

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 improvisation portion of the Florida All State Middle School Jazz Band. This year (2025/26), we are using “**Sonnymoon for Two**” by **Sonny Rollins**. 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 **TWICE** “Part 1 - melody” and then improvise **TWO** choruses so that they may develop their solo.

[Click this link](#) for Practice Backing Tracks

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

- a. [Sonny Rollins on Sonnymoon for Two](#).
 - i. You might have your students *transcribe* a few licks here!
- b. [Backing Track Example](#) with the Head performed by guitar.

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 fours” 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 can model on your instrument of choice and the students play it back. They should “air-band/finger along” while you are playing by yourself.

3) Teach the Rhythm Section to Play the Changes:

- a. Piano/Guitar
 - i. Using the sample piano and guitar voicing, play the changes.
 - ii. Have students 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. Learn the Sample Walking Bass Line (note that *m.9 doesn't follow the original form here*).
 - ii. Try adding eighths on a particular beat (beat 4 is a good place to start!)
 - iii. Move the notes around and find creative ways to approach another chord (arpeggios/enclosures/chromatically).
 1. Example: Bb to Eb = Walking Down Bb, Ab, G, F, Eb **or** Walking Up Bb, D, G, F, Eb
 2. Example: Eb to Bb = Walking Down Eb, Db, C, B, Bb **or** Walking Up Eb, G, Ab, A, Bb
 3. Example: F to Bb = Walking Down F, Eb, D, C, Bb **or** Walking Up F, A, C, B, Bb
 4. Example: Bb to F = Walking Down Bb, Ab, G, Gb, F **or** Walking Up Bb, D, Eb, E, F
- c. Drums
 - i. Learn a swing groove. Check out YouTube or the “Drum School” App for ideas.
 - ii. When the 12 bar pattern repeats, move from the hi-hat to the ride and vice-versa.
 - iii. Add simple hits and fills on the snare/tom/kick/crash. This is more effective at the end of 4 bars.

4) Teach the “Changes”:

- a. Have the rhythm section vamp (loop) on the chords associated with each “Useful Scales”.
 - i. The book shows a Blues Scale which works over the entire form, but you can also play the following:
 1. Bb7 = Bb Mixolydian (Bb, C, D, Eb, E, G, Ab)
 2. Eb7 = Eb Mixolydian (Eb, F, G, Ab, Bb, C, Db)
 3. CMi7 = C Dorian (C, D, E, F, G, A, Bb)
 4. F7 = F Mixolydian (F, G, A, Bb, C, D, Eb)

- b. Play the modal patterns over a vamp of every two or four bars emphasizing chord tones and recognizing passing tones. This can be done by trading twos and fours.
- c. In the examples below, you could play the first four bars of each pattern and the students would repeat it back. This gets them familiar with what notes work for each chord symbol and helps them “feel the changes.”

- d. Make up your own patterns! This can be improvised once they are familiar with the tones they can use. **See patterns C, D and E for examples.**
- e. Play one or two bar teacher led “licks” and have them play 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.
- f. **Let your students be YOU where they play “licks” in call-and-response with the band.**
- g. Eventually, they should develop the confidence to start improvising over the changes.
- h. Repeat this process for each mode and then play the form allowing each student to play the entire form over the head.

5) Other Important Points:

- a. Besides learning to improvise, 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”.
 - ii. The rhythm section will then repeat over the changes in the Head while soloists perform.
 1. Typically, any player 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 2’s to feature their soloists. This is especially effective for Bass and Drums.
 - iii. Everyone plays the “shout chorus” after the solos.
 1. This is used as a bridge to get back to the head.
 2. This is a great spot to add dynamics and drum fills.
 - iv. Everyone plays the Head (Part 1 - melody) two more times and then take the Coda.
 1. This is a good opportunity to use the harmony parts with the winds.
 - a. Example: Trumpets and Altos play Melody 1, Tenor Saxs play Part 2 harmony, Trombones and Bari Sax play Part 3 harmony.
 - v. Communicate with the Drummer for the last Chord.
 1. Winds can “noodle” a solo over the last 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!
- b. In the Real Easy Book, see pages v and vi for “How to use this book”!