

Jerry Coker's Vehicle-Type concept

How and what select when studying jazz.

by Mike Tracy

When teaching improvisation within the jazz idiom, one faces the challenge of just what material to cover. Each individual is different, with varied background and experience and there always seems to be an overwhelming amount to work on. I always hear – What do I do? Where do I start? Of course, there are scales and chords, pattern and idea study (primarily based on II-V7-I's), various progressions – all of which need to be practiced and memorized in all keys. All essential but no one starts playing music, jazz or otherwise, to focus on the fundamentals, regardless of how necessary. No, they want to play music, melodies and, in case of the jazz musician, to improvise. So, it is important to incorporate working on tunes that go hand-in-hand with all foundation work. Which tunes? How many? How does one select?

I was most fortunate to have studied with the major figures of the jazz education movement – Jamey Aebersold, David Baker, Dan Haerle, David Liebman and Jerry Coker. I spent considerable time discussing all things jazz with them. While all were highly influential, I found that Jerry's approach and articulate manner of explaining and describing challenges the most helpful. One concept of Jerry's that has remained a major part of my jazz experience and that is a significant part of my teaching is his vehicle-type or tune-type concept. He believes that there are general types of tunes, which can be categorized, requiring the performer to approach each differently. That each vehicle-type has specific challenges that need to be addressed if one is to perform each in a convincing manner. I have found that such study helps the individual recognize the value of all the foundation practice, enabling one the opportunity to apply all in an appropriate musical setting.

Listening to the masters and knowing what to listen for is essential. Using Jerry's concept of vehicle-type will help, even encourage, one to focus on the unique qualities of each tune being studied through dedicated listening. It will help one to identify personal strengths and weaknesses and help to recognize how master performers address similar challenges. Transcribing and playing just the melody along with a respected performer can be transformative.

Jerry focused on six vehicle-types:

- **Blues** – a long history of performance practice, has its own unique 'language', a very special interpretation, little resemblance to other vehicle-types, typically simple harmony with no modulations, melodies and harmony can be exceeding simple to complex
- **Standards** – material typically from the 'great American songbook' and popular music of the time, melodies are song-like with long phrases, basic melodic rhythms are quarter to half-note based, often have lyrics, harmony is II-V7-I based, often modulates to different keys, tempos are varied, forms typically are AABA, ABAC
- **BeBop** – typically quick to fast moving, melodies are etude-like, basic melodic rhythm is eighth-note, harmony often based on Standard progressions (contrafact), harmony is II-V7-I based and often altered/enhanced, often modulates to different keys, forms typically are AABA, ABAC

- **Ballad** – slow tempo, expressive, melodies are song-like with long phrases, basic melodic rhythms are quarter to half-note based, often have lyrics, harmony is II-V7-I based, often modulates to different keys, a ballad can be a Standard
- **Latin** – rhythm is straight eighth note feel, can incorporate a variety of styles (bossa, samba, calypso, tango etc.), harmony often is similar to a Standard, II-V7I based, song-like melodies, tempos can vary greatly
- **Contemporary** – newer chord types, not typically II-V7-I based, uncommon chord progressions, modulations are common, melody is often abstract or intervallic based, uncommon form and length, harmony can vary from quick moving (Giant Steps, Moment's Notice) to long durations (So What, Maiden Voyage), has nothing to do with when the tune was written

I like to add a seventh vehicle:

- **Rhythm Changes** – distinctive harmonic progression, AABA form, 32 measures in length, does resemble other vehicles (Standard & BeBop), like the Blues a long history of performance practice, has its own unique 'language', tempos can vary but typically quick moving, melodies and harmony can vary from simple to altered.

Going hand-in-hand with being uncertain of what to study is taking on too much, choosing far more to work on than is practical is a very common misjudgment. Doing so typically leads one to being unorganized, overwhelmed and self-defeating. In addition, some will get so frustrated that they quit or, in the least, accomplish less than possible. Selecting material for study under Jerry's vehicle-type concept helps the student and teacher to define a limited number of tunes that helps one to focus on specific improvisational challenges. Following are two suggested lists: one for the novice student and another one who is far more experience. I believe one can recognize the variety, connections and how it would help focus study. Keep in mind that both lists are just suggestions, with numerous/countless other like options possible.

