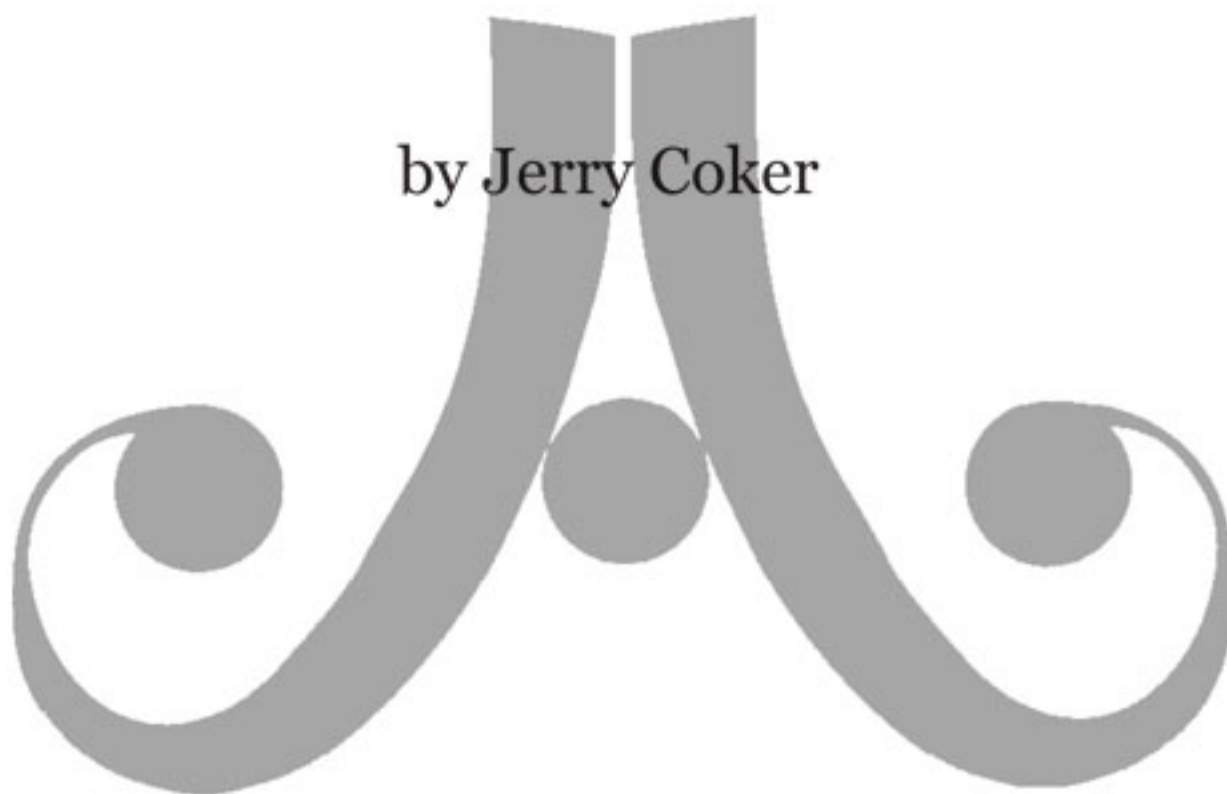


# THE JAZZ REPERTOIRE

**Selecting, Understanding,  
and Remembering Tunes**

by Jerry Coker



Published by  
**JAMEY AEBERSOLD JAZZ®**  
P.O. Box 1244  
New Albany, IN 47151-1244  
[www.jazzbooks.com](http://www.jazzbooks.com)  
ISBN 978-1-56224-289-3

