

HOW TO LEARN A TUNE

Learning tunes is more of a challenge for the contemporary jazz student than it was in my student days. The “casual” gigs we played to make the rent were usually dances, Bar Mitzvahs, weddings, restaurant gigs and the like. Fortunately, the tunes we played on these gigs were the same tunes from the classic American Standard song repertoire we played in jam sessions and jazz gigs. Tunes by Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Jimmie van Heusen, etc.

I used lug my fakebooks to every gig. The problem was, the band leaders would often call medleys which gave us no time to find the page in the books for a particular tune. Rather than wait for you they’d say “fake it kid, fake it.” You’d listen to the bass and guitar player for the changes and the form and after a few choruses you’d have most of it by ear. Any gaps in your knowledge would then be easily filled with a few questions like “What was the change in the third bar of the bridge?”

I began my first semester at Berklee in 1955. I estimate that by 1960 I knew 1,000 tunes without the paper. Knowing so many tunes affords one a unique perspective that may be impossible for the contemporary student to acquire. Firstly; today’s commercial gigs are generally “Top 40” tunes and not part of the standard jazz musicians repertoire. Secondly; only after you’ve learned 1,000 tunes do you realize that there are really only about 20 song forms and every tune is a combination of segments of these 20 forms. This overview made it easier to learn (internalize) any new tune. Thirdly; the current proliferation of original music makes this overview more difficult to achieve.

Thomas Mastroianni, in his very important article: *Can Musical Memory be Manipulated?* (*Piano & Keyboard* magazine (May/June 1997 issue) states; “The manipulation of incoming musical stimuli most effectively promotes long term memory when it creates a synaptic connection to something in the semantic memory. Another way of say this is that new learning which is resonant with our musicianship can be remembered readily (often instantaneously) because it ties into something we already

know.”

“Let the melody be your guide” is sage advice for the jazz improviser but may not be so for learning a tune as usually the melody is the most complex element of a tune and therefore the most difficult to memorize.

Taking my cue from Mastroianni I offer the following proposal: it is easier to learn a tune from it's simplest (key) aspects first, to it's most complex (melody) last. The more information you have about a tune the easier it is to learn because you have more knowledge to relate it's succeeding elements to.

1. Learn the key.
2. Learn the meter.
4. Learn the length.
5. Learn the form. (AABA, ABA, etc.)
6. Learn the harmonic form. Where are the I chords, major and minor? Once you have the I chords you know that every I chord is preceded by it's appropriate II-V.
7. Learn the first chord of every section. (AABA) Is it a I, II, or V chord?
8. Since the melody fits the chords, at this point you should have enough info to begin learning the most difficult and complex part of a tune, the melody. It must be learned by rote. No short-cuts. Then test yourself. Can you sing the melody with and then without the chords being played underneath it?

It's almost impossible to memorize a tune isolated in a practice room. It takes at least three times of playing a tune in a performance context to learn it. Performance gives you even more information to relate to. i.e., the other instrumental parts (bass line, chordal accompaniment, horn melodies, drum beats, etc.). Rhythm sections encounter more memorization difficulties as they usually don't get the opportunity to learn the melody of a song as the horns are usually playing it. Every

pianist, guitarist, bassist and drummer should know and be able to play the melody of a tune.

The first two times use the paper, the third time, throw the paper away and try to work from what you have in your head. Make mental notes of what you can't remember and work on it later. It's important that you get away from paper as soon as possible. When you're looking you're not hearing!

Confirm you have it memorized. The best time to review a tune is when laying in bed before going to sleep. At a certain point the mind goes into it's "Alpha" state, which is the ideal mental state in which to work on memorization. Go over all the aspects of the tune in the above order, making mental notes of what you can't remember, then work on them next day.