Introduction

This book of jazz etudes and exercises is designed for vocalists who are interested in developing their jazz improvisation skills. Though designed for vocalists, the vocabulary explored in this book comes directly from the instrumental jazz/bebop idiom, so instrumentalists will also find some interesting material to practice. This book is designed to build your jazz vocabulary and theoretical knowledge through imitation and repetition.

I like to compare the process of learning jazz improvisation to learning a new language. Many of us have studied a foreign language at some point, with varying levels of success. Some of us have only learned to understand the language a bit, while others are able to communicate comfortably in a second language. In either case, we find that the learning process can be slow. If we continue to study and truly embrace the language, our vocabulary, sentence structure and flow begin to solidify. Those of us who truly immerse ourselves in the language eventually become bi-lingual, able to communicate with ease. We are even able to find our own voice or personality in this new language.

I have never reached that point with a foreign language, but I have made a bit more progress in the jazz "language." To take this analogy a step further – instead of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, we now have chords, "licks," patterns, scales, rhythms and song forms. We also draw from the history of the musicians who have developed this language over the past century.

I am both a vocalist and saxophonist. I developed most of my improvisation vocabulary through my saxophone studies, and then applied these skills to my voice. When comparing singing to playing, there are a number of different elements at play. When singing, there is a two-step process: idea → note. When playing, it is a three step-process: idea → fingering → note. At first glance, one might think that it would be easier to improvise with the voice than with the horn. However, with the horn, there is a distinct security in knowing that a specific fingering will produce a specific note. One does not have to hear the note as precisely to successfully produce the correct chord tone. I find it easier to improvise with my voice when working with more basic chord progressions, but when tackling more complex chord progressions, the horn is a more comfortable vehicle.

Why do vocalists often struggle with the connection between their creative voice and the complex structures of jazz? I believe it has less to do with talent or ability, but more with the process by which we learn music. It is a left-brain/right-brain thing. We all have a creative side, our right-brain, and a logical side, our left-brain. Through instrumental studies, both the creative and mathematical aspects of music are cultivated. For many singers, an imbalance occurs, where the creative (right-brain) side is nourished, but the left-brain is left behind. In jazz, it is important to cultivate both sides.

For instrumentalists, the concepts of learning to read music, practicing scales, and developing disciplined practice habits are formed at an early age. As an interest in jazz develops, these concepts carry over to learning jazz harmony, jazz scales, memorizing melodies and song forms, practicing licks and studying jazz interpretation. The creative right-brain is balanced by the left-brain knowledge – theory, structure and note relationships. Through this whole process, the young instrumentalist is learning extensive jazz vocabulary.

For many vocalists, the process is quite different. A young singer may have innate talent, a beautiful voice and a natural musical instinct. However, the left-brain skills are often not properly nurtured. A young singer might feel very comfortable performing in numerous settings, and may excel as an ensemble singer and soloist, relying on a strong ear and natural ability. This approach may carry the singer through many years and many successful musical experiences. As we know, there are a myriad of vocalists who have had very successful careers without developing the musicianship skills that instrumentalists learn. However, if at some point a singer becomes interested in jazz, he or she may run into a bit of a wall. Though the creative energy and freedom of jazz is very exhilarating, the structure and theory can be quite intimidating. The fledgling jazz singer may feel comfortable singing a song with the jazz band or combo, but when asked to improvise with the melody or take a scat solo, he or she will often feel like a fish out of water. To be a well-rounded jazz singer, it is important to learn jazz theory, jazz history and jazz improvisation vocabulary. One needs to learn the nouns, verbs, and sentence structure of jazz!

Over the years, I have heard many student singers express their frustration over their skill imbalances. They often do not know what to practice or how to get things started. They are often told to transcribe instrumental solos and learn them. This is a great idea, but can be initially quite daunting, as the harmonic and intervallic complexity of many instrumental solos can be very challenging to transcribe and sing.

This book will act as a starting point, or a bridge to more extensive studies of instrumental jazz. As you learn the licks and etudes, you will be developing a foundation of bebop-based vocabulary. While the melodies and licks are steeped in instrumental sensibility, I have made an attempt to write lines that are "singer-friendly." This book covers information for intermediate and advanced jazz students. The chord vocabulary and piano chapters are geared towards intermediate students looking to develop solid jazz theory and harmony knowledge. The patterns and etude chapters are designed for intermediate and advanced students looking to develop fluid jazz vocabulary. Some of the early material will be quite easy for some of you, whereas some of the later etudes will be quite challenging.

