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SING IT FIRST: THE PEDAGOGY OF WYCLIFFE GORDON

by

Thomas Edward Johnson, Jr.

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

Major: Music

The University of Memphis

August 2020

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DEDICATION

To my stepfather and Dad since the age of three, Michael P. Harley Sr., who taught me the value of hard work and unfortunately, did not survive to witness the completion of this process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Mr. Wycliffe Gordon for his continued mentorship and willing contributions to this project. Thank you to Dr. John Mueller for his faith in my ability to complete the doctoral degree process. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the members of my doctoral committee Dr. Jack Cooper, Dr. Kenneth Kreitner, Mr. Dan Phillips, and Dr. Kevin Sanders for their guidance and the individual roles they have played in my degree studies. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family who have supported me through this process.

PREFACE

The first time I heard Wycliffe Gordon play the trombone is an experience that is permanently etched into my memory. It was the late 1990s when the casually dressed Gordon, wearing sweatpants and a *Go-Army* tee-shirt, walked into my high school band room at South Aiken High School in Aiken, South Carolina. My band director, Everett “Sparky” Noel, introduced Gordon as the trombonist with the Wynton Marsalis Septet and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. Gordon took to the podium and proceeded to play what he referred to as his warm-up. His warm-up consisted of sounds that I had never heard come out of a trombone before. He then walked immediately behind where I was sitting in the euphonium section, borrowed a tuba from one of the other students, and gave the class a similar demonstration on the tuba. On that day, I became a fan of Wycliffe Gordon and his music.

In 2008, with two music performance degrees and after nearly a decade of studying music at the university level, I reached out to Gordon for private lessons in jazz improvisation. What I discovered in those lessons was that Gordon was not only a master musician, but he was also a master pedagogue and a gracious human being. Gordon’s pedagogy and approach to improvisation have profoundly altered and enhanced my experience as a performing musician. My hope is that this document will be of similar value to others in the music community.

Tommy Johnson, 2020

ABSTRACT

Johnson Jr., Thomas E., DMA. The University of Memphis. August 2020. Sing It First: The Pedagogy of Wycliffe Gordon. Major Professor: John Mueller, DMA.

This document presents the pedagogical techniques and materials recommended by trombonist Wycliffe Gordon. Gordon is an internationally renowned performer, composer, arranger, and educator. He has recorded twenty-one albums as a leader and eight albums as a co-leader. Gordon has received numerous awards including “Trombonist of the Year” and “Best Trombone” from the Jazz Journalists Association and Downbeat Magazine respectively. Gordon is a veteran member of the Wynton Marsalis Septet and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. He is currently Director of Jazz Studies at Augusta University in Augusta, Georgia and has held faculty positions at Michigan State University, Manhattan School of Music, and The Juilliard School. Compared to the currently accepted improvisation methods, Gordon offers a unique and valuable alternative.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The musical art form now known as jazz emerged in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century. Throughout the first half of the century, jazz was generally considered a vernacular music not worthy of study in educational institutions. However, as the art form developed and progressed from a vernacular music, based on simple tunes and group improvisation, into a more serious art form built on instrumental virtuosity and compositional complexity, jazz eventually began to be taught in institutions of higher education.

The inclusion of jazz-oriented programs in university music programs began in the 1940s and by the early 1960s, the original spirit of aurally conceived jazz gave way to a more dogmatic approach based on written theory. This early version of institutionalized jazz pedagogy was largely influenced by the work of historian Marshall Stearns and music theorist George Russell, who presented their work at the Lenox School of Jazz during the summers of 1957 to 1960. According to Ken Prouty, Associate Professor of Musicology and Jazz Studies at Michigan State University, “George Russell and Marshall Stearns ... laid out how jazz would be taught [in universities] ... and neither were affiliated with an academic institution [at that time].”¹

An explosion of jazz education programs occurred during the 1960s. According to Alex Rodriguez in his article *A Brief History of Jazz Education*, “In 1960, there were

¹ Alex W. Rodriguez, “A Brief History of Jazz Education, Pt. 1,” *NPR: A Blog Supreme*, 2 November 2012, <<https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2012/10/26/163741653/a-brief-history-of-jazz-education-pt-1>>, (18 February 2020).

thirty college jazz ensembles and approximately five-thousand high school bands; by the end of the decade, those numbers had increased to four-hundred-fifty and fifteen-thousand.”² It is interesting to note that this explosion of educational opportunities coincides with the decline of jazz as a popular music. As the popularity of jazz declined throughout the second half of the twentieth century, institutions took on an increasingly important role in how jazz music was heard, taught, and learned. The result of this scenario on jazz pedagogy is a gradual shift from an oral pedagogy into a more compartmentalized and intellectual pedagogy.

This document focuses on the pedagogy of world-renowned jazz trombone virtuoso, Wycliffe Gordon. Considered by many as one of the all-time jazz trombone masters, his approach to jazz pedagogy is based on practical techniques he developed throughout an extensive performing career. Gordon is a historically significant jazz musician and his pedagogy stands in stark contrast to the dogmatic pedagogy present in many institutions of higher learning today.

² Alex W. Rodriguez, “A Brief History of Jazz Education, Pt. 2,” *NPR: A Blog Supreme*, 8 January 2013, <<https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2013/01/08/168893316/a-brief-history-of-jazz-education-pt-2>>, (18 February 2020).

CHAPTER 2

Wycliffe Gordon: Background

Early Life

Wycliffe Gordon (b. 1967) is one of the leading jazz trombonists in the world today. A veteran member of the Wynton Marsalis Septet and one of the founding members of New York City's Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, Gordon has enjoyed a successful career as a soloist, multi-instrumentalist, composer, conductor, arranger, and educator. Born in Waynesboro, Georgia, Gordon was introduced to music in grade school by his late father Lucius Gordon.¹ Lucius Gordon was a classically trained pianist who taught piano lessons and was an active performer in the church. Lucius encouraged Wycliffe and his siblings to take piano lessons, but being a young boy growing up in the country, Wycliffe says he was always more interested in going outside and playing sports and other games with his friends at that time. However, he still remembers certain things his father would show him on the piano, including simple tunes like *Chopsticks* and the "Boogie Woogie."

Gordon and his family moved to Augusta, Georgia when he was ten years old. At age eleven he, along with his sister Karen, began taking piano lessons. He first became interested in the trombone at twelve years old, when his brother Lucius Jr., who was a year older than Wycliffe, began to play trombone in the junior high school band. Lucius Jr. had wanted to play the trumpet, but like many students who join the school band, he had little choice in the matter, and the trombone was ultimately selected for him by the

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all biographical information is taken from: Wycliffe Gordon, Interview by Author, January 13, 2020.

school band director. Gordon jokingly says regarding the matter, “Who in their right mind would pick the trombone as their first instrument?” However, seeing his older brother bring home a trombone was the catalyst for his desire to obtain a trombone himself and sign up for the school band program. After much pleading with his parents, his mother bought Gordon a trombone and he joined the school band. Soon after, he began playing both the trombone and the tuba at school. Wycliffe and Lucius Jr. played in the Segó Jr. High Band together for 1 year before the school system was restructured from a Jr. and Sr. High system to the current middle (sixth through eighth grades) and high school (ninth through twelfth grades) structure.

Gordon’s interest in jazz began at age thirteen, following the death of a great aunt whose record collection found its way to the Gordon household. Included in the collection was an extensive jazz anthology, consisting of five LPs and ten sides, covering the history of jazz from early slave chants to the modern jazz of the time. Listening to these records is where Gordon developed a passion for jazz. He recalls hearing Sonny Rollins’s *Sonny Moon for Two*, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington among others. However, the music that really caught his attention was the earlier style of New Orleans jazz. He fell in love with the music of New Orleans and especially that of Louis Armstrong, taking it upon himself to learn, or cop, the solos to *When the Saints Go Marching In* and *The Keyhole Blues* directly from the record.

Gordon’s introduction to getting off of the written page and into the world of musical improvisation came during a joint concert with the high school and middle school bands when he had to take a solo with the jazz band. He was playing in the middle school jazz band while the high school students were in the audience when he

made a bet with his friend that he could play the first half of his notated solo and then make up, or improvise, the remainder of a short sixteen-bar solo. Gordon recalls the exhilaration of receiving a positive response from the crowd for his efforts on that day.

Gordon remained in the band throughout his high school years and credits his band director, Harkness Butler, as being a particularly positive influence in his early development. Mr. Butler encouraged all of his students to audition for the various All-County, District, and All-State band clinics and Gordon remembers hearing the frequent encouraging statement of, “you can do it, Cliffe,” whenever he would take on a new challenge. He attended the State of Georgia Governor’s Honors program in 1983 and was a member of the McDonald’s All-American High School Band in 1984. It was these rich musical experiences and the encouragement he received from Mr. Butler that led to his desire to pursue a music degree in college and to eventually become a professional musician.

Collegiate and Initial Professional Experiences

Gordon chose to study music at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, based on the prominence of their successful marching band program. It was in his second year at Florida A&M that Gordon first came in contact with trumpeter Wynton Marsalis. Marsalis had come to the university to give a lecture during Black History Month and while he was there, Marsalis came to a jazz band rehearsal and worked with the band. One of the things Marsalis asked the band to do was to play a blues on the spot by making up a riff and harmonizing it. After asking the band to play what they had come up with, he asked the class who had created the riffs, and everyone looked back to the

trombone section and pointed to Gordon. Nothing came of it at the time, but Gordon would later find out that Marsalis had asked his friend Scotty Barnhart for the name of the trombone player that had created the riff used by the band. The next summer, Marsalis began calling the university looking for Gordon, but in an age before email and cell phones, Gordon was nowhere to be found because he was back in Augusta working construction between the spring and fall semesters at school.

The following year, in February or March of 1988, Marsalis had Marcus Roberts contact Gordon because he wanted to try him out with his band at the Caravan of Dreams in Fort Worth, Texas. Gordon says he believes Marsalis wanted him to record with the band, but at the time he was completely unprepared and didn't have his chops together well enough to record. At that time, Marsalis and Marcus Roberts gave Gordon an extensive list of records to buy. The list was two to three pages long, divided into two columns on the front and back of each page, and covered the complete history of recorded jazz. Gordon spent the rest of the year listening to and learning as much as he could from those albums so he would be ready when another opportunity arrived.

