Rehearsal Strategies: *Swingin' the Blues*

The decision by Jazz at Lincoln Center to include music of other seminal big band arrangers and composers has added a wonderful dimension to an already strong educational approach. This year the focus is not just other arrangers/composers, rather another *band's* approach, and there is no other better band to start with than the Count Basie Orchestra. The early Basie band was the most successful of the Kansas City style, riff or jump bands. The groups were called "*riff*" bands because the arrangements often began their lives as repeated riffs made up on the bandstand with each section and/or soloist artfully dialoguing with the other. They were called "*jump'* bands because of the swinging, danceable nature of the tempo and feel of the music. While the music was always danceable, the Basie band approach was still centered on featuring the great improvisers and blues players within the orchestra. ***Swingin' the Blues*** offers you and your students to explore all of these elements and allows room for you to open the chart up for many possibilities.

Listening

It is important, as always, to start with some listening. There are many great riff tune examples out there, many of which your students have heard such as ***One O'clock Jump***. This could be a great starting place because of its familiarity. Have the students listen for the balance between the section riff and the soloist. Have them check out the groove that is being created by the riff itself. Have them take note of how the soloist plays over the riff without stepping on it. Most importantly, make sure they check out the groove of the band, starting with the rhythm section.

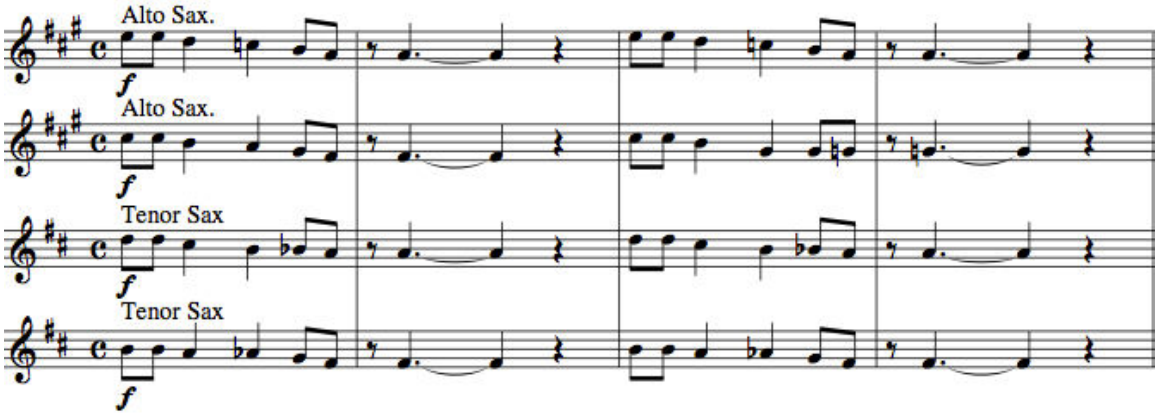
When you do start to listen specifically to recordings of "***Swingin' the Blues***", don't be afraid to check out different recordings. There is a 1947 recording by *Count Basie, His Instrumentalists and Rhythm* that is a slower tempo, small group recording. You can also find a faster 1941 version on YouTube and it is extremely valuable to *see* the band perform. You will find that this tune can work at several tempos, just as long as it grooves. Still, one

of my favorite recordings is the King Cole Trio recording. This is a great recording for rhythm sections to check out because of how hard it swings with just piano, bass and guitar – drummers can actually practice along with the recording and get the feeling of playing with that great trio.

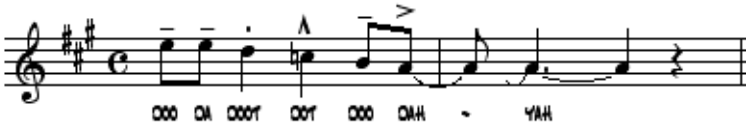
Again, when checking out the recordings, be sure to take note of subtleties about articulation, section playing, sound and balance, time and subdivision – all of the musical things that make that performance special. Sing along with the recordings and try to capture those subtleties before even beginning to play.

