

The Jazz Piano

Welcome to the wonderful world of jazz piano! Understanding the function of the piano and how to play your part in the jazz band can be overwhelming when first exposed to standard jazz material. But if we take small steps towards correct performance concepts, the instrument can be source of great joy to play in a jazz setting.

What's the function of the jazz piano in the jazz ensemble?

The piano has a unique place in the jazz band.

- It is a rhythm instrument comping on chords.
- It is a solo instrument that can have the melody.
- It is a polyphonic instrument (more than one note at a time)
- It is one of the few instruments that comp while soloing at the same time.
- It fits in the rhythm section perfectly with bass, drums and guitar.
- There is only one piano in a jazz band.

A simple approach to comping on the piano

Sometimes the complete chart is written out for the piano in jazz bands. This is great to get a good feel for the various jazz styles, (swing, latin, rock etc.) These exercises are going to focus on when you only have chord change symbols such as Bb7 or F7.

When a young student begins soloing on the piano, don't worry about the left hand. Just focus on the melody creation. As they advance, add the left hand.

Definition of Comping

Comping is short for accompanying. In a jazz setting it's deciding on chord voicings and rhythms to fit with a tune or the chart. Voicings are the order, placement and notes on the piano that you choose for each chord. In general chords should change from one to the next with the least amount of movement on the piano.

Every exercise here is based on the Duke Ellington standard *C Jam Blues*. It has been transposed it to be in Bb to facilitate ease of learning for the entire jazz band. Also, 12 bar Bb blues is a more common place to start for improvisation.

EX 1

We will start with some simple 2-note voicing exercises. Here you'll find the 4 chords that are within the simplest form of the C Jam Blues (in Bb). Fill in the 3rd and 7th of each of these chords at the end of staff.

Chords for C Jam Blues

Building Simple Voicings

Duke Ellington

Write in 3rd and 7th

Piano

The musical staff shows a piano exercise for the Bb7 chord. It is in 4/4 time. The first measure contains the full chord voicing: Bb3, Eb4, F4, and Bb5. The following five measures are for building a simple voicing: Measure 2: Root (Bb2); Measure 3: 3rd (D3); Measure 4: 5th (F4); Measure 5: 7th (Bb5). The final measure is blank for the student to write the 3rd and 7th notes.

Write in 3rd and 7th

Pno.

The musical staff shows a piano exercise for the Eb7 chord. It is in 4/4 time. The first measure contains the full chord voicing: Eb3, Gb4, Ab4, and Eb5. The following five measures are for building a simple voicing: Measure 2: Root (Eb2); Measure 3: 3rd (Gb3); Measure 4: 5th (Ab4); Measure 5: 7th (Eb5). The final measure is blank for the student to write the 3rd and 7th notes.

Write in 3rd and 7th

Pno.

The musical staff shows a piano exercise for the Cmin7 chord. It is in 4/4 time. The first measure contains the full chord voicing: Bb3, Eb4, F4, and Ab5. The following five measures are for building a simple voicing: Measure 2: Root (C2); Measure 3: 3rd (Eb3); Measure 4: 5th (F4); Measure 5: 7th (Ab5). The final measure is blank for the student to write the 3rd and 7th notes.

Write in 3rd and 7th

Pno.

The musical staff shows a piano exercise for the F7 chord. It is in 4/4 time. The first measure contains the full chord voicing: F3, Ab4, C4, and Eb5. The following five measures are for building a simple voicing: Measure 2: Root (F2); Measure 3: 3rd (Ab3); Measure 4: 5th (C4); Measure 5: 7th (Eb5). The final measure is blank for the student to write the 3rd and 7th notes.

Our next step is to take these 2-note voicings and create voice leading that makes sense. It's important to move from one chord to the next with the least amount of movement. There should be no jumping around on the piano when changing chords in general.

EX 2

The first chord is given. Move to the next chord with the least amount of movement while staying around middle C and below. This is the order of chords in a simple Bb7 blues. The standard has a ii-V7-I (Cmin7 F7 Bb7) which we'll review later.

C Jam Blues 2-note Voice Leading

Duke Ellington

Piano

Bb7 Bb7 Bb7 Bb7 Bb7 Cmin7 F7 Bb7 Bb7

Ex 3

Here are all the chords plugged in for actual chord progression. You can compare your note choices for the 2 note chords you wrote in above. Notice how little the notes move from chord to chord.

C Jam Blues

Duke Ellington

Piano

Bb7 Eb7 Bb7

Pno.

5 Eb7 Bb7

Pno.

9 F7 Eb7 Bb7 F7

COMPING

Comping on the piano involves playing a rhythm with the chords involved that fits in the “Pocket” or “Groove.” That means the rhythm makes sense and fits with not only the rest of the rhythm section but also with the rest of the band. Here are two levels of comping that work in a swing setting:

The first is a basic Charleston rhythm, a style of music that was popular in the 1920s and 30s. So much so there are 2 styles of dance specifically for this rhythm. There are two different basic ways to play it. It is recommended that you don’t just play an ostinato pattern all the time but this is great place to start.

