



JAZZ IMPROV MADE EASY FAST TRACK GUIDE

The 3-Step Quick Guide for Playing
Amazing Jazz Solos Without
The Overwhelm



Tell me if you can resonate with any of these common pitfalls:

- ✓ You have no idea where to start when it comes to jazz improv
- ✓ Your solos sound boring, and you keep playing the same stuff over and over again
- ✓ You feel like you are copy-and-pasting licks, and your solos sound inorganic

If you've ever struggled with any of these, I get it! I've been there before too, and it can be frustrating - especially if you've been practicing a lot and trying hard to crack the code.



In case you don't know me, my name is Brent Vaartstra. I'm a professional jazz musician out in New York City, author, podcaster, and jazz coach.

But I'm best known as the jazz musician behind the internationally renowned jazz education website, learnjazzstandards.com. Over the years, I've helped thousands upon thousands of musicians that struggle with all of the things I just mentioned.

The good news is you're not alone, and there are solutions to all of these problems!

Jazz improvisation can be a big, confusing skill to master - especially if you get lost in the sea of random ideas on YouTube or elsewhere.

But my goal in this quick guide is to cut the fat and make jazz improvisation simpler for you.

Let's do it!

STEP 1:

Understand How Jazz Improv Works

Before we dive into some high-leverage strategies for improving your jazz solos quickly, it can be helpful to understand how jazz improvisation works.

The question to ask yourself is, “when I hear my favorite jazz musicians solo, what are they actually doing (on a technical level)?”

When we understand things from a simple music theory vantage point, it can help bring context to the other side of jazz improvisation, which is learning by ear (we’ll get to that).



Since this is a chord progression found everywhere in jazz standards, this will be a helpful context to demonstrate jazz improvisation.

Level 1: The Major Scale

Over all three of these chords, we can play a C major scale.



If you play through it yourself along with chords, you will hear that there are no “wrong” or off-putting notes.

The reason this works is because all of the chords are in the key of C major. Therefore, all notes of the C major scale sound stable to the ear.

But here's the problem:

When you play the C major scale, you can't hear the chord changes. When the best jazz musicians in the world improvise, you can hear them playing the chords to the song - even if there isn't a piano or guitar playing chords behind them.

Level 2: The Modes

Instead of just playing the C major scale, let's now start the C major scale on the root of each chord.



What results is what we call “modes.” Over the Dmin⁷, we play Dorian. Over the G⁷, we play Mixolydian. Over the Cmaj⁷, we play Ionian.

Don't be intimidated by this concept or these fancy names. The modes aren't as difficult as they sound!

Dorian means we are starting and ending it's parent scale (in this case, C major) on the second tone. So D Dorian would start and end on the second tone of the C major scale, which is D.

Mixolydian is the 5th mode of the major scale. So this means we would start and end the parent scale on the 5th tone (in this case, G).

Ionian is the first mode of the major scale, which is just a fancy way of saying “the major scale.” So C Ionian is simply the C major scale.

Notice that now we can better hear each chord because we are starting the scale on the root of each chord.

Or are they?

The key is jazz musicians aren't playing the chromatic scale like a scale. They are simply aware that they can play any note and resolve it to a stronger note in the chord.

Level 5: Approach Notes and Target Notes

Let's go back to thinking about chord tones. A good idea when improvising is to often resolve to a chord tone of the chord you are improvising over. This will make the chord changes pop out.

So in an improvisation context, we can call a chord tone (or even a particular note in the scale) a **target note**. This simply means we are aiming to land or resolve to this note in a musical line.

So to arrive at a target note, we have to use an **approach note**.



An approach note is a note that is being used to arrive at a target note - or lead into it. In the example above, the 3rd of each chord is being used as our target notes.

Notice how we are using both **diatonic approach notes** (within the scale) and **chromatic approach notes** (notes from the chromatic scale).

The E natural leading into the Dmin7 is a diatonic approach note. It's in the C major scale or D Dorian. The A# and D# leading into G7 and Gmaj7 are chromatic approach notes. They are not in the key of C major but strategically approach the target notes in half steps.

If you play through this, you'll hear that we are getting closer to the jazz sound!

Level 6: Enclosures

To take this to the next level, let's use a technique that beboppers use called **enclosures**.

These are also sometimes called "upper and lower neighbor groups."



We call it an enclosure when we are **approaching a target note with approach tones from above and below the target note**. In the example above, we have a 3-note enclosure, but you can also have a 4-note enclosure.

For example, leading into the $Dmin^7$, we have an E natural (diatonic approach) below in pitch from the target note. Then an F# (chromatic approach) above in pitch resolving to the target note.

We are getting closer to the language jazz musicians use when improvising.

But of course, this sounds more like an exercise than music. Let's take some of these concepts and apply them to a more musical line!

Level 7: The Jazz Lick

Play through this 2-5-1 jazz lick.



Can you see the notes from the C major scale (or the modes)?

Notes from the chromatic scale?

Chord tones being targeted?

Enclosures being used?