Marsalis contacted Gordon at the end of the year, via Marcus Roberts, and asked him to play a string of gigs at Blues Alley in Washington, D.C. Gordon hesitated for a moment because he was supposed to play at a family wedding and when he asked if it would be possible to play only a portion of the gigs, the reply from Marsalis was that it was an all-or-nothing proposition. Ultimately, Gordon made the decision to play the series of gigs with Marsalis, which led to an offer to record on Marsalis's album *Crescent City Christmas Card* in February/March 1989. When asked what his plans for the summer were, Gordon replied that he would likely return home to Augusta and work

construction as he had done in years past because he still had one more year left to complete his degree. Marsalis then told Gordon to give him a call if anything changes. Gordon returned to school for the remainder of the semester and decided to call Marsalis on his birthday, May 29, 1989 and was instructed to call Marsalis's manager, which he did. He was then told to meet Marsalis at the Spoleto festival in Charleston, SC to begin a temporary summer gig. That temporary summer gig has become a more than thirty-year career in jazz.

Transition to Solo Career

Gordon began his playing career as a sideman in the Wynton Marsalis Septet and continued in that role throughout the early 1990s. In 1995, Marsalis decided to disband his Septet in favor of beginning what has become the musical institution now known as Jazz at Lincoln Center. At that time, Gordon and the other members of the band were offered positions with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. Gordon became one of the founding members of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra and remained a full-time member of the orchestra from 1995 to 2000. During that time, the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra was a full-time performing job, with the orchestra spending approximately three hundred days a year on the road. As the performing seasons progressed, Gordon began to contemplate what he wanted to accomplish as a professional musician. Among other things, he aspired to compose and arrange original music, as well as record and perform as a soloist and bandleader, which would be difficult to accomplish if he maintained a full-time touring position with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. With his

sights set on moving forward with his professional aspirations, he decided to leave the orchestra in the summer of 2000.

An opportunity to accept a teaching position at Michigan State University arose in 2000 where he became an Associate Professor, teaching full-time from 2000 to 2002, and then remained an Artist in Residence from 2002 to 2003. This new venture allowed Gordon the freedom to explore and develop some other artistic avenues while still having a steady job with benefits. In addition to teaching five days a week, he began writing, arranging, and booking various gigs on the weekends. Initially, Gordon found it challenging to garner attention as a solo artist because audiences, who still associated his name with the enormously popular Wynton Marsalis, would skip his solo engagements thinking that they could catch him at the next Marsalis performance to come through town. Additionally, Gordon eventually found it necessary to hire a manager to help with booking events and other administrative duties.

Major Contributions to the Jazz Idiom

Since the early 2000s, Gordon has established himself as one of the most prolific jazz musicians of the twenty-first century. His performing experience includes work with David Sanborn, Wynton Marsalis, Arturo Sandoval, Doc Severinsen, Dizzy Gillespie, Lionel Hampton, Tommy Flannagan, Shirley Horn, Joe Henderson, Eric Reed, Randy Sandke, and Branford Marsalis among others.² He has been a featured artist on Billy Taylor's *Jazz at the Kennedy Center* series and his show *Jazz a la Carte* was named one of the five best moments in jazz by the Wall Street Journal. To this date, he has recorded

² Wycliffe Gordon, *Biography*, <<https://wycliffegordon.com/bio/>> (1 February 2020).

twenty-one solo albums as a leader, eight albums as a co-leader, and one-hundred and nineteen albums as a sideman or guest artist in addition to multiple DVD, TV, and film credits.³

In 2006, Gordon established his own record company, Blues Back Records, coinciding with the release of *This Rhythm on My Mind*, a collaborative album with bassist Jay Leonhart.⁴ The establishment of Blues Back Records came about due to, “Wycliffe’s interest in having full artistic control, autonomy, and the freedom to release as he creates.”⁵ The name *Blues Back* comes from the Wycliffe Gordon original composition, *I Want My Blues Back*, which was playing in the background during a meeting with Jay Leonhart. Additional releases by Blues Back Records include the *Wycliffe Gordon Signature Series* (a four-disc collection of original music previously recorded by Wycliffe Gordon), *Hello Pops* (an homage to one of Wycliffe’s musical heroes, Louis Armstrong), *Somebody New* (featuring the DiMartino/Osland Jazz Orchestra playing Wycliffe’s original big band charts), and releases by other artists in Gordon’s sphere who have “consistently created strong original recordings.”⁶ Gordon is currently a Yamaha Performing Artist and has his own line of Wycliffe Gordon Pro Signature Mouthpieces produced by Pickett Brass.

The Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, the Brass Band of Battle Creek, and numerous other ensembles, including the bands he personally leads, have performed Gordon’s

³ Wycliffe Gordon, *Discography*, <https://wycliffegordon.com/discography__/> (1 February 2020).

⁴ Wycliffe Gordon, *Blues Back Records*, <<https://wycliffegordon.com/blues-back-records/>> (17 February 2020).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

compositions. In addition to several solo recordings that feature his original compositions, he has composed several pieces on commission at the request of various entities.⁷ Perhaps the most widely heard of his compositions or arrangements is his arrangement of the theme song to NPR's *All Things Considered*, which is heard daily across the globe. His film and television credits include performances at the 2000 Grammy Awards with Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, BET's 13-part series *Journey with Jazz at Lincoln Center*, and he is a featured soloist in the Ken Burns documentary *Jazz*.⁸ Arrangements from his CD *Dreams of New Orleans* can be heard in *Race*, a biopic of track star Jesse Owens, *NCIS: New Orleans* (episode 63), *Manhattan* (episode 111), *White Rabbit Project*, and *Marsalis on Music*.

Gordon has been recognized with numerous awards including Downbeat Magazine's "Best Trombone" Award in 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, and 2018.⁹ He was awarded Trombonist of the Year by the Jazz Journalists Association twelve times between 2001 and 2019, and the Jazz Journalists Association Critics' Choice Award for Best Trombone in 2000, in addition to being nominated for the Jazzpar Award. In 2007, The City of Augusta declared August 17th Wycliffe Gordon Day by proclamation authorized by Augusta Mayor Deke Copenhaver. He received The International Trombone Association Award, which recognizes the highest level of creative and artistic achievement, in 2017. He is the youngest member of the U.S. Statesmen of Jazz and serves in many tour performances as a musical ambassador for the U.S. State

⁷ Wycliffe Gordon, *Biography*, <<https://wycliffegordon.com/bio/>>.

⁸ Wycliffe Gordon, *Biography*, <<https://wycliffegordon.com/bio/>> (1 February 2020).

⁹ *Ibid.*

Department. He was also awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Scranton in 2006.

In addition to his many accomplishments as a performer and composer/arranger, Gordon is an equally dedicated and inspirational educator who presents master classes, clinics, workshops, children's concerts, and lectures to students of all ages around the globe. He is currently Director of Jazz Studies at Augusta University in Augusta, Georgia and has held teaching positions at The Juilliard School (Professor of Jazz Studies, 2002-2008), and the Manhattan School of Music (Professor of Jazz Arts, 2009-2015) in addition to teaching at Michigan State University. He has held the position of Artist-In-Residence at several universities including Augusta University (2014-2018), Peabody Conservatory (2018-2019), Temple University (2018), and the James Morrison Academy in Mt. Gambier, Australia (2016-2017). He also held residencies at Columbia College Chicago, LALPC Chicago, and Prince Claus Conservatoire (Netherlands) in 2014 and 2016. Additional educational contributions include the trombone technique book *Sing It First*,¹⁰ compiled and edited by Alan Raph, and a forthcoming method book entitled *Basic Training, Exercises and Suggested Studies by Wycliffe Gordon*.

¹⁰ Alan Raph, comp. and ed., *Sing It First: Wycliffe Gordon's Unique Approach to Trombone Playing* (Delevan, New York: Kendor Music, 2011).

CHAPTER 3

The Education of a Jazz Musician

“The solutions all are simple — after you have arrived at them. But they’re simple only when you know already what they are.” — Robert M. Pirsig¹

The Institutionalization of Jazz Education

The institutionalization of jazz education is a phenomenon that began to occur during the 1940s. Prior to the era of institutionalized jazz education, the art of jazz improvisation was learned primarily through self-directed learning, experimentation, and the oral transmission of information from one generation of musicians to the next. By the 1930s, some jazz musicians, such as pianist Teddy Wilson, who pioneered correspondence courses in improvisation, began to share their knowledge of improvisation with a paying public.² Joseph Schillinger was another influential pioneer of jazz improvisation correspondence courses during this era. Schillinger’s students included well-known names such as George Gershwin, Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, and Henry Cowell. Schillinger’s method inspired one of his pupils, Lawrence Berk, to

¹ Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 287.

² Unless otherwise noted, all information regarding the history of jazz education comes from the following two-part article: Alex W. Rodriguez, “A Brief History of Jazz Education, Pt. 1,” *NPR: A Blog Supreme*, 2 November 2012, <<https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2012/10/26/163741653/a-brief-history-of-jazz-education-pt-1>>, (18 February 2020); and Alex W. Rodriguez, “A Brief History of Jazz Education, Pt. 2,” *NPR: A Blog Supreme*, 8 January 2013, <<https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2013/01/08/168893316/a-brief-history-of-jazz-education-pt-2>>, (18 February 2020).

establish the Schillinger House in 1945, which later changed its name to the Berklee School of Music, one of the leading institutions in jazz education today.

The first jazz-oriented degree program, a degree in Dance Band Arranging, was established in 1946 at North Texas State Teachers College, now named the University of North Texas. Texas State University's historic One O'Clock Lab Band soon became a breeding ground for professional big band musicians. Another important figure in the early development of jazz education is Marshall Stearns, who began teaching jazz history courses in the 1950s. During the summers of 1957 to 1960, Stearns established the Lenox School of Jazz in the Berkshire Mountains of Western Massachusetts, which brought together musicians such as Jimmy Giuffre, J.J. Johnson, John Lewis, Bill Russo, and George Russell to present lectures and mentor aspiring jazz students.

