

LEARN JAZZ STANDARDS

The 5 Step
Quick-Guide
for learning
jazz tunes
like a pro

The **SMART** *way*

BRENT VAARTSTRA

Tell me if you can resonate with any of these common pitfalls:

- ➡ You can't play a jazz standard without looking at sheet music.
- ➡ You learn jazz standards but easily forget them.
- ➡ You frequently get lost in the form when playing them.
- ➡ You generally find them hard to improvise over because you don't understand them.

If you've ever struggled with any of these, I get it! I've been there before too, and it can be frustrating.

In case you don't know me, my name is Brent Vaartstra.



I'm a professional jazz musician out in New York City, an author, and podcaster.

But I'm best known as the jazz musician behind the internationally renowned jazz education website, learnjazzstandards.com. Over the years I've helped thousands upon thousands of musicians that struggle with all of the things I just mentioned.

The good news is you're not alone, and there are solutions to all of these problems!

I find that many of these issues are rooted in the learning process. So many musicians are simply not learning jazz standards the best way. But that's why I'm here to help.

I'm going to teach you a simple **5 step process** for learning jazz standards the smart way. Follow these steps, and I guarantee you will know, play, and understand jazz standards way better.

Let's get started!

Learning by Ear vs. Sheet Music

When it comes down to learning jazz standards the right way, how you do it is crucial. The “how” may seem inconsequential, but it is.

The easy way is to buy some sheet music, read the melody and chords off the page, memorize (or sometimes not) and call it good. That’s undoubtedly the instant gratification way, but I guarantee you that’s not the best way to learn jazz language or any piece of music.

Remember that jazz is a language. One of the most critical parts of learning a language is **mimicking**. You hear something and copy it. If you talk to anyone who is bi-lingual, they will tell you they became fluent by surrounding themselves with native speakers and being forced to listen, decipher and respond.

Jazz is not music meant to be learned from sheet music. It never was. Back in the bebop days in the 1940’s, jazz musicians would pile into clubs and listen to each other play. They would literally pick things up on the bandstand, in rehearsals, and just by listening to records.

That doesn’t mean they couldn’t read music, or never read music, but learning music by ear was always the primary method. That’s something I want you to understand. **Jazz**

is first and foremost aurally learned music. So if you want to become a great jazz improviser, you need to follow in the footsteps of the great jazz musicians before you.

Learning music by ear is not always the easy way, and if you aren’t used to it, you may find it quite challenging at first. But it’s the best way hands down, and the more you do it, the easier it gets.

Don’t misunderstand me either. Sheet music is not bad. Can sheet music play a role in your jazz education? Of course, it can. In fact, reading is an essential part of learning a language. It can be a great tool to conceptualize and analyze jazz language.

It can also be an excellent resource for checking the work your ear has done. If you’ve gone through the process of learning a jazz standard by ear, you may want to check a chord or two you are unsure about or a piece of the melody that seems ambiguous.

Now you may be thinking, **“Okay, I get that it’s more effective to learn them by ear. But how do I go about doing that?”**

In comes my LIST process for learning jazz standards..

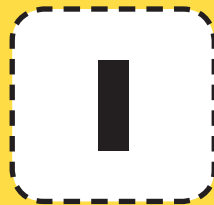
The LIST Process

If you're anything like me, you appreciate an organized step-by-step process of doing things. It's helpful to have a checklist to go through so that you know you are accomplishing something to its fullest extent.

In comes my handy little acronym for learning jazz standards and jazz language in general: **LIST**.



Listen



Internalize



Sing



Transfer



L

Listen

The first step in the process is fairly simple: **listen to the jazz standard.** That may seem like an obvious first move, but you would be surprised how many students rush into learning a song with having barely listened to it.

The most important thing you can do when learning jazz standards is put your instrument away and just listen. Find as many recordings as possible of the jazz standard you want to learn and go through all of them. You need to become acquainted with the song, and without becoming acquainted with it first, you will have started off on the wrong foot.

Only after you have identified recordings and started listening to the jazz standard should you move on to the next step.

PRO TIP #1: Learn the Lyrics

Learning lyrics is extremely helpful for internalizing melodies. Especially in the case of many jazz standards, they are poetic, memorable, and tell the story and essence of the song.



Internalize

This step involves more listening, but a different kind: **intentional listening**.

What do I mean by that? Imagine you are sitting in your living room watching a movie. As long as it's engaging enough for your tastes, it's likely you will sit still, eyes trained on the screen for two hours or more. That's pretty incredible if you think about it.

What if you treated music in the same way you did the movie? In general, it's a great practice to listen to music and give it your full attention, no distractions. But this is especially important to spend time doing when you are trying to learn a new jazz standard.

If you give that song your full attention, you will begin to internalize that song, and it will start to sink into your subconscious.