They are all working together to create a musical line that not only sounds like jazz but perfectly outlines the chords.



Having a basic theoretical understanding of how jazz improvisation works can be helpful. But jazz musicians aren't thinking about any of this stuff when they improvise! Instead, they have internalized this information differently.

Let's talk about the other side of getting good at jazz improvisation.

Want to take what you're learning in this guide to the next level?

Our Inner Circle membership helps you start improving your jazz playing in as little as 30 days. With monthly jazz standard studies, courses, and a thriving community of like-minded musicians for support, you'll have everything you need to shortcut your improvement and play solos you are proud of.

[FIND OUT MORE](#)

STEP 2:

Learn Jazz Language By Ear

Because improvisation is where hearing music in your head and muscle memory meet, the best way to improve your jazz soloing is by learning solos (or parts of them) by ear.

Think of any language you have learned, native or otherwise. The first way you started to communicate was by hearing someone speak it, and then you mimicked it. For jazz improvisation,

Our goal is to copy what the great jazz musicians have played and then figure out how to say it in our own way. It is no different.

Here are a few important guidelines when doing this:

1. Always memorize what you learn.

You don't need to remember it forever, just in the short term. If you don't memorize it, the likelihood is you haven't internalized it, and therefore, it won't be very effective.

2. Learn both macro and micro forms of jazz language.

Macro would mean an entire chorus of a jazz solo or even an entire jazz solo. Micro would mean a jazz lick, perhaps over a chord progression such as a 2-5-1.

3. When possible, learn jazz language by ear.

When it comes to improvisation, the problem with reading jazz language from sheet music is you are mainly exercising the muscle of reading. However, if you do learn by reading, no problem! Just make sure to memorize. But when you learn content by ear, you are exercising your ear and the connection of your ear to the instrument. This is most important for improving your improv skills.

So that begs the question:

How do you learn solos and licks by ear?

Follow my **L.I.S.T** Process for learning jazz language by ear.

L

Listen

I

Internalize

S

Sing

T

Transfer



L: Listen

First, start by listening many times to the jazz solo you want to learn. It may seem obvious, but I've noticed many musicians will start learning a solo without being very familiar with it.

During this phase, you are doing what's called "**passive listening**." This means you have it on in the background while you're doing things around the house, cooking dinner, or engaged in any activity. I'd recommend spending at least several days to a week doing this.

I: Internalize

During the internalization phase, you are engaging in what's called "active listening." This means that you treat listening to the solo like a practice session.

Sit down wherever you practice and listen to the solo you want to learn without any distractions. The idea is to focus on it completely and deepen your ear connection to the music being played. At this point, you want to feel fairly familiar with the solo. This may take 1-3 30-minute practice sessions, but don't rush this - take as much time as you need.

S: Sing

You may have heard the phrase, "if you can sing it, you can play it." That's not entirely true, but if you can sing it, you are likely 50%-75% of the way to being able to play it.

Singing (or humming if that suits you better) the solo means you have indeed internalized it. If you can vocalize the solo along with the recording without confusing one section for another, you are ready to take out your instrument.

It's important to note that the idea isn't to be able to sing each note perfectly (this should be a relief if you aren't a good singer). It's to at least vocalize the essence of the phrase. We will worry about exact notes next.

T: Transfer

This is the phase where you take out your instrument (notice the first three steps did not require an instrument). The goal is to take what you have now internalized and figure out how to play it on your instrument.

Because of the work you have already done, it may be possible to learn the solo on your instrument without using the recording. But this is not recommended.

You will want to use this time to make sure that the notes and the phrasing of the solo are exact. So play 1-4 bars of the recording at a time, figure out where the notes lay on your instrument, practice until muscle memory sets in, and then move on to the next section. This will be a lot easier to do because of the L.I.S steps you have already done.

Especially in cases where the notes are being played quickly, it can be helpful to use a slow-downer. Use tools like Amazing Slow Downer, SongMaster, or even the slow-down feature on YouTube. This will help you pick out the notes more efficiently and reduce the need to repeat sections of the recording.

Once you have learned some jazz language by ear, your work is not done! Let's move on to the next step.

STEP 3:

Compose Your Own Jazz Solo

One of the most high-leverage activities I have my Inner Circle members engage in is composing their own solos.

There are three reasons this is so powerful:

1. It allows you to use the language you have learned and put it into practice
2. It allows you to slow down the improvisation process so you have time to think about what you would like to play over a jazz standard.
3. The music that you create for yourself is much more likely to come out in your jazz solos later than the stuff you learned from someone else.



When I talk about composition, I am not necessarily recommending that you notate it. I'm referring to the process of coming up with ideas and memorizing them as you go. This is far more important than notating music for the same reason as it's better to learn jazz language by ear than by reading.

You will be incredibly surprised how well this works for your improvisation, and the more you do this (especially after learning new jazz language), the better your solo compositions will get and the better your improvisation will get.

But at the end of the day, to improve with jazz improvisation, you need to get in the water and start swimming.

STEP 4:

Improvise and Record

It's important that you regularly practice improvising. Please note the practice part. The way you practice improvisation will have massive implications on how quickly you improve.

