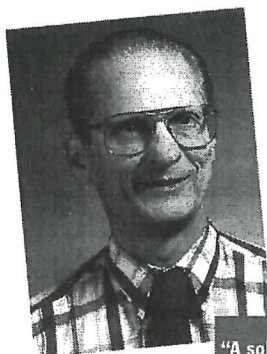


# Teaching Improv in a Big-Band Setting

BY JOHN KUZMICH, JR.



"A solid warm-up routine based on improvisation skills can stretch rehearsal time and improve the rehearsal."

*Dr. John Kuzmich, Jr. is a regular contributor to SBO magazine as well as a nationally known music educator with more than 30 years of teaching experience.*

*His academic background includes a Ph.D. degree in comprehensive musicianship. As a free lance author, Dr. Kuzmich has 200 articles and five textbooks published. As a clinician, he frequently participates in workshops throughout the United States and several foreign countries. For more information about Dr. Kuzmich check out his home page at: <http://home.earthlink.net/~jkuzmich>*

Jazz education has a special quality that makes it a very attractive part of any music curriculum. The exiting harmonies of big-band sounds, the variety of the rhythm section comping styles, and the challenge of improvisation all help to make jazz education unique. The most significant factor affecting the quality of big-band rehearsal instruction is the ability to teach combo/improvisation concepts within a big-band rehearsal setting. This can be a daunting challenge for those who do not have a background in jazz.

This article will focus on some great ideas that teaches improvisation as the band warms up each day. These procedures work particularly well at keeping everybody in a big-band alert playing background riffs while individual students solo. In the average, fast-paced rehearsal, a good director will try to "kill a few birds with one stone," so to speak. A solid warm-up routine based on improvisation skills can stretch rehearsal time and improve the rehearsal. Consider the following ten pedagogical enhancements that I have experienced in my rehearsals and you understand my enthusiasm for combo/improvisation instruction as a daily big-band warm-up.

1. The bassist can learn and master bass line development without the stress of reading charts.
2. The pianist can learn and master piano voicings without the stress of reading charts.
3. The guitarist can learn and master guitar voicings without the stress of reading charts. The drummer can learn and master comping skills without the stress of reading charts.
4. Rhythm sections can get comfortable with a variety of comping styles.
5. Rhythm section can learn to play with more dynamics when intimately matching the soloist's phrasing and dynamic nuances. Accompanying so many soloists in the warmup gives the rhythm section more practice adjusting their dynamics than they would in a big-band arrangement. It is important that each member of the rhythm section can see the eyes of the other members. Their comping skills develop amazingly well when they don't have to concentrate on reading the music and can focus



attention with both their eyes and ears to the other members of the rhythm section. This intimacy doesn't come as easily in a big-band where reading skills are more important.

1. Horn players in the big-band can warmup their embouchures with a better tessitura and more musicality than just starting out on big-band charts.
2. Horn players can concentrate on their intonation with the unison lines in the background riffs and heads.
3. The big-band can learn to create instant head-band arrangements with a minimum of reading and/or verbal instructions.
4. Group improvisation can be a great morale booster for the band with the spontaneity and excitement that is

generated even with incomplete instrumentation.

**"Good eye contact is an important discipline for rhythm section players to develop that allow them to perform more cohesively together."**

This summer I taught a big-band for a week at the Pulawy (Poland) Jazz Clinic. Big-band is not a regular part of the professional Polish music scene and is nearly nonexistent in their music education programs. What I did that week was teach combo/improvisation concepts during the warm-up segment of the rehearsals so that the big-band could mature more quickly in a limited amount of time with everybody participating in improvisation instruction. The result was that in only five rehearsals I had everyone in the big-band featured on our closing concert in soloing, trading in 4's, spontaneous background riffs and collective group improvisations. The audience responded

to the excitement of soloists and the band's interactive playing behind soloists. Without full solo participation, the Pulawy, Poland big-band experience would be been significantly less successful.

