

# DAVID LIEBMAN WRITES ON EDUCATION, THE SAXOPHONE AND RELATED TOPICS

This is a collection of articles and papers that I have written over the years, in some cases for publications or for my own purposes to summarizing thoughts on various topics related to jazz and education. As I have noted in interviews and elsewhere, the mere thought of discussing how to play jazz was relatively unknown to musicians of my and previous generations who learned about jazz to use the vernacular, "on the street." This meant observation, listening, questions whenever possible and a lot of trial and error. The advantage of learning in this way translates to an immediate need to realize one's own individual way of processing information. The disadvantages are that gaps of learning inevitably occur, possibly due to bad instruction or misconstrued concepts on the part of the learner without much recourse to correction. Of course in the final result after decades of doing something over and over, everything more or less balances out.

My introduction to teaching was an invitation by Jamey Aebersold to take part in a clinic in the late 1970s and was amazed to see how the "ABCs" of jazz education, Jamey, David Baker and Jerry Coker along with others (acknowledged in the credits of the "Philosophy of Education" article) were so glib and organized in their thoughts and methods. I was both impressed and intimidated. But after a few years, the natural verbal inclination I already possessed found a home in learning to explain principles of music and art. With writing and teaching, I found as most teachers do, that by talking about the details, concepts become clearer resulting in better musical decisions in the performance realm, a worthwhile side effect to be sure.

The first article, "My Philosophy of Education" is a broad overall statement of views on pedagogy with specifics pertaining to jazz education. This is followed by a general discussion of that all important musical element, rhythm, and its workings in jazz. The next sections are a bit of an offshoot but since my instrument is the saxophone, I felt they could be of value here. I discuss the soprano saxophone, breath control, the challenge of playing solo saxophone and some pedagogical concerns for beginning saxophonists. I conclude with a transcription of a talk I gave concerning some of the general qualities and traits personally exhibited by jazz musicians and a final essay titled "What Jazz Means To Me" which speaks for itself. In any collection of disparate articles there are inevitably some repeated ideas, but detailed analysis of these points only appears once throughout the course of the writings.

I hope that the reader will find this potpourri interesting and stimulating, inspiring or confirming thoughts on the subjects. Teaching is a responsibility that is not taken lightly by those in the field. Success in teaching is not measured by awards or points, only by the gratification of having possibly influenced the future in a positive way.

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## **Beat Placement**

After a certain degree of accuracy of pulse is established I urge the student to purposely try to play ahead and behind the beat. At first just use simple scales, licks or forms such as the blues that are automatically under the fingers so you can concentrate on the task at hand, which is feeling the “area” of the beat in order to get that part of the body which is responsible executing what one feels and hears. Using a playalong record can help since whatever the rhythm section feels like, at the least it remains in the same place time after time, so you can use this as a sort of barometer to play with in order to habitualize the sensation. This is really more of a physical exercise than just musical. One must feel the beat as a rubber band—expanding and contracting at will, but never so far as to drag or rush the beat!!

## **Transcription**

I have written a great deal over the years on this all important method of learning the thought patterns as they pertain to notes and harmonies (“*The Complete Guide To Transcription*” video available through Caris Music Services). But even more so in the area of nuance and time feel, there is no better method for understanding what is involved than to be able to imitate a model who does it expertly. Through transcribing and exact replication of every aspect of the performance, it is possible to analyze the possibilities demonstrated on the recording, copy the methods and eventually use this accumulated material to enlarge and develop one’s own palette of expressive devices. (Example 10)

## **Be A Drummer**

Any serious musician knows that understanding and at least having a minimal amount of execution concerning the piano is mandatory for musical excellence. In the area of rhythmic feel it is the same for learning drums. All musicians should feel what it is like to account for every beat over the course of an entire performance. The physical aspect of “riding” the cymbal and keeping the pulse is beyond description. But even a casual familiarity with the drums will be revelatory. And anyway, who doesn’t like playing the drums or hanging out with drummers? They are always the loo-sest of musicians with a sense of tradition which rivals pianists. After all, drummers and drums are universal since the beginning of time. Even if it means just getting a pencil and playing on the table with records, this is a start. Furthermore, I urge everyone to work out with a real drummer in a duo setting. Try to make playing with a drummer a weekly activity. The two musicians should be specific as to what they want to accomplish. For example, today they may work on one of them playing over the time with the other being very accurate stating the form of the tune. Then listen back and try to understand anything that happened which was unclear. That is how we learn about each other’s instruments and musical concerns in order to enlarge our ability to communicate with other instrumentalists in a group.

