

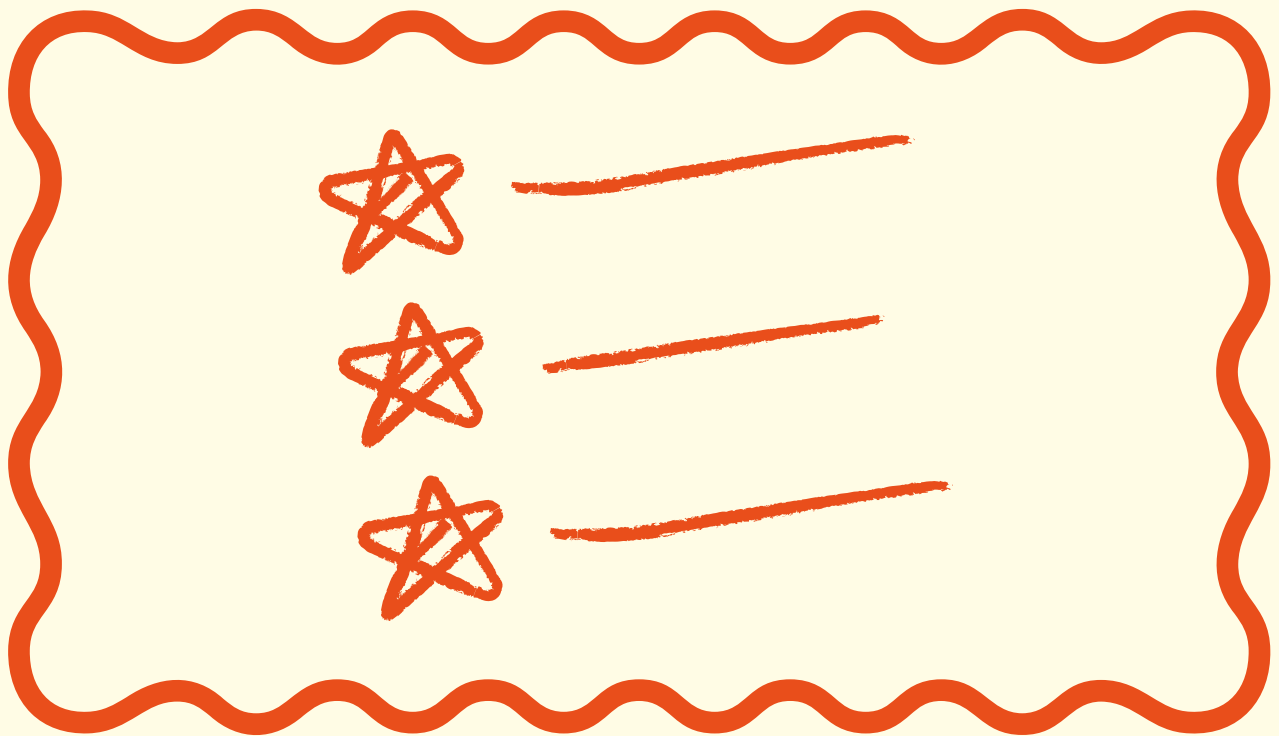
NYJO

Improvisation for Beginners



CREATED BY JAMIE HARMS

Learning Objectives

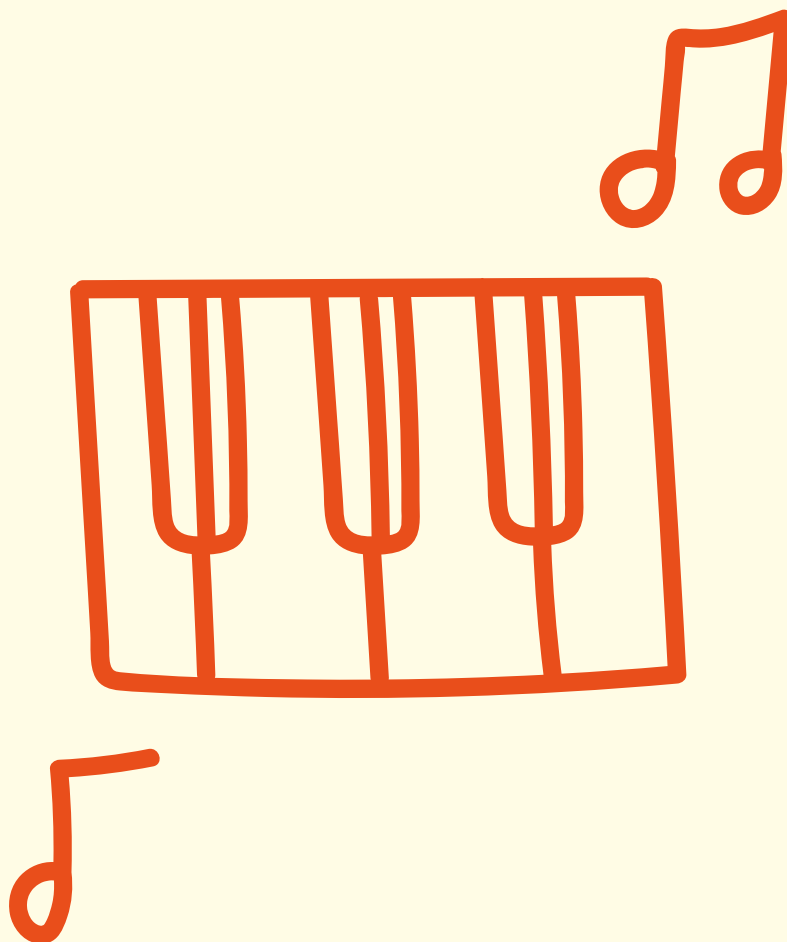


In this worksheet, we will take our first steps into the world of improvising! These exercises can be done by musicians of any level, and will provide a groundwork in how to practise coming up with new ideas.

The first exercise will introduce improvising using cells, which I argue is a core element of any form of improvising. Focusing on rhythm at first, we will practise developing ideas over progressively longer periods of time, until we can take a one bar idea and extrapolate it across 8 or 16 bars. Because this is a very rhythmically driven exercise, it can be done without instruments, and clapped or sung.

The second exercise develops some of the skills we work on in the first, looking at a very common chord progression, the Blues. We will discuss some strategies that you can employ when tackling a new tune, and try using some notes to create melodic phrases. For this exercise, you will need an instrument or your voice, because we will look at using pitches in conjunction with rhythm. However, the principles discussed can be applied to 'unpitched' instruments, like a drum kit.

From doing these exercises, you will develop the basis of an improvising vocabulary, creating a palette of sounds you can apply to other songs. They can be used for your entire musical career, coming up with new ideas and building a vocabulary is an essential of practise.



