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High School Jazz Band Program

Rehearsal Strategies – *A Night in Tunisia* By Reginald Thomas, Professor of Jazz Piano Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI

Do you remember the first time you heard this jazz classic, *A Night In Tunisia*? Was it the small group recording with the famous Charlie Parker solo break? Was it a big band version? Maybe you didn't hear the recording first. Maybe you heard a local group playing it live. Whatever your first experiences, I'm sure this tune has left a lasting impression that embodies and defines jazz repertoire. Many of your students are already familiar with *A Night In Tunisia* but for others this may be their first introduction. It will be beneficial for you and your students to find as many recordings as possible to use for reference. Don't only listen to the reference recording from JALC; have your students to find their own favorite recordings. Listen to different examples of groove, of great solos to transcribe and of musical decisions. Listening will be crucial for you to find ways of making your own unique statement with this chart.

Rhythm Section

Your first challenge will be with the rhythm section. Finding an appropriate groove from the information given is vital. Though the drum part says '*Beguine*' there are a number of recordings that approach this groove with different rhythmic feels. Be sure to investigate many recordings. For example, Dizzy's recording with Chico O'Farrill uses a 12/8 Afro-Cuban feel and is quite different from the Afro-Cuban feel Dizzy's small group utilizes on his Verve/Phillips recording. Art Blakey's rendition has a totally different feel. Your rhythm section will need to find what feels good for them as a section AND what works in the context of the arrangement.

Simply reading the parts as written in the score will not work. The drum part only gives a bass drum pattern and the '*Beguine*' rhythm on the snare line. This is only meant to be a guide to get your students in the ballpark. If going for the type of groove that is on the JALC reference recording, you will notice that the snare rhythm is played with cross-sticking included:

Written part



Closer approximation



Playing this groove with the snare off and bringing out accents in appropriate places is often the desired sound. Again, this is just a basic groove to point you in the right direction. I recommend listening to different recorded

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examples, finding videos of drummers to see how the sound is created and consulting books, such as *Afro-Cuban Rhythms for Drumset* by Frank Malabe and Bob Weiner, to see written patterns from which to start.

The bass is actually the first instrument to deal with the groove in this chart and reading the rhythm will only get you so far. Your bassist must *articulate* the desired feel. For example, in the JALC reference recording, the bass ostinato is played with a more even 8th note approach. However, if you check out the Dizzy Gillespie Big Band 1957 recording, you will notice that the bass plays with a slight swing feel. This is crucial because you will want the drums to match this feel as well as the piano and saxophones upon their entrance.

Next, it is vitally important that the tempo doesn't change when the actual groove switches to swing. The pulse must remain the same. In section rehearsal, have your rhythm section spend time simply going back and forth between these two feels anticipating the transition to make sure that time is steady.

Finally, though much attention is given to the Afro-Cuban or 'Beguine' feel or Latin feel at the top of the chart, please have your students take note that this only happens on the intro and the A sections at the beginning and end of the chart. The rest of the chart is all about swinging! Be sure that your students are checking out bebop playing versus Basie or Ellington examples. This will be crucial for piano and guitar comping especially.

Articulating the Feel and Chart Direction

This chart is built in layers. Those layers include background effects/textures, background hits or melody. The initial sax line is an effect meant to create a texture or mood and the articulation will create the desired sound:



The accents show the appropriate emphasis but what can be overlooked are the phrase markings. Students may look at them as slurs but that is not the intent of those markings. They are given to indicate note groupings and will affect note length. Also notice that the volume is different from the first measure to the second. These are the types of musical decisions sections must make in order to create the mood of your effects.

The trumpets play background hits that punctuate or dialogue with the melody at **letter A**. These hits are not meant to create mood but act in call-and-response with the melody. Listen closely for the articulation of these hits;

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make use of slurring rather than tonguing each note. Now pay close attention to balance. The trombone soloist, who is outnumbered by the saxophone background and the trumpet hits, must be heard clearly.

Make sure everyone is aware of when his section is playing melody, creating a mood or playing in call/response. For example, the entire band is creating an effect in the 1st ending after **letter A**; this must be articulated together. The saxophones have the melody at **letter B** with the brass responding; the balance must reflect this. Be careful of the balance at **letter D** so that the sax line comes through and make sure the brass cuts off the sustained note with the last saxophone note. Finally, the effect at the interlude (**letter I**) has a double time feel and must build to set up the shout section at **letter J**; be sure the drummer is aware of those 3 bars of double time that go back to the original tempo for the 2 bar solo fill to set up the shout. Also, though the saxophones are marked *mf* at **letter J**, be aware that this countermelody is as important as the brass tutti and should be balanced accordingly.

Solos

The best reason for playing this chart is to focus your attention on blowing; this chart is just begging to be opened up for solos! The solo section is from **letter E** through **letter H** and can be repeated as many times as needed. The interlude at **letter D** can be used more than once as well if you desire to give any other soloists a send off. This brings us to the first concern with the solo section – the 2 bar solo break.

