

# Jazz Speak

BY JEFF ANTONIUK



Jazz musicians are by definition highly creative types. As we pour out our emotions through our instrument, listeners in the audience may be wondering just how we do it.

No matter how poetic and “on the edge” our calling appears to be, the truth is that jazz is exactly like any language, with its own rules of grammar, meaning, and syntax. When we master the dialect, we’re free to say anything we want to say musically.

I am fortunate to teach many different levels of jazz students, from third grade assemblies in public schools, to adult semi-pro combos; and from teaching jazz majors at Towson University to running a summer jazz camp. One thing I’ve found that bridges this eclectic collection of students varying so widely in age, experience, and genre is the powerful analogy of learning music like a language.

## The Language of Jazz is Comprised of Eighth Notes

You have to know the vernacular and slang of a language if you want to try to speak it convincingly. If one wanted to sound like a native Canadian, it help to say things like: “It’s really cold out, eh?” (I’m originally from Canada). If you want to sound like a jazz musician, be comfortable with playing strings of eighth notes. Of course there are thousands of examples of great jazz played with other note values, but open any transcription book of jazz solos, count up the note values, and you’ll find many more eighth

notes than any of other values. This concept may seem obvious, but most of my students (graduate students included) take months to master this.

- **The Trick** – don’t worry about playing “correct” notes as you do this – it’s too much pressure. Just play strings of random eighth notes to get the feel and flow. Start adding the “right” notes you know how to play later, but with your new ability to play longer lines and phrases with more momentum.

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## Use Repetition

When we repeat words and phrases in spoken language, people rarely think, “Wow, what a dope! He keeps referring to the same subject.” Repetition aids in communication by focusing attention and limiting the extraneous. Many fledgling jazz musicians have the romantic notion that they must come up with endless ideas to play a solo. However, if you listen to the greats, from the Basie band to Branford Marsalis, you’ll hear that one or two ideas can last for choruses, whereas less experienced players will abandon seven good ideas in the first

four bars of a solo. It gets exhausting to listen to someone who is talking to you and changing subject every sentence. Why would you mentally exhaust your audience by improvising this way?

- **The Trick** – the very first thing you play in your next solo is your theme. Don't abandon it for at least four-to-eight bars. It's much harder than it seems. Make this part of your daily practice routine.

## Use Space to Create Shape

Most beginner jazz players sound like they are speaking a foreign language phonetically – the right words in odd and uncomfortable positions. Again, the note choices aren't the trouble; the phrasing is. Generally when listening to these younger players, I hear too many notes, and a lack of accurately placed space. The otherwise good notes lose whatever value they might've had by sitting in strange places.

- **The Trick** – get comfortable with four-bar phrases. Look at great melodies written in a fake book, and you'll see four-bar phrases that contain perhaps two and a half or three bars of music, and a bar or so of space. That is the shape of most melodies. Learn to

**"WE CAN PUNCTUATE OUR MUSIC TO GIVE IT SHAPE, EMOTIONAL CONTENT, AND WELL-PLACED TENSION."**

Instead of speaking jazz like an over-caffeinated three-year-old, experiment with compound sentences, use commas.

- **The Trick** – Not all notes in a given chord are created equal. Notes with more tension (i.e. an F# played over a C7, a blues scale note) followed by a bit of space tend to be heard as a comma. Notes with less tension (i.e. a C over a C7) played at the end of a phrase tend to be heard as a period. For example, improvise over the first four bars of C blues. End an idea in the second bar on an F#, then end the next idea in the fourth bar on a C. By doing this, you've played a compound musical sentence that had tension and release and a mature, organized, engaging quality.

first phrase ending with a tension (a comma)      second phrase ending with a resolution (a period)

Jeff Antoniuk is a jazz saxophonist in the Washington DC area. From Alberta, Canada, he holds a master's degree in jazz performance and West African musicology from the University of North Texas. An award winning composer and critically acclaimed performer, he teaches at Towson State University in Maryland, runs adult level master classes ([jazzbandmasterclass.com](http://jazzbandmasterclass.com)) and directs a popular summer jazz workshop ([marylandsummerjazz.com](http://marylandsummerjazz.com)). Jeff Antoniuk and the Jazz Update's latest CD, *Here Today (Atonal Licks)*, was released in 2006. [www.jeffantoniuk.com](http://www.jeffantoniuk.com)