First Steps to Improvisation

All great improvisers start from building strong, simple phrases, and developing a vocabulary from there. The aim of this first activity is to create confident, rhythmically strong phrases, and we can do that most effectively by not worrying too much about pitch at first.

To begin with, you don't need an instrument, and you can clap, but afterwards you will need to use pitches! This is also best done in a group, but you can do it on your own too. All you need is a metronome (you can download metronome apps for free, my favourite is called SoundBrenner).

Let's begin. If doing this exercise alone, set your metronome to 60 BPM. You don't want it to be too fast or too slow, it would be very tricky!

Improvise a 4-beat idea. Focus on having very *clear* rhythms – keep it simple. An example is below.



If using your instrument, pick no more than 3 notes for this exercise. At first I would even recommend using just one.

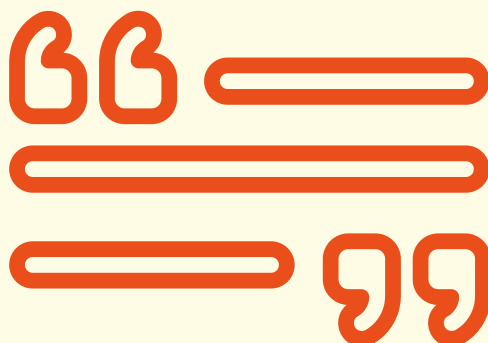
Continue this one bar improvise/one bar rest cycle until you're feeling happy with the time and you've come up with a good selection of ideas.

(if in a group, or with a teacher, improvise one bar and have everyone else play it back, go round in the circle so everyone has a chance to have a go!)

The next step is to create longer phrases. Keep the same level of focus on rhythm, but go for 2 bars, then 4 bars, gluing the ideas together.