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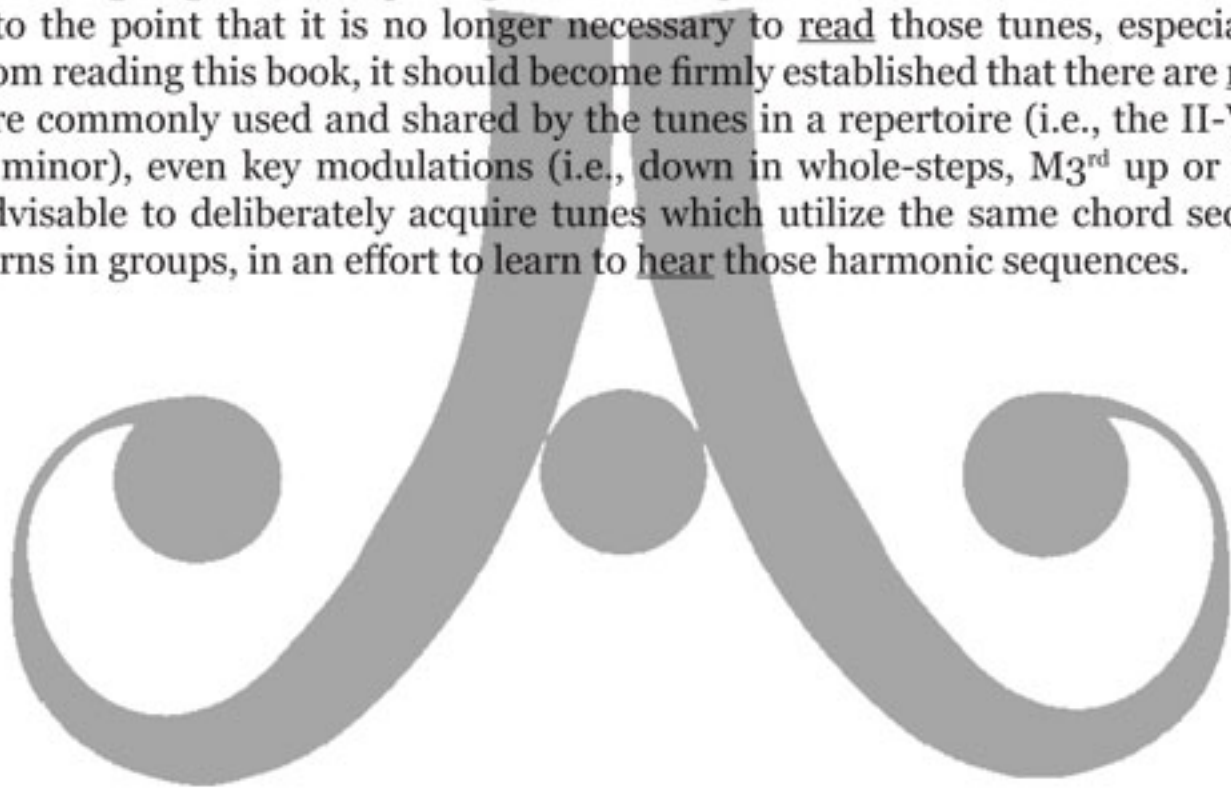
# Table of Contents

Author's Preface .....	1
Introduction .....	2
The Meritorious Aspects of Analyzing The Tunes Of The Jazz Repertoire .....	3
Learning To Evaluate The Tunes Of The Jazz Repertoire .....	15
Lists Of Tunes Which Utilize Commonplace Aspects of Chord Progressions And Modulations .....	20
Easy To Intermediate Exercises And Tunes .....	27
A Multi-Faceted Practice Routine Leading To Highly-Creative Improvisation .....	29
Melodic Form In Jazz Improvisation .....	32
Developing Musical Perceptions .....	35
Note-Of-Chord Choices .....	36

## Preface

It's very difficult, perhaps impossible, to imagine any field of human endeavor that can favorably compare, in its results, with the study of jazz improvisation. It offers artistic self-expression, excitement, beauty, thoughtfulness, inspiration, etc., and the potential for the joys of personal accomplishment. You can't achieve those resulting attributes from watching television or from using your computers, iPads, or smart phones. Becoming a jazz improviser, even a great one, carries little hope of becoming financially or occupationally secure, but even so, we shouldn't fail to recognize the potential benefits of artistic expression, even at the spiritual level. Attaining the goal of becoming a great jazz improviser is no easy task, and we may never achieve the level of a Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Herbie Hancock, Michael Brecker, etc. But in 60 years of teaching jazz, I have seen many virtual novices experience the thrill of improvising to relative success in their earliest efforts. Those who set their goal as being at the highest level they can achieve must 'gird their loins' in preparation for the task. Instrumental techniques must be developed. Exercises, all scales, patterns, and commonplace 'elements of the jazz language', etc., must be learned in all 12 keys, and all along the way, the best recorded soloists must be listened to, even transcribed, as often as possible.

Then we come to the ongoing task of acquiring a sizeable repertoire, one that has been studied, analyzed, and assimilated to the point that it is no longer necessary to read those tunes, especially their chord progressions. From reading this book, it should become firmly established that there are many harmonic sequences that are commonly used and shared by the tunes in a repertoire (i.e., the II-V-I progression in major and/or minor), even key modulations (i.e., down in whole-steps, M3<sup>rd</sup> up or down, etc.). It might even be advisable to deliberately acquire tunes which utilize the same chord sequences and/or modulation patterns in groups, in an effort to learn to hear those harmonic sequences.





