

Back to the Roots: Teaching Jazz By Ear

Step By Step instructions with Suggested Songs by Adam Meckler

Tune: Sonny Moon For Two - Sonny Rollins

Type: Blues

Recording: <http://youtu.be/DXMwHVM113s>

Step 1 - Bass Line: Teach the entire band the bass line (everyone!). Call and response is the best way to teach things by ear. First, have them find the note while you play it on whatever instrument you choose. Hold it out so it is loud enough for them to hear. Sometimes everyone finds it fast, sometimes it takes a while. If your band struggles at first, don't give up; it gets easier! Since the first note is concert Bb in this case, the kids are used to playing this note and usually find it quickly.

Once the kids are able to make it through the form, have the drummer join in playing a swing beat. You can tell them to only play quarter notes on the ride, and the hi hat (with foot) on beats 2 & 4 for now.

Musical notation for the bass line of 'Sonny Moon For Two' in 4/4 time, measures 1-9. The key signature is Bb (two flats). The notation consists of three staves of music. Above the first staff are the chords B^{b7}, E^{b7}, and B^{b7}. Above the second staff are E^{b7} and B^{b7}. Above the third staff are F⁷, E^{b7}, and B^{b7}. The bass line consists of quarter notes on each beat.

Step 2 - Chords: Teach each chord separately, note by note. With younger bands, this can take some significant time, but it can be done! Start with the Bb7 chord. Then teach the Eb7 chord and combine them so the students are playing them back to back. Have them run from the beginning through measure 8 since those measures only use the first two chords. Finish by teaching the F7 chord. Once they are able to arpeggiate the F7, start at the beginning and put it in to context.**

Musical notation for the chords of 'Sonny Moon For Two' in 4/4 time, measures 13-21. The key signature is Bb (two flats). The notation consists of three staves of music. Above the first staff are the chords B^{b7}, E^{b7}, and B^{b7}. Above the second staff are E^{b7} and B^{b7}. Above the third staff are F⁷, E^{b7}, and B^{b7}. The chord progression is shown with notes on a treble clef staff.

**A note to the teachers: The better you know the song, the easier this will be. Get to know the song by listening and playing along. It can be fun!

Step 3 - Rhythm Section: Your rhythm section players have all learned their parts by this time. Take a second to run the song with each rhythm section player playing his/her part together. Your bass player can play the bass line the entire band learned in step 1. If your bass player is a little more advanced and can play the arpeggiated chords from step 2 instead, that is another option.** The chordal instruments (piano/guitar/vibes) can build their chords off of the arpeggiated chords learned in Step 2. Encourage the students to mess around with rearranging the pitches so they sound interesting. Creativity in this matter is greatly encouraged.

Step 4 - Melody: Teach the entire band the melody. Eventually, only the horns will play the melody if you're dealing with a jazz combo or a big band with horns but it's important for everyone to learn it. Sonny Moon for Two is great because it is the same four bar riff repeated three times over 12 bars. Teach the melody note by note. Have them find the first note, then be more rhythmic in your approach. Play the first two pitches and have them respond with the same notes. If they can't find the second pitch right away, repeat it until the majority of the band has it. It's important to keep trucking, even if not every single student is getting it. I usually say something like "if we're losing you a little bit, take a second and ask a player nearby to help you with the notes" and give them 15 seconds to talk. This is really great because it empowers the students who've caught on quickly and encourages them to take on leadership roles.



Step 5 - Extra Stuff: At this point, your band can play an entire tune by ear! Talk over the form with the kids and try running the song from start to finish. Usually, the form consists of the head (the melody), solos, and the head again. Encourage the students to improvise using the notes of the melody. This is a streamlined way of teaching them which notes to play when improvising because they already know the pitches, and the melody outlines the Bb minor pentatonic scale.

