Vocal Improvisation in the Choral Classroom

Southern California Vocal Association Fall In-Service

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www.JazzHarmonyRetreat.com

Vocal Improvisation is the spontaneous creation of a melody, rhythm and syllables creating harmony itself, or guided by the harmony of a song. Although no note is technically right or wrong, there are definitely certain guidelines which have led jazz musicians to certain note choices over the years. Improvisation is *not* a skill you ever master – even the most accomplished improvisers are still honing their craft, and evolving!

To get better at improvisation, you must input & output!

- 1) INPUT Listen to others, to recordings, absorb and learn solos
- 2) OUTPUT Practice (and as often as you can)

THE INPUT

One of the best methods of learning is to find some recorded solos (both vocal and instrumental) that you enjoy. Listen to the solos repeatedly, then begin to sing along with them, trying to emulate their sound and phrasing.

Finding good solos is easier than it sounds!

Some singers to check out: Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Chet Baker, Mel Torme, Mark Murphy, Darmon Meader, Michele Weir, Rosana Eckert, John Proulx, Aimee Nolte. Or check out instrumentalists like: Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Chet Baker, Sonny Stitt, Cannonball Adderley, J.J. Johnson, Stan Getz.

THE OUTPUT

Besides listening, you can also check out Michele Weir's iPhone App called "ScatAbility," which allows you to scat with some of the finest vocal improvisers on the planet. Also, check out "iReal B" phone/iPad app which allows you to scat with electronically-produced backing tracks. Finally, check out anything from the Jamey Aebersold "Play-along" series — these now-downloadable MP3s allow you sing jazz tunes and practice improvising with a professional rhythm section! For beginners, I recommend Aebersold's *Blues album — Vol. 2*, and his *Duke Ellington album — Vol. 12*.

Syllables

In general, the goal of the syllables you use should be to mimic the sound of a horn player, not to call attention to the fact that you are a singer doing a silly "scat". Therefore, instead of "squiddly", "squee", "bwee", or "perfaffin", try using neutral syllables instead.

For example: Dah (for a long note), Daht (for a short note),

Or for a 4/4 measure of eighth notes: Da va da va da va da va

Or Da ba da ba da ba

JAZZ LINGO for IMPROVISERS

- "Head" the main part of a tune the part of the song that has the melody/lyrics "Chorus" (not what it means in pop music) once through the entire form/harmony of a tune
- (Often, a *chorus* equals 32 measures. For Blues, one chorus is typically 12-bars long.) "Changes" the chords of a tune
- "Bridge" the middle part of the tune, different from the 'A sections'
- "Fake Book" a book of songs, usually with simply the chords and melody
- "Lead Sheet" a printed version of a song, usually with simply the chords and melody
- "Tag" or "Outro" the ending, not a part of the tune itself.
- "Trading" (usually "Trading eights", "Trading fours", "Trading twos") passing off the improvisation to various players or singers in the band. Usually follows the same order as who improvised earlier in the tune.

The WAY to PLAY

- Melodic Variation Historically, improvisation started when jazz artists simply took the original melody of a song, and simply altered the notes/rhythms slightly, or ornamented them. This is a great approach to get you started!
- Rhythm a strong rhythm can be the backbone of your improvisation.

 Exercise: improvise with only one note, the key center for instance, and concentrate on varying the rhythm instead.
- Shape a strong shape can also be the foundation of your improvisation.

 Exercise: improvise without worry about "in-tune" notes or whether the notes fit the chords. Try instead to create a good shape.
- Motive/Sequence Practice taking an idea and using it as a motive, i.e. a germ of an idea that you keep using (with direct repetition, or altering its pitch).
- Guide Tones the 3rds and 7ths of each chord are the most defining notes of the harmony. If you learn to sing the guide tones, it will help you maneuver any chord progression.
- Simplify your ideas one, two, or three notes can be enough to say something poignant.
- Space we're often so concerned about what notes we sing, that we forget that space helps makes everything we say much more powerful!
- Arpeggios and scales if you know basic chord theory, try arpeggiating each chord on a lead sheet. For instance if you see CMaj7, sing 1-3-5-7-5-3-1, then continue to the next chord and arpeggiate 1-3-5-7-5-3-1, etc...
 - You can practice scales in a similar manner, but this generally gets into a bit more advanced discussion.
- Licks certain melodic ideas (usually very "catchy") have been used repeatedly by many jazz singers/instrumentalists. Listen for these licks, and steal them for your own use!