# Introduction

Nearly fifty years ago, in my first book (**Improvising Jazz**, 1964), I described improvisation as being *spontaneous composition*. It was true then, and it has been true ever since. When we think of the process of written composition, we tend to picture the composer leaning over the piano, slowly notating and tweaking each melodic phrase, chord, and rhythm, perhaps many times, and for days, weeks, months, even years before its completion. Improvisation however, transpires immediately and in a relentless tempo, with no time in which to tweak or revise each phrase. This is the general nature of jazz improvisation. To be sure, there were many instances of spontaneous composition in earlier styles of music. History has reported “improvisation contests/duels” in Spain in the 1600’s. We also know that the great composers of the Classical Period (ca. 1700-1800), in their relatively informal salon performances, would request a melodic motif from a member of the audience, whereupon the composer would spontaneously use that motif to structure (at the piano) a new piece of music. We can be sure, however, that the meter, harmonies, modulations of key(s), melodic sequences, etc. were ingrained into the musician’s overall creative disciplines, so that the real achievement was the aspect of creating the ‘new’ piece in an effective, spontaneous manner without spending many lonely hours composing it. In jazz improvisation, the process takes place, in nearly all instances anyway, over a pre-existing chord progression to a specific tune from the repertoire, and like the classical composers, jazz improvisers will generally lean upon and utilize their knowledge of chords, chord-scales, patterns, keys, chord progression tendencies, modulation patterns, meters, rhythms, and (hopefully) inspired melodic content.

The classical composer/improviser had to rely upon his attunement to the style and to pre-existing compositions (of others, as well as his own). The same holds true for the jazz improviser. The quantity of pre-existing literature to be studied and internalized for both styles (classical and jazz) is nearly the same. Jazz improvisers study, memorize, and perform tunes from a vast quantity of old tunes, new tunes, standard tunes, bebop tunes, modal tunes, blues, and contemporary tunes. It is an enormous, seemingly unending task, one which needs to begin early in the life of the improviser and continue throughout his/her musical career. It should go without saying, then, that the serious student of jazz improvisation will need to discover, remember, and hear all the unities that exist among the tunes of the jazz repertoire. Such recognition of said “unities” is the primary purpose of this book.

The primary goals of this writing are to assist the reader in:

1. Learning the tenets of chord progression analysis;
2. Discovering the many commonplace harmonic clichés that are extant in the tunes of the jazz repertoire;
3. Removing the need to incessantly read chord progressions of tunes already learned;
4. Discovering the relative values of melody, meter, rhythm, and harmony in the tunes being studied/performed;
5. Recognizing the merits of learning to play the melodies of various tunes in all 12 keys;
6. Learning to customize the melodies of standard tunes;
7. Learning to distinguish and/or appreciate revisions of chord progressions by various recorded artists;
8. Acquiring keyboard skills, regardless of the chosen instrument;
9. Practicing improvisation in all 12 keys of any tune;
10. Learning to construct ‘road maps’ for any given tune;
11. Learning to select effective note-choices for improvisation on all tunes;
12. Learning to evaluate and select good tunes for a discerning repertoire.



# The Meritorious Aspects of Analyzing The Tunes of the Jazz Repertoire

This study focuses on those students of jazz improvisation who have achieved the stage of knowing all of the chord-types and their attendant scales, as presented in the Chord-Scale Compendium in the Appendix of **The Complete Method For Jazz Improvisation** (Coker, Alfred's Music, Los Angeles, 1980) or a reliable equivalent, and able to perform those scalar applications in all 12 keys. In practicing and applying such information to improvisation, the reader is encouraged to practice with the pre-recorded accompaniment tracks provided in various volumes of the Jamey Aebersold play-alongs, such as Volumes 1, 3, 16, 21, etc., which focus upon the particular items being studied.

In the teaching of jazz improvisation in private lessons, I have frequently observed, when students attempt to play a tune in 12 keys, (as presented in Aebersold's volumes 67 and 68, for example), that they are very likely to rely upon reading the chord symbols in each key (sometimes even reading the sequences of scales provided in the book's rendering of the tune's chord progression in each key). This bothers me considerably, primarily because I know that so long as one is reading chord symbols and/or scales, the eyes and their attendant brain functions are hampering the needed activities of the ears, the memory, imagination, and even the creative musical heart. Reading is not only a distraction, but also will usually insure a mechanical result. Certainly we initially need to read melodies, chord symbols, and perhaps even recommended (and notated) scales, in the original key, but once that stage is past, we need to function, musically, in a way that enables us to actually close our eyes, think/remember details, hear what our musical imagination confers upon us, and perform them! So how do we achieve that desired stage of development? Read on!