### Instructional Procedures

I mix combo/improvisation instruction with a slick warmup procedure in ten minutes or less. The band plays a popular jazz tune from a Jamey Aebersold play-along book. The easy melodies are written for treble C, Bb, Eb and bass clef parts. Jamey Aebersold's Volume 54, "Maiden Voyage" is a great starting book to use with your students. We first select a medium tempo swing about 120 to 140 mm. To start, the band plays a blues tune such as "Comin' Home" by Ben Tucker or "Watermelon Man" by Herbie Hancock. First, we play chord progressions as the band plays the roots with me and I use my fingers to guide them through I, IV and V chords. We begin with a one-note rhythmic solos on the roots to get comfortable with the simple harmonic and rhythmic changes. We expand the solo's to the root and a flat-7th. Behind each solo, I have the band play simple unison background riffs. After four or five soloists, I like to play the tune again to reenforce the melody before going on to more soloists. Soon the band is cooking, trading 4's with other horn players and with the drummer. The students watch my hand-signals so each warmup is original and spontaneous. Sometimes we begin with just the rhythm section playing alone and then add the horn players. After every member of a section has soloed, I have the entire section jam together for one chorus, then play head again for musical contrast. The audience loves the contrast of the individual soloists, collective improvisation and the original tune.

This is a great opportunity to work on your rhythm section's comping skills. Voicings, rhythms, comping styles, etc. can be given personal attention without the stress of reading music. One immediate goal is to get the entire section to have steady eye contact with each other. Good eye-contact during a rehearsal or a concert is an important discipline for rhythm section players to develop that



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allows them to perform more cohesively together.

### Advanced Techniques

Once you have the band warming up on a daily basis with the head tune and lots of improv experiences, students are open to incorporating more combo/improvisation concepts such as:

1. Stop time. Here the band and rhythm play simple unison rhythms without comping, leaving the soloist more exposed while soloing. (See music example 5.)
2. Change tempo to half or double time on different choruses gives the tune a completely feel. For example, "Summertime" from volume 54 and can begin slowly or more up to 120 mm. Then on one of the solos, go back to half time (60 mm.) and for another soloist, go back up to 120 mm. All tempo changes can be communicated from hand signals making a more spontaneous rehearsal without stopping the band to give directions.
3. Change musical styles for different soloists. If you're playing a jazz tune, go to a Latin or rock comping style for a particular soloist. Go back to jazz for another soloist and close the tune out with the original musical style. "Green Dolphin Street" works well with this idea. Change the bridge to a Latin style, as well as, changing the comping style for certain soloists.
4. Harmonize heads with 3rds, 6ths, or 4ths. Don't be afraid to harmonize unison melodies. Rock or modal tunes can be more interesting when harmonized in perfect 4ths. Jazz tunes harmonized in 3rds or 6ths also sound good.
5. Expand to modal and standard 32 measure tunes after getting comfortable with the blues and simple jazz tunes. See the bibliography at the end of this article for a list of play-along albums that contain catchy, easy jazz/Latin/Blues/Rock tunes on selected Jamey Aebersold recordings.
6. Perform slow ballads and some up-tempo tunes, 180 mm. Don't play every tune in the same key. Work through a variety of keys to increase the students' abilities to transpose rhythm patterns to other keys. It

opens up their harmonic capabilities when they move beyond concert Bb.

7. Extend the drum solo as an open solo. They can be a great crowd pleaser. Either the drummer or the band director can count off to bring the band back in playing the tune.
8. Do more trading of 4's instead of always separate soloists. Get students to imitate their partner's solo ideas. Copying others is a great way to learn and to stimulate them to study recordings. Don't always match up students to partners of the same instrument.
9. Rotate soloists in rehearsal to speed up rehearsal. I find that once my instructional procedure becomes fluent, I can easily warmup the band in less than 10 minutes with most or all of the students soloing plus get everybody involved with background riffs. Sometimes I do more teaching with explanations and demonstrations. Many times I use my soloists to teach concepts to the others. Peer relationships work great in motivating the entire band to actively get involved with combo/improvisation concepts.

