



BASS

Standards for Becoming a Jazz Musician

by Tom Pieper

Jazz standards are tunes that all or most jazz musicians know and perform. Certain tunes seem to have a timeless quality that makes them interesting to improvisers and keeps them in the repertoire for many repeated interpretations. Many of these tunes are from the early to mid 20th century and include songs composed by Green, Berlin, Porter, Strayhorn, Van Heusen, Gershwin and others. To get started playing jazz standards you need to understand and become familiar with the most common standards. Years ago you could go into any club and listen to a group of musicians that you were interested in and that you wanted to sound like. Whether you are playing jazz or any kind of music you need to have an ideal sound in your mind of what you are aiming at. Your tastes can and will change over time but modeling of music that you like is an important beginning step. Usually the musicians who you see playing regularly are the masters of their craft. I drove to Chicago once (1982) to see Miles Davis among others and told my bass teacher, Reggie Willis, that I really enjoyed hearing pianist Jodie Christianson playing at the Chicago Jazz Festival. His response was well of course you did, “you’re supposed to like Jodie”. Even though I was not familiar with his playing except from one Eddie Harris recording that I had found in a cut-out bin, the rest of the world knew his playing. A lot of what we need to learn to function as jazz musicians still comes from word of mouth and the accepted standards of the day; usually we just have to catch up and be aware of what is out there.

If you live in the Twin Cities you are lucky to hear many of the best musicians in the country on a regular basis. When you see live jazz musicians there is a good chance that everyone who plays at these venues will know certain tunes. Go to these clubs and hear the songs that people play and note what you like. If you are in school and your teacher brings in a guest artist or jazz group for a clinic, attend the clinic and take mental notes of the songs that they play and take note of what you like. Your second

priority is to find as many musicians that you can hear live and support what they are doing. This may also guarantee that you will someday have an audience to support your work (i.e. play).

Jumping ahead to today’s world where we can instantly download any song that we want—it makes it easier to access the music but a little more difficult to see which songs are the most common. You have been patient so far so now go to your computer and open iTunes. When iTunes is loaded, enter “On Green Dolphin Street” into the search box and see how many different artists have recorded this tune. Most jazz musicians consider this tune as a standard because it is in an ABAB song form, is 32 measures long, and has a relatively easy chord progression for improvisation. Your initial search brings up 419 recorded versions on iTunes alone. This might make me think, as a young and aspiring student of the American music called jazz, “here is a tune that I should know” or at the very least expect to be able to play in the future. As a student in the 10s you could probably find this on YouTube as well so there are even more options for learning about this tune. I now run suggest you run upstairs and ask your parents permission to download a couple of the top takes so you can put them on your iPod to listen to for the next week.

On YouTube as I watch and listen to Hank Jones *On Green Dolphin Street* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89Emv-YAnWM>), I can begin to map out the song in a very simple fashion. This will help me if I want to spend more time learning more of the details when I learn the tune. This version starts with a bass line played by piano and bass in unison and serves as the intro to the tune. Next the melody is played by piano. I listen and take note of a Tadd Dameron turnaround leading into the piano solo. The feel goes from Latin alternating with swing to all swing in the second chorus. A certain number of chromatic chord alterations happen with the tonic chord C major alternating to C# major. This is a fun way to begin transcribing or learning all that

goes on in a tune in an overall way. You do not have to be clear about all the details, but you can begin to form a concept about the whole performance of the tune. Next they interview Hank Jones! Here you can get insight into the character of one of the best jazz pianists in history and begin to understand how much has gone on before you hit the play button. I wonder what the Keith Jarrett Trio or Chick Corea does with this tune? (A confession is that is what I am doing while I continue to write; it’s called research.)

Next you eagerly follow up and ask your bass teacher at your lesson about this tune and what she or he can offer. The teacher may recommend another recording or have a lead sheet for the song and then you are armed with the recording, music, and visual performance of a modern genius to help you begin to decode and learn the piece. Later that week you know of a coffee shop that has a jazz quintet playing and you may be brave and ask one of the players in the band about the tune and if they can perform it. Job one is done.

When you find yourself in the soloist spotlight remember—Don’t Panic. First of all, audiences are intrigued by the bass and generally love bass solos. You will find this true often by noticing how people’s attention changes at the beginning of a bass solo. The challenge is keeping them interested for the whole solo. Second, your instrument, which can sometimes be less out front in the ensemble (Basie vs. Holland), will finally have a chance to be heard through the mix. Finally, the reason you have been asked to take a solo is that everyone has been comfortable with your support during their own solos and they are now honoring you with the chance to show what great ideas you have to bring to the song.

To make the transition from accompanist to soloist remember that the bass lines that you have already played are melodies and are improvised and are solos in themselves. The new element is playing notes at the speed of the other improvisers. I suggest the same process from above when research-

ing tunes; however now put yourself in the role of the soloist. Listen to all instruments, especially horn players and ask yourself if the solo is made up of mostly eighth notes? What is the range of the notes? Does the soloist take pauses and phrase with the melody? Any and all of these questions will help you to develop your own soloing concept. I just saw Douglas Ewart demonstrate some of his hand-made instruments and he spoke eloquently about combining the intellect with the heart in order to really excel as an improviser. He said if you do this

and play completely alone for an audience, “then you will have something”.

It is certainly one of the most challenging activities to improvise in jazz but when you are committed and experience this flow you will be greatly rewarded for your efforts. After you have done all the preparation you can and have become competent on your instrument you are free to improvise and let your heart and emotions take over your playing. The best playing you will do is not when you say, “I had a great solo,” but when you get lost in the act of improvising and

may only remember the good feeling that you helped create on the bandstand

Keep playing and improvising.

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