



Primer

Jazz Improvisation Course

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [Shape, Colour and Palette](#)
3. [Historic Development of Jazz Improvisation](#)
4. [A Happy Day](#)
5. [Practice](#)
6. [Rhythm Patterns](#)
7. [Swapping 2s](#)
8. [How to learn more](#)
9. [Quiz](#) and [Quiz Answers](#)
10. [Downloading Bay](#)
[About the Improvisation 1 Course](#) - [BUY](#)

[Free Courses Online](#) - [Scales & Chords](#) - [Play-alongs](#) - [MP3s](#) - [My Blog](#) - [Jazzclass Products](#) - [Shop](#) - [Other](#)

([Down](#) - [Top](#) - [Jazzclass Links](#))

IM 1 - Introduction

Improvisation is **instant composition**, the instant creation of a new melody.

When the improvised melody is not related to another song it is called **free** improvisation.

In Jazz (like in Classical music in the past) the improvisation is usually related to a song. In most cases the improvisation follows the chord progression of that song.



([Oil painting by Wivica](#))

In the early days of jazz, improvisation was a skill purely **guided by the ear**.

Although this approach is still used by some, most jazz players now use their **knowledge** of chords, chord progressions and chord-scale relationships **as the basis of their improvisation**.

This is the approach of the many Tertiary Jazz Institutions around the world.

It takes some time to absorb this knowledge (known as 'Jazz Theory') and new graduates sometimes still improvise in stilted, artificial patterns.

But look at the same graduate 2 or 3 years down the track and the once ugly duckling has become a beautiful swan. For in the end the deeper musical knowledge and skills acquired, greatly expand the musician's creative and imaginative horizons.

The improvisation lessons in Jazzclass will therefore also be based on the principle of understanding.

The beginning improviser must learn to master three skills :

1. What notes to play
2. How to play the notes selected, and

3. How to improvise without losing his/her place in the song.

In the following Chapters we will make a start with this.

([Down](#) - [Up](#) - [Top](#) - [Jazclass Links](#))

IM 2 - Shape, Colour and Palette

Every Jazz tune contains three musical levels :

- Melody
- Chord progression
- Scale progression

You can compare these three levels with a painting.
The melody represents the shapes in the painting.

The chords represent the colours filling and surrounding the shapes.

The scales are the resource from which the melody notes and the chord tones are selected - they represent the palette of the painter.

1. **Melody** = 'shape'

2. **Chord** = 'colour'

3. **Scale** = 'palette'

The image shows three staves of music. The top staff is a treble clef with a melody line. The middle staff is a bass clef with two chords, C and F, indicated by 'C' and 'F' above the staff. The bottom staff is a treble clef with a scale line.

An improvisation can be guided by any of these three levels.

The improvisation could for example be just the embellishment of the melody :



Embellish the Melody

1. **Melody** = 'shape'

The image shows two staves of music. The top staff is a treble clef with a melody line that has an embellished version above it. The bottom staff is a treble clef with a scale line.

Or the improvisation could be based on the chord tones of the underlying chords :



Use Chord tones

2. **Chord** = 'colour'



Or the improvisation could be based on the entire palette, the underlying scales (which of course include all melody notes and chord tones) :

Use Scale tones

3. **Scale** = 'palette'



([Down](#) - [Up](#) - [Top](#) - [Jazclass Links](#))

IM 3 - Historic Development of Jazz Improvisation

It is interesting that over the years **Jazz improvisation as a whole** gradually developed through these three levels.

- In the early days of Jazz (around 1900) improvisations were very simple and largely **embellishments** of the song's melody.
- Gradually (with Louis Armstrong) improvisation started to focus on **chord tones**,
- until in the Bebop era improvisation tapped the deepest level of the song, the **scale progression**.
- (Experienced improvisers descend even to a deeper level (Level 4) when playing '**outside**' the tonality of the song. This occurs for example in so called 'side slipping' where the improviser uses a scale a semitone or a whole tone away from the proper scale resource.)

([Down](#) - [Up](#) - [Top](#) - [Jazclass Links](#))

IM 4 - A Happy Day

For our first improvisation we will use Level 2 of a song : the Chord progression.

A Happy Day is a simple tune. The chord progression consists of major triad (3-note) chords and Dominant 7th chords. The melody is composed of chord tones only.

