

# Basics to Running a Successful Jazz Program

October 15, 2020

2:00-3:30

Before beginning, please mute your microphone. Thank you! :)

[Click here](#) if you want a copy of my warm up packet

To piggyback on what Marcia Neel was saying, [here's a project](#) my students put together last year.

## Introductions:

Lewis Nelson, Band Director, Sentinel High School – Email: [lnelson@mcpsmt.org](mailto:lnelson@mcpsmt.org), Cell: 406-207-5638

## Overview:

1. Why do I need to have a jazz band? Pros vs. Cons
2. I've never played in a jazz band, what do I do? (teacher perspective)
3. Getting kids excited and recruitment.
4. Warm-ups: Do you need to do them?
5. What do I do with my rhythm section?
6. How do I structure a jazz rehearsal?
7. How do I teach improvisation?
8. Theory Lesson & Warm-Ups

## Topic Discussion:

### **1. Why do I need to have a jazz band? Pros vs. Cons/challenges**

#### Cons/challenges of running a jazz program:

- It will be work. Some kids will be there for social hour and some will take it seriously. You will need to find a balance to nurture all students.
- Jazz music at times is more difficult than concert music in that every player has their own part. There is nowhere to hide and tuning is always a challenge.
- You need to purchase jazz equipment like amps, drums, music, and specialty mutes.
- You will need to purchase jazz music that fits your ensemble and teaching style.

### Pros:

- Your concert and marching/pep bands will immediately improve because your jazz students will read and move air better than the majority of your non-jazz musicians.
- This new genre gives students an area where they can truly express themselves in a much more open environment.
- Jazz band is America's music! It needs to be taught!
- **PAY** – This is one of the largest pluses about having a successful jazz program. Remember most teacher contracts are based on teaching 5 classes in high school or 6 classes in middle school. If you do not teach enough music classes, you may have a reduced contract or be required to teach something that you don't want to. Also, if you ever want to have an assistant band director at your school, grow your jazz program so you can justify adding more staff. This is how I was able to get a 3rd assistant during my tenure in Arizona.

## **2. I've never played in a jazz band, what do I do?**

- First thing, breathe! Music is music and you are a trained pro! You have ears, trust them! Remember, your band will most likely not sound good at first! Here are some tips to help you:
  - o Start listening to jazz music, especially ensembles that represent your group. (If you have a combo, listen to combos. If you have a full big band, listen to big bands). Remember to listen to ensembles that are from the era of music you are trying to play. You and your students both need to listen to the correct things.
  - o Choose easy music! Why kill yourself? We are all guilty of over programming! The beauty of jazz is, you can always add more to an easy piece, but it is difficult to fix something that is simply too hard! What I mean about adding more is you can add rhythm section interludes, more solos, have your kids invent backgrounds for the solos, etc! Your students will like doing this! I like programming real easy music, especially for the first concert! The first concert should be focused on moving air, sounding like a jazz band, and basic theory training so your kids can begin improvising. The goal is to have the students feel successful. Always set your students up for success.
  - o Be honest with the students! Tell them that you are learning too and that you will make mistakes. I make a lot of mistakes and the students will like and respect you more when you're honest!
  - o Ask for help and attend festivals. Remember, it will take time or even years before you feel like you have a solid grasp on how to prepare for festivals/performances. Don't be afraid to ask your jazz friends how they do stuff. Find someone in your district or region to help you. If you don't ask, you will not find the answer.

## **3. Getting kids excited and recruitment.**

- This is important. You need to have at least one drummer, one bass player (or extra piano player that can play bass lines on a keyboard) and either a guitar or pianist.
- For a big band, the goal is to have at least 3 trumpets, 3 bones, and 5 saxes. The preference for me is 4-5 trumpets, 4-5 bones, and 5-6 saxes.
- For your beginning ensembles, do not be afraid to take more kids and double up on parts. Take non-jazz instruments as well to start building. A clarinet player will make a great saxophone player later.
- Play “POP” sounding tunes the first concert until you get your numbers up. As the year and festival season continues on, begin assigning them real jazz lit.
- Build a jazz community within your program. You know you’ve accomplished this when you have kids in your band room at lunch jamming out.