S

Sing

PRO TIP #2: Finding the basic version of the melody

One common complaint I get is not knowing what the “correct” melody is because jazz musicians take so many liberties. Here’s something to remember: Frank Sinatra is your friend. Frank almost always sings melodies straight.

If it’s a less classic song, identify the original composer or artist who originally performed it. Chances are, they are going to play the melody true to its original intent.

This next step is really important. Singing is a powerful way to prove that you have actually internalized the information you are hearing. No, you don’t have to be a great singer, and sure, if you want, you can whistle or hum.

The primary application of singing involves the melody. Be sure that you can sing the melody of the standard, both along with the recording and on your own **before you learn it on your instrument.**

What singing does is it takes away 50% of the learning process. It proves you have internalized it and all that is left is transferring that musical information to your instrument.

If you want to take singing a step further, try **singing the bass notes.** This will help you begin to learn the harmony (chord progressions) of the jazz standard. Listen in to the bass instrument on your recordings and see if you can sing the roots. This is a more advanced tip, but this will help you along with the next step.

T

Transfer

PRO TIP #3: Listen to the bass notes

Like I mentioned in the Sing step, the bass note movement is very important. For example, if you can identify that the bass player is playing a concert Eb note for the first chord, then all you have to do is figure out what quality it is. Then you listen to the bass note of the next chord. Let's say the following bass note is a concert C. From there you can start to identify the chordal movement.

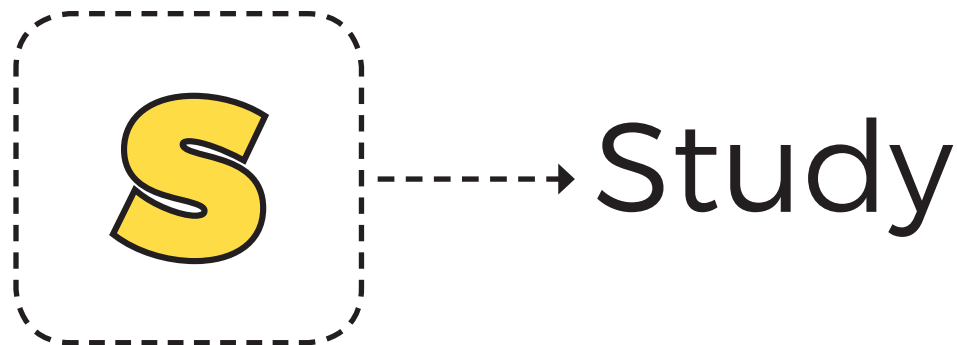
Now, if learning chord progressions by ear is brand new to you and you get stumped, that's okay. This would then be a good time to take a look at the sheet music. But when you do, go through it while listening to a recording, starting and stopping when appropriate to see if you can decipher what's going on by ear.

Now it's time to actually pick up your instrument (you shouldn't have been touching it until now). You should be quite familiar with the song, know the melody, and have at least a grasp on the chord changes depending on where you are at in your musical abilities.

- 1. Transfer the melody.** Start learning the melody on your instrument. Again, this should only be a matter of you taking what you can already sing and finding the notes on your instrument.
- 2. Learn the chords.** This is the most challenging part of learning songs by ear, but I encourage you to do your best! It is incredibly helpful to have a good understanding of how jazz harmony works. The trick is to combine knowledge of building chord progressions and ear training together to identify the quality of the chords (major, minor, dominant...etc.) and how those chords function in the chord progressions.

The Bonus Step

I often like to sneak an extra letter to the **LIST** process and turn it into the **LISTS** process.



If you really want to get inside of the tune and understand it, you've got to study it. How do you do this? Analyze the chord progressions to see what's going on.

Analyzing jazz standards with roman numerals can help you start to understand the function of the chords within chord progressions. When you start to break things down and conceptualize them, it can make everything so much clearer. If you can understand the theory, it will make improvising that much easier.

A lot of what has been presented in this quick-guide is excerpts from the introduction chapter of my eBook [The Jazz Standards Playbook](#).

It's a book that goes through 10 in-depth jazz standard studies and really digs deep into analyzing jazz standards. If you truly understand these 10 jazz standards, it will make improvising and learning any other jazz standard so much easier.

If you think something like that could help you, feel free to check it out at thejazzstandardsplaybook.com.

Thanks for taking the time to read this quick-guide. Start taking action on these steps, and I guarantee you will be blown away by the results!

Before

you go ...

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About the Author



Brent Vaartstra is a professional jazz guitarist and educator living in New York City. He is the blogger and podcast host for **learnjazzstandards.com** which he owns and operates. He actively performs around the New York metropolitan area and is the author of the Hal Leonard publication “*Visual Improvisation for Jazz Guitar*.”