(Chord symbols are written above the staff. Numbers in brackets below the staff indicate the bar number.)

This song is written in the most popular Jazz song format, a 32 bar song in the 'A A B A format'.

1. The first eight bars (1 to 8) represent the 'A-section.
2. This A-section is repeated in bars 9 to 16.
3. Then follows an eight bar 'Bridge' or 'B-section' from bar 17 to 24.
4. The song is completed with a final repeat of the A-section in bars 25 to 32

Audio 1

A Happy Day

Michael Furstner

The musical score for 'A Happy Day' is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. It is marked 'Swing'. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. Chord symbols are placed above the staff: C (bars 1-2), D7 (bars 3-4), F (bars 5-6), G7 (bars 7-8), C (bars 9-10), F (bars 11-12), C (bars 13-14), D7 (bars 15-16), G7 (bars 17-18), and D.C.al Fine (bars 19-20). The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Jazclass - www.jazclass.aust.com
© 1995 Michael Furstner

Other songs with the 32 bar AABA format include :

Solitude - Satin Doll - Take the A Train - In a Sentimental Mood - Sophisticated Lady - Perdido (to name just a few written by Duke Ellington alone).

Also : Georgia - Over the Rainbow - I can't get Started - What is this Thing called Love - Love me or Leave Me - Lullaby of Birdland - Misty, and many many more.

A Happy Day features two of the most powerful devices used in music composition and improvisation.

1. Repetition

Good improvisation (or composition) is not about cramming a song full with one new idea after another. This is rather boring for the listener.

Instead take a simple idea and repeat it. This instantly creates interest, as it sets up a 'story'. Develop the idea with a small variation, then combine it perhaps with another idea. But not too many.

In the A A B A format three quarters of the song consists of the same thing (A) and only in the Bridge is new material introduced.

There is much more repetition (and of different types) going on at a smaller scale throughout the song. Can you spot these ? We will discuss them next lesson.

2. Varying rhythmic activity levels

Music is all about tension and release.

A succession of short notes creates rhythmic tension (high activity).

Long notes and long rests create rhythmic release (low activity).

Alternating activity levels immediately creates interest and meaning in a melody or improvisation. Look at the first 4 bars of 'A Happy Day' for example.

The diagram above the notation shows activity levels: 'Low' activity at the start and end, and 'High' activity in the middle. The middle section is labeled 'Low rhythmic activity'.

([Down](#) - [Up](#) - [Top](#) - [Jazclass Links](#))

IM 5 - Practice

Practise A Happy Day in the following ways (using the Play-a-Long Midi file track) :

1. Play the melody until you can play it from memory. (Keyboard and guitar players also learn to play the chords from memory.)
2. Play sustained chord **root tones** until you can play them from memory.

[Audio 2](#)

A section

Bridge

3. Play root tones only using a [Rhythm Pattern](#) (see [IM 6](#) below).

4. Play all chord tones in crotchets (1 beat notes).

[Audio 3](#)

A section

Bridge

5. Improvise over the song's chord progression using **chord tones** only.

([Down](#) - [Up](#) - [Top](#) - [Jazclass Links](#))

IM 6 - Using Rhythm Patterns

To overcome the problem of getting lost in the song, start with using 2 bar [rhythm patterns](#). These also have 'in built' contrasting activity levels, which helps you to practise appropriate phrasing.

For example :

1. First play the pattern using **one note only** until you are thoroughly familiar with its rhythm.

2. Next play the pattern using **chord root tones** only. Go this way through the entire song a few times.

[Audio 4](#)

3. Then fill in your own choice of **chord tones** for the improvisation.

[Audio 5](#)

Here are five patterns to get you started. Make some of your own as well.

[Audio 6](#)

Rhythm Patterns 1 - 5

Play each **off beat quaver** that is followed by a rest **staccato** (short).

On the [Audio Demo](#) for 'A Happy Day' I play the melody for the first chorus followed by one chorus of improvisation using chord tones throughout. I used Rhythm Pattern 3 for all A sections and Rhythm Pattern 4 for the Bridge.

REMEMBER :

When you just start painting you don't expect to come up with a masterpiece straight away. It is the same with improvisation. You first have to absorb the principles and material involved. This takes time. So don't worry if your first efforts are not what you would like them to be. Keep working at it, gradually things will come together.

