

## How to Internalize a Tune

It is essential for jazz musicians to have a body of tunes that they know. These tunes are the jazz musician's repertoire. Just as a classical clarinetist studies Mozart and Brahms, a jazz musician studies jazz standards, especially those coming out of the Great American Songbook tradition. We then turn to the question of *how* to learn a tune. In this worksheet, I break down the process I have developed for learning tunes. My goal is for it to be clear, effective and universally applicable.

First, we must define what it means to "know a tune." It should probably mean more than just knowing of the tune although, too often, this is the outcome for many students after going through their process of learning the tune they are attempting to master. To set our minds right on the matter, our focus must be on **internalization**. The melody and chords must become a part of us. That being said, this worksheet will stop short of discussing *how* to play over a tune (improvisational techniques or exercises) and will stick to the process of internalizing the melody and chord changes. This process is vitally important in order to play convincingly over a tune.

### Step 1: Listen

1. Start with **original recordings** & recordings by the composers themselves, if possible. If these aren't available, go as far back as you can.
2. Next, listen to recordings of artists you are familiar with. They should be recordings both of artists that play your instrument and artists that do not.
  - \* Emphasize **studio recordings**. These typically have better sound quality, allowing you to hear each aspect of the tune from the respective instrument (melody from the lead instrument, chord structure from the chordal instruments, root notes/bass lines from the bass player).
  - \* Listen to **singers**. This will teach you how to **phrase** the melody.
  - \* Listen to the **lyrics** so you know the song's story.
  - \* Listen to the recording all the way through. Take note of the different sections (intro, melody, solos, head out, ending).
  - \* Take note of **similarities** between recordings. i.e. each one has a solo break or trades 4's with the drums.
  - \* If **Chet Baker** has a version of it, listen to that. He often has a faithful rendition of the melody and you get to hear him sing & play trumpet.

*Now ask yourself: "Do I like this tune?" If yes, continue to Step 2.*

*If no, pick another song. You won't have the desire necessary to actually learn the tune. Plus, no one wants to hear you play a song you don't like. (That is unless you're in my class and I'm requiring you to learn it, in which case, you'll learn to like it! ☺)*

## Step 2: Research

1. Your research has already begun through the listening you did in Step 1. You should already have an idea of the general style it is played in.
  2. Here are some additional items you should know about your tune:
    - a. Composer(s)
    - b. When it was written
    - c. Why it was written (as a part of a musical, for a particular performance, in reference to something or someone, etc.)
    - d. Key(s) it's typically played in
    - e. Any backstory
- \* This step helps prepare your brain for what you are about to learn.
- \* Go to [LearnJazzStandards.com](http://LearnJazzStandards.com) for a blurb about each tune, recommended recordings, reliable chord charts and a backing track.

## Step 3: Melody

1. First, **sing** the melody.
  2. Next, **transcribe** the melody on your instrument.
    - \* Don't look at a lead sheet.
    - \* Go phrase by phrase.
    - \* Learn from multiple recordings but watch out: they could be in different keys.
- \* **Memorize** the melody at this step (with the lyrics if it has them). The melody will act as your reference point as you move to other aspects of the tune.
- \* While you're at it, learn any counter lines, send offs, backgrounds, etc. that seem integral to the tune. An easy way to detect these is if you hear the same thing in multiple recordings i.e., if Duke Ellington, Miles Davis and Emmet Cohen all play the same ending, you should probably learn that ending too.

*“But why is the melody so important?!” It is because the melody contains all relevant aspects of the tune. Think about it. It includes the:*

- a. *Melody, of course (which IS the tune when you really think about it)*
- b. *Form*
- c. *Key*
- d. *Changes (very often, the melody will clearly outline the chord changes, i.e. “All the Things You Are”). At the very least, the melody contains many of the notes that work over that set of chords.)*
- e. *Style*

*\*The melody is also the best place to start if you're not sure how to improvise over the tune.*

#### Step 4: Roots

1. Try to **sing** the roots of the chords you hear.
2. Then **write** down the chords you're hearing on your cheat sheet to the best of your ability.
3. Find an accurate set of changes and compare to what you have written down. Make edits as needed.
4. Now play just the roots.
  - a. If you know basic functional harmony, your ear will fill in the chord qualities based on their function. You don't have to arpeggiate each chord to learn the changes although arpeggios can be a helpful exercise later on.
5. Now that you are more familiar with the chords, sing the roots while saying the name of the chord.
  - \* Playing only the roots allows you to focus on the **Harmonic Rhythm** (when the chords move). It is a simple yet important concept to be aware of.

#### Step 5: Analyze

1. Circle all of the **Major Chords**. These are your tonal centers (what key you are in at that point in the tune).
2. Put a bracket over all **ii-V chord progressions** with an arrow pointing to the following Major Chord if it resolves.
3. Now, identify what key you are in and write the Roman Numerals beside each chord.
  - \* There is a lot of overlap between standards. This step will keep you from starting from scratch with every tune you learn.

## **Other Considerations**

### Importance of Singing

You'll notice that in each step, you sing before you play. That is because: *if you can't sing it, you can't play it!*

### Cheat Sheet

Throughout this worksheet, you see references to a Cheat Sheet. This is a blank piece of manuscript where you will write out the chords, melody and other helpful information to learn the tune and begin to craft a solo.

### Absence of the Real Book

Nowhere in this worksheet do I mention the need for a copy of the Real Book or any other lead sheet. That is because they are not absolutely necessary for learning jazz. Jazz lives in the recordings, not on the page! Lead sheets can be a very helpful tool, especially for less experienced students, but if this isn't your first rodeo, ditch the Real Book and learn by ear. It will take you longer but, you'll never forget it.

Happy Internalizing!

Nathan King

nathanking-music.com

nathanking.sax22@gmail.com