The lasting impact of the Lenox School meetings is evidenced in the work of jazz education luminaries such as David Baker and Jamey Aebersold, who attended the Lenox School sessions as students. The Lenox School sessions were where George Russell began teaching his *Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, which is considered by many to be the first important text on jazz theory. According to Ken Prouty, Associate Professor of Musicology and Jazz Studies at Michigan State University, "George Russell and Marshall Stearns ... laid out how jazz would be taught [in universities] ... and neither were affiliated with an academic institution [at that time]."³ The chord/scale approach to jazz improvisation, taught at many universities today, is largely an outgrowth of Russell's *Lydian Chromatic Concept*. Likewise, much

³ Ibid.

of our current understanding of jazz history can be traced back to the work of Marshall Stearns.

In 1959, Stan Kenton hosted the first Stan Kenton Band Clinic at Indiana University, sparking a trend of summer jazz camps that has continued to this day. The next decade would witness an explosion of jazz education programs in institutions of higher learning. In 1960, there were only thirty established college jazz ensembles and by the end of the decade, there were four hundred and fifty. As schools began to establish full-fledged jazz programs, an institutionalized system of pedagogy developed, based on the earliest models established at North Texas State, the University of Miami, Indiana University and others. This institutionalization of jazz pedagogy cemented institutions of higher education as an important part of jazz musicians' development, and these programs have had an enormous impact on how the music is learned, taught, and heard, and how it has developed through the years.

The Jazz Studies Degree

The university jazz studies degree typically involves participation in large and small jazz ensembles with courses in jazz history, theoretical aspects of improvisation, and composition and arranging. These courses are usually taken in conjunction with a basic core of Western classical music courses such as music history, education, and theory and composition.⁴ The jazz degree programs established in the 1960s, such as those founded by jazz education pioneers Jerry Coker at Miami University and David Baker at Indiana University, served as a model to be adopted by other programs across

⁴ Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking In Jazz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 56.

the country. Much of how improvisation began to be taught in these institutions was based on the *Lydian Chromatic Concept* of George Russell, with an emphasis on the chord/scale approach to jazz improvisation. As the publication of educational materials such as the Jamey Aebersold play-along series developed, the chord/scale approach to learning and teaching improvisation became increasingly standardized.

An improvisation course based on the chord/scale theory approach to improvising will often begin by introducing the modes of the major scale during the first semester of study, and presenting the students with a selection of lead sheets to tunes that allow the application of certain scales or modes to the specified chord changes. If the instructor is blessed with an ambitious class of students, they may attempt to have the students apply some simple melodic patterns to the assigned modes and maybe even have the students transcribe all or part of a recorded jazz solo. The following semester, the student will be introduced to additional scale forms and more complex harmonic concepts with an increasing emphasis on mastering their ability to navigate common chord progressions, such as the major and minor ii-V progression or the iii-vi-ii-V turnaround, through the application of specified melodic lines, or licks, that fit the chord progressions. A third semester will likely be more of the same; emphasizing increasingly complex harmonic concepts and avant-garde tune choices.

There are many benefits to this approach, especially as it applies to teaching improvisation in the university setting. Firstly, this approach provides a clear rubric for classroom assessment. Asking students to apply specific scales, melodic patterns, and licks to specified chords, in notation and performance, provides the instructor with a clearly defined right or wrong, testable skill. Secondly, this approach helps the student to

quickly begin playing so-called *right* notes; or perhaps more aptly stated, this approach helps students to quickly begin avoiding *wrong* or *bad* notes. Thirdly, with the students' time in university split between the study of Western classical music and the study of jazz, in addition to their core studies as a university student, the instructor is expected to accomplish the monumental task of covering the entire scope of jazz improvisation in a matter of only a few semesters. Using the chord/scale approach allows instructors to cover a vast amount of information in the limited time constraints of a structured degree program.

Failures of Institutionalized Jazz Education

While the benefits of the established jazz pedagogy mentioned above are many, there are several inherent downfalls to learning the art form in this environment. Beginning the study of jazz improvisation through the application of specific scales to fit various chords instantaneously removes the all-important aural aspect of improvisation from the equation. There is no doubt that many of the great jazz masters have studied and applied varying degrees of music theory to their improvisations; but this usually happened after they had first developed a strong aural understanding of jazz. Such is not normally the situation in, for example, an Improv I class, which may well be dominated by conventional music majors without much exposure to jazz of any kind: as the popularity of jazz has diminished since the 1950s, to the point where it is considered a somewhat esoteric specialty, many young musicians simply have not listened to recordings of the great improvisers before coming to college. For these students, to begin the study of improvisation via lead sheets and chord/scale theory without going directly

to the primary sources will leave them lacking the proper context for their efforts to create something of musical and artistic value.

Many of the great jazz masters have described the process of learning jazz improvisation as one of “imitation, assimilation, and innovation,” a process akin to that of a child learning to speak their first language. Legendary bebop pianist Walter Bishop, Jr. says:

It all goes from imitation to assimilation to innovation. You move from the imitation stage to the assimilation stage when you take little bits of things from different people and weld them into an identifiable style, creating your own style. Once you’ve created your own sound and you have a good sense of the history of the music, then you think of where the music hasn’t gone and where it can go, and that’s innovation.⁵

In attempting to get students playing right notes quickly, the chord/scale approach essentially turns an aural art form into a mathematical process analogous to a color-by-numbers approach to visual art. In his JEN clinic *Audience Decline: Is it Because Jazz Concerts are Boring*, drummer Matt Wilson points out that a common critique of the jazz education phenomenon has been that the emphasis on learning technique and theory obscures the spirit, and real-life application, that drives the music.⁶ Chord/scale theory can be a useful tool once the student has acquired a basic aural understanding of the music, but the student must first have an aural sense of the style and sound of jazz in order to make sense of the scales they are taught in the classroom. In short, the beginning improvisation student needs a reference point, or model to imitate.

Additionally, by prescribing the same tunes, licks, and tricks for round after round of improvisation classes, there is bound to be a substantial amount of sameness that

⁵ Berliner, *Thinking In Jazz*, 120.

⁶ Rodriguez, *A Brief History*, Pt. 2.

develops among students who learn improvisation in this manner. This poses a significant problem, because one of the most sought-after tenets of an accomplished jazz improviser is the expression of a unique and individual musical voice within the idiom. Another concern for the student trombonist is that many university jazz departments do not have a dedicated jazz trombone teacher on faculty. This means that university improvisation classes are most often taught by a woodwind, valved-brass, or rhythm section specialist. The slide trombone poses unique technical challenges in jazz improvisation that can only be adequately addressed by someone who understands how to overcome the peculiarities of the instrument. This issue is evidenced by the gap found between trombonists of earlier jazz styles and the bop or post-bop eras. The trombone is conspicuously absent from the early years of the bebop era, until players like J.J. Johnson and Frank Rosolino began to find inventive ways to navigate the new style of virtuosic improvisation led by instrumentalists such as trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and saxophonist Charlie Parker.

The Importance of a Mentor/Teacher

There is no easy solution to solving the problems inherent within the established jazz education system; nor is there much of a push to do so, given that the established methods have proven to be quite effective in many ways, having produced numerous talented jazz students over the decades. However, seeking out an experienced mentor can save the jazz trombone student a significant amount of time and avoid unnecessary frustration in their pursuit of mastering this art form. As Alan Raph has put it:

We all learn something when the right path to it is opened and recognized by us. We need to relate to the path. It needs to coincide with our experience. A good teacher is

a pathfinder. Once shown the path, we then need to follow it. We need to make it our personal path and explore as we go. We can wear it smooth, and we can build on it. We also need to note any side paths to explore later. If we learn by imitating, why do we need a teacher? Sometimes the approach to a technique is not always apparent and we need a push in the right direction.⁷

A qualified teacher can assess the student's needs and direct them towards the most direct route to reaching their musical goals. For this author, that pathfinder has been Wycliffe Gordon.

The concepts, materials, and processes found in the following chapters have been recommended to me by Wycliffe Gordon in private study over the course of several years. These recommendations will provide the jazz trombone student with a foundation in the history and language of the jazz trombone, an awareness of its greatest practitioners, and a path towards discovering and developing their own unique musical voice within the jazz tradition. Wycliffe Gordon has done the work of mastering both his instrument and the art of improvisation. His real-world experience, working with and learning from many of the all-time great jazz masters, in addition to his artistic output, lends gravitas to his pedagogical concepts and teaching philosophy.

⁷ Alan Raph, comp. and ed., *Sing It First: Wycliffe Gordon's Unique Approach to Trombone Playing* (Delevan, New York: Kendor Music, 2011), 21.

CHAPTER 4

Concepts and Philosophy

Master Pedagogue

While the performing credentials of Wycliffe Gordon presented in the Chapter 2 should leave no doubt that Mr. Gordon is a master musician, he is equally important as a master pedagogue. Gordon is currently Director of Jazz Studies at Augusta University in Augusta, Georgia. He has also held faculty positions at some of the most prestigious music conservatories in the world, including The Juilliard School and the Manhattan School of Music, both located in New York City. In addition to the various faculty positions he has held, he has also held residencies at several universities in the United States and abroad, and continues to give masterclasses, clinics, and concerts around the globe.¹

Gordon's former students include some of the most recognized young trombonists in the profession today. Among them are Michael Dease,² who, according to his personal website, "learned the craft from trombone legends Wycliffe Gordon, Joseph Alessi, and master teacher Dr. John Drew."³ Dease began his musical studies on saxophone and trumpet before picking up the trombone at the age of 17. Soon after, he became part of the historic first class of jazz students at The Juilliard School when they implemented a jazz studies program in 2001. He can be heard on over two hundred recordings and

¹ Wycliffe Gordon, *Biography*, <<https://wycliffegordon.com/bio/>> (17 February 2020).

² Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

³ Michael Dease, *Biography*, <www.michaeldease.com/bio> (8 February 2020).

currently teaches jazz trombone and improvisation at Michigan State University.⁴

Another former student of Wycliffe Gordon who has achieved great professional success is trombonist Chris Crenshaw. Crenshaw currently plays lead trombone in the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. Both Dease and Crenshaw are originally from the Augusta, Georgia area.