([Down](#) - [Up](#) - [Top](#) - [Jazclass Links](#))

IM 7 - Swapping 2s

Swapping 2s or 4s is often included as a special feature in performances by many small Jazz combos. It is especially popular with Trad Jazz groups, but can be just as effective in a modern Jazz ensemble.

Rather than one performer improvising over an entire chorus (or more), two or more soloists take turns playing only 2 or 4 bars at a time.

Each player reacts to what the previous player just has played. This is great fun and can produce a fresh and unpredictable outcome.

Each lesson in the [Improvisation Email Course](#) includes a play-a-long midi track for swapping 2s or 4s. These can be of great benefit to your development so make sure you use them.

Play in all the 4-bar (or 2-bar) gaps as indicated in each lesson.

Use the chords or scales discussed in each lesson.

In this lesson for example improvise using **chord tones** only. I have done the same here.

[A Happy Day](#) : [Swapping 2s](#).

1. **1st chorus** (32 bars) : **I** play the first 2 bars of each 4 bar phrase, **you** play the following 2 bars.
2. **2nd chorus** (32 bars) : **You** play the first 2 bars of each 4 bar phrase, **I** play the following 2 bars.

Improvise using chord tones only.

Use the swapping tracks in the following 5 ways :

1. LISTEN

Play each gapped track several times, just listening to it. They contain many rhythmic ideas ('licks') you should absorb so that they gradually become part of your own vocabulary. The spaces between each phrase nicely highlight each idea in isolation.

2. WRITE

Write out some of the ideas on paper as 2- or 4-bar rhythm patterns.

The more you involve yourself actively with music elements like these the more you learn and absorb them.

3. SING

Sing the rhythm pattern of each phrase segment in the gap immediately behind it. Like "deeedadadadit -dedaaaah".

4. REPEAT

Improvise on your instrument. Use your own note selection but try to repeat the rhythm pattern of each preceding phrase segment.

5. COMPLEMENT

Improvise on your instrument. Use your own note selection and rhythm pattern and complement in your own way the phrase segment before (or behind) it.

[\(Down](#) - [Up](#) - [Top](#) - [Jazclass Links](#))

IM 8 - How to learn more



The [Improvisation Course](#) is available as a **download** or **on CD** sent to you by Airmail postage. The Improvisation Course also includes complimentary copies of the [Rhythm Class](#), [In Focus](#) and the [Jazz Theory](#) course.

To purchase simply go to the SSL secure online [Jazclass MUSIC SHOP](#).

If you have any questions [ask me](#).

Michael

[\(Down](#) - [Up](#) - [Top](#) - [Jazclass Links](#))

IM 9 - Quiz

1. What is improvisation ?
2. What is Free Improvisation ?
3. What levels are there in a Jazz song ?
4. Name three ways of tone selection for improvisation.
5. Name two devices used in composition and improvisation, discussed in this lesson.
6. Of how many sections does A Happy Day consists, and how long is each section ?
7. What types of repetition can you find in A Happy Day ?
8. Give a definition of a major triad chord.
9. How many occurrences of syncopation ('rhythmic surprise') are there in the A-section of A Happy Day ?
10. How many occurrences of syncopation ('rhythmic surprise') are there in the Bridge of A Happy Day ?
11. Try to work out (by reason or ear) which scales underlie the chord progression of 'A Happy Day'.
12. Which Rhythm Patterns (1 to 5 in Chapt.1-6) contain syncopations ?

[Quiz ANSWERS](#)

[\(Down](#) - [Up](#) - [Top](#) - [Jazclass Links](#))

IM 10 - Downloading Bay

File Name	Contents	Size
im1fac.gif	Facts sheet	10K
im1soc.gif	A Happy Day - Lead sheet (C)	10K
im1sobe.gif	A Happy Day - Lead sheet (Bb, Eb)	10K
im1som.mid	A Happy Day - Melody & Improvisation	10K
im1so.mid	Play-along Midi file	20K
im1so2s.mid	A Happy Day - Swapping 2s	20K
im1rp.gif	Five Rhythm Patterns - Notation	10K

[im1rp.mid](#)

Five Rhythm Patterns - Demo

10K

([Up](#) - [Top](#) - [Jazclass Links](#))

Copyright © 1997 - 2011 [Michael Furstner](#). All rights reserved.