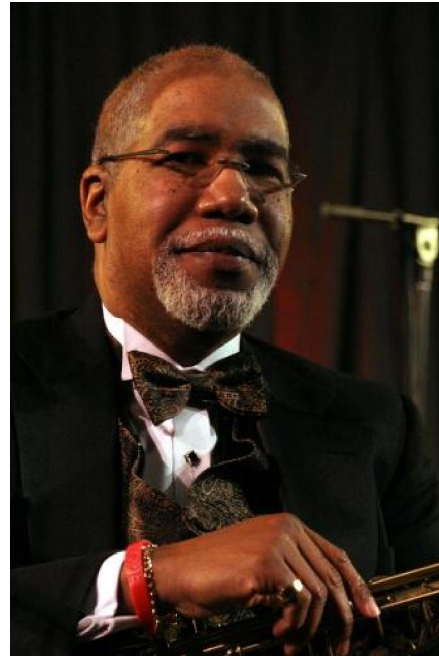


Using Jazz Method Books to Develop Your Style

By Ronald E. Kearns

Over the years as a high school band director and private teacher, one of the greatest challenges my jazz students encountered was being able to convert things they used in method books to things that could be used in improvised solos. I would try to explain to them that in order to use method books effectively, you must understand what they are designed to do.

Most method books are not designed to teach you how to improvise. They are designed to help you develop the skills you will need to draw from in order to become a good improviser. You shouldn't expect to learn improvisation directly from a method book any more than you expect to learn how to read from a dictionary. Method books help you to understand jazz articulations and phrasing similar to how a dictionary helps you to learn to define words and pronounce words. Dictionaries equip you with a working knowledge of words to use in sentences but they don't teach you how to create sentences or how to read them.



If you can understand this concept, you can learn to effectively use method books. First, you must decide what skills you are working on. Method books in general are designed to help you gain facility on your instrument. Repetitive digital exercises are designed to help you play fluidly. Once you have gained mastery on your horn technically you are then ready to start working on your creative skills. As you work on your digital skills you should also start working on your aural skills at the same time. This will help “release” your ideas as they come to you. Most players have difficulty playing ideas they “hear” in their heads because they lack the technical proficiency to play their ideas in cohesive units.

I have had students work on either playing by “ear” exclusively or working on technical studies exclusively without pairing the two. Neither component will work alone for effective soloing. Improvised solos are a way for the soloists to tell their story through sound. The best soloists do this effortlessly because their technique allows them to be fluid in their expression.

There are too many “technical” soloists who sound mechanical when playing because they have concentrated too heavily on technique. One of my mentors used to tell us a joke that says, “I have good news and bad news for you. First, the good news, you have a lot of technique; the bad news is that you have a lot of technique.” At some point an audience should be able to connect with your playing on an emotional level. If they leave talking about how many notes you played rather than marveling at how you “told your

story,” then you haven’t been an effective soloist. I compare this to listening to someone tell you a story using multi-syllabic words that you don’t understand. You’ll leave impressed by their vocabulary but chances are you’ll have no idea what the story was about.

Trane and Bird had a lot of technique but when you listen to their solos you don’t just think of the fact that they played a lot of notes, you think about how they used those notes to keep their solos moving along the way they wanted to express themselves. Some students will memorize their solos note for note but have absolutely no idea the logic behind their note selections. Should they happen to take an extra chorus or if the rhythm section alters the progressions they are totally lost. One of the things that’s happening now is soloists working out complete solos at home and trying to play them “as is” on the bandstand. This happens most often because the player has become “eye dependent” with their method books and solo transcription books.

These books can be very helpful in your development if you use them as references or guides. Play a pattern as it’s written in the book and then see if you can transpose it to another key by “ear.” Play the first four measures of an eight measure phrase as written and then try to “make up” the last four measures. By doing things like that you’re trying to develop improviser’s logic. Once this process begins, you’ll be able to start your development as an improviser. There are no shortcuts in your development. Method books are a vital part of your development but they are not meant to be a crutch. They are meant to be an aid. Listening is a vital part of understanding method books. As you listen to recorded solos you’ll learn the importance of the rudiments taught through exercises in method books.

Ron Kearns is a Vandoren Performing Artist and a highly respected performing artist and clinician. Ron retired from teaching in 2005 after thirty years teaching in Maryland Schools.