There are two important factors to keep in mind when playing the solo break. The first is the time-feel. Often students want to play something very fast to show off chops and the time will be unsteady. Or sometimes because the student is trying to figure out what to play, the time can be unsteady. The second concern is in knowing what to play harmonically. Though the top of the form starts on an Eb7 resolving to D minor, the break is on an F major. It is important that the break reflects that tonal center. Note the solo break written in the trumpet part:



Notice how simple this idea actually is. Harmonically, it centers on an F major triad (circled notes) using leading tones and surrounding tones to get to the chord tones. Rhythmic interest is created by use of a repeated hemiola (3 against 2) rhythm in the first bar. *The result is a rhythmically interesting solo*

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break outlining the appropriate chord sound that can be played with a good time feel. There is nothing wrong with having something worked out to play on the break. Have the students check out recordings with great solo breaks to get more examples that swing and are in the correct tonal center.

The next harmonic challenge for playing over the form is in playing in a minor key. When musicians approach improvising by playing within the tonal centers of major keys, their ideas often center on the diatonic notes of that major key. For example, the following solo idea is totally diatonic to F major and reflects the sound of the chord changes:



In minor keys, however, students need to be aware that there are different forms of minor and that they can exist simultaneously. What I mean is music is simply written in the minor key, not over the harmonic minor or the melodic minor or the natural minor scale. The decision of which scale sound to use depends on what is going on with the melody that is being created and/or what is happening in the chord progression. Here are some examples of each:



The melodic minor scale is different ascending and descending because ascending melodies are making use of leading tetra-chords (with a leading tone up by 1/2 step into the 1st scale degree) and descending melodies are making use of resolving tetra-chords (with a resolving tone down by 1/2 step into the 5th scale degree). Melodies *tend* to do that, hence the name *melodic* minor. Find melodies that exemplify that tendency to share with your students. Notice also that the idea above is centered on the D min chord and not the Eb7. We'll return to that thought later. Let's look at harmonic minor:

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HARMONIC MINOR SCALE

USE OF HARMONIC MINOR

In this example note the use of the major 7th (C#) and the minor 6th (Bb). These notes fit the dominant chord for this key. Without raising the 7th scale degree, there would be no dominant chord built off of the 5th scale degree. This dominant is needed to have a V7-i cadence in Western harmony, hence the name *harmonic* minor. The use of this sound, as can be seen in this example, allows us to create sounds that reflect the chord progression (ii-V7-i in minor keys) as well as the overall tonal center. Have students practice writing ideas over the ii-V7-i progression in minor keys to work on this sound.

Next, make students aware of the leading sound of the first two chords, Eb7 to D min. This sound is really like a V7-i chord progression if the students realize that the Eb7 is simply a tri-tone substitution for the dominant V7 (A7 in this case) chord. The rule of tri-tone substitution is this:

Dominant chords that are separated by the interval of a tri-tone can separate for one another because they have the same 3rd and 7th.

TRI-TONE SUBSTITUTION

So, the Eb7 leads to the D min just as A7 leads to D min. This will affect the phrasing in how the melodic line resolves from the dominant to the minor and where it starts and ends. Take note of these two things in the trumpet solo at letter E:

You will notice that at key places in the melodic line (the end of the 1st and 3rd measures) resolving tones and leading tones will connect the two chords (or

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lead from the Eb7 to D min). The melodic minor example shown earlier does not do that. Instead that melody simply centers on D min. Both examples are perfectly fine and give the improviser choices in how to create varying phrases within the solo; the phrasing will change depending on which approach is being used.

The final step is to continue work on ii-V7 and ii-V7-I (i in minor) ideas. This is vital to creating melody over the chord progression on the bridge. Be sure that students make subtle differences to allow for the V7(b9) chord and i6 chord in the idea. The example below is a very basic ii-V-I idea that very clearly outlines the chords:

By making slight adjustments to this phrase, you can use the sound of the b9 and make the idea resolve to a minor chord. Be careful to use a major 6th on the minor chord and not a minor 6th. To clear up any confusion, have students think of the chord as a G min triad with an added 6th. Now, observe the same idea adjusted to fit these chord sounds:

Bebop improvisation is all about using rhythmic language while leading through the chord changes. Following these examples will be a great start to improvising on this tune. Still, the best exercise is transcription. Be sure students are finding great solos and transcribing as much as possible to learn language and familiarize themselves with the sound.

Make It Your Own!

Making this chart fit your band is key. Anyone can read the parts down, but your approach to making it personal should include finding different examples of groove, choosing which soloists in your band will shine and making musical choices that make definite statements. As mentioned earlier, the 1957 Dizzy Big Band recording is similar but not quite the same as the JALC reference recording. The feel is slightly different and the parts are not all the same; as a matter of fact there are different background parts throughout. There is nothing wrong with having your students transcribe those

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backgrounds (or making up your own) to use behind different soloists; this is fine as it shows your ability to improvise. There are recordings where artists go as far as changing this groove to a funk feel. That is fine for that recording, but in the context of *this* chart that wouldn't be the best musical choice. Be careful that whatever you do does not deviate from the language of the chart.

Performing this chart in program with other Ellington gems offers a great opportunity to show off your range of varying jazz styles. I hope these tips help you and your students explore the sound of bebop and, most of all, enjoy the journey!