

DELFEAYO MARSALIS | DAVE LIEBMAN

DOWNBEAT[®]

Jazz

SONGS OF ASCENSION

**GREGORY
PORTER**

LAKECIA BENJAMIN

APRIL 2020

U.K. £4.00

\$6.99US \$6.99CAN



DOWNBEAT.COM

BRASS SCHOOL

REX RICHARDSON *on Chops Endurance*

NICK FINZER *Trombone Transcription*

IAN CAREY *Master Class*



Learn the Words!

How To Internalize Standards with the Help of Vocalists

If you're an aspiring instrumentalist learning to play standards, chances are at some point you've been told by an older musician to learn the words (probably in a stereotypical grizzled jazz-musician voice). I heard it frequently when I was younger, and I'd nod and say, "I know, I know," and add it to my mental list of the thousand other things to work on.

If I asked why a contemporary nonsinger should take the time to learn the lyrics of a 100-year-old pop tune being used as an improvisational form, I might have heard something about the composer's intent or the spirit of the song. To be honest, I never bought this justification—do you think John Coltrane's version

of "My Favorite Things" was true to Rodgers & Hammerstein's original vision? Does listening to that driving maelstrom make you think of "whiskers on kittens?" Not to mention that many standards composers were less than enthusiastic about having their songs interpreted by jazz musicians. Jerome Kern, who penned such classic vehicles as "All The Things You Are" and "The Song Is You," complained that jazz versions of his tunes were "a fraudulent imitation."

But the truth is that learning the words is immensely valuable for instrumentalists. I'll tell you why this is true, as well as how to go about learning them in an efficient and musically enriching way.

Mnemonic Device

The primary value in learning lyrics to standards is not emotional, but *mnemonic*. The words help you remember the melody and the form of the tune. Musical material is easier to remember when it's mentally connected to catchy, rhyming lyrical phrases than if it's just notes memorized from a piece of paper.

I often run into students who have learned the melody to a standard without the lyrics, and their phrasing can be ... odd. For example, the Warren/Gordon perennial "There Will Never Be Another You" contains the following lyric: "There may be other songs to sing, another fall, another spring." But someone who doesn't know that might play the phrase

in a way that sounds like: “There may be other songs to sing, another fall *anahh*—[rest].”

If you have the lyrics in mind, you’re likely to play in a way that outlines the phrase, even if you’re embellishing and playing around with the line. Which brings me to the best way

historian Loren Schoenberg. When I realized how useful these could be for learning tunes, I asked my dad (a diehard thrift store hound) to grab any pop-standards albums he saw. I recorded any tune I recognized onto a (then-state-of-the-art) 120-minute cassette and lis-

If you have the lyrics in mind, you’re likely to play in a way that outlines the phrase, even if you’re embellishing the line.

to learn the words and melody: by ear.

There’s been a lot of discussion in online jazz circles recently about learning standards, sparked by a deep dive on the subject (“Deepening Your Relationship to Musical Theatre”) by pianist/writer Ethan Iverson on his blog *Do The Math*. Iverson makes the case for studying the original sheet music when learning the tunes—because by doing so you can get as close as possible to the notes the composer chose, and perhaps discover idiosyncrasies that have been flattened out in the transformation from Broadway showpieces to jazz workhorses; and because, contrary to conventional wisdom, many jazz musicians from earlier generations commonly did so.

Osmosis Approach

I definitely support checking out the sheet music as part of the learning process. But I want you to think about a popular song from your childhood or adolescence that you know really well—I mean you can sing along with every word, vocal fill and guitar solo. Got one? Good.

Now, did you ever check out the published sheet music to this song? I highly doubt it. You absorbed it by hearing it and singing along with it a bazillion times. (And I’m willing to bet you’d notice if you heard a cover version with the wrong chord changes.) That osmosis-style approach works for learning standards, as well, and it’s the closest we can come to simulating what it would have been like to grow up surrounded by this music on the radio and the bandstand, as earlier generations of jazz musicians did.