Articulation

Once the band does start to rehearse the parts, it is important that they play the same articulations that were sung. Many of these articulations are not notated and the ensemble must agree before hand on those articulations. For example, the very first sax riff (and main riff of the tune) has no articulation written:

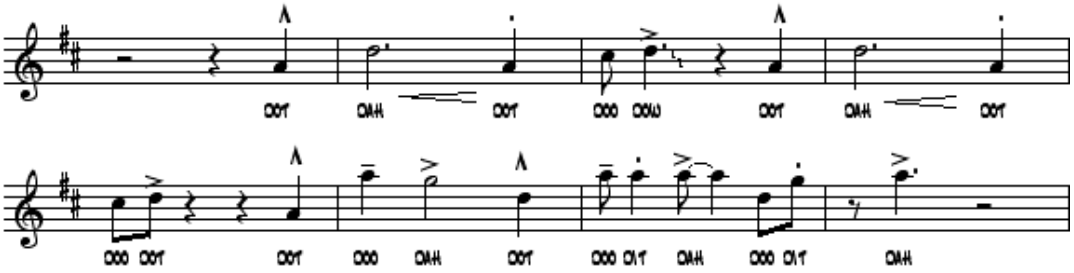


Have your students pay attention to how the 8th notes are played – are they all treated the same? How are the quarter notes played? On the original 1938 recording you will notice that the 8th notes are long and the quarter notes are short. Also, notice that the 8th note at the end of the first measure actually sounds as though it is tied to the next measure:



These little things will make a huge difference and will show whether you play well as a section and ensemble. The same will hold true for the simple *wa-wa* in the trombones; it is important to make that effect sound like one instrument. Balance and articulation are key.

The brass melody at letter C is played with a pretty even articulation on the recording but this doesn't mean that you can't make it your own. The style should be set by the lead trumpet and there is room for interpretation. For example, it is often effective to make something happen with held notes (whole notes, dotted half notes, etc.) Your lead player may desire to do something with that long note at the beginning of the phrase or put a slight fall somewhere or put a little more emphasis on a particular note:



I've taken a lot of liberties here, over-exaggerating to make the point that your lead player should have some latitude. The main thing is to make it swing and to play together.

Some effects are better examined if you can actually see how the players created them. The trombone effect at the 9th measure of letter C is a perfect example. It is tempting to try to use the slide to create this effect, but if you watch the Basie band trombones on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYLbrZAko7E) or the JLCO rehearsal video, you will notice that this effect is actually a lip slur. The sound is totally different if you try to do it with the slide. The trombone soli then at letter D should be interpreted by the lead player and followed by the section just as the brass followed the lead trumpet at letter C.

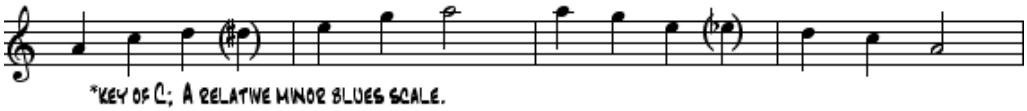
These same general principles will hold true throughout the chart. Some places to pay particular attention to are: letter I, the entire ensemble; letter J, brass (put some *stank* on it!); letter K, brass (again, watching the videos will help you understand how to use the mutes). Remember this is a riff arrangement and each repeated riff should swing even without a rhythm section!

Solos and Transitions

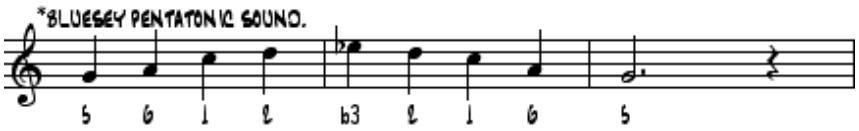
The Basie band, while still being a dance band, has always kept the soloist as an integral part of its music. The band had (and still has) many great soloists and they were featured as much as possible, always reminding us that we were listening to a great jazz band. For the purpose of recording, the arrangements needed to remain a certain length. Live, however, could be a different story. With that in mind, it is entirely possible to open

sections up for more solos. Letter D can be opened for solos using letter E as the interlude/transition to go on. The same can be done with letter F (solos) and letter G (transition), letter H (solos) and letter I (transition). Letter J would probably be the last section I would consider opening up because from there is where the band starts to build toward the shout section at letter K and continue to transition to the end. Letter L serves as what we can call a "*bear down and groove*" section preparing us for the drum solo at letter M.