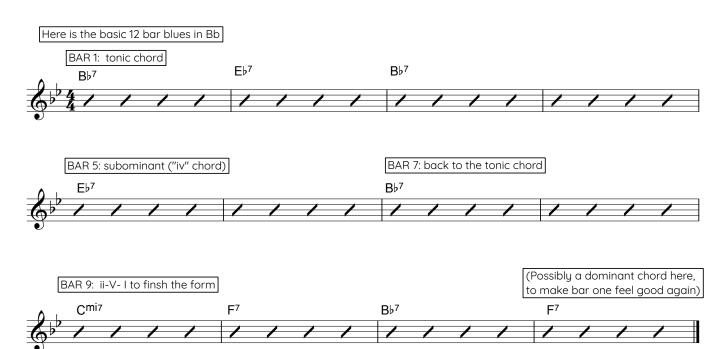
Improv over 12-bar Blues

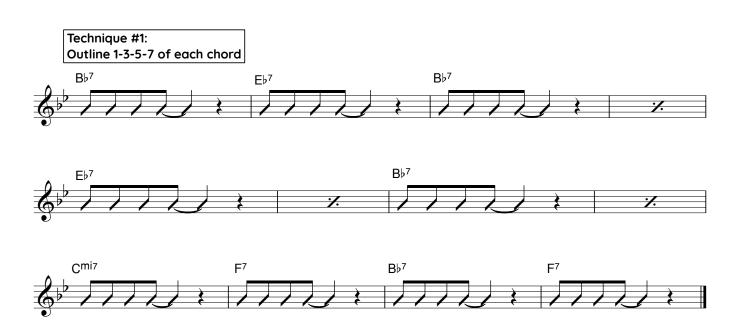
Dr. Jeremy Fox

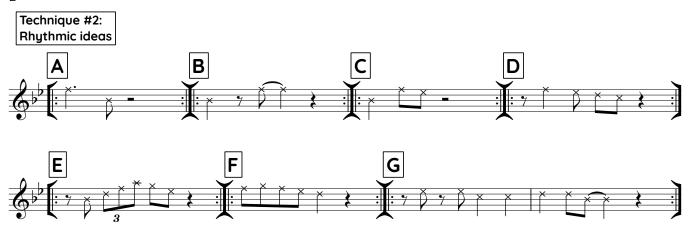
12-bar blues, 12-bar **minor blues**, and **("I Got") rhythm changes tunes** are the 3 most common types of jazz tunes. Learn to improvise over these, and you have the foundation for improvising over many jazz tunes.

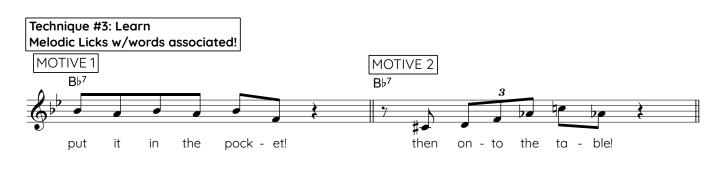
Most all 12-bar blues forms share a few basic characteristics:

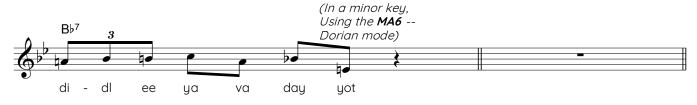
- Movement from a tonic to subdominant in bar 2 and 5
- Movement back to the tonic sometime between measures 9 11
- Typically in jazz, a faster "harmonic rhythm" in bars 9 12