The concepts and techniques recommended by Wycliffe Gordon provide the jazz trombone student, or any other jazz student for that matter, with a direct path towards discovering and developing their unique artistic voice within the established jazz idiom. His teaching style is direct and goal oriented, with a penchant for simplifying what others tend to make complex. According to Victor Goines, former Director of Jazz Studies at Juilliard, “Wycliffe can take the student in whatever direction he or she needs. His own extraordinary performance skills, the historical perspective he brings to his students and the fact that he interacted with so many of the veteran musicians are a rare combination. As a person, he is very open-minded, has a tremendous work ethic and the ability to convey his message.”⁵ What follows below is an assessment of the various concepts, techniques, and materials employed by Wycliffe Gordon in teaching the art of jazz improvisation.⁶

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ed Berger, “Wycliffe Gordon: The Beautiful Soul of...” *JazzTimes*, 1 May 2006, <<https://jazztimes.com/features/profiles/wycliffe-gordon-the-beautiful-soul-of/>> (17 February 2020).

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, the pedagogical concepts, techniques, and materials presented are those experienced by the author in private study with Wycliffe Gordon. This document has been presented to Wycliffe Gordon for review and is published with his knowledge.

Sing It First!

Wycliffe Gordon's approach to playing and improvising on the trombone is based primarily on a concept he refers to, quite simply, as *Sing It First*. In 2011, Gordon, in conjunction with Kendor Music, published a trombone technique book outlining his singing approach to trombone playing. The book, compiled and edited by Alan Raph, is entitled *Sing It First: Wycliffe Gordon's Unique Approach to Trombone Playing*.⁷ His recommended approach is to do exactly as the title of his book suggests; whatever it is you are trying to play on your instrument, sing it first. He recommends applying this concept to everything from warm-up exercises and technique development, to learning a transcribed solo or improvising over the chord changes to a standard jazz tune. Below is a description of this concept taken directly from the master-classes section of Gordon's professional website:

“Sing It First” is based on the premise that if you can sing something, then you can play it, or train yourself to play it. The concept applies to all instrumentalists, brass, wind, percussion, strings, etc. When you are able to sing rhythmically, melodically, and harmonically through a given exercise, etude, excerpt, or chord progression, this means you have “internalized” the music you are attempting to make and this is the best place to start.

While it is something that came to me in the latter part of my musical development, it is not so “unique” a concept, and certainly not new. Many of the great master performers and teachers have applied and employed this concept throughout the history of musical pedagogy and performance. I have been told from the earlier years of my development, “The instrument is an extension of your voice.” Of course, I understood what it meant, but until I began to practically apply it to everything I worked on, I was unaware of its true and immediate benefits. As instrumentalists (trombonists) we spend lots of time trying to learn and “figure out” music while we are playing on our instruments, oftentimes thinking of chord changes, scales, key signatures, positions, tonguing, etc. This applies to every situation, such as learning an etude or excerpt, right up to transcribing a JJ Johnson solo. Try leaving the horn

⁷ Alan Raph, comp. and ed., *Sing It First: Wycliffe Gordon's Unique Approach to Trombone Playing* (Delevan, New York: Kendor Music, 2011).

on the stand, or in the case for that matter, and “sing” through the etude or exercise first. Sing along with the recording of a solo that you are attempting to learn before attempting to do it on the instrument. “If you can sing it, you can play it!!!” is what I always say. It is important to sing accurately and in tune, and if difficult at first, with practice it will come with great ease. When you are able to execute this, it means you have “internalized” the music and it now resides where music should come from, within. You can always learn to play something on an instrument, but when you can sing it, you got it!!!! When you “Sing it First” you learn it more expeditiously, as you will always have your voice with you, whether you have your trombone or not.

Your only evidence that you know the words to your favorite song comes when you sing it. If you want the same verification that you know something that you’re working on musically, Sing it First!!!!⁸

As Gordon states in the excerpt above, this is not an entirely new concept, noting “Many of the great master performers and teachers have applied and employed this concept throughout the history of musical pedagogy and performance.”⁹ For instance, the famous tubist and brass pedagogue Arnold Jacobs, whose pedagogy is well documented in the book *Song and Wind*¹⁰ by Brian Frederiksen, advocated singing as an effective means of improving various instrumental techniques. Charles Vernon’s *The Singing Trombone*¹¹ is another pedagogical resource by a respected brass player that advocates a vocal approach to trombone playing. Gordon also states above that, “I have been told from the earlier years of my development, ‘The instrument is an extension of your voice,’

⁸ Wycliffe Gordon, *Sing It First*, <<https://wycliffegordon.com/clinics/master-classes/>> (8 February 2020).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Brian Frederiksen, *Song and Wind*, ed. John Taylor (United States of America: WindSong Press, 2013).

¹¹ Charles Vernon, *A Singing Approach to the Trombone and other Brass*, (Atlanta: Atlanta Brass Society Press, 1995).

but until I began to practically apply it (singing) to everything I worked on, I was unaware of its true and immediate benefits.”¹²

Gordon believes in the philosophy of, if you can sing it, you can play it, saying “if you can first execute it away from the horn, then you can play it on the horn, or work it up to be able to play it on the horn.”¹³ *Sing It First* provides a number of exercises and suggestions for applying this approach to the development of technique on the trombone, recommending singing for everything from warm-ups and flexibility to range, articulation, velocity, and specialized avant-garde techniques. Gordon also recommends using this singing approach when working with an ensemble or big band, stating that he does not like to put articulation markings in his arrangements because interpretation can vary from one player to the next.¹⁴ Instead, he prefers to accomplish the goal of getting the band to play together by first getting them to sing together, imitating the way he sings a phrase. In doing this, he finds the desired results are immediate.¹⁵

Gordon suggests that much of your daily practice can be accomplished through singing saying, “singing is like having your instrument with you wherever you go.”¹⁶ Additionally, he says, “you don’t need a good voice to sing. Go for accuracy of pitch, and later for articulation. If you stick with it, you will receive a bonus – you will actually get to sing better than you ever thought you could.”¹⁷ Gordon says he personally “sing[s]

¹² Wycliffe Gordon, *Sing It First*, < <https://wycliffegordon.com/clinics/master-classes/> > (8 February 2020).

¹³ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Raph, *Sing It First*, 12.

¹⁷ Raph, *Sing It First*, 9.

everything, every day, and in every way ... apply[ing] the concept to every musical situation or idiom, from working on orchestral excerpts to big band parts to scat improvisation.”¹⁸ He states that singing helps to internalize the music and play it better on the instrument. Gordon says that singing, and breathing as you would breathe to sing, automatically gets the air control right and helps to, “get the body on automatic pilot when you pick up the horn.”¹⁹

Additional Pedagogical Concepts

In addition to the *Sing It First* philosophy, Gordon employs several other useful pedagogical techniques to help his students. One technique he employs is to offer questions rather than provide concrete answers or solutions to problems, thus allowing the student to discover, through an experiential process, the answer to their challenges. This self-teaching, or experiential learning, concept is often alluded to in educational publications by way of reference to the familiar quote, “The best teachers are those who show you where to look, but don’t tell you what to see,” attributed to Alexandra K. Trenfor. For instance, in one of my earliest private lessons with Mr. Gordon, Gordon asked me a seemingly simple, but profound question regarding improvisation. He asked, “What is the goal?” The specific answer to that question will likely be somewhat variable from one student to the next, but it is nevertheless an important question to ask. Without a clear goal in mind, it will be difficult to find a direct path to accomplishing whatever it is you are trying to accomplish. However, by first clarifying the goal, you

¹⁸ Ibid, 4.

¹⁹ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

can then implement a plan towards accomplishing it. A proposed answer to the *what is the goal* question, as it relates to improvisation, is discussed further in Chapters 6 (The Language of Jazz) and 7 (Repertoire) below.

Another example of the *where to look but not what to see* philosophy is evident in the specific materials that Gordon assigns as a basic course of study. These materials will be discussed in more detail in later chapters, but it is important to note that the material he assigns will, by design, lead the student down a path of self-discovery, allowing the student to learn, through experience, many of the most important skills, concepts, and techniques required of a competent jazz improviser. Among these are historical awareness, exposure to important recordings and musicians, development of instrumental virtuosity, and the nurturing of an individual artistic voice within the established musical art form called jazz.

An additional aspect of Gordon's approach to teaching and performance is the removal of limiting beliefs. He says the word *can't* is a bad word and recommends removing it from your vocabulary.²⁰ At one point in an interview, while discussing playing the trombone in the extreme high register (nearly three octaves above the bass clef staff in this case), Gordon even catches himself using the word *can't* and quickly corrects himself, revising *can't* to, "I haven't worked on that yet." As an example, he mentions the difficulty of performing in the high altitude of a city like Vail, Colorado saying, "it may be difficult at first, but that is only because you are not yet acclimated to the environment ... with practice it will become easier."²¹ Gordon says sometimes you

²⁰ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

²¹ Ibid.

need to get out of your own way and that saying you can't do something, before you have even attempted it, is counterproductive. He offers the example of classical musicians who will often come to him saying, "I don't improvise." Gordon's response is that, "everybody improvises, you just have to unlock that door."²² In the Preface to *Sing It First*, he credits his mentor and high school band director, Harkness Butler, with instilling this idea of *can-ness* during his developmental years writing, "I never learned that I couldn't or can't do something. I felt that if I tried to accomplish something and wanted it badly enough, I could do it ... It has carried me thus far."²³

A final concept of Gordon's teaching is a striving for complete mastery of whatever material is being studied and a willingness to think outside of the box in order to accomplish the task at hand. He says, "if you want to be a master, you have to do what the masters do," implying that hard work is needed to become a master musician.²⁴ However, he is also quick to point out that he likes to tell his students that they have a choice in the matter, noting that if you just want to play for enjoyment, then that is okay, too. Additionally, he points out that there are different levels of mastery, noting that before he got rid of certain bad habits, such as playing with too much tension, he had reached one level of mastery, while another level was still available.

