Internalizing Tunes
a free tutorial

by Chuck Sher
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"Concepts for Bass Soloing"

with the hope that it will help my fellow musicians
make good use of their time in the woodshed during
this perilous period we are going through.

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While sheltering-in-place during the Covid-19 pandemic, I discovered a very useful process to help with soloing on standard tunes. The following outline need not be applied strictly over and over, but try doing it step-by-step for a song or two and see what seems useful to you.

A - LEARNING THE MELODY

1. Play the melody multiple times. Play it all over the range of your instrument until you are able to change octaves in the middle of the melody at will.

2. Do the same thing but this time embellish the melody with passing notes and grace notes, and also freely interpret the rhythms so that the melody sounds like you might have just made it up on the spot.

3. Play pieces of the melody and then improvise for a bar or two, back and forth. Ultimately, you should be able to quote the melody at any point in the middle of a solo chorus of the song. For bassists, try playing a walking line that contains a liberal number of melody notes in it.

4. Try singing along with #2 and #3 above and make each succeeding chorus more solo-like than the last one until you are playing a solo that is directly derived from the melody but is not necessarily the melody notes at all.

B - LEARNING THE HARMONY

1. Play pieces of the arpeggios of the chords of the song using the full range of your instrument. No set number of bars on each chord here—just play until you are comfortable with each one.

2. Play the chords in time, with the same number of bars/beats for each chord as indicated in the chart. Try to use chord notes only, as much as you can. For this exercise, play the chord notes with soloistic phrasing, not just running arpeggios. Do this until you have memorized the chord sequence and can play through it without looking at the lead sheet.

3. This time add scalar and chromatic passing notes to connect chord notes (i.e., think of the chord but play anything you hear). Do this until the chord sequence has been internalized and you can sense the next chord before it comes up. This will give your lines a feeling of forward motion because you will be heading for the following chord even as you are playing on the current one.

4. Do #1-3 here but using the appropriate scales that best fit each chord. Mark Levine's "The Jazz Theory Book" is the standard work on that subject. Make sure you know what scale notes change as you go from chord to chord.

C - USING THE MELODY'S PHRASES TO CREATE YOUR SOLOS

Think of (or sing) the melody's phrases to yourself while you are soloing, but use any notes, not just the notes of the melody. Thinking in phrases will help you avoid sounding like you are just 'wiggling your fingers.'

Use either rests or longer-held notes to separate phrases. Of course, if you really hear a line that extends through two phrases, for example, then by all means go ahead and play it.

Here are some suggestions for soloing in phrases.

1. Start on the melody notes at the beginning of each bar, then play whatever you hear after that. As a variation, play two bars of the melody and then sing the next two bars. Go back and figure out what you sang and then continue this process through the whole song. The crucial thing here is to internalize the main melody notes to use as signposts for improvising. This will bring more immediate results than any other approach in this tutorial, so don't skip it!

2. Start on any chord note at the beginning of each bar, then play whatever you hear on the way to the next down beat. For ballads that often have two chords per bar, also try doing this on two chords per bar, not just the first one.

3. Start each bar on a step-wise (including half-steps) sequence of 'target' notes. Work this out in advance if you want or just improvise these as you go. Also try this based on the last note of each phrase instead of the first note.

4. Start each phrase on any note that you hear, but do keep the melody's phrases in mind as you go through the song. This was the genesis of this tutorial and remains its core exercise, to be done if nothing else.

D - MORE ON SOLOING IN PHRASES

1. Solo on the song using discreet phrases, each one of which has some direct connection with the previous phrase, e.g.
- repeat the shape, intervals or rhythm of the previous phrase but starting on a different note
- create a "call and response" relationship by alternating two different melodic ideas back and forth
- play a phrase, then play anything else, then back to the first phrase or a close variation of it.

2. As you do #1 above make sure that you keep your place in the form by either thinking of the main changes as they go by &/or hearing the melody internally.

3. More generally speaking, internally hearing the melody of the song happens on one level, while the phrases you spontaneously create as you solo happen on their own level. By acknowledging each one of the phrases you play as they go by, whether or not you are consciously linking them to each other, you will find yourself building off of them as you proceed. (This is another reason for leaving some space between musical thoughts.) Then your solo will develop an internal coherence that it wouldn't otherwise have.

E - INTERNALIZING THE SONG

1. Spend some time consciously integrating the melody and the chords so that you know how the two fit together at every point in the song. Start by seeing what degree of the chord each melody note is. Play embellished versions of the melody with this in mind.

2. Give yourself different parameters to work within. For example:
- try playing through the song using a minimum number of notes while still maintaining a coherent line through the changes.
- try repeating a lick or rhythmic pattern multiple times before switching to a new one as you go through the song. If any given figure presents a technical challenge for you, then try leaving the tune for a bit and taking the it up and down the key of the song until it is smooth and relaxed.
- try feeling the song in 2 (half notes) as opposed to 4. This will change the kind of lines you play - interesting!
  Make up more things like this of your own.

3. Spend some time analyzing the structure of the song. For almost all standards, you can break the song up into four-bar sections—so treat each one as an independent unit in which you understand the chord movements and can therefore look at it as a single piece of information (e.g. II-V-I-VI). For many songs, it will be more helpful to look at it in two-bar phrases instead of four-bar ones—do whatever aids you the most in memorizing it. Importantly, *the chords (and also the melody notes) at the beginning of each four-bar or two-bar phrase create their own sequence that is like the signature of that tune*, so make sure you have them ingrained in your mind.

4. Feel free to cycle any given number of bars over and over until it is 'yours.' Anything from two chords up to eight-bar sections of the tune can be looped with great benefit to your ability to internalize them.

5. By using these different ways of learning a tune, at the end of this process you should be able to intuitively know where you are in the song without thinking too much about it—real freedom!

6. Two final thoughts: One, this process is not so much about self-expression as it is expressing the inherent beauty of the song. As the late Lee Konitz once said, "A good solo doesn't care who played it." And two, even before you've 'mastered' a tune, if you let the music take you and just have a ball swinging through the changes, that's it!—that's the whole point of this beautiful path called jazz.