Top Tip – Repetition and space are good! You don't need to play on every beat, and the two bars don't have to be different.

Now you can think about how to make these ideas more musical. You can think of music like a language, with words, phrases and grammar. To make a clear sentence, you can't just list random words that you like! It's the same in jazz. We have learned how to come up with some words, now we need to put them in sentences.



We are going to improvise in 2 bar chunks, as before. Bar one should 'ask a question', and bar 2 should 'answer' it. Here are some things to think about when doing this:

- How would you speak a question? You might raise the pitch of your voice at the end of the sentence. Try doing this with your instrument.
- How would you speak an answer? Perhaps by using lowering your voice and ending it strongly. Try aiming for a lower pitch in the second bar. If you're using C – D – E, aim for C as your final note.
- Think about the rhythm of a question. Ask a question out loud and try to play that rhythm on your instrument, or clap it.

Experiment with it, and find some ways that feel natural to you. This will help build your improvising vocabulary. Write them down so you can remember them!

If you're in a group, do this with a partner. Have one of you 'ask the question', and one of you 'answer' it, listen very carefully to what they do so it feels like a natural conversation! In jazz, this is sometimes called **trading**, where you take turns improvising.



The next step is to do this with longer phrases. Try spending 2 bars on the 'question', and 2 bars on the 'answer', to make a 4 bar phrase. If you feel comfortable with this, try it over 8 bars.

Remember, the foundation of this work is strong rhythmic ideas, so if you feel yourself playing out of time or not knowing what to play, go back to the first exercise and come up with some 1 bar ideas and start gluing them together.



Further Practise

If you feel that you have managed to get to grips with this exercise so far, the thing to work on is doing it for longer!

Experiment with working over 8, 12, or 16 bars.

Keep thinking in blocks of 2 or 4 bars, and thinking about questions/answers.

Practise doing this task with more pitches. Try doing the same thing, but instead of only using 3 notes, use the pentatonic scale, which has 5 notes. The C major pentatonic scale is shown below. Find notes that sound better when asking questions and when answering them, and experiment to see what sounds good! If you find something you like, write it down so that you remember it. Maybe even try and play it in a different key.



C Major Pentatonic

Playing the Blues



Now we have gotten to grips with improvising phrases on their own, let's work on putting those phrases into practise on a tune.

One of the most common chord progressions in jazz is a 12-bar form called a blues. In its simplest form, it contains 3 chords, chord I, chord IV and chord V. An example chord chart is below.

The blues can be played in any key, but two very common ones are Bb and F (concert pitch). For today we will be learning a blues in F (Eb instruments: D, Bb instruments: G).



Learn a blues head. Oftentimes, heads give us the best way to improvise over a chord sequence. They're pre-composed, and are (in many cases) clear rhythmically and harmonically. The essence of jazz is, in part, improvising around melodies, so learning tunes is key to learning jazz.

For this exercise, you should **transcribe** 'Bags' Groove', written by Milt Jackson. Try to memorise this without writing it down, it will massively improve your memory and help you internalise the music more effectively. It is most commonly played in F, hence why we are using it in this exercise.

However, any blues head will do just as well!

Start by improvising 'off' the melody. Use the melodic ideas already present to generate some new things. You can add fills and flourishes, or use different dynamics and articulation to add new flavour to the melody. Don't worry too much about what notes you're using at this stage, play what sounds good!

Top Tip - A useful tool when practising on your own is backing tracks. You can find them on YouTube (Phil Wilkinson has lots of great ones), or use an app like iRealPro. You have to pay for iReal, but it is a really helpful resource. Remember, ALWAYS practise in time, with a metronome or a backing track.

The next step is to start using relevant pitches in your improvising. A great scale you can use is the Blues Scale. This is made up of: I – bIII – IV – bV – V – bVII. The F blues scale is written out below. At first, use these notes in your fills when playing off the melody. It adds a huge amount of character to a solo, and sounds great everywhere in the **changes**.

After you feel happy with using those notes in fills, try and find ways through the tune only using the blues scale. Create phrases in the same way we did in exercise 1, thinking about questions and answers, and maintaining a clear sense of rhythm. You can play the scale up and down, vary the rhythm, or start in different places in the scale. Find things that sound good!