1. Basic Charleston Rhythm



Go back to **Ex 3** and play those chords with this pattern.

The second example is a great way to move this same Charleston beat around and make a very interesting comping rhythm.

2. Moving the Rhythm Around



Go back to **Ex 3** and play those chords with this pattern.

Advanced comping

In general comping ultimately does not involve a strict pattern but is more based on what’s happening in the piece. These two examples are a great starting point from which to take that jump. Listening to recordings of great jazz piano players such as Bill Evans, Thelonius Monk, Art Tatum, or Oscar Peterson.

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

Where to play on the piano

When playing the piano, if you're comping chords get too low they will get too muddy and mixed up with the bass line. It's also important not to make large jumps when comping. Of course, there are exceptions to this. But if you follow the guide of trying to keep fairly center around middle C, it will work.

Placement of the piano

In a jazz ensemble setting the piano player needs to be able to communicate with the rest of the rhythm section. If playing on a grand piano the piano should face the back of the band with player looking at the drummer. The lid can be opened towards the band to get a little more sound out. When using an upright generally facing it towards the band or if you can see the drummer over the top of it, just like the grand piano.

Playing with a guitar player

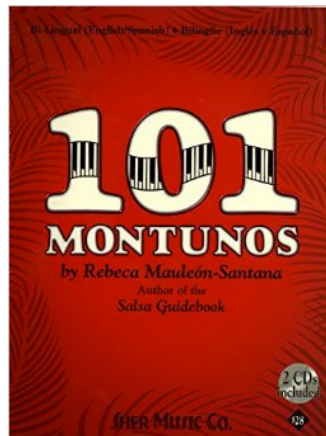
It's important to mention that when guitar players are in the band, both the piano player and the guitar player have to be aware of walking over each other. That is to say playing comping rhythms that don't work together or make it too busy. This is especially true during solo breaks. A good plan is to have the piano comp for the first soloist's changes and then have the guitarist take the next soloist's changes or vice-a-versa.

Further resources

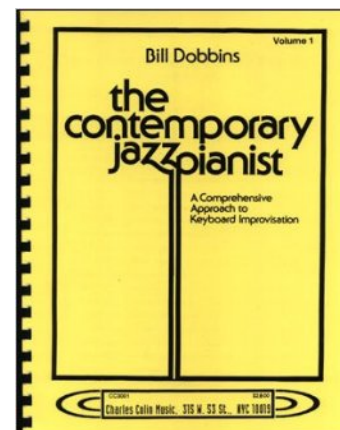
The Jazz Piano Book
by Mark Levine



101 Montunos
by Rebecca Mauleon-Santana



The Contemporary Pianist
by Bill Dobbins



CHORD CHANGE EXERCISES

The following exercises are all arrangements of the 12 bar Bb blues. Students can play only the left hand to get a feel for the changes and then add the right hand when they feel more comfortable. Additionally when soloing the student can use the left hand voicings for comping while they themselves are soloing. It is however not recommended that beginning jazz pianists start by comping and soloing at the same time. Split it up and then move towards adding simple voicings as your confidence is gained.

The right hand is made up of extensions and chordal tones. Extensions of chords are the 9ths, 11ths, and 13ths. For example the Bb7 chord has the 3rd and 7th in the left hand and then adds 9th (C) and the 5th (F).

Example 4 Easy Chord Changes

C Jam Blues

Duke Ellington

The musical score for 'C Jam Blues' is presented in three systems, each for the piano (Piano/Pno.). The key signature is one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system contains bars 1-4 with chord changes: Bb7 (bars 1-2), Eb7 (bar 3), and Bb7 (bars 4-4). The second system contains bars 5-8 with chord changes: Eb7 (bars 5-6) and Bb7 (bars 7-8). The third system contains bars 9-12 with chord changes: F7 (bars 9-10), Eb7 (bar 11), Bb7 (bar 12), and F7 (bar 12). Each bar shows a specific voicing for the indicated chord, with notes placed on the piano staff.

EX 6 Medium 12 bar Bb Blues

C Jam Blues

Duke Ellington

Chord progression for EX 6:

1-4: Bb7 Eb7 Bb7

5-8: Eb7 Bb7 G7

9-12: Cmin7 F7 Bb7 F7

EX 7 Advanced 12 bar blues

C Jam Blues

Duke Ellington

Chord progression for EX 7:

1-4: Bb7 Eb7 Bb7

5-8: Eb7 Edim7 Bb7 A7 Ab7 G7

9-12: Cmin7 F7 Bb7 Cmin7 F7