



Jam Session Primer

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF SITTING IN

By Paul Haar

There was never a shortage of musicians to be found at the club. After all, it hosted one of the finest after hours jam session in all of Chicago. But tonight was different. Tonight the great Don Byas was in town, and everyone knew he would be at the session—especially Sonny Stitt, who was coming to the club to cut down the tenor legend. “Man, we could barely wait for Basie to cut off the last note,” says saxophonist Frank Foster. “We were in such a hurry to get to the club that we were still putting our instruments away on the train.”

As Don Byas was taking his turn at the mike, in walked Stitt looking more like a gunslinger than a musician. With his case in one hand and his tenor in the other, he made it clear what he was there to do. Stitt called for “I Got Rhythm” changes and took off. As he ended his last chorus, one could sense his confidence. “You could see he [Stitt] knew he was *bad*. But just as he was finishing his last notes, Byas came up behind him, stuck the bell of his big tenor in Stitt’s backside and played four or five notes—I mean, old-school tenor stuff: *vo vo voo voo voooooo*. Stitt’s eyes got so big because he knew that Byas had just schooled him—with five notes! Well, Stitt was dejected and left the club,” laughs Foster.

Throughout history the jam session has been at the center of the development of jazz music. It is where the traditions of our art have been passed down from generation to generation. Although times have changed and jazz education has moved from the bandstand to the classroom, the jam session still offers real-world experience that is invaluable to each player’s develop-

ment. The key to jam-session success is to come prepared.

FINDING THE RIGHT SESSION FOR YOU.

It used to be the only way to learn about a jam session was word of mouth. Today it is easier than ever to locate the right jam session for you. In most major cities you can locate sessions via the Internet. Simply do a search for “jazz jam sessions” plus the city you are looking for. It is important to include the word “jazz” because a blanket search for jam sessions will include an abundance of rock and blues events.

There are a great number of sites dedicated exclusively to the location, support and development of jam sessions in a particular city. For example, *Portland Jazz Jams* (portlandjazzjams.com) offers lists of locations, times and tips for participating in jazz jam sessions in the Portland area. Other sites will even go as far as to offer rules and procedures, song lists and background information on the house musicians used in the weekly jams.

If high-tech is not your thing, or if your town is too small to have a dedicated

Web site, you can check local alt-weeklies and entertainment newspapers and magazines to find local clubs and events. You can also check with the local musicians’ union or area arts organizations such as jazz societies. For example, Musicians Local 627 in Kansas City has been hosting after-hours jam sessions on Friday and Saturday nights since 1930, bringing together established professionals with young players from all over the metro area.

Finally, there is always the local library. Libraries are usually tied into local databases and are constantly in touch with community news.

It is important to discover the type of jazz jam session being offered. If you are a music student who is not experienced with tunes and public performing you may not gain much from a pro jazz jam featuring the best players in the city. Many larger cities will offer sessions that are tailored to the young player offering seasoned professionals in mentoring roles.

Even the world’s largest gathering of jazz, the International Association for Jazz Education annual conference, offers jam sessions for students, educators and professionals.

Scouting the Session. Once you have found the right session for you it is always a good idea to attend it at least once or twice before showing up with your horn. This allows you to talk with musicians, patrons and the wait staff to gain critical insight. Any information you can take from the evening is going to help you in the long run.

“People don’t run out and buy a home without doing an inspection and asking questions. It wouldn’t make sense,” says Dr. Jack Cooper, director of jazz studies at the University of Memphis. “When you

are a musician it could be professional suicide to just walk into a club without learning the inner workings of the musicians and the area.”

No matter how excited you are to play and how much you want to get involved in the local music scene, you need to temper it with knowledge. Saxophonist Gary Foster agrees, “Remember the old Boy Scout motto: Be prepared.”

The following advice is useful in scouting a jam session:

Always take notes. Write down the tunes that are played, the names of the players in the house band and the names of players you meet that made an impression. Note little things, like how long the soloists commonly play, the reaction of the crowd, the level of the players, even the attitudes of the players you talked to. What may seem silly at the time might be the thing that gives you the edge when it is your time to participate.

Come early and stay late. You want to see if there is a change in personnel, flow or change in the ability of players as the night goes on.