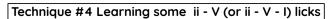


















JAZZ RHYTHM





Improv(e) Licks to Borrow or Steal







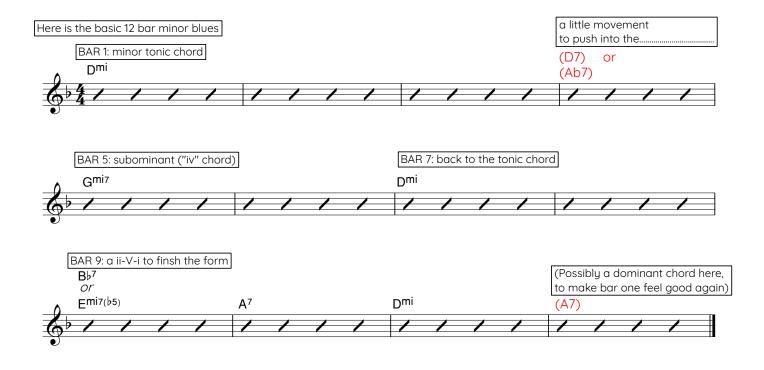
Improv over 12-bar Minor Blues

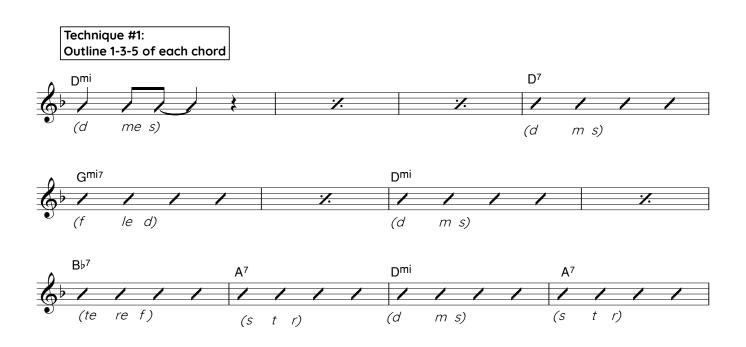
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Most all 12-bar blues forms share a few basic characteristics:

- Movement from a tonic to subdominant in bar 5
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Circle Songs

for the aspiring choir

composed by Dr. Jeremy Fox - www.JeremyFox.net

Note to Directors

Circle-Singing can offer singers a welcome departure from our day-to-day rehearsal regimen. Circle-Singing allows our singers to QUICKLY create music using simple ideas. From an educational standpoint, it reinforces musical concepts such as: dynamics, shape, tone, and unified section sound. There are also typically opportunities for one or more of your singers to improvise within any particular Circle Song.

This first collection of Circle Songs is meant to introduce you and your singers to improvised group singing in a very user-friendly way. You should congratulate yourself (or contact me to congratulate you) for trying Circle-Singing in your own rehearsals. If you have never attempted Circle-Singing before, your singers will likely respect you for daring to go outside your own comfort zone.

Be careful: Circle-Singing MAY be highly addictive! It is my recommendation to either include one or two Circle Songs within your daily warm-ups; or to use them as incentives, ending your rehearsals with one or two of them. Upon working through these 8 written-out Circle Songs, you may wish to branch out and try improvised Circle Songs of your own!

The Process is simple...

Singers should form an evenly-spaced circle in S A T B formation, staying within their given sections. Each person should be level in the circle - no back rows if possible! Each section of the choir may act as a separate unit. There is often a leader (perhaps you!), who offers the lines to each section. The goal is for every person within the section to help create a unified section sound as quickly as possible. The urge to dominate or "be correct" is strong - stress the importance of setting aside egos in order to be "of the section". If everyone else is singing something different, but a singer knows he or she is singing what the leader has sung, they should follow their group.

Once a section begins singing an idea, they should continue until the leader takes them out or changes the idea. If they are taken out, the group should still try to hear their part in their head, in case the leader brings them back in at any time. The leader can also show dynamics through conducting or using hand gestures. Gesturing may be directed toward the entire circle, or to one section in particular.

If you wish, in order to be heard, you may use a microphone as the leader. It can come in handy when you invite a solo improviser to the middle of the circle.