F Blues Scale



Building on exercise 1, experiment with clapping a 1 bar rhythm. Make it strong and simple, this will give you the best starting point.

Use this rhythm as a grid throughout the tune. Keep the rhythm the same, but change what notes you're playing. Be very strict with yourself when practising this, really focus on keeping the rhythm the same. This step is a very good way to build vocabulary. Keeping the rhythm the same helps with engaging the audience. As listeners, we are often drawn to patterns, and developing your solo through this technique helps guide your audience through the story being told in your improvisation.



Once you feel happy with these elements on their own, its time to start blending them all together. An effective solo will utilise many of the ideas we have discussed above; referencing the melody, using solid rhythmic ideas, utilising different scales.

Have a go playing along with a backing track, starting with the melody of 'Bags' Groove', and then taking a few **choruses** to improvise. For each chorus, focus on one of the elements above, then try to blend them all together in a final chorus. Finish the exercise by playing the head again.

When playing in a very focussed way for a long period of time, try to squeeze in some completely free improvising at the end of your practise session. Play what sounds good, play what sounds bad, but experiment and have fun! You can do this along to a backing track or on your own. Music is fun! Always remember to have fun!

Further Practise

Using the chord chart, try and improvise using the notes written out for each of the chords. These are called chord tones. All the chords in a 12-bar blues are dominant 7th chords. Experiment with playing the chord tones up and down, in different orders, and with different rhythms. Maybe try and find a scale that works with the notes in the chord as well.

This kind of work is the basis for more complicated jazz songs. Knowing how to play 'within' harmony is a very important skill to have!

Now you've got it down in F, try using all the above exercises in other keys! Try playing in Bb, or G, or D. Work out the blues scale for that key, find some ways to play with the chord tones, and see what happens. Eventually, you should know how to play a blues in ALL 12 KEYS!

And finally, keep listening to music, and keep listening to jazz! If you're stuck for ideas on what to play, see what other musicians have done before you. Transcribe Louis Armstrong solos, or Lester Young, or Ella Fitzgerald. They knew what they were doing, and we can all learn a huge amount from them...



Mini Quiz



1. WHAT NOTES WOULD BE USED IN A G MAJOR PENTATONIC SCALE?

- ☐ G - B - D - E - F
- ☐ G - A - B - D - E
- ☐ G - A - D - E - F#

2. WHICH CHORD SYMBOL REPRESENTS THE FOLLOWING PITCHES: F - A - C - EB

- ☐ F7
- ☐ Fm7
- ☐ Fmaj7

3. WHICH CHORDS WOULD BE USED IN A 12 BAR BLUES IN G?

- ☐ G7 - Bb7 - G7 - D7 - Bb7 - G7
- ☐ G7 - Cm7 - G7 - D7 - Cm7 - G7
- ☐ G7 - C7 - G7 - D7 - C7 - G7

Answers

G A B D E, F7, G7 - C7 - G7 - D7 - C7 - G7

Key Words



Improvisation: Creating and presenting an idea without specific advance planning.

Phrase: A small section of music, like a short sentence in a paragraph!

Trading: In jazz, trading is taking turns when improvising. An example is between a drummer and other members of a band taking 4 bars at a time to solo (also called 'fours').

Pentatonic scale: A collection of 5 notes which can be used for improvising. The major pentatonic scale, which is talked about above, is made up of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 6th notes of a major scale.

(eg. C major pentatonic is C – D – E – G – A).

Root Note: The lowest note in a chord. In these exercises, the root is always the tonic.

Tonic: The main note in a tonality (eg. C in C major, or F in F minor). In jazz, it is sometimes called 'one' ("there is a walk-down back to one in the last 4 bars").

Transcribing: Learning music, especially jazz solos, by ear.



If you have any questions about the content within this worksheet, please contact us on projects@nyjo.org.uk.

This resource pack was created by:

Jamie Harms: NYJO Saxophonist

NYJO

National Youth Jazz Orchestra

Woolwich Works, The Fireworks Factory, 11 No. 1 Street, London SE18 6HD
www.nyjo.org.uk | +44 (0) 330 500 2000 | info@nyjo.org.uk

Company registration number: 01334250
Charity registration number: 274578



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

