

Work Song – Teaching Improv Using the Real Easy Book

Tips and Tricks for the Middle School Band Director by Tim Ostrow

Below is an outlined recommendation for band directors to help prepare their students for the **mandatory** improvisation portion of the Florida All State Middle School Jazz Band. This year (2024/25), we are using “**Work Song**” by **Nat Adderley**. Materials and useful resources can be found in the Real Easy Book Volume 1 from Sher Music Co./Stanford Jazz Workshop. Students will perform the head and improvise TWO choruses so that they may develop their solo.

Click the links for Practice Backing Tracks (160 BPM) for [Brass and Saxes](#), [Guitar and Piano](#), [Bass](#), and [Drums](#)

1) LISTEN to Recordings to Understand Style. Jazz is an Aural Art:

- a. [Nat Adderley](#)
- b. [Them Dirty Blues Album](#)
- c. [Backing Track Example](#) from LearnJazzStandards.com
- d. [Other Ideas](#) for Development

2) Get EVERYONE to Play the Head:

- a. This is called “Part 1 - melody” in the Real Easy Book.
 - i. Piano, Guitar and Bass should also learn this.
 - ii. Drummers can play vibes using the C book. This helps them develop a melodic ear.
- b. To get the entire band to play this, try “trading twos” with your ensemble.
 - i. Ask a drummer to vamp on a swing groove, use a backing track, or even the swing groove on the Harmony Director.
 - ii. You model on your instrument and the students play it back. They should “air-band/finger” while you are playing by yourself.
 - iii. Repeat as necessary and then move on to the next two bars **when** they get it!
 - iv. You will need to “trade fours” on the last four measures of the head.

3) Teach the Rhythm Section to Play the Changes:

- a. Piano/Guitar
 - i. Using the sample piano and guitar voicing, play the changes as written on the lower staff (“Hits” on Beat 1 and 4).
 - ii. Have them play half notes/quarter notes and then syncopated comping patterns with the same voicings so they get comfortable with the changes and transitions.
 - iii. When they are comfortable comping, have them play the chords in other voicings.
- b. Bass
 - i. Play the bass part as written on the bass clef (“Hits” on Beat 1 and 4).
 - ii. Learn the Sample Walking Bass Line.
 - iii. Try adding eighths on a particular beat (beat 4 is a good place to start!)
 - iv. Move the notes around and find creative ways to approach transitions to another chord (enclosures/chromatically/etc.).
- c. Drums
 - i. Learn a swing groove. Check out the “Drum School” App for ideas here.
 - ii. Play hits as indicated in the first 12 bars of the Head (also in the recordings!) and then play the groove in the last 4 bars.
 - iii. When the pattern repeats, move from the hi-hat to the ride and vice-versa.
 - iv. Add simple hits and fills on the snare/tom/kick/crash.

4) Teach the “Changes”:

- a. Have the rhythm section vamp (loop) on the chords associated with each “Useful Scale”.
 - i. F Mi 7 = F Dorian
 - ii. C 7 = C Mixolydian
 - iii. Bb7 = Bb Mixolydian
- b. Play the modal patterns over the vamp emphasizing chord tones and recognizing passing tones. This can be done by trading twos and fours. In the examples below, you would play the first two bars (stems up) of each pattern and the students would repeat it back (stems down). This gets them familiar with what notes work for each chord symbol.

The image shows a musical score titled "Dorian Examples for F MI7". It consists of five staves labeled A through E. Each staff contains a sequence of notes and rests, representing different rhythmic patterns for the F Dorian mode. Below the staves, a number system is provided: 1 2 b3 b4 5 6 b7 8 9 8 b7 6 5 4 b3 2. This system is used to identify the notes in the patterns.

- c. Make up your own patterns! This can be improvised once they are familiar with the tones they can use.
- d. Play one or two bar “licks” and have them play them back in a “call and response”. You might repeat this if they aren’t getting it, make it easier, or develop an idea depending on how they respond.
- e. **Let them be you where THEY play “licks” in call and response with the band.**
- f. Eventually, they should develop the confidence to start improvising over the changes.
- g. Repeat this process for each mode and then play the form allowing each student to play the entire form over the head.
- h. Personally, I don’t teach the Blues Scale until they have learned the changes.

5) Other Important Points:

- a. Students should be familiar with scales and a number system (1-8 instead of Do Re Mi, etc.). [Here’s some scales](#) I wrote that we also use in concert band. Simply add numbers under each whole note at the top of each page.
- b. The Real Easy Book also offers “Background Cues” and a “Melody – Part 2/3”. If you want to teach your entire jazz band to play lead sheets, here is the basic formula:
 - i. Everyone plays the Head two times using “Melody – Part 1”.
 1. I recommend that the rhythm section perform hits and then a walking bass line with comping in piano and guitar in the last 4 bars leading to the repeat of the head.
 - ii. The rhythm section will then repeat over the changes in the Head while soloists perform.
 1. Typically, a saxophonist, trumpet player, or trombonist would perform two choruses and the band can softly play the prescribed background cues (or make your own) during the second chorus of each soloist.
 2. The rhythm section can trade 4’s to feature their soloists. This is especially effective for Bass and Drums.
 - iii. Once solos have concluded, the ensemble will repeat the Head (Melody 1) two more times and then take the Coda.
 1. This is a good opportunity to use Melody 2 and Melody 3 with the winds. Example: Trumpets and Altos play Melody 1, Tenor Saxes play Melody 2, Trombones and Bari Sax play Melody 3.
 - iv. Communicate with the Drummer for the last Chord.
 1. Winds can “noodle” a solo over the chord.
 2. The drummer can play a solo with a defined cut off.
 3. The bass can do a walking solo with a fall.
 4. Any combination of the above and more. Be creative and HAVE FUN!