

Jazz & improvising

Improvising is composing at full speed with no rubber. Classically trained players often find it frightening because there is no page to be right about – but the theory you already know is exactly what it runs on. Start with three notes and a form, not with freedom.

THE TWELVE-BAR BLUES IN C

Four bars of I, two of IV, two of I, then the turnaround: V, IV, I, V. Every blues you have ever heard is this shape or a variant of it. Learn it in C, F and B flat and you can sit in with almost anyone.

WHAT THE CHORD SYMBOLS MEAN

SYMBOL	NOTES ON C	NAME	WHERE IT TURNS UP
C	C E G	Major triad	Home. The resting chord in any key.
Cm	C E $\flat$ G	Minor triad	The ii and vi chords; minor keys throughout.
C7	C E G B $\flat$	Dominant seventh	Blues on every chord; elsewhere it pulls to the key a fifth below.
Cmaj7	C E G B	Major seventh	The standard ballad sound – warm and settled.
Cm7	C E $\flat$ G B $\flat$	Minor seventh	The ii of a ii-V-I; the most common chord in jazz.
C6	C E G A	Major sixth	An ending chord in swing; softer than maj7.
C $\emptyset$ / Cdim	C E $\flat$ G $\flat$ (B $\flat$ / B $\flat\flat$)	Half / full diminished	Passing chords, and the vii of a minor key.

YOUR FIRST SOLO, IN SIX STEPS

- 1 Play the rhythm only, on one note. Nothing else. Make it sound good.
- 2 Add a second and third note from the minor pentatonic. Three notes, many rhythms.
- 3 Play a two-bar phrase, then leave two bars empty. Silence is half of a solo.
- 4 Answer your own phrase – same rhythm, different notes.
- 5 Aim for the chord's third or seventh on the change. That is where the harmony lives.
- 6 Steal a lick you love, learn it in all twelve keys, then forget where it came from.

Swing, and why it isn't written

Written as even quavers, played long-short – nearer a triplet feel than a dotted rhythm, and it tightens as the tempo rises. A part marked *swing* is telling you the notation is an approximation. You learn the feel by copying recordings, never from a page.

SCALES THAT WORK OVER THE BLUES

Minor pentatonic – C E $\flat$ F G B $\flat$. Five notes, all safe over all three chords. Where every blues player starts.

Blues scale – the same plus G $\flat$, the blue note. Pass through it, don't sit on it.

Mixolydian – the major scale with a flat seventh. One per chord: C over C7, F over F7. More sophisticated, less forgiving.

See Pentatonic & blues scales for these written out in six keys.

ii – V – I

In C: Dm7 – G7 – Cmaj7. This one progression accounts for more bars of jazz than any other. Learn it in all twelve keys, hands or fingers, until it is automatic – then you can read a standard's chord chart and hear where it is going before you arrive.

TRANSCRIBE BY EAR

Learn one short solo off a recording with no notation. Slow it down, take four bars a day. This is how the tradition is actually taught.

WRONG NOTES RESOLVE

There are no forbidden notes, only notes you leave too early. Land on something unexpected, then step to a chord tone and it sounds intentional.

PLAY WITH PEOPLE

Improvising alone teaches you half the skill. The other half is listening and responding – and that needs a rhythm section, or at least one friend.