

Thoughts on Developing Jazz Vocabulary

Listening, Imitation, Analysis, and the Language of Bebop

Brian W. Gorrell | A self-directed jazz study resource | Revised from teaching notes © 2017/2026

Jazz is a language. Its vocabulary consists not only of recognizable melodic fragments but also of inflection, articulation, rhythmic placement, and phrasing. The great improvisers draw on a shared tradition without merely repeating it: they absorb the language deeply enough to speak in their own voices. This lesson offers a practical path from listening to that kind of fluency, using the opening of Charlie Parker's "Donna Lee" as a concentrated study in bebop vocabulary.

1 Learn the sound before the explanation

Consider how a child learns to speak. Listening and imitation come first; formal grammar comes later. Jazz should be approached the same way. Notation and theory are valuable, but neither substitutes for knowing how the music actually sounds. A transcription captures pitches and approximate rhythms; it cannot fully convey a performer's articulation, time feel, timbre, vibrato, or phrasing.

- Listen actively and repeatedly to recordings that move you emotionally. Those reactions are clues to the sound you want to develop.
- Sing phrases before trying to reproduce them on your instrument. Aim to hear the entire phrase internally.
- Copy musical details—not just notes. Ask where the phrase sits against the pulse, which notes receive emphasis, and how the phrase is shaped.
- Make listening an ongoing habit, not a preparatory box to check before "real" practice.

Pianist Hal Galper has described vocabulary as the material that makes learning the process of improvisation possible: we learn the process by doing it. Vocabulary is therefore neither the goal nor a shortcut. It is what allows meaningful improvisational practice to begin.

2 Transcribe, memorize, and make the language usable

Working out a solo by ear can be demanding, but the effort links musical hearing directly to physical execution. Published transcriptions can also be useful—provided that the recording, not the page, remains the authority.

- Before using a written transcription, know the original recording well enough to sing along with its phrases.
- Study contrasting performers and tempos. Include ballads: their exposed phrasing demands particularly close attention to subtle expressive detail.
- Memorize the passage completely. Reading a phrase accurately is not equivalent to owning it.
- Choose compelling fragments, identify their harmonic functions, and practice them until they can be recalled fluently in all twelve keys.
- Balance this work with tone, technique, scales, études, repertoire, ensemble playing, and thoughtful guidance from a qualified teacher.

The object is not to build a warehouse of licks. It is to develop an ear, memory, and command of the instrument so that the vocabulary can be recombined naturally.

3 Why “Donna Lee”?

Charlie Parker’s “Donna Lee,” recorded for Savoy, offers a compact and exceptionally rich encounter with bebop language. Its changes derive from “Back Home Again in Indiana.” Instead of learning dozens of unrelated patterns, we can investigate one short phrase and discover how Parker connects harmonic targets through chromatic movement and rhythmic imagination.

The examples below retain alto-saxophone notation and the chord symbols used in the original handout. Concert-pitch players should account for the instrument transposition when applying the exercise.

Begin with the harmonic skeleton

The opening movement can be understood as I–VI7–II7: in the notated key, Fmaj7 moves to D7 and then G7. Compared with a purely diatonic vi–ii progression, changing the latter chords to dominants introduces leading tones and stronger chromatic voice leading. Focus first on each chord’s third and seventh: those tones identify chord quality and clarify the movement between harmonies.



Figure 1. The opening harmonic framework: Fmaj7–D7–G7 (from the original handout).

When examining the melody, listen for Parker’s use of thirds and sevenths as stable points amid chromatic lines. Chord tones should be heard as destinations, not merely labeled after the fact.



Figure 2. Opening “Donna Lee” phrase, with selected chord-tone targets identified.

Hear the phrase across the barline

One striking feature is rhythmic displacement. A line can imply harmony clearly even when its entrance is delayed or important notes fall at unexpected metric positions. In the original notes, I propose a useful teaching thought experiment: imagine the phrase beginning earlier, then shift its entrance. This is an interpretive way to hear the phrase—not a documented claim about Parker’s compositional process.



Figure 3. A pedagogical rhythmic repositioning of the phrase to reveal its linear harmonic motion.

Understand the major bebop scale

The major bebop scale adds a chromatic passing tone between the fifth and sixth degrees of a major scale (for F major, D-flat between C and D). The resulting eight-note collection can help chord tones align with strong beats in continuous eighth-note lines, depending on where the line begins.



Figure 4. Major bebop scale example from the handout.

Compare the original phrase with the variation below. The added chromatic motion produces a different route to a familiar chord tone. The lesson is not that every line must use a fixed scale pattern; it is that purposeful passing tones help the melody retain harmonic direction.



Figure 5. A variant phrase using descending major bebop-scale motion.

Hear altered dominants as voice leading

The D7 sonority is enriched with a flat ninth; an F-natural within the melodic figure may also be understood as a sharp ninth relative to D. The half-whole diminished collection supplies both colors over a dominant chord. The original handout explains the motion through individual voices: E-flat resolves toward D, C toward B, and F-sharp toward F. Hearing these resolutions is more important than memorizing a scale name.



Figure 6. Half-whole diminished vocabulary and its relationship to the altered dominant sound.

The subsequent G7 passage also demonstrates the sound of 3–5–7–9 chord extensions. Compare the altered ninth color of D7 with the natural ninth on G7; both are parts of the larger melodic argument.



Figure 7. Revisiting the original phrase: chromaticism, extensions, and voice leading.

4 The all-keys assignment

Analysis is only useful to an improviser when it becomes sound and muscle memory. Here is a practical sequence for turning this one passage into usable vocabulary:

- Listen to the original recording repeatedly. Sing the opening phrase accurately, including articulation and time feel.

- Learn the phrase by ear on your instrument. Use the printed example to check details, not as a substitute for listening.
- Memorize the phrase in the original alto-saxophone key; play it without written melody.
- Sing and play the guide tones (thirds and sevenths) of Fmaj7–D7–G7, then identify where the Parker line approaches them.
- Transpose the opening phrase through all twelve keys. Reference the chord changes when necessary, but not a written-out melody.
- Create two small variations—one through rhythmic displacement, another using chromatic approach notes—without losing harmonic direction.
- Gradually extend the project phrase by phrase until you can play the complete 32-bar melody of “Donna Lee” in all twelve keys from memory.

This is a long-term project rather than a weekly assignment. In a 2014 residency at the University of Central Oklahoma, Bob Mintzer emphasized the particular value of choosing a melody like “Donna Lee” for all-keys study because it contains so much bebop language. I took the challenge seriously and spent much of a summer working through it; the experience transformed my own understanding of the material.

5 Questions for continued study

- What is the difference between accurately playing the notes and authentically reproducing the phrase?
- Which notes make the chord changes audible even without accompaniment?
- What changes when a melodic idea begins two beats later?
- Where do chromatic notes create direction rather than merely decorate the line?
- Can you invent a fresh phrase that uses the same harmonic principles without quoting Parker?

Closing thought

Jazz vocabulary is not a collection of formulas to be inserted into solos. It is a living musical language, acquired through attentive listening, imitation, rigorous study, and performance. The deeper we absorb that language, the more freedom we gain to say something of our own.

Watch the full lecture: [Thoughts on Developing Jazz Vocabulary — Video Presentation](#)

Listening reference: Charlie Parker, “Donna Lee” (original Savoy recording). Additional perspective: Hal Galper, “Master Class – Musical Vocabulary” (youtube.com/watch?v=b4kVUIpfTPU). Musical excerpts reproduced from Brian W. Gorrell’s original teaching handout, © 2017/2026.