Use the Circle Songs and the melodies in this collection only as guides - for example, you may choose to give these melodies to different sections in different octaves, or you may use any of the provided melodies as seeds for your own Circle Song. NOTE: in these written Circle Songs, all four melodies are stacked on top of each other. It is up to you to decide the order of which voice part sings when. Also, feel free to conduct dynamics (to one particular section or to the entire group) that are not in the music, in order to emphasize a line's shape. Similarly, you may choose to bring sections of the choir in and out in different orders than what is notated. Trust your instincts, and you are well on your way to creating your own Circle Song!

The History of Circle-Singing

The tradition of improvised group singing is not new to Western Civilization. It can arguably be traced back thousands of years, and more recently to Pre-Civil War times in African-American call-and-response songs. Bobby McFerrin began Circle-Singing in the late 1980's, and now occasionally gives Circle-Singing concerts, utilizing his own group - *the Bobby McFerrin Voicestra*.

Jeremy's workshops which include sessions on Improvisation & Circle-Singing:



www.JazzHarmonyRetreat.com Beginner-friendly camp for choral directors

Circle Song #1 - New Horizons

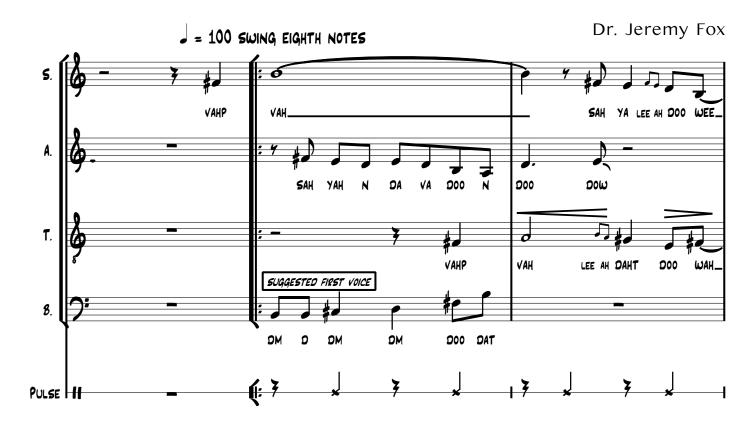
Enter one voice part at a time, until all are singing.

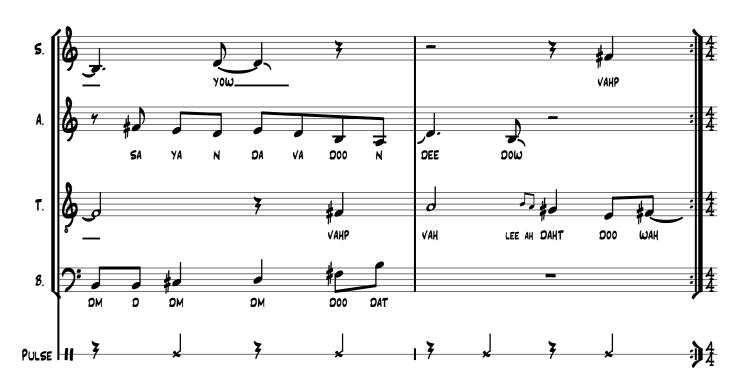
Take voice parts in and out, conduct dynamics, or have a singer improvise on top of the texture.

Keep singing light and energized. Every singer should feel the pulse!



