

Methods For Fighting The Epidemic Of Tune Illiteracy {Part 2}

Perhaps the only thing worse than not knowing a tune when it's called on a gig or jam session is not knowing a tune you *used* to know. It's disheartening (and embarrassing) not to be able to play something you once could, simply for lack of review.



On the other hand, having every tune you've ever learned right under your fingertips, while you still continue to add to your repertoire, makes for a higher level of confidence that allows you the freedom to actually create jazz rather than worrying about what the next change is.

Following is a systematic method for learning new tunes and reviewing old ones. The three-component system is based on spending one hour per day divided into three 20-minute sessions: **1) Learning a New Tune**, **2) New Tune Review** and **3) Old Tune Review**. Note that this method, based on the principles of short-term, medium-term and long-term memory, will only work if you do not skip days. Practicing seven days in a row over a period of time is key.

Long-term memory requires "rehearsal," that is, doing or thinking about something over and over. What makes one forget is twofold: lack of rehearsal and "interference," that is, thinking of things other than what you're trying to remember. The longer you go without reviewing, the more interference there is, hence, the sooner you forget.

Think of your memory as a large funnel: As you pour information into the wide end at the top, it slowly drips out the narrow end at the bottom. In order to keep the funnel full, you must continually replenish (review tunes). If you allow the funnel to empty, you have to start over, that is, *re-learn* the tunes (which takes a lot longer than simply reviewing them once they're memorized). It's not how *much* you practice that matters, it's how *often*. Indeed, practicing one hour per day/seven days a week is usually far more productive than practicing, say, 14 hours on the weekend only. Even though the latter adds up to twice as many hours at the end of the week, the funnel tends to empty during the five days off.

The good news is that the more you review, the less you'll have to. Eventually, the tunes will become part of your long-term memory, meaning they'll be with you forever (like becoming fluent in a language). The goal is to speak jazz as effortlessly as you speak English or whatever

your native language is. The following steps will help get you there:

- 1) Learn New Tune (20 minutes)**—This could be the whole tune, just the changes, or even just the root movement. The point is to learn something new *daily*. (For a systematic method on learning new tunes, see Part 1 of this article in the May 2010 issue).
- 2) New Tune Review (20 minutes)**—Once a tune is memorized, play two choruses (the changes as described in Part 1 of this article for the first chorus, then the head while thinking of the changes for the second) every day for seven days *in a row*. This helps put the tune in your long-term memory. Once you've played it by heart for seven consecutive days, list it in your "old tune review bin."
- 3) Old Tune Review (20 minutes)**—Each day, review five tunes in your old tune review bin. This should take no longer than four minutes per tune (two minutes to review the form and changes, another couple to review the head). Circulate through the bin, always picking up where you left off. For example, if you know 50 tunes you would review tunes 1–5 on day one, tunes 6–10 on day two, 11–15 on day three and so on. By the time you finish practicing on day 10, you will have reviewed them all. And if you kept up with steps 1 and 2, you will have added a few more tunes to the bin during that time. Review those, then start with tunes 1–5 again, then 6–10, etc., and continue to circulate through your list. By the time you have 150 tunes in the bin, you'll be reviewing each of them once per month. When you have 300, they'll only get reviewed once per two months, but that will be enough provided you have followed the steps religiously.

Executing these three steps *daily* for a couple of years will put the tunes in your long-term memory; they'll become part of you. You will not only have significantly increased your repertoire, you will have gained the sense of confidence and freedom that only comes from truly *knowing* tunes.

A list of the must-know tunes along with their most common chord progressions can be found in the book *Pocket Changes* (available online through jazzbooks.com). Regarding the order in which to learn them, I suggest you make a tune checklist as in the following example:

- 1) Take inventory of the tunes you really *know* (K).** "Really" knowing a tune means that you can write the chord changes down

quickly on a cocktail napkin, and if you're playing with someone you want to impress and the tune is called, you feel an overwhelming sense of relief! Check those tunes first and put them into your old tune review bin.

- 2) Next, check the tunes you "sort of know" (SK).** This means you pretty much know them but they don't quite meet the criteria above.
- 3) Work on the "sort-of-know" tunes, getting them up to speed so they meet the "know" criteria; then move them into the "know" column.** This should go relatively quickly.
- 4) Once you have all the "sort-of-know" tunes in the "know" column, work on the "don't know" (DK) tunes.**
- 5) Before learning any tune, make sure you own the definitive recording.** If you do, check the ODR (own definitive recording) box; if not, purchase or download the recording, listen to it *a lot*, then check it off in the ODR column.

Tune	DK	SK	K	ODR
1 After You've Gone				
2 Afternoon in Paris				
3 Ain't Misbehavin'				
4 Ain't She Sweet				
5 Airing				
6 Alice In Wonderland				
7 All Blues				
8 All My Tomorrows				
9 All Of Me				
10 All Of You				
11 All The Things You Are				
12 Almost Like Being In Love				
13 Alone Together				
14 Along Came Betty				
15 Am I Blue				
16 Angel Eyes				
17 Anniversary Song				
18 April In Paris				
19 Are You Real?				
20 As Time Goes By				
21 Ask Me Now				
22 Autumn In New York				
23 Autumn Leaves				
24 Avulsion				
25 Bauble, Bangles And Beads				
26 Beautiful Love				
27 Beyond The Blue Horizon				
28 Bill Bailey				
29 Birth Of The Blues				

And finally, don't forget to learn the lyrics. This will not only help inform your interpretation during performance, it will also provide you with additional mnemonics, giving you the ability to forever remember which heads go with which titles.

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