## **Other Rhythmically Based Music**

It goes without saying that any serious musician would be interested in other musical traditions which are heavily rhythmic. Some suggestions are the aforementioned Indian classical music, Afro Cuban, African and the Balkan traditions. The concept of grafting an idea from a different source to one’s own home idiom is both practical and enlightening. In other words, hearing something from another culture and imagining how it could be transformed to jazz is one of the most rewarding and enjoyable processes for encouraging and developing an individual style.

## **Attitude**

Rhythmical confidence comes with time and experience, but it must be sought after to develop. If a musician is only satisfied with merely playing a never ending stream of eighth notes, excellent as far as the harmonic and melodic choices may be, then further development in the rhythmical sense will be difficult. What is “natural” meaning intuitive and easily grasped is a great place to start, but to excel one must go beyond. A budding artist should desire to expand their horizons so that the possibility of finding an individual voice can occur. That is the challenge of learning an art form...the quest for something new to enlarge one’s creative palette. Jazz is in the final analysis rhythmic music and it is the responsibility of the serious artist to do research into this mysterious and powerful universal force.

difference between “top part” breathing and “bottom part” breathing. It’s very easy, make him run around the street and then bring him back. Say, “Look at the way you’re breathing. That’s top breathing. Why? Because you’re out of breath and you need air as soon as possible. That’s not the way we want to play an instrument. We want slow, even, deep breathing.” Whatever rationale you bring a kid in is up to you. The point is that you want them to immediately realize that they should do breathing exercises separate from playing the saxophone, especially the younger they are because they’re thinking about something when the horn is in their hands.

The first thing you should do is the breathing exercise alone. At least you and him do it, even if it’s just once a week. When he comes in to you before you take the horn out, do a couple of deep breaths just to calm down. Tell him to copy you, put your stomach out, pull your stomach in and put your hand on his stomach. Push him against the wall, put him on the floor, that whole thing I do in the video. Have him do that for at least five minutes and tell him that this is what deep breathing is. This will be something that he will intrinsically get anyway. He won’t understand it now, but later on he’ll understand what deep breathing is.

Another thing to do is stretches. I’m talking about the top part of the body. I would have them normal things such as loosening up the shoulders, crisscrossing, pulling the shoulder blades back rotating the arms, etc.....all the basic exercises. Get the shoulders to feel good. That’s number one.

Number two is the neck by doing neck rolls. Then we concentrate on mouth movement. We make faces and try to get some blood to go through this area, especially to the lips. Stretch them. Then the tongue sticking out to touch the nose and down towards the chin... a real stretch. Feeling the inside rim of the lip and teeth with the tongue to just get some sensation in the tongue. The tongue is a muscle. In fact what we are doing is sensitizing the kid’s whole upper body. Then go to the breathing exercises in the first ten minutes. If you have a class with 10 to 15 kids, it’s basically like going to the gym. I try to explain to them this is a physical thing you’re doing. Music is cerebral which is true. It’s inside us, but playing an instrument is physical. The saxophone is a very physical instrument, maybe not as much as the drums, but more than the guitar. We have a lot of stuff going on and I want that part of the body to be stretched and warmed up, just like a runner would do. You are using certain muscles. That’s why the breathing exercises. My point is, make the kid aware of the physical parts of the body involved with the saxophone.

### **PART III: 0.Ear Training, Reading, Philosophy**

**DL:** Now ear training. What do you do?

**CS:** *Solfegge singing. I try to get them to sing every scale that they have. After that, maybe do a couple of tunes so that they understand that concept. I really have difficulty getting them to transcribe things. That seems to be a real weak area.*

**DL:** Okay, let’s back up a little bit. One thing about the solfegge deal. You’ve got to play Ella Fitzgerald for them or Joe Williams, somebody who scats. Say, “This is called jazz and this is called scatting.” Now I can’t see how a kid would not find this thrilling, cute and appealing. It sounds like fun. So, la, ti, do is not fun. It has nothing to do with our life. Why not have them do bip, de bip, de bip. Then have them do a simple little melody like “Twinkle Little Star” and “How High the Moon.” scatting. Have them get right away into jazz syllables, because jazz syllables are more natural and rounded. Let them know right away that notes can be sung with a soft sound syllabication.

As far as what material to use, try scales and repeating back some notes. Here you can really use the aid of a teaching tape. You can make up your own tape right there in front of the student and tell them, “I want you to be able to come in next week and play that melody.”

In other words, this transcription thing has to be done gracefully for a young person. It can’t be over-the-head the way I teach it for older students telling them that they have to do it because of the time and nuance and there’s no other way to teach you about the feel. You already know what jazz is about. You already