Circle Song #2 - Minor Monday



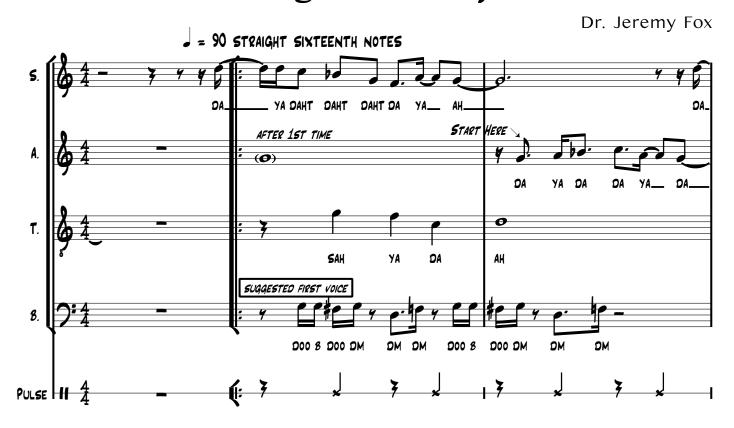


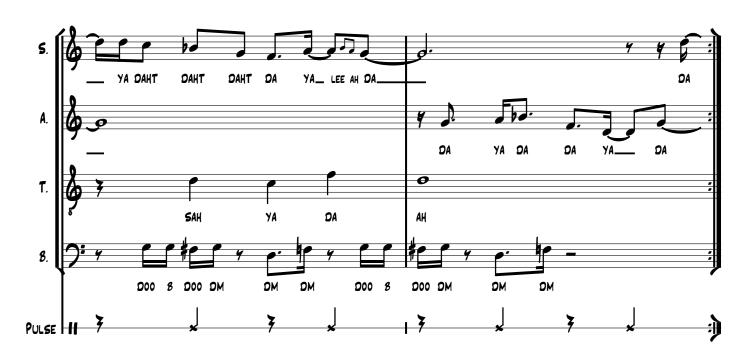
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Please no unauthorized use - visit www.JeremyFox.net to order entire set for your choir.

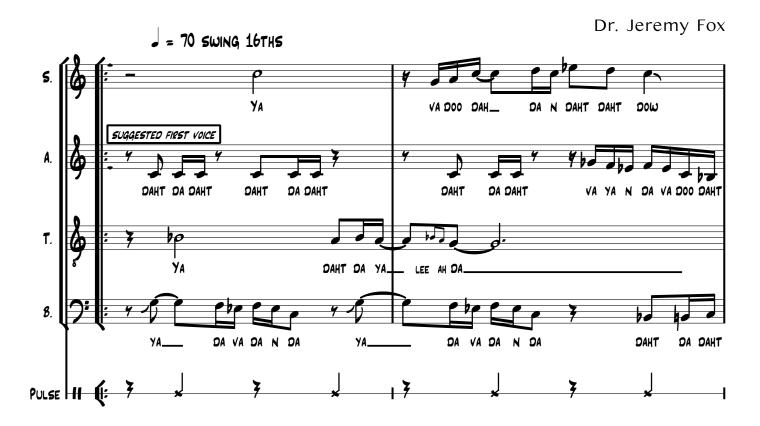
Visit www.JazzHarmonyRetreat.com and www.VocalJazzCamp.com for info about summer camps that include Circle-Singing.

