

JAZZ ON THE ACCORDION

HOW DO I LEARN TO PLAY JAZZ?

by TONY DANNON

I would like to play jazz. How long will it take me to play good jazz? What do I have to study to play good Jazz Accordion? What did you study to play jazz? These are only a few of the questions I have been asked by students. I have found that most students have the impression that playing jazz is the type of playing that takes just a matter of a few weeks and you are playing jazz. I found, also, that these are the students that have had about three to four years of study and are now ready to start playing jazz. Sometimes I wish it could be that simple.

I would like to point out some of the weaknesses I have found with most of these students. Lack of technique, control of the instrument, knowledge of scales, and harmony. These are the basic requirements needed before attempting to play jazz.

Every student should have a good classical background. How much of a classical background a student should have is a very difficult question to answer. However, it is very safe to say that it is almost impossible to acquire a sufficient classical

background in two or three years of study; even if a student is very conscientious. By acquiring a good classical background, the student is developing technique plus control of the instrument. Remember, playing jazz is spontaneous playing and your fingers must react as fast as your mind thinks. This requires technique and control.

How important is it to have scales? Without a good knowledge of scales it is almost impossible to learn chord construction. Students should know scales not only be able to play but have them by memory. This is practically a study in itself — this requires much time and study.

How important is it to learn chords? Equally as important as to learn scales, without a good knowledge of chords, jazz is impossible. Learning chords is also a study by itself. Much time and study are required.

We must not forget that learning to play jazz is not simple. It's a type of study that requires the foundation aforementioned plus much more painstaking effort than regular studies of the instrument. There is no definite pattern of studies that can be followed. A lot of experimenting must be done by the student himself along with the teacher.

It is important to point out also that a more matured mind is necessary. To be more specific, the students from approximately the ages of 9 to 14 that have been studying the accordion have used these tender years for learning the necessary rudiments. Meanwhile the student is maturing musically and mentally. I am aware of the fact, however, that there are exceptions.

A "Style" in jazz is created by taking ideas or patterns and weaving

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them in a flowing manner. What most beginners in jazz need are ideas. This is what Jazz Accordionists have attempted to put into jazz books. If these books are studied properly, it will give the student the proper beginning of developing a "style."

Take one song in any book, memorize the melody line and the chord progressions, then memorize the take off chorus by associating the different ideas with the corresponding chord. Some of these ideas are repeated in different keys and different chord progressions. When you have memorized most of the contents, this is where the experimental work comes in. Try to incorporate these ideas in your playing of some other songs in the same keys — the chord progressions in songs are all different, so you take one idea from one chord pattern that you have memorized, then another from another song forming a 4 bar phrase. Don't try to form a 32 bar phrase at the beginning because it is almost impossible. This will sound repetitious at first, but don't feel that it is wrong. It is a start and by studying hard and experimenting with different ideas in different keys and different chord progressions, you will find yourself playing a better style of jazz.

In conjunction with studies, remember that doing a lot of listening to other jazz artists is of great help. Remember that setting your aims high is very good, but heights are not achieved in one day or one month. It takes work.

No matter how bad something may sound to you that you have created, remember that it is something you have never done before, and it is but a start. It is very hard to please yourself. Someone else's playing always sounds better, but chances are that he has been playing jazz for years and experience will make the difference. Keep working and experimenting with different ideas that you have memorized, and someday you will find yourself playing fine jazz. One important thing to keep in mind is that good jazz is not how many notes you play in one measure but what kind of notes. Also remember that a good solid beat is very important.

I have employed this method of teaching jazz, and I have gotten results. I hope it will be of help to you. **KEEP SWINGING!**