

From Right to Cool

Strategies for Transcending the Ink (Part 1)

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Your Notes:

Listening - Listening cannot just be choosing a random Spotify jazz playlist to have on in the background while you make dinner. It has to be more work than that. You will need to listen to the same pieces repeatedly, sometimes paying close attention, sometimes in “osmosis” mode.

Start with whatever has the most appeal to you *right now.* (But aim for something that swings, whether it’s swing-era big band, be-bop, hard bop, etc...)

Play the entire album on your commute, both ways, every day. And listen sometimes when you’re not doing anything else and have no distractions.

A Start on Essential Listening

- The Atomic Mr. Basie
- Moanin’ (whole album); Art Blakey
- Somethin’ Else; Cannonball Adderley
- Mingus, Ah Um; Charles Mingus
- Kind of Blue; Miles Davis

Once you can sing along with every solo, start messing with the balance and the equalization. See what pops!

When you’ve got your feet under you with at least one album, start branching out. Ask someone with more experience to

recommend an album (or even a single song) that opened up their listening. (My answers: Fly Me to the Moon, Sinatra/Basie; Lush Life, Johnny Hartman/John Coltrane.) Check out the albums above if you don’t know them already. Then work backwards in time to Duke Ellington, then to Louis Armstrong’s early recordings. Notice differences in the rhythm section, vibrato style, etc.!

Listening for Kids

Create a list for them. Start with what they might like, but don’t pander.

Suggested kid-friendly recordings to start your list:

- Such Sweet Thunder, Duke Ellington
- Jeannine, Eddie Jefferson
- There Ain’t Nobody Here But Us Chickens, Louis Jordan
- Pennies from Heaven, Louis Prima
- Moanin’, Art Blakey
- Moanin’, Charles Mingus (middle school jazz kids love Mingus!)

Hold them responsible for knowing the music on the list!

Ideas for that:

- -Every week, have them spend 5 minutes writing about what they've been listening to, what they noticed about it, how they liked it, etc.
- -Assign each section (or break it down to altos, tenors, etc if you have a small army) a particular song, and have them present it to the others.
- -Have an after-school or lunchtime listening party. Feed them and talk about what they notice.
- Get your section leaders involved in choosing the listening.

Instrumentation, Equipment:

Drum set: kick (small, tuned high and dry); snare; floor tom and one rack-mount tom; ride (22"); crash ride; and hi-hats. Brushes, 7A sticks. Aim for a ride that's dry enough that you still hear plenty of ping during time.

Acoustic bass is always preferable if you can manage it. Action may need to be adjusted lower to the fingerboard. NEVER have two bass players amplified and playing at the same time.*

Do NOT put clarinets in the reed section on tenor sax parts* - put them on trumpet parts.

Make sure the guitar amp is never cranked.

When you have an auditioned group, it's ok to re-assign sax flavors. Just be nice & super-encouraging about it.

PENCILS should be considered standard required equipment. Have them mark every change you make. Circling something doesn't count.

*both of these are real-life stories. I couldn't make this up, folks.

Miscellaneous Thoughts:

-One of the best compliments you can receive from a knowledgeable clinician is, "Your kids are really playing jazz." The more you allow your students to embrace their roles within the ensemble, the more you will have true jazz musicians. Give them responsibilities and leadership roles, and they will rise to the occasion. In the beginning, they may need some training wheels - when there's an interpretive decision to be made, give them an option between two inflections, and let the lead trumpet player (or section leader as applicable) choose.

-When they know the music but it's just falling short, have them turn their stands around

and play it without looking at the music. This can make a huge difference. Give them images to think about or key words like “snappy,” “greasy” or “smoky” first.

-When it comes to festivals, remember that whatever placement you end up with is just the opinion of one panel (or even one judge) of one performance on one particular day. It does not define you.

People listen first with their eyes: Let the kids have cool concert attire. Middle school is a rough time; your students will feel more confident if they look professional and mature.

Don't stand in front and conduct, unless it's a ballad that requires it, or there are time or tempo changes. Conducting steady time just makes you look dorky.

Reading

The Jazz Standards - Ted Gioia

How to Listen to Jazz - Ted Gioia

Jazz Pedagogy - J. Richard Dunscomb and Dr. Willie L. Hill, Jr.

Websites

Wynton Marsalis - Why Teach Jazz: <https://academy.jazz.org/ee/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/WhyTeachJazz.pdf>

David Berger - Notes on Conducting Jazz Ensembles (This one could use some updated editing, as it comes across a bit sexist these days. But Berger no longer works for JLCO, so that's not going to happen...)

<https://academy.jazz.org/ee/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/David-Berger-On-Conducting-Jazz-Ensembles-edited.pdf>

Cynthia Plank's crash course for starting up a jazz band with beginning players:

<https://pdxjazz.org/education/online-education-resources/>

Tommy Igoe's Groove Essentials and Jazz Rhythm Section 101 (and how to sound like Elvin Jones!) <https://vicfirth.zildjian.com/education.html>

JLCO's Jazz Academy Series: <https://www.youtube.com/@JazzAcademy>

Downloads

Guidetones in every key (first 8 of Autumn Leaves)

<https://www.scoreexchange.com/scores/110145.html>