Creative Comping:

How To Help Your Jazz Ensemble Pianist Work

With Chord Symbols And Lead Sheets

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Northwestern University

Summary: While there are many excellent resources available that offer excellent instruction in jazz theory and chord voicing, very few present these topics in context. Going from theory to practical application is often a giant leap for students. This clinic offers educators the opportunity to explore the process of putting the theory into practice in a meaningful way that allows the student to work in a more self-directed way.

Topics of discussion will include chord symbol nomenclature, chord-voicing, voice-leading, and arranging all in the context of standard tunes notated as lead sheets.

Contents

Three Suggestions

by Michael Kocour

1. Give your pianist a guitar part!

More and more, publishers are adopting the practice of providing realized piano parts in the jazz band arrangements they offer. While this trend benefits the student and director in many ways, it can also rob the student of the chance to learn a skill that will enrich his or her musical experience.

Since the content of a guitar part is often interchangeable with the piano part, a possible solution is to give your pianist a guitar part. While this may sound potentially disastrous, hy doing so, you will send a strong message to your piano student that an important part of their role in the jazz band is to read and understand chord symbols. Follow up with a homework assignment that requires the student to write out the chords on paper. Since a chord progression is usually repeated throughout an arrangement, there aren't as many chords to identify as you might think in a given chart. You may correct the student's work using your own understanding of jazz harmony and/or by supplying the realized piano part at the appropriate moment so that the student can correct his or her own work.

It may he impractical in the beginning to expect your pianist to learn every chart this way. Use some discretion. Try this process with pieces that are less complicated harmonically. Adjust your requirements to the student's ability. A less experienced student may be quite challenged to perform one piece using this process on a given concert. Another student with more experience may learn all the charts this way.

You may not always like everything your pianist comes up with. Try to be patient, however. The student might just be working out a few kinks. If problems persist, relax! You can always utilize the realized part.

2. Make lead sheets and fake books available to your students!

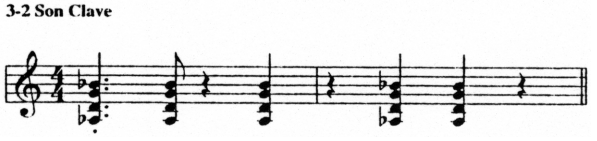
Your students will enjoy the music so much more if they learn in the context of tunes, especially those that are familiar. Abstract elements such as form, scales and chords literally come to life in the context of a familiar tune. A lead sheet provides a valuable supplemental resource as well, because few jazz band arrangements provide the soloist or rhythm sections with essential information like the melody or form of the

3. When in doubt, try the CLAVE!

While creative interaction is an alluring aspect of playing in the rhythm section, interaction alone is insufficient as a strategy for making good music. A more effective strategy involves providing a strong rhythmic foundation. Piano comping is primarily about grooving, and yes, it is also about interaction, but there can be no interaction without a groove.

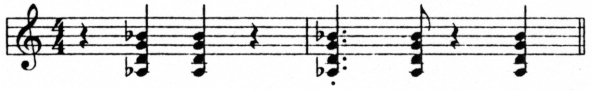
Evidence of the Cuban rhythm called *clave* is widespread in all swing and latin related styles. Amazingly, most grooves in jazz and pop music are related to the clave rhythm. The two most commonly known versions of the clave are shown below.

3-2 Son Clave



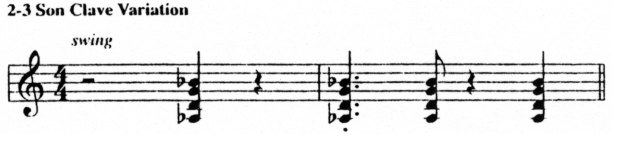
In straight 8ths, the 3-2 *Son Clave* may work well in some rock tunes. It's commonly used in salsa and New Orleans funk. In swing 8ths, this rhythm becomes the classic New Orleans *street beat*.

2-3 Son Clave



In straight 8ths, the 2-3 *Son Clave* is an excellent groove for bossa nova and samba. It also is commonly found in gospel, soul and funk. In swing, the 2-3 *Son Clave* is the grandaddy of all comping rhythms. It is also the basis of many swing riffs. One obvious example is *Woodchopper's Ball*.

