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**Article 29:  
Learning Standards  
- The Easy Way**

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## The Visual Approach to Learning Standards

by Bob Taylor – ©2007 Visual Jazz Publications

Isn't it amazing – we can usually learn to hum the melody to a tune pretty quickly, but learning the chord progression to that tune is often a long and painful process. Sure would be nice if there were an easier way ...

Actually, there is – or, there are. I know two ways to learn to remember jazz chord progressions. One method is the more complete approach, where you learn to construct “helper” bass lines and more. I explain that in detail in Level 3 of “The Art of Improvisation,” and it's a technique that's proven quite effective in getting a grasp on chord changes.

### The Visual Approach

The other approach – the one we'll discuss here – is even simpler. Although not as extensive, as the bass-helper method, it still gives you a solid foothold with chords, regardless of your instrument or voice.

The key to this approach is *visual* – no surprise there, considering the approach of Visual Jazz ... Here are the steps in the process:

1. Organize the form of the tune into a simple map.
2. Find the overall key centers in each section of the map.
3. Link the key centers visually to get a connected framework.
4. Memorize the framework picture to use in your performance.

Let's take a look at each of these steps and how they work ...

▶ What's the Visual Approach to learn chord progressions for standard tunes?

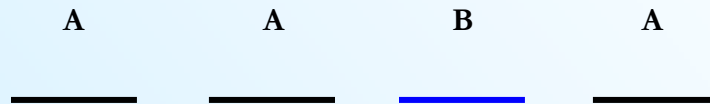
## Step 1: Finding the Form

The first task in getting a grip on standard tunes is knowing and being comfortable with the form of the tune. This actually involves two skills: the ability to see what the form is, and the ability to keep track of where you are in the form when you're playing the tune. If you don't have the first skill, the second one is nearly impossible. For the second skill, practice and a metronome can prove quite valuable – we won't take the time here to discuss skill #2.

So let's take a look at how to find a form ...

The object is to assign letters to the main sections of the tune, repeating letters when the music repeats a section of chords. (If you've studied music theory, this process is probably a familiar one already.) For example, "I Got Rhythm" is an AABA form – four sections, with three of them (the A's) just about identical, and a B section for the bridge. Other common forms include ABAC, AB, and ABCD.

We can create a simple line diagram in our mind to remind us of the form:

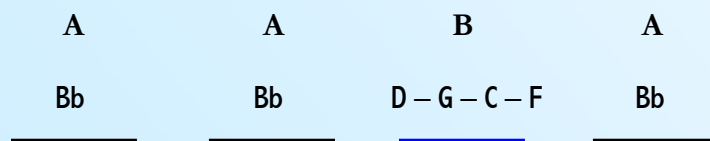


## Step 2: Finding the Key Centers

After you've identified the tune form, the next thing to do is find the key centers in each of the sections (letters). The basic idea here – and I discuss this in more depth in "Article 15: Keep It Simple with Chord Progressions" – is to reduce the equation by converting ii-V-I's and related chords to a single key.

For example, the entire A section of "I Got Rhythm" can be simplified to the key of concert Bb. (Remember: we are simplifying to get a handle on memorizing chords, not to drain the interest out of the music ...) The B section is more involved: the key centers are D, G, C, and F, leading us back to the Bb key center of the A section.

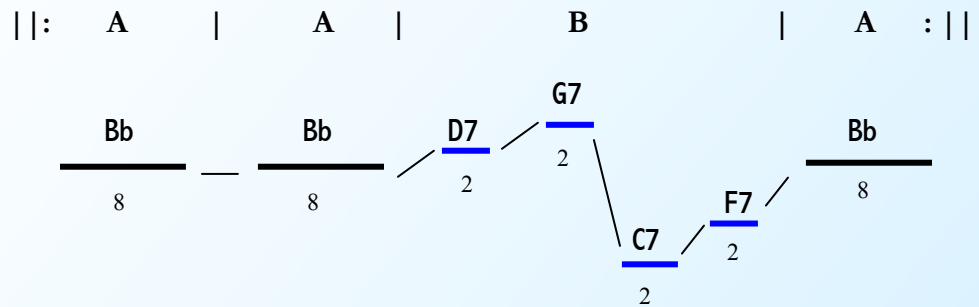
Now our line diagram – for all 32 bars of "I Got Rhythm" – looks like this:



### Step 3: Link the Key Centers

The final step is to add links (connector lines) between the key centers, so we can get a visual framework that goes up and down with the pitch.

Here's how we do it with our I Got Rhythm example:



Notice that I've added the number of bars (8 or 2) under each section as appropriate, and I "transposed down" from the G to the C, in order to keep the diagram from expanding upwards too far. The B section may look a little tricky, but remember that it uses intervals of 4ths, which are very easy to hear. Also, I've added the "7's" to indicate that the key centers on the bridge are dominant chords, not major.

### Step 4: Memorize the Map

There it is – you now have a visual framework, or map, for "I Got Rhythm" that you can use to help you remember and play the chord changes correctly. I have used this model countless hundreds of times in performances of many standard tunes, and it keeps me focused and on target with the chord changes.

► What are the advantages of using a visual map for standard tunes?

The nice thing is that it's a whole lot easier to remember a picture than it is to remember a "laundry list" of seemingly unrelated chords. Hmm ... something about a picture being worth a thousand words? And the best part is that you no longer have your nose buried in a fake book as you play the tune! You're now free to make eye contact with people – or close your eyes – whatever you like!

### More Examples

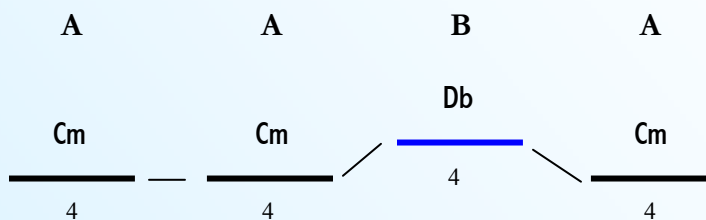
Now that we're having fun, let's keep our visual-map going to help us learn two more standard tunes: "Blue Bossa" and "Have You Met Miss Jones."

### Blue Bossa

The chord form for Blue Bossa is AABA, even though the melody of the tune looks more like ABCD. Here's the key center amp (step 2 of the process):

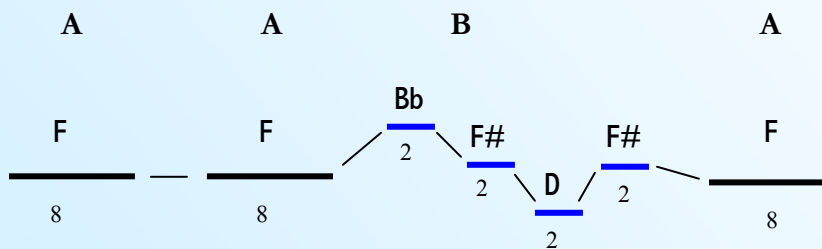


That's pretty simple, compared to the original chord progression! And here's the connected map with lengths:



### Have You Met Miss Jones

The chords for "Have You Met Miss Jones" have long been a challenge for many players. Again, the form is AABA, and the real challenge is the bridge. But with the visual map in place, it gets a whole lot easier to handle:



### **Conclusion**

There's actually more to this model – we've built the basic structure, but there are some helpful refinements that need to be added. Look for these in a future article ... and for now, enjoy the maps and use them to accelerate your learning of standard tunes!