Novice	Blues	Bag's Groove or Mr. PC
	Rhythm	I've Got Rhythm or Lester Leaps In
	Standard	Autumn Leaves (major and minor II-V7-I's)
	BeBop	Lady Bird
	Ballad	Misty or In A Sentimental Mood
	Latin	The Girl from Ipanema
	Contemporary	Maiden Voyage
Experienced	Blues	Sandu or Blues for Alice
	Rhythm	Anthropology
	Standard	Have You Met Miss Jones or Stella by Starlight
	BeBop	Donna Lee or Confirmation or Hot House
	Ballad	Round Midnight
	Latin	Desafinado
	Contemporary	Dolphin Dance or Giant Steps

I recommend that one reference sources of music that are accurate and clear to read. I default to the Jamey Aebersold series because I know that Jamey works from the published source and that he takes care and pride in only offering what jazz musicians use. The New Real Books by Chuck Sher are outstanding and a very reliable source for material. Pocket

Changes I & II, books that I helped compile with pianist Glenn Fisher, are an excellent source for accurate progressions to over 800 tunes. We researched what were the 'original' chord choices and then added what jazz players use in practice. The iReal Book is also an excellent source. You can transpose easily at a touch and it offers a digital rendering of the progression to hear and practice with.

Following is an excerpt from Jerry Coker's **The Creative Nudge – That Fuels Jazz Improvisation** (Aebersold Jazz, 2007) explaining his vehicle-type concept. I highly recommend reading the entire book, for it offers excellent insights, clear examples, practical and innovative suggestions (it is also short). I also recommend checking out Books by Jerry Coker found under Useful Material by Other Master Educators on my web site MichaelTracy.com. Jerry is a master at identifying challenges and offering practical solutions. His writing style is at a very high level without being academic, certainly user friendly and clear.

Vehicle-Types (or Tune-Types) by Jerry Coker

A thorough examination of tunes commonly selected by jazz improvisers reveals that there are discernible categories of those tunes, categories which drastically affect the needed approaches to improvising on them. There are **Standards** and **Bebop** tunes which, except for their melodies, are very nearly the same, each incorporating short-duration chords, relatively simple chord-types, commonplace progression cells, frequently played at fast tempos, and often contain quickly-transpiring modulations to other keys. Then there are **Modal** tunes, which have extremely long chord durations, few if any changes of chord or key, and no progression cells. There is the **Blues** genre, which is a class unto itself, bearing little resemblance to the other vehicle-types, yet requiring a very special interpretation, simple chord-types, generally using very few changes of chord, no modulations, a unique language with respect to chord-types and scales, an unlimited capacity for variations, and the only tune-type that leans heavily on its long history. **Contemporary** tunes are the most recently-established category, characterized by newer chord-types and corresponding scales, a general absence of common progression cells, a less-traditional approach to length and formal structure, and a more variegated approach to chord durations. Some of the best composers of contemporary tunes would include Wayne Shorter, Ron Miller, Joe Henderson, and Tom Harrell. (Herbie Hancock is another excellent example, MT)

Finally, there are **Ballads**, which by nature of their very slow tempo and mood, and their especially thoughtful, very specific harmonies, are in a class by themselves.

The approaches to improvising on the various vehicle-types are drastically different, as would be evidenced by recordings as well as by common sense. For example, a fast bebop or standard tune encourages players to use short, simple substance, coupled with linear approach to improvisation, all of which would be misplaced, even ludicrous if used in a modal tune, a blues, or a ballad. Conversely, the fourth intervals, pentatonic scales, and outside playing used in modal tunes would be inappropriate in standards, bebop, blues or ballads. Any of the logical substance for bebop tunes, modal tunes, and blues are likely out-of-place in the ballad, as well as being too simple in nature for most contemporary tunes. So, a different musical 'gear' is necessary if we are to interpret each of the vehicle-types effectively.