Take time to meet people. It is important to meet and talk with as many people as you can. A jam session is as much a social event and networking opportunity as it is a place to play. From the players you can learn about other sessions and playing opportunities as well as learning inside information about the session. It is always good to have business cards handy in case you are asked for one.

In addition to the musicians, talk to the patrons and the employees. Patrons will give you the listener’s perspective, and the wait staff will give you the truth about everything else. They are in the club day in and day out, week after week. Oh, and don’t forget to tip well.

Make sure to introduce yourself to the session leader. It is best to do this on a break. Before the session the leader may be running late or may have to set up equipment, call musicians, figure out set lists, etc. “Players who are already part of the scene have no problem getting asked to play,” says Todd Wilkinson, saxophonist and author of *Kansas City Jazz and Blues: Nightlife Survival Kit*. “Professionals can read other pros in a conversation and will often soften up the more they see you. If they don’t know your name they will be less likely to ask you to participate.”

Preparing for the Session Once you have done your homework finding and visiting the session, it is time to prepare for it. The most important asset you can take into a jam session is knowledge of tunes (see sidebar on next page). Hopefully you will have done your homework and have discovered some tunes that are commonly played at your favorite session. Some sessions may offer fake books, but it is important to note the general rule is that if you bring a book or a lead sheet on stage (for a standard tune) you are not considered a serious, professional musician.

“If you do not know the tunes from the week before, make a concerted effort to learn them before you sit in,” says bassist Rufus Reid. “Never bring a book to a session! The bandstand is a very reverent place. Respect it.”

Trumpet legend Marvin Stamm agrees: “A young player has to do his or her homework, through a great deal of listening, and to learn a basic repertoire of those tunes most commonly played. This is why

listening, careful listening, is so important. Showing up to a jam session of professional jazz musicians with a *Real Book* is unacceptable.

“Jam sessions,” he continues, “like all informal playing opportunities in jazz, require the jazz musician to have learned and to draw upon the standard literature that is part of our history. Many of the tunes played come from the American popular songbook or classic jazz standards.”

Woodwind artist Gary Foster has long advised his students to carry a small memo book that contains only those tunes with which the student is intimately familiar. The tunes should be organized according to genre or style. For example, there should be sections reserved for blues, standards, ballads, bebop, modal, contemporary and Latin tunes. You should include the key of the tune and the style(s) and tempos you are comfortable playing. This can save valuable time on the bandstand and show your depth of knowledge.

It is always advisable to have at least three to four tunes per style, offering a variety of keys. “If you are called up onstage,” says saxophonist Mace Hibbard, “and have only prepared a swing tune and the leader wants to play a bossa, you will seem unprepared as you stammer, trying to figure out what to play.”

Finally, it is good to practice tunes at different tempos. I remember being asked to play “Corcovado” at an Austin, Texas, jam session only to find that the house band commonly performed it as a fast-tempo samba. Knowledge of the tune allowed me to navigate the harmonic waters, but the drastic tempo change made for an uncomfortable time soloing.

SESSION ETIQUETTE: WHAT TO DO ONCE YOU ARE THERE.

Now that you have done your homework and have spent the necessary time in the practice room, there are some unwritten rules of the stage that are good to know before you start soloing.

Arrive early. Often the best players are going to play earlier in the evening, allowing others to sit in later. These are the players you want to get to know and work with in the future, so take time to introduce yourself to the leader of the jam session early on and express your interest in playing. Take a seat near the stage and keep your instrument in the case until you are asked to play.

Be patient. If this is the first time you have come to session, ready to play, you may not be asked to play for a while, if you are asked at all. It will often depend on the temperament of the leader and the number of players wanting to sit in. Players who regularly attend the jam session will often get preferential treatment over newcomers.

Be gracious and professional. Remember, the players don’t know how you play. So when you do get called, be the consummate professional. You never know who you might play with. If it turns out that you are grouped with players of lesser ability, be respectful and encouraging, waiting patiently for your turn to play.

“No matter what happens onstage, be professional,” says Hibbard. “It doesn’t matter what anyone else does on stage; it is your reputation you are trying to build and maintain. If someone else in the band is acting unprofessionally, it is not your job to tell them what is right and wrong.”