2-3 Son Clave Variation



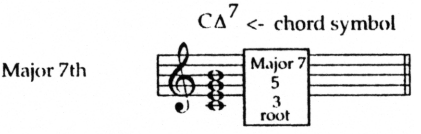
This variation of the 2-3 *Son Clave* is also very effective!

7th Chords

For you to become successful at working with standard tunes and lead sheets, it will be essential that you understand the construction of 7th chords. They are the foundation of jazz harmony.

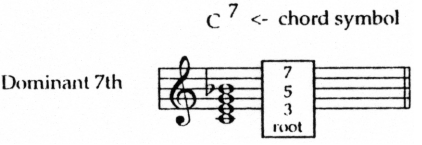
The three most common types of 7th chords are illustrated below. Please note the chord symbol for each.

Major 7th

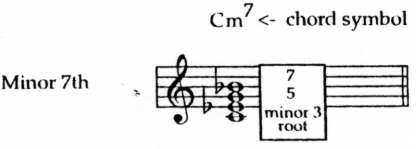


Also notated: C M7, C Maj 7, CΔ

Dominant 7th

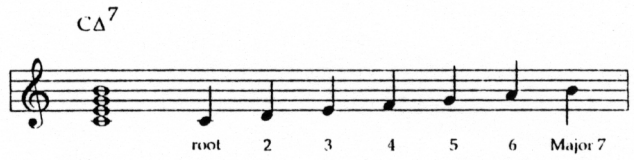


Minor 7th

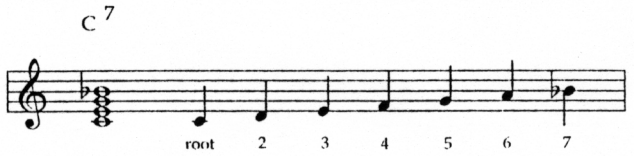


Also notated: C min7, Cmi7, C- 7, C-

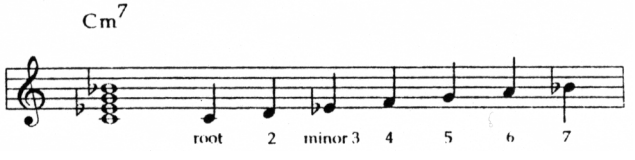
There are corresponding scales for each of these 7th chords. The major 7th chord generally corresponds to the major scale. Notice how all of the chord tones are contained in the scale. Also notice that the seventh note of a major scale is referred to as *Major 7*.



If we modify the major scale by lowering the 7th, we create a scale that corresponds to the dominant 7th chord. Note that when we do so, the lowered 7th is called simply 7. The dominant 7th scale that is created is also known as the *mixolydian mode*.



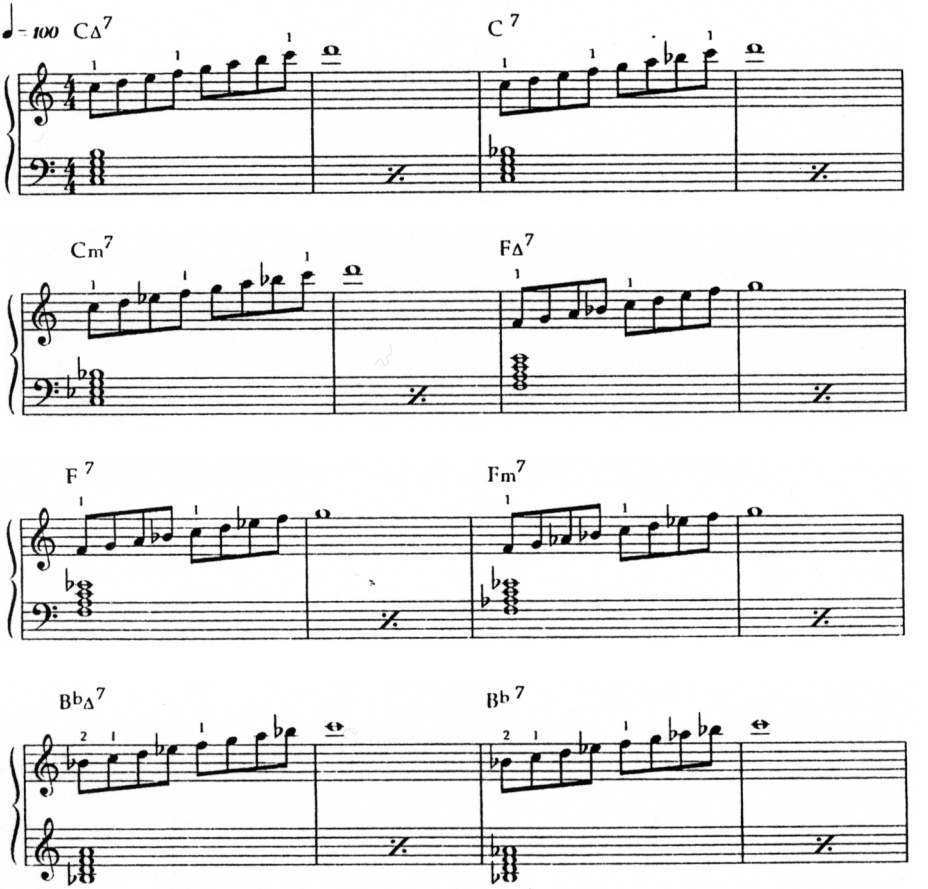
By lowering the 3rd and the 7th, we create a scale that corresponds to the minor 7th chord. This minor 7th scale is also known as the *dorian mode*.