The primary stage involves analysis. Players who only know several tunes will experience difficulty with this, as their analyses might produce very limited understandings and results, since they are not necessarily cognizant of how often said analyses are found to be in several, even many, other tunes (not yet learned/played) which might reflect and support their findings. They might even conclude that their findings are probably verifiable in only one tune, among the several other tunes they've come to know, especially if the several other tunes are from a different genre of tune-types. There are about six different tune-types in the usual jazz repertoire, to include Standard, Bebop, Modal, Blues, Contemporary, and Ballads, all discussed in detail in **The Complete Method For Jazz Improvisation** (Op. cit.), with a chapter devoted to each. The student who has only learned several tunes thus far might, in his/her analyses of them, find that there is little agreement among them, if each tune is a different tune-type, since the harmonic language, even the melodic style, will vary considerably between one type and another. If, however, most or all of the several tunes are of the same type, there will probably be many similarities between their individual analyses, especially if the analyzer has a system for the comparison of tunes in sharply contrasting keys.

## **Discovering Uniformities and/or Distinctive Traits**

### **Melodies.**

Melodic analysis is relatively simple, yet critical in performing the same tune in any or all keys. One method is to relate each note of the melody to the key in which it transpires, using Arabic numerals. For example, the Christmas carol, "Joy to the World" could become 1 (or 8)-7-6-5-4-3-2-1, 5-6-6-7-7-1 (or 8), making that phrase transferable to any key by simply re-assigning "1" to some other key-note. However, most tunes of the jazz repertoire will include subsequent chords that emanate from other keys, or altered chord-notes, or chromatic notes, etc. A better solution would be to relate the melodic digits to the currently-transpiring chord. For example, "Blue Bossa" begins with a pick-up note that is the fifth of the key (as well as the fifth of the first chord), so if you know which of the 12 keys you're currently



attempting to practice playing the melody, you only need to be able to find the fifth of the first chord/key to get under way.

Another consideration is knowing the interval between one note and another. For example, the third measure of the melody of “Blue Bossa” necessitates (when playing the melody in a different key) playing a major seventh interval, which is a relatively large interval to quickly compute and play. Hence the learning of all intervals could assist a player to quickly find the correct notes of a melody that is being played in a different key.

Since melodies frequently outline the passing chords and/or scales, then knowing the chord progression also assists in finding the specific notes of a tune that is being played in one of the eleven non-standard keys.

A final consideration, when playing melodies in non-standard keys, is knowing commonplace melodic/harmonic devices, such as the Bebop Scale, C.E.S.H (Contrapuntal Elaboration of Static Harmony), Change-Running, 7-3 Resolutions, Digital Patterns, Scalar Patterns, Enclosures, Sequences, etc., all of which, and more, are thoroughly defined, with examples from recorded solos, in **Elements of the Jazz Language** (Coker, Alfred’s Music, Los Angeles, 1991). If the reader comes to know those ‘elements’, he/she will recognize them when they appear in the melodies of the tunes being studied, which makes it much easier to transpose them into any key.

For many years, while still teaching in university jazz programs, one of the courses I taught was Advanced Improvisation, a senior course for jazz majors. For about the first half of the semester, the first 5-10 minutes of each class meeting was spent playing melodies to jazz tunes in all 12 keys. We began with simpler ‘heads’, such as “Tenor Madness” and “Blue Bossa”, then worked our way to playing more difficult tunes, such as “Dig” and “Donna Lee.” They already knew the ‘elements’ from taking Sophomore Improvisation and Analysis of Jazz Styles, both of which included study and assimilation of ‘elements,’ so they were quick to recognize their use in the 12-key tunes. Toward the end of the course they were each required to play a 30-minute in-class performance of 6 tunes of their choice that included one of each of the 6 ‘vehicle-types’ discussed earlier in this study, one of which had to be in a non-standard key, and one of which had to be at 232 b.p.m. or faster. They were also responsible for engineering their 6-selection accompaniment recording, performing them without printed music, and having memorized the order of the selections and the number of choruses included on each track, so that they could play the melody on both the first and last chorus of each track. I’m happy to say that there were no fatalities, they all benefited from the various aspects of the training, and each was better prepared to render his formal senior recital later in the year.

Finally, with respect to performing melodies of the jazz repertoire, whether in the original key or some other key, I have noticed, among those who read or memorize the printed version of the melodies of the tunes they choose to play, that there is a tendency to render them in a mechanical manner, devoid of proper phrasing/articulation/accents, and failing to re-phrase the melody, especially noticeable when a melodic segment is repeated, i.e. the second, or last, ‘A’ section of a tune having an AABA form. When professional players and singers perform the melody to a standard tune, they never perform it exactly like it appears in print! The printed version merely represents the most basic information (pitches, harmony, meter, and some aspects of rhythm), but it is expected that individual interpretations will follow. We do, however, have to be more cautious about non-standard tunes, such as bebop ‘heads’ or a contemporary tune by Wayne Shorter. Can you imagine trying to re-interpret the phrasing of “Donna Lee” or “Yes And No?”