I believe the best source for learning standards is the treasure trove of recordings by the great midcentury pop vocalists. For me, this journey began when I was in college, with a stack of 1950s Frank Sinatra LPs, generously gifted to me by my teacher, the saxophonist/

tened to it for an entire summer. By the time I was back in school I could sing the melodies, lyrics and bass lines to dozens of tunes, and found I could jump on to any of them on a jam session and hold my own.

Pop-Standards Recordings

Why are these versions so perfect for learning the tunes? First of all, unlike singers more explicitly in the jazz realm like Billie Holiday or Sarah Vaughan, the pop-standards singers—artists like Sinatra, Nat “King” Cole, Rosemary Clooney, Jo Stafford and Peggy Lee (plus Ella Fitzgerald, who straddled the jazz/pop divide)—tend to stick close to the original melody of the song. If you want to be able to come up with variations on a theme (as Holiday and Vaughan did), you should know the actual theme pretty well, right?

Secondly, the chord progressions on these recordings usually represent a sort of compromise between the original Broadway harmony and the more tricked-out and/or smoothed-over changes used in jazz. I often was surprised when a commonly used jazz substitution didn’t show up, but that taught me about where and how those substitutions can work.

They’re also short. The time limits of radio singles meant that all that information had to fit into an extremely focused 3-ish minutes, making internalization through listening much easier than on, say, a 7-minute cut with only a chorus of melody at the beginning and end.

Finally, you’ll discover some deeply virtuosic, beautiful performances by masters of the genre, backed by lush orchestras and swinging big bands, with charts by ace arrangers like Nelson Riddle, Billy May and Axel Stordahl (containing many tasty ideas for intros, endings and modulations, which can help generate ideas for spicing up your small-group versions).

Online Access

Now, how to go about absorbing these tunes? The good news is that you can now access myriad versions of any standard without having to visit a single thrift store. Today’s streaming services all have extensive back-catalogs of vocal albums, so when I recently dove into these recordings to expand my repertoire, I discovered many great vocalists in the same tradition.

Visit my website at iancareyjazz.com for more suggestions and a playlist of a few hundred tracks to get you started.

Begin by choosing a tune and searching for a version or two by the singers mentioned above; then put it on repeat and sing along. It can be helpful to start with a version that’s close to your natural vocal range but you can also sing it up or down an octave. Keep listening until you’re able to: 1) sing the melody and lyrics; 2) sing along with the bass line; and 3) sing improvised fills behind the melody.

Start Playing

When you can do those three things easily, move to piano or your main instrument. If you’ve internalized the melody and bass line (and have a basic knowledge of jazz harmony), you should be able to start picking out the big-picture structure—this is where it can be helpful to look at a lead sheet or sheet music version of the changes and see where it aligns with the recording and where it differs.

There will be transposing involved, but this is also great for your development; always try to think in terms of roman-numeral-style roots (e.g., “starts on the I, then to the V of V, then ii-V7 back to I, then up a major third for the bridge” instead of “Cmaj7, D7, Dm7–G7, Cmaj7, B7, Emaj7”). This will help you learn the *blue-print* of the tune rather than a series of key-specific chords or melody notes. Then listen to some instrumental versions to see what choices they made, melodically and harmonically. You’ll hear fresh nuances in the way they phrase the melody now that you know the lyrics.

Then, it’s time to play. Decide which version of the changes you’d like to use (maybe a hybrid of the version from the recording and a fake-book version?) and give it a go. And when possible, play with singers, who will force you to play in unusual keys and give you practice in blending with the ensemble. Experiment at will.

Lastly, the more deeply you internalize the source material of these songs—which as a canon I consider to be one of the high points of human culture, up there with Shakespeare and Louis Armstrong’s Hot Fives—the more you can let your individualism shine through. **DB**

Ian Carey is a San Francisco Bay Area-based trumpeter and composer whose latest album, *Fire In My Head: The Anxiety Suite*, will be released in April on Slow & Steady Records. Visit him online at iancareyjazz.com.