### Future Growth and Development

Combo/improvisation instruction in a big-band program allows you to do a multitude of creative things that only the most sophisticated high school jazz band programs have done in the past. Here are some creative ideas that will enhance your jazz band performances because of the combo/improvisation experiences you've taught on a daily basis.

1. Open up all big-band charts with more soloists. At least double them. Try inserting additional soloists in solo sections. Sometimes a soloists can be added at the end of a chorus of the arrangement. In order to do this, you need to figure out the form of the tune. Duke Ellington's band is not only awesome because of the compositional merits of Duke Ellington and his arrangers but also because his band had some many outstanding soloists. Generally, audiences love the contrast between the band's playing and a variety of creative solos plus different background riffs and possible music style changes, as well.

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- Add background riffs in solos. Blues progressions are short and easy to transpose background licks. The audience can quickly catch the creative programming of soloists accompanied by unique background riffs.
- Use Band-In-A-Box by PG Music for printing heads/melody/chords and give to all members of the band to encourage more soloists. Copy rhythm section to cassettes. Copy sample solos from Band-In-A-Box to student cassettes to stimulate solo ideas. Students need play-along accompaniments and you can do the audio recording and print the lead sheets. If you haven't worked with Band-In-A-Box, it is an amazing computer play-along accompaniment generator program. See the appendix for the manufacturer's address.
- Check out <http://www.changes98.com> for complete printing of scales, chords and chord substitutions. Never will your students be uninformed about the spelling of any

chord and what scales go with it. There's even a special section that allows one to substitute chords so tunes that have few chord changes can be made more interesting. The manufacturer also makes it available on CD-ROM at an attractive price of only \$40.00. This web site and/or CD-ROM is a must for every jazz education program.

5. Download free demo versions of Band-In-A-Box from their web site at: [www.pgmusic.com](http://www.pgmusic.com). These demo versions for Mac and PC platforms are functional operating versions with some of the advanced features disabled. Not only can this software produce good play-along recordings, but the software can also create model solos for your students in the style of Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, etc. (over 100 noted artists) to listen to and learn that will speed up their learning scale in becoming proficient soloists. Unfortunately, student don't usually listen

enough to authentic improvisation models.

6. Duplicate big-band charts play-along tapes generated by Band-In-A-Box and give to all students in your big-band. Now they have no excuse to start practicing at home with rhythm section accompaniment. Remind them to use the Changes 98 web page printouts so they know the changes and scales for improvisational practice.
7. Develop hand signals for "live" improv instruction. Fist up means stop-time accompaniment. Two wiggling fingers up says on the next chorus the band will play the background riff that the band director either sings or plays on his own instrument. Four fingers up means that the following students pointed to will trade in 4's with each other. Index and pinky fingers up indicates that this is the last time performing head or end of the tune.

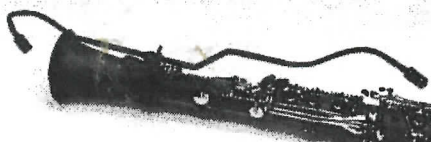
There is a software product that allows one to slow down a tape and CD recordings from 3/4 speed all the way down to 1/26th without changing pitch. What a great way to transcribe solos from the masters or be able to play with the solos at a more realistic tempo. The product is Transcriber by Reed Kotler at only \$49.95.

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### Closing Comments

Combo/improvisation instructions takes a big-band to a new level of excitement. Creative warmup procedures can be a great way to warm up the band each day and, on occasion, set up a great opening tune on a concert in which everybody solos. I did this with the Utah All-State Band a number of years ago and at the Pulawy, Poland Jazz Clinic this past summer. I strongly recommend that you use your instrument when you initiate background riffs instead of singing them. Your students will enjoy your presence with an instrument on the bandstand playing background riffs even if you don't improvise at all.

You can also adapt this method to a small jazz combo, a marching band, or orchestra. I have even applied combo/improvisation concepts to my marching band playing and jamming "live" at football games in the stands as pep band music featuring jazz tunes and many improvised solos. ♪

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