#### **4. Warm-ups: Do you need to do them?**

- Yes. All students need to play long tones and learn how to move air.
  - o Why should we do long tones?
    - [Example 1 - Mouthpiece and horn work outs](#)
    - What did you notice about the video? Good, different, bad?
  - o Dynamic workouts?
    - [Example 2 - Dynamic work outs](#)
    - What did you notice about the video? Good, different, bad?
  - o Great way to introduce doubles for the saxophone section (for advanced groups)
    - [Example 3 - Doubles](#)
    - What did you notice about this video? Good, different, bad?

- You need to work on jazz basics, scales, articulations, style, getting used to beats 2 and 4.

- \*Count concert band rhythm sheets, put doing it in a swing fashion

- [Example 4 - counting with a click](#) (Nelson will demonstrate) (THANKS JESSE DOCHNAHL FOR THIS DOCUMENT!)

- \*Phoneticize

- Staccato = dit

- Marcato = dot or Daht

- Swung 8ths = du du OR du va

- Accent = firm DU

- [Example 4 - phoneticize with a click](#) (Nelson will demonstrate)

- \*When working on articulations, remember to put emphasis on the end of a note.

- RELEASE together using an articulated release, unless you are looking for an open concert band type sound. Students need to understand that the end of a note is just as important as the beginning of a note.

- For example:

- A whole note will release on one (Nelson will demonstrate)

- A dotted half note will release on 4 (Nelson will demonstrate)

- Everyone also needs to learn ii-V-I scales and how they work with chords.

- [What this sounds like slow](#)

- [What this sounds like fast](#)

-For my class I teach the modes: dorian, mixolydian, and major/ionian for a ii-V-I pattern. The reason for this is it is easier to teach and kids are good at relating these 3 scales to a normal major scale. Here's what each scale will look and sound like in the key of F. If your kids can learn how to play basic scales over a ii-V-I, they will be able to improvise over the majority of high school level music available.

ii-7 or g-7 or Gmin7 = G A Bb C D E F $\sharp$  G

V7 or C7 = C D E F $\sharp$  G A Bb C

Imaj7 = F G A Bb C D E F

Here is a challenging key: [A: ii-V-I](#)

## 5. What do I do with my rhythm section?

- The trick with the rhythm section is to keep them busy, while keeping what they do manageable. If you find that the rhythm section is bored during rehearsals, give the students assignments and sectional time. For example, tell them to write a rhythm section break for their favorite tune and then you should/could add it in for the performance.
- For the drummer, I typically have them start the year off just playing on a ride and hi-hat. They have to earn the right to add gear. Once they can play on 2 and 4 on the hi-hat and keep a steady pulse while playing quarter notes on the ride, they can add a snare. The key to jazz drumming is not overplaying. Just because you have a drum, doesn't mean you need to hit it.
- For the piano player, depending on their level, have the pianist focus on playing root in their left hand and 3rds and 7ths in their right hand. If they cannot do that, have them play block chords until they improve enough to play 3rds and 7ths. Remember the 3rds and 7ths can also be built with the 7<sup>th</sup> on the bottom and 3<sup>rd</sup> on top.
- For the guitar player, do not let them use TAB. They need to learn how to read music, even if all they play is one note per bar. Give your guitarist small goals. Also realize your guitarist will probably be your best improviser. Make sure you use them!

## 6. How do I structure a jazz rehearsal?

### Warm-ups:

- You must have organized warm-ups, especially at the beginning of the year whether you are teaching jazz band, marching band, or concert band. You always need to have long tones, scales, and basic improvisation warm-ups scheduled for every warm-up. Your warm-ups should take up approximately 1/3 of your rehearsal. Here's how a generic warm-up looks for Sentinel:
  - o First 5 minutes: We play our long tone exercise (see above examples) 2 or 3 times. Sometimes I have the brass buzz the warm-up the first time (except this year due to covid). When the students are ready, I have them add scales (\*\*It takes a long time for the kids to be able to play the scales, have them play the warm-up real slow and slowly add the scales until they can play everything.)
  - o Minutes 5-10: ii-V-I Scales. These scales are imperative to learning how to improvise. If your students learn and master the theory behind these scales, your students will become more successful with learning the literature and their improvisation skills will improve.
  - o Minutes 10-15: We practice improvisation during this block. There is a lot you can do here. For example: have just the saxes each improvise on Monday, Trumpets Tuesday, etc.... Everyone needs to practice improvising at least once per week. Encourage students to transcribe. Once a week take time to listen to

different jazz genres. Offer students extra credit to transcribe easy solos like 'So What' from Miles Davis's album "Kind of Blue". Singing the solo section is also imperative and helpful to learning it.