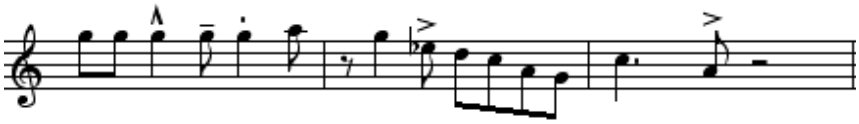
I'll discuss these transitions more in the next section. For now let's go back to the solos. It is important for soloists to understand what it means to play the blues. This is not bebop language and it is not necessary to be a great bop player to play well on this tune. However, students must keep in mind that playing the blues does not mean playing the "blues scale". Don't allow students to simply play up and down the scale without regard to melody or chord changes. They will play without a sense of how to use the leading tone and resolving tone (found in parenthesis in the below example) in creating melody. Further, blues still has a progression of chord changes that we want the students to hear and the notes of a single blues scale will not correspond to all of the chords in that progression. To get notes that correspond to more of the chords, the blues scale found at the relative minor can be used:



Also, the blues sound must be heard and experienced to give a better understanding and this does not necessarily mean through use of the blues scale. Try using this 5-note scale (taken from the blues scale built from the relative minor) to help teach students to construct bluesy melodies: 5 – 6 – 1 – 2 – b3 – 2 – 1 – 6 – 5:



When making melodies from this sound, it will still be important to be rhythmic with swinging articulations. Note the rhythm and articulation of the following example:



Finally, the soloist must be aware of blues phrasing and be aware of the rest of the band parts. Common blues phrasing breaks down into three 4-bar phrases – a melodic statement, a repeat of that statement and a conclusion of the statement. This is not to say that the entire solo need be built that way, but an awareness of this phrasing will allow the soloist to construct ideas that display form. Also, the band's riffs and melodies often dialogue with or set up the soloist. Students should be aware of the band parts so as not to step on the entrances. This is even true of the drum solo at letter M. Check out the way Jo Jones plays these solo breaks with regard to the band. Find as many examples of great soloists as possible and observe and assimilate what they do – in other words, transcribe!

Rhythm Section and Chart Direction

Last but certainly not least we need to discuss the rhythm section. This is the motor that drives the band through this chart. The Basie rhythm section is the most emulated rhythm section in jazz music and for good reason. The drive and pulse of the guitar, bass and drums with the tasteful comping of Basie at the piano has come to define what it means to swing and propel a big band. We constantly preach about the quarter note pulse, but what makes this rhythm section so unique is the balance of the section. The drummer needs to be sensitive to the volume level of the guitar and that's where the balance should be set. Once a solid groove is established, then the rhythm section (especially drums) will guide the band through the arrangement paying attention to form and texture. The use of the hi-hat or ride cymbal or cross-stick will have different effects on the intensity of the ensemble. Be sure to plan carefully as to how to orchestrate the arrangement.

The first half of the chart establishes the tune – sax riff, brass melody, soloists. After the final transition (letter I), the arrangement changes keys and starts to gear up for the climax. It is important for the rhythm section to be patient during the first half of the chart and not peak too soon. After this transition, the drums and rhythm section need to be prepared to set up the shout section at letter K, as mentioned earlier. Though this is a shout section, however, don't give it all away yet because it is not the final climax. You will "*bear down*" at letter L and then propel the band into the drum solo at letter M. The drummer

then needs to lead the band to the climactic shout section at letter N. Now, when the audience thinks you've given it everything, you build letter O to the end. When done right with patience and purpose, the effect created is one of undeniable joy and spirit.

This is why we call it ***Jump Music!*** Let your students explore, experiment and find an infectious groove that they can share each other and on the Rose Hall stage in New York. We hope to see you there next Spring!

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