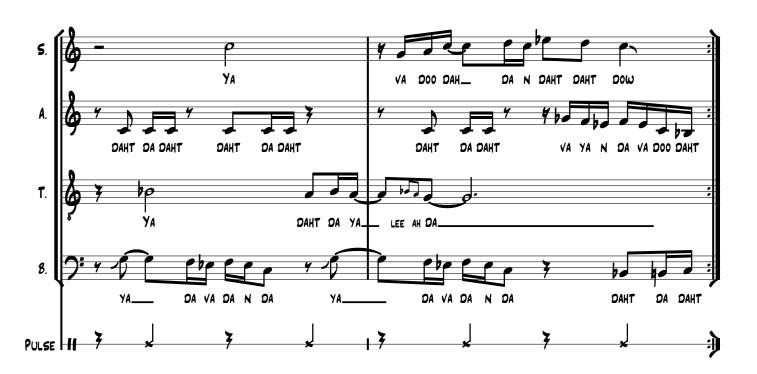
Circle-Song #3 - Funky Fresh



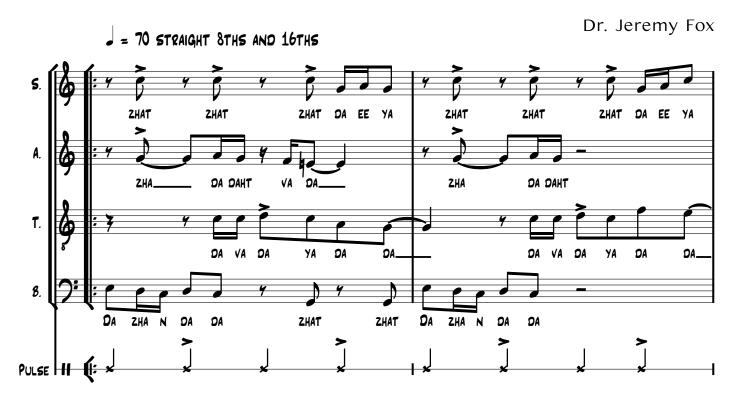


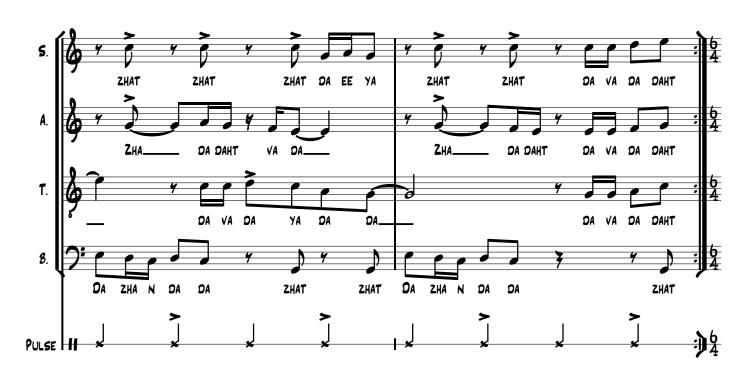
Circle Song #4 - Blue Breakdown

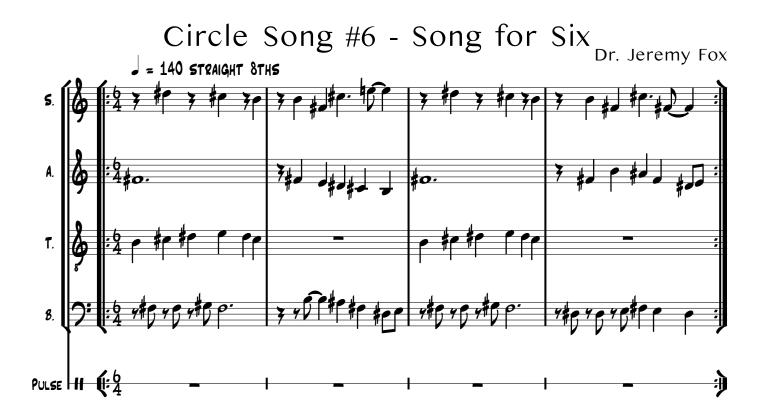


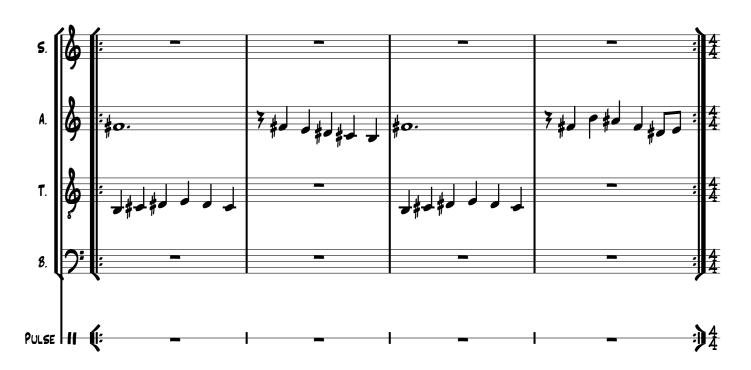


Circle Song #5 - Pentatonic Practice









Circle Song #7 - Seventh Step



<u> مرا</u>

YAH

DAH

DAHT

YA DA

Circle Song #8 - Swing Set