### Rehearsing literature:

- Make sure you choose appropriate literature! Remember, to program to your strongest sections! In my experience, you will have to teach every rhythm and note on the sheet multiple times.
- Make sure your rhythm section and wind sections are playing with the correct style. If you don't know what to say as far as style goes, play lots of recordings! There is no excuse for not understanding how something should sound, with YouTube and all of the other resources out there. Remember, to focus on small chunks every day and do not settle for average.
- Use all of the teaching strategies that you would use in a concert band: be able to count the rhythm and sing it. Also have your brass players buzz the parts, if they cannot get their slides/fingers in time.
- **Make time to teach the improvisation sections.** Remember to make sure you take time to teach students how to approach the improvisation sections. The students need to understand what scales, licks and patterns will work over the chords. Have the students write out solos so you can see if they are on the right track.
- **\*\*When rehearsing, do not accept average.** If the students are not able to perform the literature at a high level, give them easier music. If students feel successful, they will practice more and you will be able to assign harder literature as time goes by.

## 7. How do I teach improvisation?

I teach improv 3 different ways in hopes to reach each student.

### 1. Scales

### 2. Licks/Patterns/Guide Tones

### 3. Transcribing

I start every year by teaching the Bb or F blues progression. We go chord by chord and learn the scale that corresponds with the chord and we single out the 3rd and 7th (called a guide tone) for each of these scales. As we progress, we discover licks and patterns that sound great over each chord. All students also learn the melody to "Tenor Madness" by ear so a student can see/hear how blues changes fit the chords, scales, guide tones, and licks/patterns.

After the students can get through playing scales/licks/patterns over the Bb or F blues, have each kid take at least one solo over the blues changes every week. It's important they play with a big sound and keep things simple. When improvising, for me, students are required to show they can use guide tones (play rhythmic ideas on their guide tones) and/or use licks/patterns.

- **Scales:** Make sure you take time to teach theory at least once a week. The kids need to understand that they play a major scale over a major chord, a mixolydian scale over a dominant chord, and a dorian scale over a minor 7 chord. (see above ii-V-I scales) If the students understand this, you will be much more successful. I also teach pentatonic, bebop, chromatic and octatonic scales.

[Example 5, advanced scales](#) : F ii-V-I, Bebop scale, octatonic, chromatic

[Example 6, scales over blues progressions](#) : Scales ascending and descending that fit an F blues progression

- **Patterns/Licks/Guide Tones:** Play licks/patterns based off of your scales and insert them into progressions. Guide tones are typically the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of a chord (the color notes)

[Example 7, Smooth Guide tone line starting on your 7th](#)

[Example 8, Smooth Guide tone line starting on your 3rd](#)

[Example 9, Lick example: 7 - 1- b3-3](#)

[Example 10, Lick example: 3 - 5- 1 - 7](#)

- **Transcribe.** It is important that each student transcribes at least 20 seconds of a simple solo each semester. Transcribing teaches style and helps show students that improvisation is not magic.

Improvisation is simply performance of learned scales and patterns. It takes time, the key is to always try and not quit!

*What I do is have the students sing their solo for a midterm grade and perform it for their final. When choosing a solo, I have the students choose one off of the document, [“50 Easy Jazz Solos by Jazz Masters” by Jeff Libman](#) OR transcribe a solo from their literature OR ask permission to do one of their choosing.*

### ***TRANSCRIPTION EXAMPLES FROM SPRING 2020***

1. [Midterm singing test - Bone player, JJ Johnson](#) - Freshman
2. [Final - Bone player, JJ Johnson](#) - Freshman
3. [Guitar Player, Miles Davis](#) - Sophomore
4. [Sax Player, Clifford Brown tune \(Harold Land, tenor solo\)](#) - Senior

### **STUDENTS IMPROVISING IN CLASS OVER B $\flat$ BLUES USING LICKS AND SCALES**

**You will notice a very wide variety of level. 3 of these students never improvised before - the second student has been playing trombone for only 2 weeks, the other 3 have been in jazz band prior. This is what real life will sound like! ;)**

## **8. Theory Lesson & Warm-Ups**

I will draw an [F blues progression](#) out on a white board and cover how the above scales and licks work over the changes.

**Questions?? Tips??**