7th Chords With Scales

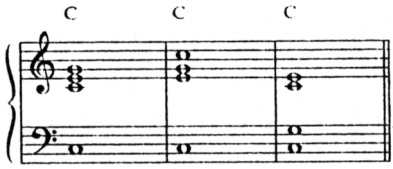
Mastering the following exercise will allow you to better understand the construction of major 7ths, dominant 7ths, and minor 7ths in all twelve keys while also allowing you to hear them in relation to their corresponding scales. Notice which scale tones change from one chord quality to the next.

To gain the maximum benefit, use the perscribed fingering and learn to play this entire exercise from memory starting with any chord.



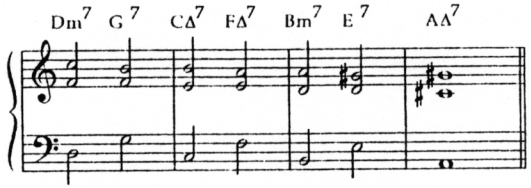
Chord-Voicing

The notes of a chord can be arranged in many ways as illustrated in the example below.



Chord-voicing is the process of choosing and arranging the notes of a chord in a particular order. Each of the above chords are examples of different voicings for a C major triad. Chord-voicings create new musical possibilities and lead us to more aesthetically pleasing music.

Being able to choose the arrangement of notes in a chord allows us to move through chord progressions smoothly as shown below.



Voice-Leading

Choosing chord-voicings so that the individual notes (voices) move as little as possible between changing chords creates what is called voice-leading.

Chord-voicings and voice-leading are the primary tools you need to play standard tunes from lead sheets. This book will allow you to explore some fundamental chord-voicings. and examine the process of voice-leading within the context of standard tunes.

The Creative Process

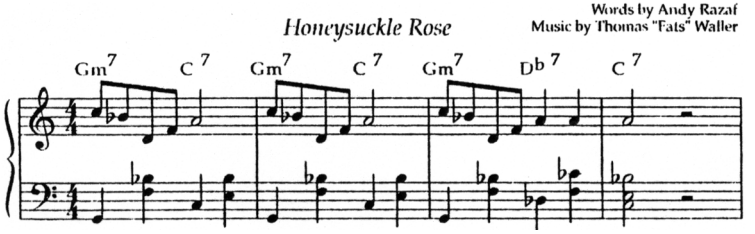
The possibilities are endless. Every creative pianist and arranger has his or her own personal style of chord-voicing. In some way, all of the greatest jazz pianists have defined their musical identities by their choice of chord-voicings. Just as a painter uses a palette of colors, a pianist can use his or her own chord-voicings as a palette for musical expression. When you hear pianists such as Thelonious Monk, Bill Evans, Art Tatum, McCoy Tyner, Chick Corea or Herbie Hancock, you will notice that each utilizes his own personal chord-voicing palette creating a wide variety of dramatic possibilities.

While this is inspiring, it also may be a bit overwhelming. It need not be. With some patience, you wil1 discover in time that there are some basic principles to chord voicing and voice-leading that are common to the styles of all great jazz pianists. As you master these principals you too will develop your own creative approach.

