



BASS

Jazz Camping over Summertime

by Tom Pieper

A Pause to Refresh

Although the traditional joke about teaching is that teachers have the summertime off, this shift in the daily routine is often the best way to make a change to explore something new. Have you noticed that everyone is much more busy in the 10s than in the past? I looked forward to a six-day band camp in Wisconsin from the 5th–10th grade, but reflect that this was only one week out of my 12-week vacation. The rest of my summer was spent biking, swimming, and watching old TV shows. Today, busy has taken on a whole new meaning with the scheduling and coordination of multiple activities and events. As a teacher at MacPhail Center for Music (MCFM), I am reminded of this because they alone offer 55 different music camps from June–August! This same shift in routines is helpful for students too. You no longer go to the “music camp,” but you research and select a camp tailored to meet your individual tastes and needs. When camp is over, it is important to process what you have learned so you can continue to benefit from your experience to accomplish greater development before your next opportunity.

From Today I have a Plan

Here are two approaches to your new summertime routine that you might try. First you could go to a variety of camps that expose you to many different musical influences; second you could focus on one specific camp to refine your musical tastes and determine your next course of action. The former is a way to experience music broadly and illustrates that today you need to know about all facets of music to be successful. The latter approach allows you to dig deeper to develop new skills, or to excel in an area and help you break out of a plateau. Obviously cost is a factor, and so is having a balance in your life. The goal is to take full advantage of this pause to recharge. This summer I was able to continue teaching two of my home studio combos, and teach one of the Jazz Improvisation camps at MCFM. As always I was able to observe

some great instruction and a steady and consistent improvement and engagement throughout the week.

Backwards Planning

For example I will share some thoughts about a Jazz Camp at MCFM. The great and most important thing about any Jazz Camp is the performance at the end of the week. The performance, while it can vary in quality, must still demonstrate students’ understanding of their role in the group, and must have an element of risk taking and surprise. All during the week, and even on the first day, the goal was to put together two groups that would deliver an authentic performance in the jazz idiom.

What continues to work well at this summer camp is jazz coordinator Adam Linz’s effort of motivating students and successfully placing them in groups with others of similar ages, personalities, and levels of ability. This is critical when you are meeting for 3 ½ hours a day for 5 days in a row! The benefit of pre-loading students is also coordinating the faculty to match their needs, as well as having faculty available to fill in on instruments that may be less common. So if you had three trumpet players the faculty would not be as balanced as having a horn player, rhythm section player, and someone with great historical knowledge and rapport. In this camp we had 9 wind players, 1 brass, and two rhythm section players. Knowing this ahead of time drove the decisions on hiring faculty to cover on bass, drums, and piano. This also helped the ensembles by rotating a professional drummer between groups, thereby giving the ensembles the opportunity to play with a world-class artist and teacher.

Number 1: Know What You Know and Need to Know

Regardless of the instrument that you play, you will need to be comfortable playing scales to play and speak the language of jazz. In the recent past, before jazz education became so codified, specific skills and requirements were acceptable and were

determined by the instrument you played. Brass and sax players needed the technical understanding to play all notes fluently in order to play the challenging melodies of the jazz repertoire, and to be able to improvise in 8th and 16th note values. This was also true of guitarists and pianists who had the added task of creating chord accompaniments from chord charts. Bassists had to be able to play quarter note walking bass lines at any tempo. Drummers needed to be able to keep good steady time and play the forms of tunes. In the 10s the entrance requirements for jazz instrumentalist performing degrees have evened out between the different instruments. Now, as a bassist you too must be able to perform the melody, solo, walk a bass line, and play with accompanying musicians in the same way as the other instrumentalist. Now everyone needs to know and be able to demonstrate a command of basic scales for use in their improvisations.

It’s Your Choice

As a music camper in the summer you have both the opportunity to hear this information, and then act on it. Since all instrumentalists need to know everything it is important to prioritize what will be needed to function in the world of jazz in a short amount of time. Fortunately, jazz scale knowledge still comes down to working within the II–V–I progression. This entails understanding how to play the scales, how to use them over a progression, and how to recognize the harmonic structure when it appears. The II–V–I can be complete, it can be just the II and V, or you can even interject the II when the V stands alone.

Number 2: Choose Your Tasks Wisely

Saxophonist Greg Keel used the work of Jamie Abersold to demonstrate that if you could learn the three scales needed for every key you would be well on your way to mastering your instrument and reaching a level of competency to greatly improve your improvisational skills. We on the faculty all lamented that we would have loved

to have known this information when we were in middle and high school. Greg is an astute teacher and knows that many horn players read well, but sometimes need to be prodded along by the rhythm section. This was most valuable about this exercise as the group reinforced the targeted outcome of playing all 36 scales. Each scale was played in 8th note values from root to octave in the order of dorian scale, mixolydian scale, and major scale. Many notes in some keys were missed, but when you have 14 people playing the same material together it was more compelling to continue; you have to fix it on the fly and are pushed not to give up. This sheet also helped because the relationship of keys descended in whole steps, rather than around the cycle of 4^{ths}, which for the advanced players made the task a little more interesting and not as automatic. An added twist was to then arpeggiate all the chords from root to octave and back down and leaving a rest for the final measure of the phrase.

Number 3: Giving Back Where Credit is Due

Melody is still important. It may seem in years past that the melody has taken a back seat for beginning improvisers. Sometimes

this is because it is easier to make up your own melody than to play some of the standard jazz melodies and until players have reached a certain level of skill on their instruments this will continue to be true. Playing the melody is important and if you think of it more clearly, everything you play must fit with this element of the tune. Not only that, but the melody is probably the only part of the tune that the audience can recognize.

Most master-improvisers could walk into a rehearsal, or a gig, and know in a very short time what tune was being played and where in the form the players were at. These are things that cannot be disguised when playing standard tunes that also have improvisations based on chords derived from the melody. A reharmonization based on the melody still can twist your ear around but with understanding of the melody you will not lose your way. The thing about jazz is that this is not like harmonic analysis where you describe and detail the inversion of chords or note the chromatic harmonization—knowing the melody and hearing the form happens in the instant of playing. Moreover, great improvisers can and will alter the harmony in the moment of the performance. Some of it may be planned

but a certain amount can be interjected by a player and responded to by the collective group.

Your last Job

It still is about learning and having fun. We don't work music—we play music. Old timers will still come out and say, "Work it," but the element of play and exploration is still a critical factor in jazz performance. As with any experience much of the learning comes in the weeks and months that follow. Continue to seek out all playing situations. You can learn when you are leading the group or when you are the weakest player. Always try new things and push ahead. If you keep this focused attention on your playing and vary your musical experiences you will reach all of your goals.

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