Batching and Looping

Most of the time, when musicians go to improvise, they improvise over an entire jazz standard. This is the end goal, but it's not the best way to practice improvising.

Instead, you should break the jazz standard into smaller chunks (aka batching). This is especially important if you are struggling to improvise over a particular section of a song. For example, here is the song form for "Autumn Leaves."



AUTUMN LEAVES

CHORDS ANALYSIS

C_{MIN}^7 F^7 $B^b_{MAJ}^7$
 ii-V-i of Relative Major -----

$E^b_{MAJ}^7$ $A_{MIN}^{7(b9)}$ D^7 G_{MIN}^7
 5 IV of Relative Major Minor ii-V-i -----

G^7 D^7 G_{MIN}^7
 9 V of ii (Turn Around) (Cont.) M 6 -----
 or VI of Relative Major

$A_{MIN}^{7(b9)}$ D^7 G_{MIN}^7
 13 Minor ii-V-i -----

C_{MIN}^7 F^7 $B^b_{MAJ}^7$
 17 ii-V-i of Relative Major -----

Instead of improvising over the whole thing, break it down to the first section.

C_{MIN}^7 F^7 $B^b_{MAJ}^7$
 ii-V-i of Relative Major -----

Then start looping that section (use loop pedals, slow-downers, or other tools) and coming up with as many ideas as possible. Feel free to loop a section for as long as you would like.

There are no wrong answers when practicing improvising. Trial and error is a perfectly acceptable strategy, and any “wrong” notes can always be converted into approach notes.

Once you feel like you’ve made enough progress for now on that section, move on to the next.

Recording B.A.D Jazz Solos

I first revealed the strategy of B.A.D jazz solos at a retreat for our Inner Circle members, and it has since had a massive impact on their playing.

Recording yourself regularly is powerful for these reasons:

1. It simulates a performance environment and will help you tackle the problem of feeling nervous about playing publicly.

2. It helps you document your progress.

3. It allows you to analyze and make “pivots” so you can improve faster.



How you record is important as well.

Record only one take of your solo. If you take more than one take, it means you are trying to play something perfect to impress yourself or someone else. We aren’t interested in that. We are only interested in an honest assessment of where your playing is at right now.

Record yourself in the easiest way possible. You can record yourself with a smartphone. It doesn’t have to require fancy equipment. We aren’t trying to make a record, we are documenting our musical journey.

Here's what a B.A.D jazz solo is:

B: Brave

You are taking risks. Mistakes are not only okay, they are a good thing. You must end your obsession with needing to sound good because it's only slowing you down.

If you catch yourself going back to the same patterns, scales, and licks you always play for fear of not liking your recording, you are missing out on something big.

A: Audited

After you are done recording your solo, you must listen back and audit it. This means analyzing it and asking two important questions.

1. What did I love?
2. What did I not like?

Write down everything you loved about your solo. It could be the smallest or the biggest of things. These are the things you need to double down on. They are just as important to focus on as the things you don't like.

Then write down everything you didn't like about your solo. Get very specific (ex. at 0:58 on the 2-5-1, I didn't outline the V chord at all). These are the things you need to work on in the practice room for next time.

D: Directional

Directional means that you are implementing something that you learned from your last solo audit. There must be something about this solo that you are bringing in from your practice sessions.

If we don't try to implement any changes, we will always remain on musical plateaus. That's not what we want! We continually rinse and repeat this B.A.D process at regular intervals.



NEXT STEPS

This guide serves as a great starting place for learning and understanding jazz theory. But the best way to truly understand jazz theory and put it into practice is by learning jazz standards. The jazz standards will teach you how to play, and you'll get better and better with each one.

In comes our [Learn Jazz Standards Inner Circle!](#)

In the Inner Circle we help you:

- ✓ Learn one jazz standard a month, so you are continuously improving without the overwhelm
- ✓ Fill in any gaps in your musical knowledge with access to all of our jazz courses
- ✓ Get support from a community of like-minded musicians playing all kinds of instruments

In as little as 30 days, you can start improving your jazz playing exponentially, even if you don't have a lot of time to practice.



HERE'S WHAT ONE OF OUR MEMBERS HAS TO SAY:

"The Inner Circle has helped me to learn jazz theory and has also helped me to develop my listening skills and ability to play by ear. My awareness and knowledge of harmony has improved and I have been able to integrate some of this new knowledge into my solos!

The structured lessons, etudes, and exercises available in the Inner Circle have provided me with a process I can follow with confidence, knowing that it will yield results. The wide selection of courses has allowed me to focus on developing to suit my needs at my own pace. The opportunity to be involved in posting on the community boards has held me accountable for the completion of the work necessary to achieve progress. Also, the chance to listen to and comment on the work of other students has provided perspective and motivation to continue on when things seem challenging. I heartily recommend it!"

- Patrick from Canada, Trumpet

We'd love to have you join us in the Inner Circle and would be thrilled to help you take your jazz playing to the next level.

FIND OUT MORE