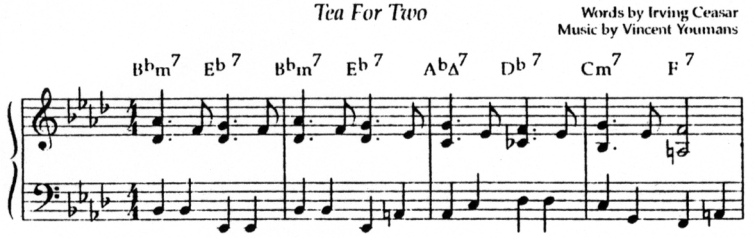
Basic Approaches

Chord-Voicing can be determined by hand placement.

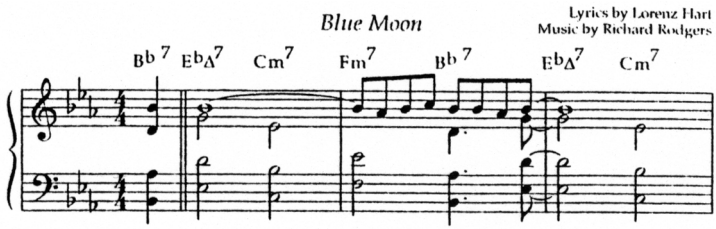
In the example below you will notice that the left hand plays the harmony. Jazz pianists favor this approach because it allows the right hand more freedom when improvising lines.



The right hand can play the to allow the left hand more freedom to play bass



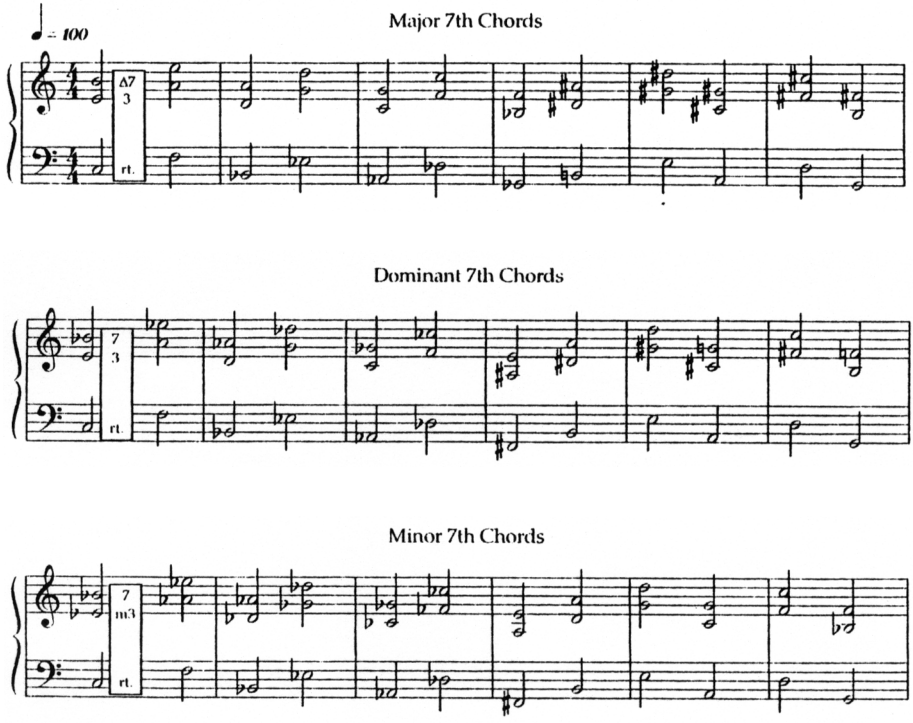
The harmony can also be spread equally between the two hands to create a fuller and richer sound using an approach similar to the chorale style generally used in hymns.