Backgrounds: One of the extras you can add are backgrounds during the solos. While one of your students is improvising, sing a simple rhythmic figure to one of your sections. Then have them play that rhythmic figure as a background behind the soloist. Tell them to choose any note in the melody, but to play the exact rhythmic figure you're singing. You can also sing a simple repetitive two-bar phrase to a different section, and have them layer in. That way you've got a rhythmic background in one section, a more melodic background in another, and a soloist! Come up with an easy two-bar blues lick before rehearsal so you don't have to think of something on the fly. Or, just think of something on the fly!

Jazz Band rehearsals at the Middle and High School levels are often extra curricular. Most of the time bands meet before school, for somewhere between 35 and 50 minutes. If this is the first time any of your students have tried to learn something by ear, this process may take a couple of rehearsals to complete. Start simple, and work your way through the material slowly. Band directors are some of the most passionate and energetic people I have the pleasure of working with, but it is worth mentioning that keeping the energy high and the pace fast (even if you're doing many repetitions of the same thing) will help your students stay engaged with the task at hand.

Example Melodic Background Figure

Example of a Rhythmic Pattern

**Common "walking" bass lines aren't usually arpeggiations. They tend to be more stepwise in nature, especially for beginners. If you have some extra time with your bass player, teach them to play 1 - 2 - 3 - 5 over each chord (or starting on the 5 and going backward). So if the chord were Bb7, we would use notes from the Bb mixolydian scale (the major scale with a lowered 7th) and that would read as follows: Bb - C - D - F. Over Eb7 the notes would be Eb - F - G - Bb, and so on.

Tune: Equinox - John Coltrane

Type: Minor Blues

Recording: <http://youtu.be/5m2HN2y0yV8> **

Step 1 - Bass Line: Follow the steps the same way as listed for Sonny Moon For Two. Teach the bass line first, and have every member of the band learn it together. As you're piecing the bass line together, encourage the drummer to start to figure out what kind of groove would work well over this bass line. A simple swing beat works great, but some drummers like to get creative using mallets to create a darker, warmer sound/vibe for this song.

Step 2 - Chords: Teach each chord separately, note by note. When played together, these are the chords that can be played by piano/guitar/vibes players. Two-mallet vibes players should start by playing the 3rd and 7th of each chord (or the 2nd and fourth notes of each written chord below).

Step 3 - Rhythm Section: Your rhythm section players have all learned their parts by this time. Take a second to run the song with each rhythm section player playing his/her part together.

**Note: John Coltrane's original recording was in C# minor not C minor, so your kids won't be able to play along to the recording on this one. It has been transposed to make it easier for younger students to learn. It is commonly performed in C minor by professionals as well.

Step 4 - Melody: Teach the entire band the melody. Eventually, only the horns will play the melody if you're dealing with a jazz combo or a big band with horns but it's important for everyone to learn it. I like to teach this melody phrase by phrase, two bars at a time, always using call and response.

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Step 5 - Improvising: At this point, you've got enough to make it through the song. The melody does give us plenty of pitches to choose from for improvising, but it's not as comprehensive as *Sonny Moon for Two*, so I like to teach students a scale or two to use for improvising. Below are a few options. Pick one for one rehearsal, then teach a different scale at another rehearsal. As the students get comfortable improvising with each scale, encourage them to mix and match.

Teaching improvisation can be complicated, so I've always been a fan of simplifying. Have your students use the below scales, but issue a challenge: see if your students can land on concert $A\flat$ in the 5th measure (this is one of two places where some of the below scales fall short of communicating the correct harmony). Try having your rhythm section play through the form and see if your students can first just raise their hand when they get to the 5th measure.

Once your students are improvising and landing on $A\flat$ in the 5th measure, see if they can do the same exercise and land on concert B natural in the 11th bar. Your students will automatically sound like they are "playing the changes" in a way that is impossible if they simply play one scale throughout. Obviously this approach takes time, but it is worth it!

Collective improvisation is the easiest way to build confidence in your players. Try having the rhythm section play through the form while everyone improvises at the same time. Role reversal: try having your horn players arpeggiate the chords while the rhythm section improvises together.

Backgrounds: Try coming up with a couple simple backgrounds for your students to play while the other students are improvising.

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