Gordon says he would often employ unorthodox techniques with his students at Juilliard in order to encourage them to master the trombone. Among other assignments, he would sometimes have them transcribe and prepare classical trombone solos by one of

²² Ibid.

²³ Raph, *Sing It First*, 4.

²⁴ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

his favorite classical trombonists, Christian Lindberg. Gordon says he would assign solos from Lindberg's album *The Criminal Trombone*²⁵ as part of his students' jury examinations. This was a challenge Gordon had tackled in his own practice and years later, he discovered that the solos he had assigned and learned on tenor trombone were being performed by Lindberg on alto trombone.²⁶

The concepts presented here may appear deceptively simple at first glance and many of them are in fact, quite simple, though not always easy; implementing them requires hard work and consistency. In an interview with Lee Mergner, published in *JazzTimes* magazine, Gordon says:

I had a student ask me one time, "This is good that we're going to study melodious etudes and we're going to start transcribing these solos, but what's the shortcut?" I said, Shortcut? The shortcut is the straightest line between where you're standing and the practice room. There's no app for your ability. You have to actually do that work. You can't Google that. You have to practice ... but I tell them that there's something called a process. It's great that you can access information, but the opportunity to actually learn something, you have to go through that learning process.²⁷

The benefits of applying Wycliffe's techniques are evident in his own musical accomplishments, as well as the accomplishments of his students; or, as they say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

²⁵ Christian Lindberg, *The Criminal Trombone*, Bis, B0000016CO, 1992.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lee Mergner, "Wycliffe Gordon: No Shortcuts in This Music," *JazzTimes*, 13 June 2017, <www.jazztimes.com/features/interviews/wycliffe-gordon-no-shortcuts-music/> (12 February 2020).

CHAPTER 5

Instrumental Technique

Wycliffe Gordon, the pedagogue, preaches what he practices; and Wycliffe Gordon, the performer, practices what he preaches. What he practices and what he preaches are complete mastery of both the instrument and the art of improvisation. In listening to his solo albums, it does not take long to recognize that he is an absolute master of his chosen instrument(s) as well as a master of communicating his unique improvisational voice through those instruments. In his hands, the perceived technical limitations of the trombone appear to be a non-issue. Whether listening specifically to his range, velocity, flexibility, or the many varied timbres he employs, Gordon displays a complete mastery of the technical aspects of the trombone. As a result, the level of creativity in his improvisations is seemingly boundless. Additionally, his improvisations reveal a thorough understanding of the history of jazz and a mastery of the language of jazz. His repertoire ranges from early New Orleans style jazz through the bebop and post-bop eras, while he sounds equally convincing regardless of which era repertoire he is performing.

For the student who aspires to the same level of mastery, it may be useful to look beyond the artistic output of Wycliffe Gordon and instead, look to what Mr. Gordon recommends doing in the practice room to achieve what he has achieved. In private lessons with the author, which have occurred intermittently over the course of a decade, Mr. Gordon has offered recommendations in three distinct areas including exercises for the development of instrumental technique, recommended solo transcriptions, and a

suggested list of standard tunes. Besides specifying the course of study, he has also offered suggestions for mastering the material in each of these categories. Ultimately, his pedagogy offers the student a foundational course of study which, when combined with his recommended processes for learning said material, will help the student to not only master their chosen instrument, but also develop their own unique voice within the jazz tradition.

Wycliffe Gordon's technical prowess on the trombone is nothing short of astounding. He demonstrates this technical mastery of the instrument in the many clinics, masterclasses, and performances he gives around the globe. Among the techniques he will often demonstrate in a masterclass type setting is an ability to play a major scale from the middle register of the trombone into the high register without ever moving the slide, or an ability to pop out a D6, in the extreme high register of the trombone, without warming up. This technical mastery is a great asset to becoming an effective improviser, as mastery of the instrument opens the door to fully expressing one's musical ideas without being constrained by the technical limitations, real or perceived, of the instrument. Or, to put it more simply, mastery of the instrument allows for increased creative freedom.

A key component of Gordon's recommended path toward technical mastery is the process by which he advises the student to execute the various techniques and exercises he recommends. This process can be summed up with the phrase, "sing it first," which was discussed in Chapter 4 (Concepts and Pedagogy). In 2011, Kendor Music published a trombone technique book addressing Gordon's *Sing It First* concept along with suggested exercises for implementing this approach in daily trombone practice. The

book, entitled *Sing It First: Wycliffe Gordon's Unique Approach to Trombone Playing*,¹ focuses more on the application of the *Sing It First* approach to trombone technique than improvisation. *Sing It First* was compiled and edited by bass trombonist Alan Raph. Raph and famed trombonist Bill Watrous authored another trombone technique book entitled *Trombonisms*,² which Gordon says he worked out of during his early development. *Sing It First* is organized in a question and answer format between Raph and Gordon, along with recommended exercises compiled by Alan Raph. Gordon and Raph's *Sing It First* book provides the aspiring trombone student with additional insight into the processes and techniques employed by Wycliffe Gordon in developing instrumental technique on the trombone.

The core concept of *Sing It First*, according to Raph, is to “hear the music before playing it, to sing the technique before perfecting it ... (combining) playing and singing to the degree that one blends into the other.”³ Raph goes on to say that there have been many singing brass players, including Louis Armstrong, Chet Baker, Clark Terry, Jack Teagarden, and others; and that these instrumentalists' singing often reflects their playing.⁴ In fact, this is one of the elements Wycliffe finds most intriguing about one of his musical heroes, Louis Armstrong, stating that Armstrong often, “sang what he played and played what he sang.”⁵ In the exercises included below, it is important to approach

¹ Alan Raph, comp. and ed., *Sing It First: Wycliffe Gordon's Unique Approach to Trombone Playing* (Delevan, New York: Kendor Music, 2011).

² Bill Watrous and Alan Raph, *Trombonisms* (New York: Carl Fischer, 2002).

³ Alan Raph, foreword to *Sing It First*, 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

them with the *Sing It First* concept in mind. As Wycliffe says in the Preface to the book, “Remember, *Sing It First*. It works for me.”⁶ The following selection of exercises and techniques were recommended to me by Wycliffe Gordon in private lessons or in *Sing It First*.

Prerequisites

Traditional means of developing a basic command of the trombone, as well as other brass instruments, are well established; and the student would be well advised to begin their study of the trombone with these established practices. An experienced private teacher can be helpful in directing the student to the many time-proven methods for developing elements such as tone, flexibility, range, and a general facility on the instrument. Gordon recommends incorporating exercises for the development of trombone technique into a daily warm-up routine. He worked most diligently on mastering articulation and flexibility, through lip slur practice, during his formative years.⁷ In addition to the exercises mentioned here, he also uses some of the more traditional etude books such as the trombone edition of Marco Bordogni’s *Melodious Etudes* with his students.

The techniques and exercises presented below are directed towards an intermediate to advanced student who has already acquired a working knowledge of the trombone. Exercises in *Sing It First* pre-suppose that the student, “has a two-and-a-half octave range with consistent tone in all registers, is able to play scales, arpeggios, and

⁶ Wycliffe Gordon, preface to *Sing It First*, 4.

⁷ Raph, *Sing It First*, 16-17.

etudes at an intermediate level, and has a strong desire to learn.”⁸ A strong command of the two-octave major scale in all twelve keys and the chromatic scale from E2 to F5 would be a useful initial goal. Complete mastery of the trombone’s technical challenges will allow more creative freedom in improvisation. The exercises and techniques offered below are directed towards the student of improvisation who wishes to develop that next level of mastery, beyond the ordinary, which will aid in the unencumbered expression of creative musical ideas while improvising.

Warm-Ups

Gordon says he will often begin his day by singing first thing in the morning, when he wakes up. Before ever picking up the trombone, he will usually sit down at the piano and sing.⁹ He spends a significant amount of time at the piano and believes every home should have a piano. During one point in my development, Gordon even recommended that I set aside the trombone for one to two days a week and focus solely on practicing music at the piano, noting that many, if not all, of the great jazz musicians could play the piano. The utility of gaining some basic keyboard skills is also evidenced by the inclusion of a piano proficiency requirement in most university music programs.

One of the exercises Gordon likes to challenge himself with is to sit at the piano and improvise with his voice, while simultaneously attempting to match what he sings on the piano in real time. He can be heard implementing this technique on recordings of his original gospel composition, *All Day Long, Sang My Song*. Recorded versions of this

⁸ Ibid, 5.

⁹ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

tune can be heard on the album *In the Cross*,¹⁰ or on disc two of the Wycliffe Gordon *Signature Series* compilation box set, *The Word*.¹¹ By singing first thing in the morning, he is establishing a connection to his internal musical voice; and singing at the piano, assuming it is properly tuned, also helps to develop accuracy in pitch and intonation. Utilizing the piano to match one's vocal improvisations allows one to visually observe their musical ideas come into reality on the keyboard. This type of practice can help the student gain a better understanding what they are hearing internally, and ultimately this will help shorten the gap between one's internal musical voice and the execution of their musical ideas on any instrument.

Doodle Tongue

One special technique that can be useful to the improvising jazz trombonist is the doodle tongue articulation. Mastery of the doodle tongue articulation will open the door to playing fast melodic lines cleanly, while maintaining an appropriate time-feel within the jazz style. Gordon says he learned to doodle tongue in the car, while on a single trip from Augusta to Tallahassee.¹² He developed his command of the technique, over the course of the approximately five-hour car trip, by singing and buzzing what he sang on his mouthpiece. Gordon says he sang the doodle articulation on a single pitch in sixteenth notes, using each of the various vowel sounds (dah-dle, deh-dle, dee-dle, doh-dle, doo-dle). He then began to alternate his singing with playing the articulation on the

¹⁰ Wycliffe Gordon, *In The Cross*, Criss Cross Records, 2004.

¹¹ Wycliffe Gordon, *Signature Series Compilation Box Set, Disc 2: The Word*, Blues Back Records, 2014.

¹² Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

mouthpiece. When he tried to apply this technique to the trombone following his trip, he noticed a substantial improvement in his doodle tonguing ability and began to work towards mastering the doodle tongue technique on the trombone.

