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**Article 9:
Chronic Jazz**

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Chronic Jazz

by Bob Taylor – ©2006 Visual Jazz Publications

Ouch – that nagging backache ... my allergies ... those same old chronic sounds in my jazz ensemble ...

OK, the title is a bit off-the-wall, but there are definitely some chronic maladies that beset young (or sometimes experienced) jazz ensembles.

So how do you know if you have “chronic jazz?” One way to find out is to check over a recording or video of your group in action – and see if you spot any of the following symptoms.

Ten Symptoms of Chronic Jazz

These chronic jazz symptoms are not in any special order – they’re just written as they happened to pop into my random mind ...



1. Rhythm Section / Horns Lobotomy

Sometimes it seems like some bands have undergone a lobotomy of sorts – the horn and rhythm section sides of the brain don’t or won’t communicate. This is generally caused by:

- 1) Ignorance – not knowing what and where the points of musical interaction are)
- 2) Apathy – the horns and rhythm section are musically boring to each other, so they each get tuned out by the other.

Fortunately, these problems can usually be fixed without major surgery. You need to help each section see where and how to interact – with dynamics, phrasing, and precise entrances.

2. Feature Stiffness



Your feature soloist on that ballad has worked so hard to polish every note and phrase – and it sounds “stiffly perfect.” There are two basic problems here: rigid rhythms and weak embellishment. Students usually have the classical melody mindset here – play it as written! But with some creative tweaks, the melody can (and should) become personal and expressive

Look for a future jazzView article on this topic!

3. Overactive Director



You’ve seen him – he’s the one who would rather be directing Wind Ensemble, so he directs every beat in each jazz ensemble tune. Or, she’s the one who knows it’s not hip to direct all the notes, so she stands in front, snaps her fingers the whole time and does little else.

The other extreme is director disappearance – and with an experienced band, that may not be a bad choice at times. (Count Basie did pretty well from the keyboard.) Here are some things a director should do ...

- Get the right tempo counted off and adhered to.
- Fix balance and dynamic problems as they happen.
- Assist with microphone issues when necessary.
- Add some emphatic directing once in a while on strong passages.
- Handle rubato passages, especially with entrances and cutoffs.

4. End of Phrase Anxiety



I’ve heard plenty of decent jazz phrases that unfortunately meet an early demise. Why? The sudden realization that you’ve almost made it through a swing phrase is enough to make you rush to the end of it.

It’s absolutely amazing how many times a swing phrase will be rushed towards the end, especially when there are consecutive eighth-notes. Getting students to settle down and really nail the triplets will do wonders for the ensemble phrasing. Instead of feeling tense, the music will feel relaxed and comfortable – while still precise.

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5. Reversed Swing

Two ways to kill the swing feel are also – unfortunately – two of the easiest things to do. They are:

- 1) Accenting all the downbeat eight-notes
- 2) Playing downbeat eighths short instead of fully legato.

Correcting those two problems goes a long ways towards getting a smooth swing feel in the ensemble. And it usually takes concentrated practice with younger musicians, playing scales and passages until the offbeats get accented and the downbeats get their full value.

6. Rhythm Section Depression

Every day it's the same old thing – looks like nothing's gonna change ... Yep, it would get pretty depressing if you felt trapped by routine day after day. But there are plenty of rhythm section members who dutifully crank out background music – the same dynamics, the same textures, the same styles.

Rhythm section players need to break out of the rut and experience interactive jazz. It begins with each player learning to use a variety of sounds and approaches on his or her instrument, switching between them to provide contrast. Then the next step is using a variety of textures, densities, and dynamics to build interest and excitement in the music. In time, the rest of the ensemble will catch the fever!

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7. Hyperactive Soloist

There are several varieties of hyper-activity in soloists: there's the non-stop talker, the faster-the-better player, and the ultimate higher-faster-louder musician.

I remember one high school trumpet player at a festival who basically struggled through one chorus of a blues solo, then continued struggling (musically) up an octave. After the first 2 or 3 high notes, the back of the auditorium practically exploded in yells and applause (nice support group). Once again, a weak solo was saved by the 3 mythical measurements of jazz – higher, faster, and louder.

Directors need to take a close look at how high, fast, loud, and wall-to-wall sound get rewarded and reinforced in rehearsals and concerts.

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8. Anemic Expression

Bands often tend to be heavy on volume but light on expression. Why? Maybe it's the controlled environment – directors demand precision at the expense of expression. Also, most players are just aware of the opportunities for expression. For example, falloffs are often weak in horn sections, vibrato is misplaced or missing, and there is generally little use of special effects.

Sectional rehearsals are a good place to discover and hone expressive areas in the music. A section that expresses together progresses together!

9. Balance Problems

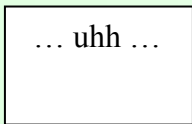


Almost always, someone in the ensemble is too loud or too soft. Find and fix the problem areas, to restore the proper balance.

Other things that lead to balance problems:

- Misplaced direction of horns
- Bad setup arrangement in the rhythm section
- Rhythm section settings (volume, tone) in the guitar or bass

10. Tempo amnesia



The director counts off a tempo and the band promptly forgets it – they quickly settle into a tempo that's easier or more familiar. Sometimes it's the director's problem – there's a big responsibility in kicking off a tempo that works for the tune.

Directors and players should be keenly aware of the tempo from the countoff through the first minute of the tune, in order to make corrections and keep the time on track.

Conclusion

With these tips, you should be better equipped to recognize and treat the 10 symptoms of Chronic Jazz. Here's to your musical health!