



Jazz Articles by Bob Taylor
from The Art of Improvisation, Sightreading Jazz, and More!
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**Article 12:
Teaching Students
to Swing**

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Teaching Students to Swing – Part 1

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It seems like some people were “born swinging” ... and I wasn’t one of them.

I was classically trained in trumpet and didn’t hear any significant amount of jazz until later in high school. When I went off to college at Brigham Young University, I was still fairly clueless about swing – other than knowing that eighth-notes were uneven (the “doo-be-doo-be” approach). The other trumpet players in the jazz band would tell me “no, that’s not right – it goes like this” and then would sing or play how it was supposed to go. When I asked them how they *knew* that, they would tell me, “You just gotta feel it, man” – and that left me even more frustrated. What was I supposed to feel, and how would it turn the printed music into actual swing?

The “obvious” answer was that I needed to listen to a ton of jazz and figure out the artists made it swing. Eventually I got the hang of it, but it was a long and too-painful process.

The Light Bulb

Years later as a grad assistant I was conducting that band and preparing Thad Jones’ “Cherry Juice” for a performance at the Pacific Coast Collegiate Jazz Festival. There was one section that just wasn’t swinging like it should. We listened to the recording over and over, but it just wasn’t clicking. As I took the piece home and analyzed it further, I realized that Thad’s band was playing consecutive dotted quarters *unevenly*. There was the answer.

But then I wondered – how many other gems of swing were still hiding on the music paper, waiting to be discovered?

The Birth of Sightreading Jazz

That's when I began writing *Sightreading Jazz*, to describe the guidelines of swing reading and phrasing. I was pleased to discover that players could learn and understand the principles of swing without a teacher having to demonstrate every rhythm and combination of rhythms to them.

At the time I taught a music reading class at Pasadena City College, and the main challenge was getting classically trained musicians to swing authentically. (Hmm, a strange sense of déjà vu ...)

I sat at the kitchen table many a night, writing and poring over music exercises, until I had a method book that explained the principles and added plenty of customizable exercises to try them out.

Sightreading Jazz has now been through a number of printings and is in use at schools and privately around the world. It gives you the guidelines and power to phrase swing authentically, without relying on guesswork or someone else's feedback.

Learning and Listening

So what's the importance of listening to swing – can we skip the listening and just “read the manual?” Definitely not – we need to reinforce and enjoy the nuances and feel of swing often in our favorite recordings. Some players can innately or quickly pick up the principles of swing by only listening to music (although explaining the principles would prove a lot more difficult). I believe most of us are not that adept – we need to understand the guidelines to accelerate our learning of swing, just like knowing the grammar of a foreign language speeds your ability to speak it.

Here's a simple “litmus” test for your ability to swing:

1. Sit in with a group of musicians who know how to swing.
2. Pick a swing-style chart with few or no articulation markings.
3. Read the chart together, and your rhythms and articulations should all basically match – without explanations or stop-and-go corrections.

It's a great feeling to know that your basic sense of swing works well, and that you can concentrate on the fine points instead of stumbling over the basics. And the swing style has made its way into so many types of jazz-fusion these days that a command of swing principles is absolutely essential – in many musical situations.

History Repeats Itself

As I watch younger players develop over the years, I get the sense that history is often repeating itself – players struggle to learn swing, especially in making the transfer from what’s written on the page to what it should sound like. Too often the chosen learning methods end up being 1) trial-and-error, or 2) gradual absorption – both of which are usually slow and error-prone.

So that’s one of my lifelong goals in music – to help others see a faster and more effective way to learn and teach the art of swing. And perhaps at least that part of history won’t have to be repeated ...

Next Time ...

Speaking of younger players, I’ve observed that there are some very common pitfalls they experience as they begin to learn the swing style. What’s also interesting is that many jazz band directors don’t seem to know how to specifically correct those problems. So, the ensemble “doesn’t swing” – but they’re still trying hard.

In the next article, “Teaching Students to Swing, Part 2” I’ll examine these pitfalls and what students and directors can do about them. The results can be amazing – I’ve seen them time and again in clinic situations. Like a large ship benefiting from a small rudder, a jazz band swings as well as it understands and pays attention to the key elements of swing.

Until next time ...