

“Jazzing Up” The Melody

by Rob Boone

(ITA Journal, Summer 1994)

Trombonists find themselves in the section of a jazz big band or small combo from time to time. Occasionally the opportunity arises to stand up and “fake” a jazz standard. Participation in these solo opportunities requires the memorization of jazz selections in a wide range of styles such as jazz ballad, pop ballad, bossa nova, medium swing, samba, rhumba, dixieland, waltz and many more. This article is the first in a series of jazz educational columns designed for players with little or no jazz experience who would like to begin playing solos in a jazz context.

This article will not examine harmonic jazz improvisation or the specific stylistic characteristics of great players. Instead, I will focus on rhythmic and melodic manipulation as a way to “jazz up” and present the melody.

Jazz melodies can be learned from recordings, other musicians and numerous “fake” books. Tom Ervin has his students keep a memo book with the tunes they knew in front and a list of tunes they needed to learn in the back. The Jamie Aebersold Play-A-Long series (P.O. Box 1244C, New Albany, IN 47151-1244) contains approximately 120 recordings of jazz standards and composition in music minus one format. The recordings come with music books containing treble clef, bass clef, and transpositions for Bb and Eb instruments. I recommend learning songs in at least two different keys (the piano or bass player may only know the tune in a different key). There is often disagreement over what key is the “original” key and it becomes terrific eartraining to play songs in different keys.

Learn the words to the tunes you play. You will play better phrasing with increased understanding of the song when you know the lyric. There are numerous instances in fake books where wrong chords are provided and the melody is inaccurately transcribed. Listen to a variety of recordings of the song and allow the lyrics to influence your phrasing.

Jazz musicians can produce their own unique rendition of each song by manipulating the melodic line, rhythm and phrasing. The melody of jazz standards may often be written in a rhythmically simplified style within fake books. Many jazz standards have beautiful introductory verses that are usually left out of fake books.

Simple rhythms and lack of syncopation may be appropriate for ballad renditions of a song, but straight ahead swing style necessitates a “jazzing up” of the melody. This process of melodic treatment can be achieved by manipulating the rhythms and adding auxiliary tones. Auxiliary tones can consist of neighbor tones, passing tones and appoggiaturas, and can appear as diatonic, chromatic or chord tone pitches.

I will use the first four measures of *All The Things You Are* (Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein II) for my examples. Example 1 shows how the opening four bars of the tune appear in most fake books. Your first option on the bandstand is to play the song exactly as written.

Example 1: first four bars of *All The Things You Are* (Hammerstein/Kern)

The image shows a musical staff in bass clef with a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb). The melody consists of quarter notes. Above the staff, four chords are indicated: Fmi7, Bbmi7, Eb7, and AbMa7. Below the staff, the lyrics are written under the notes: "You are the prom - ised kiss at spring - time that".

Although tone, dynamics and idiomatic devices are important in any stylized performance, this article will be restricted to rhythmic and melodic manipulation. Most rhythmic stylized elements can be grouped into two main categories: 1) displacement of the beat and 2) repetition, addition or omission of notes. Displacement of the beat is easily achieved by anticipating the tone before its written beat (example 2), or delaying the striking of the tone until after the written beat (example 3).

Example 2: anticipation of the beat



Example 3: delaying of the beat



The performance becomes more interesting when both anticipation and delay are used within the same phrase (example 4). It becomes apparent that the melodic line can be modified in many ways by shifting the placement of the beat to the left or right of the written beat.

Example 4: combination of anticipation and delay elements in the same phrase.



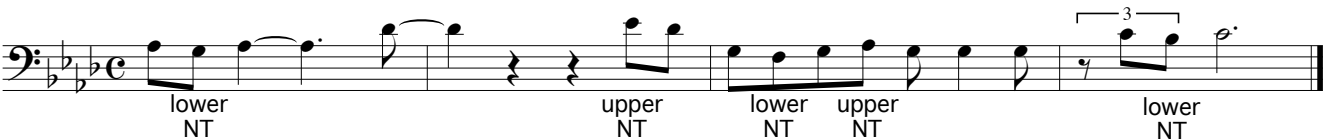
We will now explore some of the melodic possibilities which can be achieved through repetition, addition and/or omission of notes. Keep in mind that many of these melodic devices will de-emphasize the lyric but will enhance the rhythmic vitality of the performance. These melodic devices will include auxiliary tones such as neighbor tones (NT) and passing tones (PT). Example 5 incorporates pitch repetition to give the melodic line increased motion and swing feel.

Example 5: repetition of the written pitches



The melody can be effectively embellished through the use of upper and lower neighbor tones. These auxiliary tones can be adjacent diatonic scale tones, chromatic leading tones, or neighbor chord tones. Diatonic upper and lower neighbor tones are illustrated in example 6.

Example 6: addition of pitches (neighbor tones).



Passing tones are useful in melodic embellishment. They can be effective in providing a linear “slippery” quality to your playing. As we found with neighbor tones, passing tones can be chromatic filler pitches or diatonic pitches. Use of chromatic passing tones is most effective when filling smaller intervals (major seconds, minor and major thirds) with all the interior half steps. Use alternate positions to help facilitate the playing of chromatic passing tones.

It is much easier to fill up smaller intervals with chromatic passing tones than it would be trying to fill up larger intervals such as fifths. Larger intervals can be effectively filled with diatonic passing tones based on the chord/scale at the moment. Due to the large intervals inherent in All The Things You Are, diatonic passing tones are used in example 7.

Example 7: addition of pitches (passing tones)

Understatement and use of space (rests) can be an effective form of stylization. Listen to 1950's and 1960's vintage "Cool School" players such as Miles Davis and Lennie Tristano to get a feel for their approach to melodic playing. Their playing contains elements of understatement while still using passing tones, neighbor tones and other melodic embellishments. Omitting pitches and use of rests produces an understated effect (example 8).

Example 8: omission of melody pitches and use of rests.

By combining these elements in your jazz playing, a new arsenal of melodic playing is possible. In example 9, the melody is manipulated with many of the embellishments discussed in this article. In the example, look at how the original quarter note rhythms are constantly displaced and also how motion is created through the use of passing tones and neighbor tones.

Example 9: first half of the song stylized in straight ahead swing feel

These are only a few of the melodic devices that can add interesting stylization to your jazz playing. Explore other melodic devices such as sequence, arpeggiation of chord tones and pedal point. These elements can be practiced, memorized and added to your jazz vocabulary.