A detailed explanation of the doodle tongue technique as well as exercises for developing and mastering the technique can be found in *Sing It First*.¹³ After gaining some facility with the concept by singing and buzzing on the mouthpiece as described above, the student should begin to refine their mastery of the technique and immediately begin to attempt using it in musical situations where applicable.¹⁴ In working to refine the doodle articulation, the student should be aware of the tendency to underplay the *-dle* portion of the articulation.¹⁵ A concentrated effort to pronounce the *d* in the second part, or *-dle*, of the articulation will help the student achieve clarity with the doodle articulation. Once the student is reasonably comfortable applying the doodle articulation to static pitches within the middle register of the trombone, they should begin to expand into other registers and work to coordinate movement of the slide with the doodle articulation by applying the technique to simple diatonic patterns. Additional doodle exercises can be found in *Sing It First*, as well as *Trombonisms*. As the exercises progress in difficulty, the student must remember to first sing the technique before attempting to apply it to the instrument for optimal results.

¹³ Raph, *Sing it First*, 23-24.

¹⁴ Ibid, 23.

¹⁵ Ibid, 21.

Special Articulations

In addition to the doodle articulation and other more traditional articulations, there are a variety of specialized articulation and timbre options available to the jazz trombonist. The extent to which one makes use of the wide variety of articulations available is largely a matter of personal choice. However, developing the technique necessary to execute all available options allows for a wider range of musical expression. Once a basic level of mastery has been reached with the more traditional articulations and timbres, the student should consider exploring the many other sounds available, such as the flutter tongue, growl, and multiphonics, using their own musical taste as a guide in deciding where to impart these techniques in their own improvisations. Several of the articulations employed by Wycliffe Gordon are described in the Special Articulations section of *Sing It First*.¹⁶ As with the other techniques discussed throughout this chapter, the student should try to approximate the sound they want to achieve by singing and then work to develop the technique on the instrument.

Slide Technique

The slide poses a unique consideration for trombonists. “A trumpet valve,” Raph says, “travels less than an inch between notes. The trombone slide sometimes travels two feet between notes.”¹⁷ Mastery of slide technique is an absolute necessity for anyone wishing to explore the full range of musical expression available on the trombone. Gordon once told me in a private lesson to “use what makes the trombone unique,”

¹⁶ Raph, *Sing It First*, 26.

¹⁷ Ibid, 27.

meaning to utilize the nuances of the slide more effectively. In playing jazz, this can mean embracing the natural slide inflections, or portamenti, often discouraged in the study of classical trombone style. Although one can certainly find ways to improvise without mastering slide technique, failure to do so will severely limit one's options for musical expression on the trombone. Liberal use of slide inflection such as scoops, falls, rips, and glissandi can be heard in the playing of many improvising jazz trombonists, but this should not be viewed as an excuse to use a sloppy slide technique. The goal of developing slide technique is to transcend the perceived limitations of the instrument, rather than be constrained by them, allowing for the full range of musical expression. The student should first work to master their control of the slide, and with that mastery, they can begin to make musical decisions about how to best apply the various slide inflections available to them.

Scale practice is an effective means for developing a basic level of mastery with the slide. Gordon recommends first learning the sound of a major scale by singing it and using the piano to check for pitch accuracy. According to *Sing It First*, learning the sound of a major scale is the quickest way to figure out the sound of successive notes in a tune or etude, since most music relates to a scale.¹⁸ Gordon encourages students to try singing as high and low as they can go, suggesting men try singing in the upper register and women work at singing in the lower register, even if they think the notes are initially beyond their vocal range.¹⁹ When the student can sing the major scale accurately, they should then begin to master the major scale in all keys and registers on the trombone. In

¹⁸ Raph, *Sing It First*, 6.

¹⁹ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

addition to the major scale, Wycliffe recommends learning to sing and buzz a chromatic scale, again using the keyboard to check for pitch accuracy, to develop an internal sense of the musical alphabet. Once the student can sing the scale, they should begin to practice it on the trombone. This process will help the student to develop a sense of relative pitch. By approaching scales in this way, by singing them first, eventually your singing and playing will come together and you can develop a *taste* or feel for specific sounds and pitches.²⁰

An additional consideration for improvising trombonists is the necessity for a fast, smooth, and controlled slide motion. Many standard jazz tunes are played at extremely fast tempos, sometimes in excess of three-hundred beats per minute. Executing an eighth-note oriented improvisation at those tempos requires great slide velocity. If the student neglects to develop suitable slide velocity, they will be relegated to playing half-note and quarter-note melodic lines, which would be inappropriate in an eighth-note dominant style. One exercise Wycliffe recommends for developing slide speed is the following (Figure 1):

²⁰ Raph, *Sing it First*, 12.

Slide Speed

Compiled by Wycliffe G

The image displays a musical score for a slide speed exercise. It consists of five staves of music, all in bass clef. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is common time (C). The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 5, 10, 14, and 19 indicated at the beginning of their respective staves. The music features a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together, with some notes marked with a 'z' (likely indicating a slide or breath mark). The exercise concludes with a final measure containing a '2' above it, possibly indicating a double bar line or a specific ending.

Figure 1—Wycliffe Gordon, *Slide Speed Exercise*²¹

This is a compilation and variation of exercises that can be found in the book *Trombonisms* by Alan Raph and Bill Watrous. In *Trombonisms*, the authors recommend employing a detached staccato as if articulating the consonants of the word “top” while keeping the slide in constant motion, noting that the slide should only stop to change direction.²² This exercise should be practiced with a metronome, gradually increasing the

²¹ Reproduced by permission from Wycliffe Gordon, *Slide Speed* (Coup de Cone Music).

²² Watrous and Raph, *Trombonisms*, 7.

speed as the student's skill level improves. For additional variations on this exercise, see *Trombonisms* by Bill Watrous and Alan Raph.

In addition to developing slide velocity, Gordon recommends mastering the use of alternate positions. Mastery of alternate positions will help to minimize awkward slide movements and keep the slide moving in one direction as much as possible.²³ While many trombonists utilize alternate positions to minimize the distance the slide needs to travel between notes, Gordon recommends taking the time to also master the longer positions. An exercise he recommends for gaining facility with the longer slide positions is a variation on the second study from the famous Herbert L. Clarke Technical Studies shown below (Figure 2).

²³ Raph, *Sing It First*, 27.

Clarke Technical

Connected Long Positions

Clarke
arr. W. Gordon

Figure 2—Wycliffe Gordon, *Clarke Technical Studies: Connected Long Positions*²⁴

²⁴ Reproduced by permission from Wycliffe Gordon, *Clarke Technical Studies No. 2: Connected Long Positions* (Coup de Cone Music).

2

Clarke CLP

38
6 — 6 — 6 — 6 — 6 — 6 —

42
7 — 7 —

47
7 6 — 6 — 7 — 7 6 — 7 6 — 7 6 —

52
G

56

60
H

63

69

Figure 2 (Continued)—Wycliffe Gordon, *Clarke Technical Studies: Connected Long Positions*

Range

One aspect of Gordon's trombone technique that stands out is his command of all registers of the trombone, from the pedal register to the extreme high register and everything in between. In fact, when listening to his recordings, it is sometimes easy to assume he is playing in a lower register due to the effortless with which he plays in the extreme upper register of the instrument. In *Sing It First*, he says, "Even if I'm tired, I can always play a double high D."²⁵ He willingly demonstrates this to be true in masterclasses, clinics, and private lessons by playing, without preparation and on a cold instrument, an in-tune D6 with confidence and clarity.

Gordon jokingly calls the D6 that he likes to demonstrate his *Steinmeyer D*, because he decided to master the extreme high register of the trombone after hearing and playing with trombonist David Steinmeyer. Prior to hearing Steinmeyer, Gordon says he was happy with playing up to F5.²⁶ Very few composers ever write anything for the trombone higher than F5 and many trombonists consider that the upper limit of their required range. However, after working with Steinmeyer, Gordon became aware of the possibilities of playing in even higher registers.

Gordon first met Steinmeyer while performing as a member of the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra. The previous year, the orchestra had hired Gordon to play lead trombone. When he returned the following year, for a tribute to J.J. Johnson concert, he was surprised to find that he would be playing second trombone, as opposed to lead.

²⁵ Ibid, 31.

²⁶ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

His initial thought was that maybe they just wanted him to be the soloist since that role typically goes to the second trombonist. However, once Steinmeyer began to play, Gordon discovered why Steinmeyer had been placed in the role of lead trombone.²⁷

After hearing Steinmeyer begin a solo on D6, Gordon's so-called *Steinmeyer-D*, and playing upwards of that note, Gordon decided to ask Steinmeyer how he plays in that register with such effortless clarity. One thing he learned was that Steinmeyer often practices in that register, even after playing a hard gig. Gordon applied this technique to his own practice for a couple of weeks and soon found that playing in that register became a part of his own playing. After a gig, Gordon says he once heard Steinmeyer exclaim from the dressing room, "I got it!" When he asked what it was that Steinmeyer had gotten, Steinmeyer told Gordon that he had just played an F7, the highest f on the piano, on the trombone!²⁸

While Gordon was teaching at Juilliard, he would often use his bass trombone in lessons, as a tool to work on breath control and to demonstrate for his students the ability to play in the high register even on a big mouthpiece. In working on extending range with his students, he directed them to listen to David Steinmeyer on the Airmen of Note recording *Bone Voyage*.²⁹ Many of the students were not interested in the recording because they felt it was not hip enough and it sounded to them like a form of elevator music. Gordon concedes that elevator music may be an apt description, but states that the students were missing the point of the lesson, which was to master the full range of the

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ USAF Airmen of Note, *Bone Voyage*, The United States Air Force Band, 1984.

instrument. It was only after one student, bass trombonist James Burton, did the work Gordon had suggested and saw significant improvement in his range, that other students began to get on board with Gordon's approach to developing the high register.

