and adults) check out when things get boring. Be creative, change things up, keep in fun AND challenging.
 - Change the key, or the feel (swing, bossa, Latin, funk)
 - Create new patterns (or have students try this.)
 - For more advanced students, try the rhythm warmups using modes (mixolydian, dorian etc.) rather than the major scale.
 - Keep the rhythm section engaged.

Take advantage of those “set-up” minutes.

- Build a playlist of great jazz albums, and have this playing as students are setting up for rehearsal. Google “Double Time 100 Historic Jazz Albums” for the list of recordings.

Build a jazz culture at your school.

- Help students create jazz combos, and assist them in getting opportunities to play in public.
- If your school allows, create an online listening/discussion forum. They can share jazz recordings they enjoy, and you can offer some directed listening opportunities too! (Extra credit?) 😊
- Better jazz soloists = better jazz ensembles = win-win!

 **We want our jazz students to be comfortable “off the page.”**

- I hope these exercises, tips, ideas, materials, and resources help you to help your students “get there.” I’ve used these materials and ideas at many clinics, master classes, and festivals, always with great results. I hope you and your students get a lot out of this. Feel free to contact me with any questions.

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CASMEC 2024: FIVE KEYS TO UNLOCKING BETTER SOLOS

KEY #1: RHYTHM WARMUPS

Ex. 1a

Ex. 1b

Ex. 1c

Ex. 1d

Ex. 1e

Ex. 1f

Ex. 1g-j

Ex. 1k

Ex. 1l-m

KEY #2: HARMONIC WARMUPS

Ex. 2a



Ex. 2a consists of three staves of music. The first staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The second staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4. The third staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4.

Ex. 2b-d



Ex. 2b-d consists of three staves of music. The first staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The second staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4. The third staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4.

Ex. 2e (3 1 5)



Ex. 2e (3 1 5) consists of three staves of music. The first staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The second staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4. The third staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4.

Ex. 2f (5 3 1)



Ex. 2f (5 3 1) consists of three staves of music. The first staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The second staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4. The third staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4.

Ex. 2g



Ex. 2g consists of one staff of music in treble clef. It contains a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. There are two sharp signs (#) above the notes G4 and A4, indicating they are G#4 and A#4.

Ex. 2h-j



Ex. 2h-j consists of three staves of music. The first staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The second staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4. The third staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4.

Ex. 2k



Ex. 2k consists of one staff of music in treble clef. It contains a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5.

Ex. 2l



Ex. 2l consists of one staff of music in treble clef. It contains a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5.