When practicing the exercises in this book, it is beneficial to play the chords at the same time. With a little practice it can be done, even if you have only basic piano skills. For those of you who do not have jazz piano knowledge, I have included a very basic piano-voicing chapter. If you practice these progressions in a few of the most common keys, you will be able to apply these skills to the etudes.

It is important to understand that the process of imitation is a necessary step in developing your own creative voice. We all learned to speak by imitating our parents. We needed to learn the shared language of our family and community in order to communicate with them. As we continued to learn our language, we developed our vocabulary, allowing us to be more creative, emotional and unique in our communication with others. This concept applies to the study of music in general, and jazz in particular. Through the process of imitating our predecessors, we learn their vocabulary, and over time, find our own voice. Instrumentalists grasp this concept quickly, while many vocalists are less inclined to embrace this idea. Singers are often attracted to the visceral creative energy of jazz, but may be resistant to learning the structure. They are often convinced that imitating and embracing the jazz music of the past will somehow stunt their innate creativity. I disagree with this notion. Through structure comes freedom.

In addition to the written etudes, you should have received a code that gives you access to downloadable mp3s for most of the exercises and etudes. Big thanks to Rosana Eckert and Ben Wittman for helping me with the recordings. Depending on the key and range, the etudes are either sung by Rosana or me, or played on alto or tenor sax. Listen for syllables, phrasing, rhythmic feel and articulation.

Lastly, take the time to listen to jazz! Immerse yourself in all styles, and take in the sounds, the feel and the emotion of the music. Listen, listen, and then listen some more.

I wish you the best of luck with your musical pursuits.

Chapter One: Jazz Harmony

It is very important for vocalists to understand jazz terminology. If you have studied traditional music theory, you will recognize many concepts used in jazz. However, there are many terms unique to jazz theory. If you are new to jazz, then I would suggest reading "Jazz Singer's Handbook" by Michele Weir (Alfred 00-22020). Her book will introduce you to many of the important terms and concepts needed to understand and interpret music in a jazz style. A couple of other good books are "Here it and Sing It" by Judy Niemack (Hal Leonard 00001001) and "Scat! Vocal improvisation techniques" by Bob Stoloff (Gerard & Sarzin Publishing Co. AM 949421). There are a lot of good texts out there to explore!

Since improvisation involves a solid understanding of harmony, this chapter is all about jazz chord nomenclature. Following is a list of common jazz chords with notated examples and chord symbols. The examples are notated twice: first stacked from middle C, then as a more open voicing with root and 7th at the bottom. The second versions are more typical jazz voicings.

Here is a quick explanation of upper structure terms such as 9, sharp 11 (#11) and 13. In jazz, the majority of chords include some version of a 7th. We commonly use many of the "higher" chord tones, which are called upper structure notes, i.e., above the 7th. So in a C major 7 chord, the D is the 9th, the F# is the #11, and the A is the 13th. Exception: in examples 1 and 2 below, you will see the A notated as a 6th, not a 13th. This is because there is no 7th in the chord. Also, there is another school of thought that does not use the 13 or b13 nomenclature, but prefers to call it 6 and #5. It is up for debate, but in this book, I will use the 13 and b13 nomenclature, as these notes are upper structure notes in my opinion. Though we think of the chord tones as ascending numerically (1-3-5-7-9-#11-13), the notes do not have to be stacked in their numerical order. For instance, as seen in some of the notated examples, the 9th is often voiced below the 3rd. You will learn more about this in the various chord examples throughout this book.

Major Chords:

1. **C major 6:** this is a major triad, plus the 6th step of the major scale.

2. **C major 6/9:** CMa^{6}, plus the 9th (D), which is the 2nd step of the major scale. Notice the open voicing made up of 4ths – this is a common voicing for this chord.

3. **C major 7:** this is a major triad, plus the 7th step of the major scale (B).

4. **C major 9:** CMa^{7} plus the 9th (D), which is the 2nd step of the major scale. This is another chord that is often played as a stack of 4ths. This is sometimes notated as CMa^{13}. See last chord in notation below.