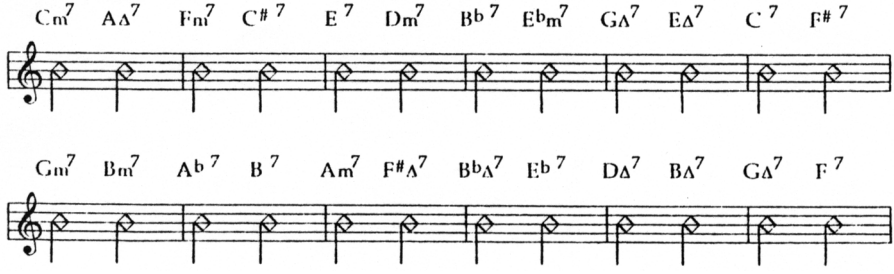
This last example demonstrates the chord voicing approach which is the primary focus of this book. While it is not necessarily the easiest of all the approaches, it does provide the most applicable way to explore chord voicing, voice leading and arranging. With a solid foundation in these principles, you will more quickly develop your own creative approach to playing standard tunes.

Basic Voicings: Root, 3rd, 7th

1. Memorize the following exercise.



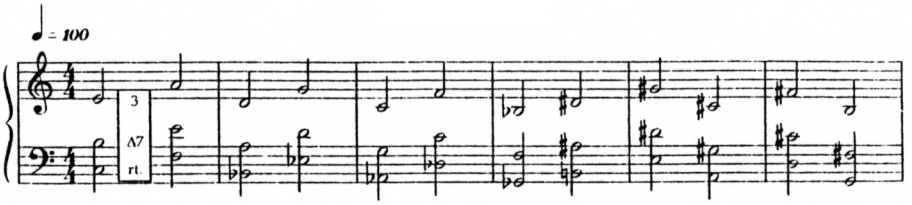
2. Use the above voicings for each chord in this random progression.



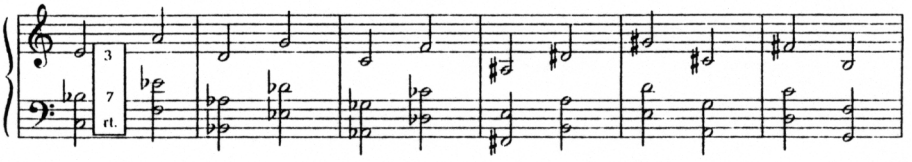
Basic Voicings: Root, 7th, 3rd

1. Memorize the following exercise.

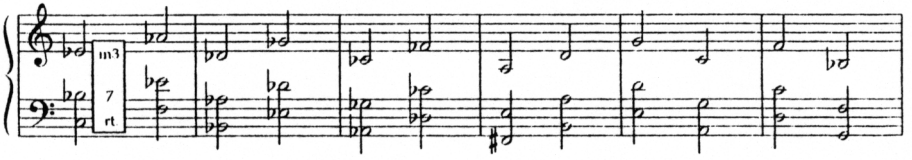
Major 7th Chords



Dominant 7th Chords



Minor 7th Chords



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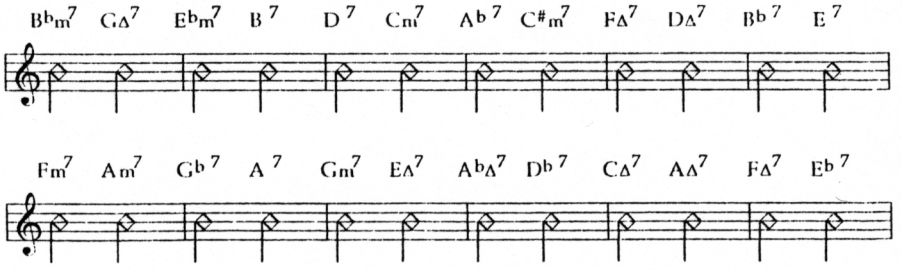
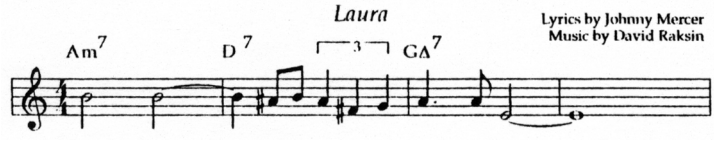


Working With Lead Sheets

At this point, you should be well prepared to work from lead sheets and fake books. The Five Step Process below is designed to help you get the most out of that work.

1. Learn the Melody

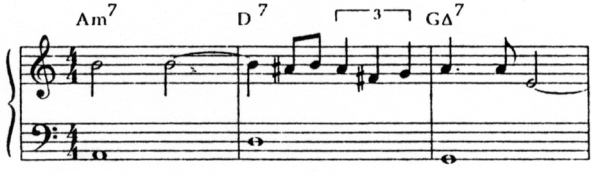
Begin by learning the melody. Play the melody without accompaniment on the keyboard. Whistle or sing the melody. Sing the lyrics if they are available. Find a recording of the tune. The melody is the most distinguishing element of any tune. Be able to play it well. Doing so will make the process of harmonization much easier.