In *Sing It First*, Gordon suggests making your goal limitless, stating, "If high F is your goal, you'll get it ... then what?"³⁰ In attempting to develop the extreme high register, *Sing It First* recommends trying to play short staccato notes in the upper register by narrowing the air stream and *tasting* the note by playing it down an octave first, then hearing and feeling it in the chops in the desired register before attempting to play it. After a few attempts at the desired high note, take a rest and move on to something else. As your accuracy improves, aim for longer notes.³¹

Another technique recommended by Gordon is to practice melodies in the upper register. Ballads work particularly well for this type of practice, but this can be done with any tune you may be working on. For instance, if you are working on a tune like Erroll Garner's *Misty*, try playing the first sixteen bars in the middle register and then play the bridge, or B section, up an octave. This serves as a practical application of high register practice, because this is a technique often employed by jazz musicians to create variety and interest in the live performance of a tune. Again, trying to sing up there and imitating your voice on the trombone will also help in achieving the desired outcome.³²

³⁰ Raph, *Sing It First*, 30-31.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Phrases

A final group of technical exercises recommended by Wycliffe Gordon comes in the form of the sixteenth-note oriented phrases shown below (Figure 3).

These phrases serve as an excellent exercise for the practical application of previously mentioned techniques. When initially presented with these phrases in a lesson, I was unsure of how to practice these exercises; and when I asked what the purpose of learning the phrases was, Gordon simply said, “It’s something that has helped me, so maybe it will help you,” displaying yet another instance of the *show you where to look, but not what to see* approach to teaching. In working with these phrases, I have discovered many useful lessons contained within them and much utility in their application to improvisation.

These exercises are an excellent vehicle for applying the doodle tongue technique mentioned earlier in this chapter. Mastery of these exercises is a good indicator of one’s mastery of the instrument. If one can play the phrases cleanly, with a consistent sound and articulation in all registers, they are surely getting around the instrument quite well. Additionally, there are lessons on chromaticism, intervals, enclosures, and even the difficult to define melodic aspect of swing contained within these phrases. Gordon recommends learning these phrases in all twelve keys. By doing so, the student would experience exceptional gains in instrumental technique as well as an intimate familiarity with all twelve major key centers. Gordon can be heard employing these phrases in various applications on recording, often combining them in unique and interesting ways.

Plunger Technique

Among other things, Gordon is considered one of the all-time masters of utilizing the plunger mute and other mutes with the trombone. He recommends watching, listening to, and imitating plunger soloists as the primary means for developing facility

with the plunger mute.³⁴ He suggests students begin by learning one to two plunger solos through a process of aural transcription, using this as a gateway to learning others.³⁵ The aural transcription process and its application to developing plunger technique is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 (The Language of Jazz). Some of the plunger soloists Gordon recommends listening to include Joe “Tricky Sam” Nanton, Al Grey, Steve Turre, Art Baron, Booty Wood, and Quentin “Butter” Jackson, among others.

Practical advice for working with the plunger mute is offered in *Sing It First*.³⁶ Gordon recommends balancing the trombone bell against the back of the palm of the hand to allow for open-closed movement with the plunger.³⁷ The plunger can be played with or without an additional pixie mute placed in the bell of the trombone. The pixie mute allows for added variety in timbre and evens out some of the intonation inconsistencies that arise from using the plunger with the open horn.³⁸ The pixie mute is designed with oversized corks so that you have to fit them to the bell of your particular instrument. Gordon says you should shave the corks down to the point that it does not stick too far out of the bell, adding that you should be able to close the plunger tight against the bell and not feel the pixie under it, but there should still be room for air to go around the mute in the bell.³⁹ Additionally, he recommends buying two pixie mutes when you happen to find a source, because they can go in and out of production and

³⁴ Raph, *Sing It First*, 34.

³⁵ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

³⁶ Raph, *Sing It First*, 34.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

³⁹ Wycliffe Gordon, Email correspondence with the author, October 10, 2013.

become hard to find if you happen to lose or damage one.⁴⁰ Gordon prefers to use a plunger with a hole drilled or cut out of the center portion, where the handle would usually attach, allowing air to escape, noting that this is a matter of personal preference and the student should experiment to discover the sound they prefer.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

CHAPTER 6

The Language of Jazz

Jazz is a Language

Jazz is a language. This oft-touted axiom of jazz education is ubiquitous to the point of almost becoming cliché. One needs only to observe the availability of numerous educational publications purporting to teach the language of jazz through the study of patterns, licks, and music theory. Jerry Coker, in his concise book *How to Practice Jazz*,¹ lists the jazz language as one of eighteen items he recommends practicing. According to Coker,

Analysis of the large number of solo transcriptions that have been published over the past two decades has shown that *all* recorded improvisers make use of a relatively small number of common phrases, patterns, and melodic and harmonic devices. This is not to say that there are no other, more creative details in the solos, but the fact remains that about 30-90% of a given solo will be taken up with phrases, patterns, and melodic and harmonic devices that are common to all improvisers, which we have come to refer to as the *jazz language*.²

Unfortunately, by extracting, compartmentalizing, and analyzing the detailed elements of jazz language, well-meaning educational publications often accomplish the opposite of their intended purpose by complicating the relatively simple process of learning the jazz language. While these publications are an excellent source for detailed study and refinement of concepts away from the instrument, the goal of the performing improviser is to not only understand, but to play, or speak, the language of jazz through their instrument. Attempting to learn the jazz language from a book of licks, scales,

¹ Jerry Coker, *How to Practice Jazz* (New Albany, IN: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 1990), 27.

² Ibid.

patterns, and melodic cells is analogous to trying to learn the finer points of grammar before we have yet learned to speak. Just as a dictionary and thesaurus can be excellent resources for someone attempting to write a paper, these jazz language publications can help to refine one's skill with language; but they are only truly beneficial once a firm grasp of executing a common dialect, learned through primarily aural means, has already been established. Wycliffe Gordon recommends an aural approach to learning the language of jazz, through the application of his *Sing It First* philosophy.

For instance, we can consider how a child learns to speak. Initially, children speak through the conveyance of emotion. It all comes back to the process of imitation, assimilation, and innovation. Children begin communicating with others using only one word, that word being *waah!* Eventually, they begin to communicate by applying inflection and non-verbal cues to their one word. *Waah* is used to mean *I'm hungry, I'm tired, etc.* Then, through the process of listening intently to fluent speakers constantly communicating with them, they begin to recognize and imitate crude sounds that become syllables, words, phrases, and sentences. Even with the fresh mind of a child, ripe for learning, and with much encouragement from fluent speakers, the imitation and assimilation processes occur over the course of many months to years, before the child begins to contribute anything intelligible to conversation. Only when the child has a grasp of basic verbal communication do we begin teaching them the finer points of grammar. Too often in jazz education, we are attempting to skip the necessary first steps of the process by providing complex music theory concepts, before the student has yet learned to speak.

Aural Transcription

So, how then, do we learn to speak the language of jazz? Gordon suggests going straight to the source, the recorded history of the music, and imitating what you hear, using your voice as the tool that connects what you hear to getting those sounds from your instrument. This is a process commonly referred to as transcribing.³ Transcribing, or the playing of transcribed solos, is a common recommendation among jazz pedagogues. Gordon, however, makes a clear distinction between what he refers to as “brain transcription” and “aural transcription.”⁴ Brain transcription is what often occurs when a teacher asks a student to transcribe a solo, especially within an academic setting. In brain transcription, the student will often listen to the material enough to begin notating what they hear and proceed by notating a solo, phrase by phrase, until they have a visual approximation of the solo that they can then study and analyze, away from the instrument. Gordon concedes that there is, indeed, some benefit to transcribing in this way, noting that trombonist Chris Crenshaw caught his attention when he showed up to a lesson with a notebook, several inches thick, of transcriptions he had notated. Gordon then asked Crenshaw, “Can you play all of those?” and of course, Crenshaw replied, “yes, most of them.”⁵ J.J. Johnson put it another way, advising David Baker, “Any idea that you can’t get out the other end of your horn is of absolutely no value in this music.”⁶ Gordon’s recommended approach, at least initially, is one of aural transcription.⁷

³ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 115.

⁷ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

He suggests that the ability to play what you are hearing on the recorded solo is of utmost importance. His recommended process for learning to play a transcription is again, the *Sing It First* approach. Gordon recommends listening to the solo repeatedly, until you begin to internalize the sound of what you are hearing. When you feel you can hear the solo, then begin to sing it, with special attention given to every nuance of what you are hearing. He suggests the analogy of becoming like a comedian impersonator, saying that you should be able to imitate every inflection of the slide, plunger mute, articulation, dynamics, and phrasing of the soloist.⁸ By first singing the solo in this way, you are truly internalizing the sound of what you hear, in addition to learning the style and vocabulary of a particular soloist. He recommends internalizing the transcription to the point of being able to demonstrate a given soloist's playing style without use of the transcribed solo.⁹

The benefits of this aural transcription process are well documented by other jazz musicians. George Johnson Jr. memorized vocalist Eddie Jefferson's unique interpretations of instrumental improvisations by singing with his father's prized Eddie Jefferson recordings.¹⁰ Wynton Marsalis once remarked to Paul Berliner, "Look out for my young brother. He's only three, but when I call home from the road, he can already sing some of Miles's solos over the phone!"¹¹ Melba Liston recalls hanging out with her friends, "listening to records together, humming the solos till we learned them."¹² In

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Wycliffe Gordon, Notes to *Recommended Transcriptions List*.

¹⁰ Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking In Jazz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 95.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 96.

addition to internalizing the sound of the music, this approach is also beneficial from an instrumental standpoint. Berliner states that “Cultivating an aural grasp of a solo before its reproduction with musical instruments avoids unnecessary guesswork when playing an instrument that might frustrate technique or exhaust endurance. It also trains the voices of students and gives them a grounding in what are for improvisers essential linkages among voice, ear, and instruments.”¹³

Once the student has learned the transcription through aural means, they should then begin applying what they have learned to their instrument by playing along with the recording, checking for accuracy in pitch, rhythm, inflection, and style. Being able to recreate the solo, as if impersonating the original recorded performance, is indicative of the student reaching one level of mastery with the material. Once this first level of mastery has been achieved, Gordon then suggests the student “go deeper” by mastering the language, vocabulary, style, and concepts contained within the solo.

