

Brad Johnson

Website: bcjwinds.com

Email: brad@bcjwinds.com

Two Essential Skills For Improvisation

Skill #1: Learn The Sounds

What sounds?

Scales and intervals

Primarily major, minor (dorian), and dominant

Think sounds 1 – 5 and 3 – 7 of scales.

Learn interval sounds from tonic and 3rd of scale asc., 5th and 7th desc.

Also, blues scale. Later, additional scale forms.

Chord forms

Primarily major, minor and dominant 7ths

Jazz usages

Learning the jazz language is just like any other language: you have to hear it spoken.

Exercises for learning the sounds

The following exercises can be done unaccompanied or with a recorded rhythm section background.

Prehearing scales, intervals, chord forms

See exercise pages “Learning Scale and Interval Sounds” and “Learning Chord Form Sounds”

Practice singing an idea, then playing the idea

This can be a short musical phrase or you can record yourself singing a complete solo, then transcribe it.

Practice trading simple ideas with your fellow musicians

Establish what notes you will be playing and a starting note.

Keep it simple.

This is beneficial for both musicians. It gives the sender practice creating ideas and gives the receiver ear training practice.

You can use this for rhythmic as well as melodic practice.

Practice creating ideas in a single key

Practice creating melodic ideas in a chosen key for 10 minutes. This will exercise your imagination and technique, and acquaint you with your own sense of melody.

Listen to jazz recordings

Don't worry about what you *should* be hearing. Just take note of what you *are* hearing.

Listening to the great improvisers is inspirational as well as educational.

As you listen, reflect on what it is you like about this music.

There are many lists of notable jazz musicians available. You can use a list to guide you in acquainting yourself with the players that have stood out over the years.

Skill #2: Learn to Stay Oriented

How do you keep from getting lost?

Identify the phrases

Most tunes are made up of 8-bar phrases.

The blues can be thought of as three 4-bar phrases or one 12-bar phrase.

Phrases have a harmonic shape. This gives the phrase the feeling of a stand-alone statement, like a sentence or paragraph.

Practice keeping place within the harmony

Start very simple.

Don't take the next step until you are super-solid with the simple materials.

Exercises for staying oriented

Practice listening first

Practice listening to tunes while keeping track of the phrases.

First listen without sheet music; then, follow along with the sheet music to see how the chord progression created the feeling of phrases.

Follow the melody through the chord progression. See how the melodic and harmonic phrases match up. Your solo should align with the phrases in the same way that the tune's melody did.

The following exercises can be done with a metronome or with a recorded rhythm section background.

Play chord tones

Get consistent playing the root of each chord with a solid sound and solid rhythm.

Then move on to the 3rd, 5th and 7th of the chords.

Create simple rhythms while playing the chord tones. Just don't let this distract you from keeping your place.

Play two- and three-note groups

Examples of simple groups would be:

root + 3 rd	3 rd + root	3 rd + 5 th	5 th + 3 rd
5 th + 7 th	7 th + 5 th	root + 3 rd + 5 th	5 th + 3 rd + root
root + 2 nd + root	3 rd + 4 th + 3 rd	root + 2 nd + 3 rd	3 rd + 2 nd + root
root + 3 rd + root	3 rd + 5 th + 3 rd	5 th + 7 th + 5 th	7 th + root + 7 th
root + 7 th + root	7 th + 5 th + 7 th	5 th + 3 rd + 5 th	3 rd + root + 3 rd

Create simple rhythms while playing the groups. The main priority is **always** keeping your place.

Helpful Aebersold Play-along Sets

- Major & Minor in Every Key
- Dominant 7th Workout (Especially recommended!)
- The II-V7-I Progression (You'll need the accompanying book)
- Maiden Voyage – Volume 54 (Entry-level tunes and blues progressions)