2. Learn the Root Movement

The most important part of the harmonic structure of any tune is the root movement. To get more familiar with this element, play through the melody with chord roots in the left hand. This is your most basic arrangement of any tune. Learn to play it musically. Try singing or whistling the melody while playing the chord roots in the left hand. Once you have learned this, you have internalized the two most important elements of the tune.

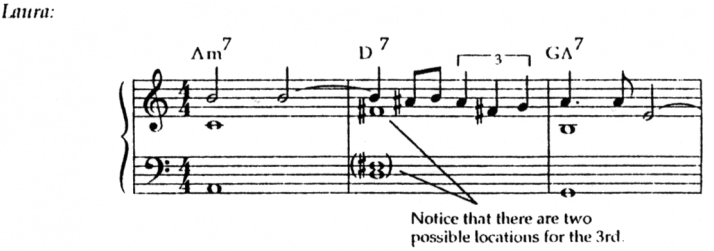
Laura:



3. Add 3rds.

Now it's time to begin filling in the middle. Add 3rds to your arrangement of the melody with chord roots. Place 3rds in your right hand. If this is awkward with a particular chord place the 3rd in the left hand. Remember to observe the lower boundary for 3rds and 7ths (the "E-flat" below middle "C"), and as always, learn to play this arrangement musically.

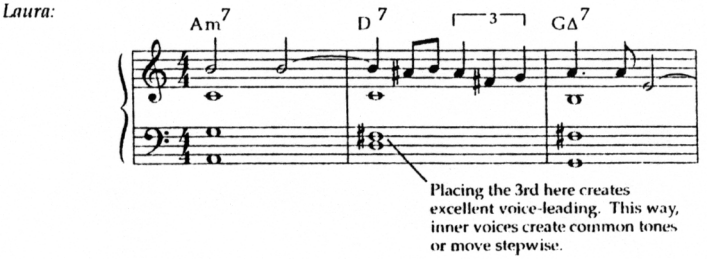
Laura:



4. Add 7ths and Adjust Spacing.

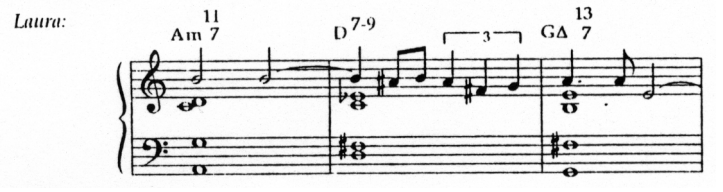
For those chords where it is specified, add 7ths to your previous arrangement. In most cases you will be placing 7ths in the left hand. Otherwise place it in your right hand. It's not hard to figure out. Remember to observe the lower boundary for 3rds and 7ths. At this point, it's a good idea to examine the spacing that you have chosen to make sure you like the overall sound and voice-leading.

Laura:

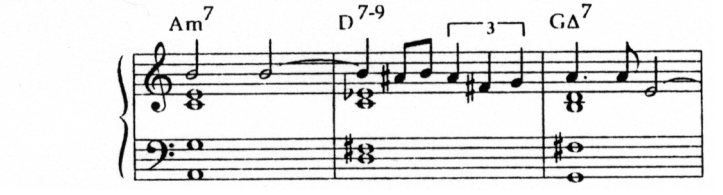


5. Add Color Tones.

Experiment with adding extensions. Look to your right hand to see what is available. Experiment with adding 5ths to see where they may enhance your chord-voicing or voice-leading. Try substituting 6th chords for triads. After experimenting with various extensions, add only those extensions and substitutions that sound good to you.



Or another way:



Summary

The Five-Step Process:

1. Learn the Melody.
2. Learn the Root Movement.
3. Add 3rds.
4. Add 7ths and Adjust Spacing.
5. Add Color Tones.

Using the above process in combination with the experience and knowledge you have acquired so far will enable you to play a wide variety of tunes in your fake book. Some tunes will come together quickly and naturally. Others may seem more complex at first, Either way the Five-Step Process will allow you to keep track of what you're doing while also insuring that you consider all of your available options. This way you can your own creative approach to playing standard tunes.

