

## Repertoire – Internalising tunes

I have heard esteemed jazz musicians advocating the necessity to learn a lot of repertoire. Nameless *esteemed artist number one* recently encouraged students to know at least 100 tunes, while *esteemed artist number two* advocated just 20 - and that some musicians are just "tune nerds" (not very helpful).

Number two misses the deeper and more useful point which is about and memory and the challenge to be thorough enough in our practice so that song-forms present as few problems as necessary, while we deal with the principal issues of improvising and expression. Many aspiring jazz musicians struggle with the repetition required in order to internalise, often losing focus and moving their attention to another new tune, the next good idea or something they have heard at a gig or on *Spotify*. It is worth noting that Bill Evans recorded "Nardis" at least 40 times, and quite possibly played it on most gigs. I encourage you to welcome the sensation of boredom with a form, and see it instead as indication of the right time to go deeper.

Below is a method for tune learning that combines the memorisation of forms with application of improvisational skills.

Rotation of tunes for learning repertoire and improvisational skills.

1. Carefully select 4 – 6 tunes to work with for a month, basically a set-list. Consider what will be both useful and enjoyable, perhaps essential tunes, a specific composer (ie Monk, Cole Porter), tunes for your combo, tunes you like playing with your mates, or that you want or need to play. Discuss your choice with friends and teachers.
2. Construct a set list, vary tempos and moods (a good opener, ballad, latin, bop head etc).
3. During this hour of practice, work on no more than 3 tunes a day, for 20 minutes on each tune (no longer), utilising the tune learning methods shown to you by your teachers.
4. Reinforce and rotate tunes daily, like this:  
Monday: tunes 1, 2 and 3  
Tuesday: tunes 2, 3 and 4  
Wednesday: tunes 3, 4 and 5  
Thursday: tunes 4, 5 and 1  
Friday: tunes 5, 1 and 2...  
and so on...
5. Utilise these tunes (or parts of them) as contexts for your improvisational practice.

6. Next month – select another 4 – 6 tunes.

It is essential that you work on the tunes for at least a month in order to allow our brain sufficient time to learn in depth, to engage in the higher levels of improvisational activity, and for skills to become embedded in the deeper levels of our memory (there is a different technique for speed learning repertoire in terms of familiarisation). After a while you will notice the material becoming very familiar. At this point don't be distracted and fall into the trap of trying out a new tune. Instead, this is the critical point at which you can go deeper, applying and developing improvisational skills and approaches without having to worry about memorising the material.

This is a highly effective way in which to practice/learn because it combines depth (repetition) with context (the song), if you are prepared to learn deeply rather than approximately!

It is also just one hour.