Keep it simple and specific. Once you are called onstage, remember that less is more. This goes for solo length and tune selection. "If you are asked to call a tune, choose something that is reasonable," says Wilkinson. "Don't call 'Giant Steps' or 'Countdown'; doing so will come across as egotistical rather than knowledgeable. Along this line, it is ill advised to call a ballad unless asked by the leader. Ballads are very specialized solo vehicles and do not allow for multiple soloists."

Pianist Jeff Hellmer suggests, "It is one thing to know a tune and its changes, but it is also important to communicate such elements as style, tempo, introductions and ending. This will help the music flow and allow everyone to communicate in a greater musical fashion." Thus, it is important to learn common practices when it comes to introductions and endings of standard tunes. When listening to recordings, see if you can find elements in common in regard to style and form. Don't assume that the way Jerry Bergonzi performs a tune is the way everyone plays it.

Perhaps the greatest jam-session faux pas is taking too much time when soloing. Chances are you are going to be sharing the stage with a number of players, so try to live by the motto that less is more. Plan to take one, maybe two solo choruses for songs that have standard song form (32 bar), and no more than two to three choruses on a blues. Generally, if there are a number of soloists, limit the duration of your solo. Nothing is worse than going to a jam session to hear a tune last 30 minutes.

Know the signs. In the moment of performance there is little time for discussion, and besides, it's disrespectful to talk while someone is playing, so know common signals used on the bandstand. For example, pointing to the top of one's head means play the tune from the top of the form. Pointing to the bridge of the nose means pick up the tune, this time starting on the bridge. Holding a fist in the air might mean the last time through or to watch for a break or cut off. Holding up four or eight fingers often means trading fours or eights with drums. Making a chopping motion on the arm can mean tak-

ing a solo chorus with the rhythm section performing breaks.

Don't linger onstage and don't leave the club. Depending on the number of people wanting to play, it is a good rule of thumb to plan on playing one tune and then assume you are finished, unless asked to stay by the leader. Once you have performed, plan to stick around the club to listen. If you must leave, it is best to do so when the band takes a break. Nothing will make you look worse than jumping offstage, while the band is still playing, and walking out without saying thank you.

Break up the monotony and share the space. Although you may only get the opportunity to play a couple tunes at the jam session, it is important to remember that the rhythm section will have probably been playing the entire time. Too often horn players view the jam session as their moment to shine, treating the rhythm section as a live version of a play-along recording. Thus, it is nice to show some variety and discretion once on the stage.

Drummer Peter Erskine says, "When I am in the audience, or behind the drums, during a jam session, and one horn player after another takes his or her solo, occasionally offering one to a member of the rhythm section, usually trading fours or eights, tune after tune, it strikes me as dull, monotonous and uncreative. When the rhythm section has to play and support an endless number of choruses, it is inconsiderate of their musical sensibilities and energies."

One tip that seems to be universal among the many professional players consulted for this article is to live by the golden rule while on the bandstand: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Always focus on the music and not your ego. This philosophy may seem to be far removed from the legendary jam session of yesteryear, where players battled till the wee hours of the morning. Still, like the great sessions of the past, the modern-day jam session still offers musicians the most realistic, spontaneous and enduring education in jazz. **JT**

JAM SESSION TUNES

More than 25 seasoned and respected jazz musicians have suggested the songs listed below. While this list is by no means comprehensive, it offers the novice musician a solid foundation for learning tunes.

Standard Tunes

"There Will Never Be Another You"
"What Is This Thing Called Love?"
"Stella by Starlight"
"Just Friends"
"I Remember April"
"Autumn Leaves"
"There Is No Greater Love"

Be-Bop Tunes

"Oleo"
"Donna Lee"
"Confirmation"
"Anthropology"
"Bebop"

Ballads

"My One and Only Love"
"Body and Soul"
"In a Sentimental Mood"
"I Can't Get Started"
"Misty"

Latin/Brazilian

"On Green Dolphin Street"
"Corcovado"
"Recorda Me"
"Blue Bossa"
"Wave"
"Triste"

Advanced

"Fe Fi Fo Fum"
"Giant Steps"
"Naima"
"Lazy Bird"
"Inner Urge"
"Moment's Notice"

Blues & Groove

"Birdlike"
"Billie's Bounce/Now's the Time"
"Blues for Alice"
"Straight, No Chaser"
"Jody Grind"
"Watermelon Man"
"Sugar"