Resources

Introductory Books:

Aebersold, Jamey. *Jazz Aids Handbook*
Collins, Ann. *Lead Lines And Chord Changes.* Van Nuys: Alfred
Collins, Ann. *How To Use A Fake Book.* Milwaukee: Hal Leonard
Evans, Lee. *How to Play Chord Symbols in Jazz and Popular Music,*
Milwaukee: Hal Leonard

Intermediate and Advanced Books:

Levine, Mark. *The Jazz Piano Book.* Petaluma: Sher Music
Mantooth, Frank, *Voicings For Jazz Keyboard.* Milwaukee: Hal Leonard
McNeely, Jim. *The Art of Comping.*

Fake Books:

The New Real Book. Petaluma: Sher Music
The Ultimate Jazz Fake Book. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard

Books About Jazz:

Berliner, Paul. *Thinking in Jazz.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press
Crow, Bill. *Jazz Anecdotes. New* York Oxford University Press
Feather, Leonard. *The Encyclopedia of Jazz. New* York Horizon
Hyman, Dick. *Piano Pro.*
Williams, Martin. *Jazz Changes. New* York Oxford University Press

Recordings:

The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz. Five CDs.
This anthology of ninety-five selections on five compact discs is intended as an introduction and interpretation of seven decades of recorded jazz.

The Smithsonian Collection of Jazz Piano. Five CDs.
Many of the greatest pianists in the history of jazz music are represented in this Excellent collection which is an essential resource for anyone interested in jazz piano.

Important Pianists to Study

JoAnne Brackeen
Kenny Barron
Dave Brubeck
Joey Calderazzo
John Campbell
Sonny Clark
Chick Corea
Duke Ellington
Bill Evans
Kenny Drew, Jr.
Tommy Flanagan
Red Garland
Errol1 Garner
Benny Green
Herbie Hancock
Gene Harris
Barry Harris
Fred Hersch
Earl Hines
Dick Hyman
Ahmad Jamal
Keith Jarrett
James P. Johnson
Hank Jones
Geoff Keezer
Wynton Kelly
Dave McKenna
Jim McNeely
Marian McPartland
Brad Mehldau
Mulgrew Miller
Thelonious Monk
Jelly Roll Morton
Phineas Newborn
Danilo Perez
Oscar Peterson
Bud Powell
Marcus Roberts
Renee Rosnes
George Shearing
Horace Silver
Art Tatum
Jacky Terrasson
McCoy Tyner
Bobby Timmons
Fats Waller
Cedar Walton
Michael Weiss
Kenny Werner
Mary Lou Williams
Teddy Wilson

Biography

Michael Kocour is a lecturer in Jazz Studies at Northwestern University. He is also a jazz pianist and arranger who has performed at the 1992 World's Fair in Seville, the *Jazz Showcase* in Chicago, the *Blue Note* in New York, and the Chicago, Montreal and Quebec City Jazz festivals. Among the many artists and ensembles with whom he has appeared are Dizzy Gillespie, Eddie Harris, James Moody, Eddie Daniels, Randy Brecker, Bud Shank, Ira Sullivan, Carl Fontana, Dewey Redman, Lew Tebackin, and the Chicago Symphony.

Kocour grew up in the North Shore area outside of Chicago, Illinois and attended New Trier East High School. During this time, he studied jazz improvisation with Joe Daley, a noted tenor saxophonist and music teacher in Chicago. He graduated from the University of Illinois in 1985, where he studied piano with Ian Hobson and composition with Morgan Powell. He was a finalist in the 1988 Thelonious Monk Piano Competition, and was awarded National Endowment for the Arts study grants in 1988 and 1990, From 1991-94 he was a visiting lecturer in Jazz Studies and Piano Pedagogy at the University of Illinois.

His recorded work as a studio musician includes soundtracks to two major motion pictures, and numerous television commercials. He has eight works published by Warner Brothers, which include collections of original compositions and arrangements for piano. In addition, Mr. Kocour frequently performs around the Chicago area.

In recognition of excellence in teaching, Mr. Kocour has been awarded the position of the Charles Deering McCormick University Distinguished Lecturer for the academic year 2000-2001.

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