Ex. 2m



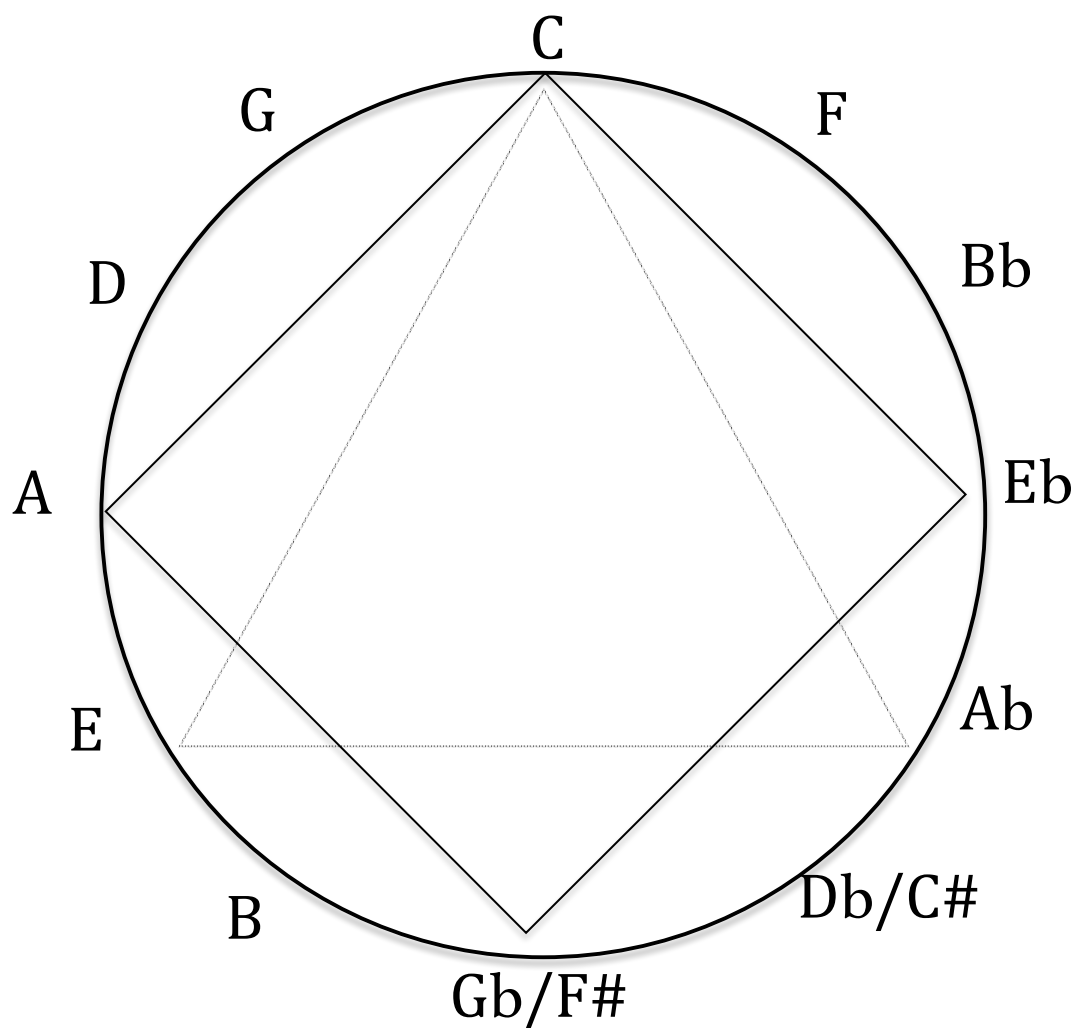
Ex. 2m consists of one staff of music in bass clef. It contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4.

Ex. 2n



Ex. 2n consists of one staff of music in treble clef. It contains a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5. There are three triplet markings (3) above the notes G4, A4, and B4.

The Circle of Descending Fifths*



- *The name issue
 - Series of descending 5ths.
 - C is the dominant (V) of F, F is the V of Bb, etc.
- ii - V⁷ - 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. ☺

Diatonic Harmony/Major Tonal Centers

Mike Dana, Fresno City College

	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-V⁷-I, or iii-vi-ii-V⁷) 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-V⁷ (I) maybe the most common jazz progression
 - iii-vi-ii- V⁷ 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) V⁷ 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 V⁷.) 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.

Great Solos for Developing Jazz Students to Listen To and Transcribe

Mike Dana, CASMEC 2024

Tips:

- **Learn the first part** of the solo (it's usually easier) **by ear, on your instrument**, before trying to learn the entire solo. Even a few bars or phrases make a great start!
- If you can't get the whole solo, **focus on the parts you can get**. It'll get easier with practice.
 - YouTube allows you to slow down the playback, making transcribing a LOT easier.
- If transcribing the solo is a little too ambitious, try learning just the **melody** of the tune, again, by ear, on your instrument.
- You can find tons of transcriptions on the Internet, but don't! **The real benefit comes from the process of transcribing the solo** by yourself, not just from playing a written transcription you've downloaded.
- Try to capture the **phrasing, articulation** of the solo...the nuances are SO important!
- Start by transcribing solos on your instrument, but **make sure you also learn solos on other instruments** too.
- Start with this partial list, then explore from there. When you find a player you like a lot, explore further. 😊

Alto Sax

Cannonball Adderley "Freddie Freeloader" (from Miles Davis "Kind of Blue")

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZcuSBouhVA>

Paul Desmond "Take Five"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryA6eHZNnXY>

Lou Donaldson "Blues Walk"

<http://youtu.be/CRIINONjJ-M>

Lou Donaldson "Midnight Creeper"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XB4e1rLBftI>

Maceo Parker "Cold Sweat"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GTxOyN9PXc>

Tenor Sax

Lester Young "Blue Lester"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPteKhaml_g

Sonny Rollins "St. Thomas"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4DySQyteRI>

Dexter Gordon "Watermelon Man"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbHJHPTikQA>

Stanley Turrentine "Sugar"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLalrVB1av4>

Stan Getz "The Girl From Ipanema"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKEmQookIDw>

Baritone Sax

Gerry Mulligan "The Preacher"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu2eyiku00I>

Gerry Mulligan "Walkin' Shoes"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6uOcShLPvE>

Also, try transcribing alto solos down an octave

Trumpet

Chet Baker "Summertime"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4yfJccwu2g>

Miles Davis "So What" (*from "Kind of Blue". All his solos are great!*)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIXk1LBvlqUArt>

Art Farmer "Killer Joe"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u23EtcB-L9M>

Miles Davis "Freddie Freeloader" (*also from "Kind of Blue".*)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZcuSBouhVA>

Miles Davis "Blues By Five"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxd7Pi3j5K8>

Trombone

J.J. Johnson "Walkin'"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMW3RloxEyA>

Jimmy Knepper "My Jelly Roll Soul"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzNuG8q2Xh8>

Curtis Fuller "Blue Train"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HT_Zs5FKDZE

Curtis Fuller "Five Spot After Dark"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-zNWpdcxvQ>

Curtis Fuller "I'm Old Fashioned"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HNnM2iRwHLE>

Piano

Wynton Kelly "Moanin'"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZcuSBouhVA>

Wynton Kelly "Freddie Freeloader" (*also from Miles Davis "Kind of Blue"*)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZcuSBouhVA>

Red Garland "C Jam Blues"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9BCWzQnQ4Q>

Kenny Barron "On The Sunny Side Of The Street"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMeC6LLeZww>

Horace Silver "Song For My Father"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKf1x3CALAE>

Joey Calderazzo "Midnight Voyage" (*starts near the end*)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQwbhtHh9RE>

Dave Brubeck "Blue Rondo a la Turk" (*focus on top note of chordal part*)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqPC-BkylxA&list=PLMxkpnecodMI06cGhDnJWlu86POfn-JJ>

Guitar

Wes Montgomery "Willow Weep For Me"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RX2m8coZiCQ&list=PL0q2VleZJVEmhGT8b7NQBIRHVjl-jDBBc&index=6>

Kenny Burrell "Midnight Blue"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNWDwOsQqlw>

Kenny Burrell "Chitlins Con Carne"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mP0flneNfaQ>

Grant Green "Django"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bA9qpIB8xQM>

Grant Green "Gooden's Corner"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bif6MKu8vAs>

Bass

Jimmy Blanton "Sepia Panorama"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FN7m8iMBIQ>

Percy Heath "One Bass Hit"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPNTcE9j-Go>

Ray Brown "Teach Me Tonight"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z4EJkzb06Q>

Various: The History of Jazz Bass (*this is pretty cool!*)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrwMltHwnKs>

More Great Resources

All About Jazz: Top 100 Albums (*build your playlist here!*)

<https://www.allaboutjazz.com/double-time-top-100-historically-significant-recordings-by-aaj-staff>

Jazzbooks (*Jamey Aebersold web site*)

<https://www.jazzbooks.com>

Aebersold Jazz Handbook (*Free! Great stuff on pp. 7-8*)

<https://www.jazzbooks.com/mm5/download/FQBK-handbook.pdf>

50 Easy Jazz Solos To Transcribe

<https://www.learnjazzstandards.com/blog/50-easy-jazz-solos-to-transcribe/>

10 Brilliant Jazz Solos And What You Can Learn From Them

<https://www.jazzadvice.com/lessons/10-brilliant-jazz-solos-and-what-you-can-learn-from-them/>

Jazz Piano Practice sessions

<https://jazzpianopracticesessions.com/beginner-intermediate-transcriptions/>

Jazz Standards

<https://www.jazzstandards.com>

Learn Jazz Standards

<https://www.learnjazzstandards.com/start-here-all-others/>

Jazz Advice

<https://www.jazzadvice.com>

Jazz On The Tube (LOTS of jazz videos of the greats)

<https://www.youtube.com/@jazzonthetube/playlists>

Don't forget to use the QR code on the cover sheet to access the ireal Pro files for this presentation!

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