Recommended Solo Transcriptions

Gordon offers several transcription recommendations of solos that will help the student develop a foundational understanding of the language of jazz and more specifically, the language of the jazz trombone. One of the unique aspects of the use of the trombone in the jazz idiom is the wide variety of personal styles, or what Gordon calls “schools” of trombone playing. Of all the instruments commonly found in jazz music, Gordon says the trombone is closest to the human voice and the “most varied

¹³ Ibid.

voice in jazz, with the most schools of playing.”¹⁴ When you listen to the historically important jazz trombonists, each has their own individual sound and style. This is, of course, true of other instruments as well, but seems to be more pronounced with the trombone.

Gordon’s suggested materials will introduce the student to many of these schools of trombone playing, giving them a sense of the history of the trombone in jazz and the history of the jazz trombone’s language and style. This process will also help the student to begin constructing their own system of judging the quality or artistic value of one trombonist’s music over another, thus developing their own unique sense of the type of trombonist, and musician, they would like to become. Once the student has thoroughly investigated and studied the materials suggested by Gordon, they should continue their development by selecting materials for study that are in tune with their personal artistic vision and values.

One of the first soloists Gordon recommends students study is J.J. Johnson.

Regarding the importance of J.J. Johnson, David Baker says,

Johnson is the pre-eminent trombonist of modern jazz. His influence is pervasive. Virtually every contemporary trombonist, jazz or otherwise, has been affected by the innovations attributed to J.J. Johnson. Technical feats that were inconceivable prior to Johnson are now commonplace, and the attitude that the trombone is capable of doing anything that saxophones and trumpets can do is generally taken for granted ... Johnson’s sound has become one of the standards by which trombone sound is measured. His complete command of the instrument from top to bottom, his pioneering efforts to adapt the language of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie for the trombone, his marvelous musicality and his unfailing good taste all support the claim for J.J. as the most important trombonist of the Charlie Parker and post-Charlie Parker eras.¹⁵

¹⁴ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

¹⁵ David Baker, Foreword to *J.J. Johnson Solos: 13 Personal Favorites: Transcribed Solos* (New Albany, Indiana: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 2000), ii.

One reason Gordon likes to begin with J.J. Johnson is because he, “plays so cleanly, it’s like he’s playing valves ... (and) a certain amount of technical proficiency is necessary to play that cleanly.”¹⁶ He recommends the album *The Trombone Master*,¹⁷ a compilation of J.J. Johnson recordings, as essential listening. One of the first solos Gordon recommends students learn is J.J. Johnson’s solo on the tune *Laura*, originally found on the album *J.J. In Person!*,¹⁸ but also available on *The Trombone Master*. As already mentioned, Gordon recommends using the *Sing It First* approach to transcribing; however, one of the benefits of beginning with Johnson’s solo on *Laura* is that a notated version of the solo can be found in the book *J.J. Johnson Transcribed Solos: 13 Personal Favorites*¹⁹ published by Jamey Aebersold, allowing the student to check their work against a reliable printed source when they are still new to the transcribing process.

There are a multitude of lessons contained within J.J. Johnson’s solo to *Laura*. By learning the solo to *Laura* using Gordon’s recommended aural transcription process, the student will internalize the sound of these lessons and be able to reproduce these sounds on their instrument. Johnson’s solo contains several pieces of useful melodic vocabulary expressed through a variety of stylistically appropriate rhythms and articulations. The solo occurs over two choruses and has a logical overarching form that proceeds from relatively low intensity to a heightened intensity with a logical conclusion. Some of the specific lessons learned in J.J. Johnson’s solo to *Laura* are discussed below.

¹⁶ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

¹⁷ J.J. Johnson, *The Trombone Master*, Columbia Records, 1961.

¹⁸ J.J. Johnson, *J.J. In Person!*, Columbia Records, 1958.

¹⁹ John Leisenring and Hunt Butler, *J.J. Johnson Solos: 13 Personal Favorites: Transcribed Solos* (New Albany, Indiana: Jamey Aebersold, 2010).

Laura

The first chorus of J.J. Johnson's solo to *Laura* begins with the two-bar pick-up shown below (Figure 4).

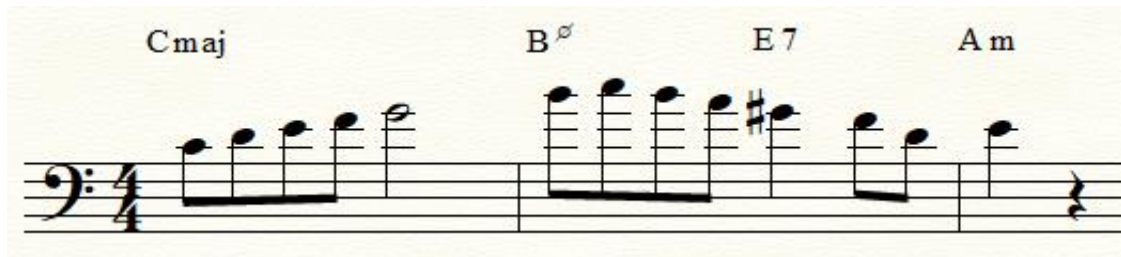


Figure 4—*Laura* (2-bar pick up to first chorus)

These two bars contain a wealth of information, before the first chorus has even begun. First, J.J. is connecting the end of the melody chorus to the beginning of his solo chorus, using this melodic line as a transition into his solo. Second, the general shape of this line is a clearly defined rise and fall. This is a common element of many of the melodic figures found in his solo, and commonly found in music in general. This melodic shape is analogous to the antecedent-consequent phrase structure of classical music. Third, this line can be easily divided into 2 separate melodic cells that would serve as excellent material for the student to master in all keys and all registers of the trombone.

The first melodic cell (Figure 5) is an eighth-note scalar figure, one measure in length, that begins on the root of the C major chord over which it is played, and that then moves diatonically from the first degree of the C major scale to the fifth degree of the scale, with the fifth degree being held for two full beats.



Figure 5—*Laura* (C major melodic cell)

The simplicity of this line makes it easy to overlook this idea as an important melodic figure to learn. However, here is one of the all-time masters of jazz trombone, using a simple expression of the first five notes of a major scale, over a major chord, to begin his solo. By learning this one piece of melodic information through the aural transcription process recommended by Gordon, the student will have automatically ingrained the sound of this valuable piece of improvisatory language. The sound they ingrain will be imbued with the style, articulation, phrasing, and inflection of J.J. Johnson within a real world, live performance context. Additionally, the student will be able to play the idea on the trombone, a practical application of the idea, before ever studying the theory behind what is being heard. Having ingrained the sound of this musical idea, the ambitious student would be wise to then work to master this piece of language. By practicing this piece of language in all keys and in all registers of the trombone, utilizing the *Sing It First* approach, the student will have it at their disposal for any improvisatory situation that may call for it.

A similar analysis of the second melodic cell (Figure 6) reveals an equally valuable improvisatory melody.



Figure 6—*Laura* (ii-V7-i melodic cell in A minor)

The second cell occurs over a one-measure, minor ii-V7-i chord progression. Many jazz musicians consider the minor ii-V7-i chord progression to be one of the most challenging to master. Here again, we have one of the jazz trombone masters showing us, on record, a clearly defined approach to navigating this tricky progression. Johnson plays the root of the B diminished (ii) chord on the downbeat. He then uses the second degree of the B Locrian mode as a neighbor tone, returning to the root on beat two. Next, he passes through the seventh degree of the Locrian mode, using it as a passing tone, and resolves to the third of the E7 (V7) chord on beat three. Finally, he resolves the phrase by playing a melodic enclosure. Johnson plays a flat-ninth degree of E7 on beat four and ghosts the seventh degree of E7 before resolving the line on the fifth of A minor (i). As before, learning this melodic idea, through aural transcription, will ingrain these sounds into the student's musical consciousness, effectively teaching the student the practical application of these improvisatory ideas. Additionally, they will be ingraining J.J. Johnson's musical style, including everything from Johnson's time-feel, swing concept, articulation, phrasing, and every other nuance of musical inflection. Mastery of these aspects of the solo are equally as important as the notes and rhythms he chooses to play. The theory behind all of this aurally gained information can be helpful in discussion, but the ability to hear and apply these sounds in a practical way is of the highest value to a performer.

Further analysis of J.J. Johnson's solo to *Laura* will reveal a multitude of additional melodic ideas, or vocabulary, for the ambitious student to master. Study of this solo also reveals important lessons in how to build a solo. Johnson plays two choruses. The first chorus contains clearly defined phrases built primarily on eighth-note, triplet, quarter-note, and half-note ideas with ample space between phrases. In the beginning of the second chorus, Johnson creates a sense of floating over the time by simplifying his melodic lines, using primarily quarter-notes at this point in the tune, before launching into a twelve-bar double-time passage. The solo ends with a relaxing of the rhythmic structure from triplets, to eighth notes, and finally to quarter notes in a generally descending melodic shape.

Additional J.J. Johnson solos recommended by Wycliffe Gordon include Johnson's solos to *My Old Flame*, *Misterioso*, and *Blue Trombone*, all of which are available on the album *The Trombone Master*. Studying multiple solos by one performer gives the student a deeper understanding of that performer's improvisatory language. By studying multiple solos by one performer, the student will begin to recognize phrases and patterns that reoccur in different tunes, and how the performer adapts their language to different musical situations. The study of solos by additional soloists will lead to an understanding of the broader improvisatory language common to all jazz musicians.

Additional Recommended Solo Transcriptions

In addition to the J.J. Johnson solos mentioned above, Gordon recommends the study of several other trombone soloists that will help the jazz trombone student to establish a well-rounded, foundational understanding of the history of jazz trombone

playing. By looking back, historically speaking, we can discover where many of the ideas found in later soloists, such as J.J. Johnson and others, originally come from. Also, studying a wide variety of soloists from different eras provides the student with additional techniques and styles, or schools of trombone playing, to draw from in their own improvisations.

One recorded solo Gordon recommends learning is Dickie Wells's recording of *The Dickie Wells Blues* from the 1937 album *Dicky Wells in Paris*.²⁰ William "Dicky (or Dickie)" Wells was a trombonist born in Centerville, Tennessee.²¹ Wells began playing trombone as a youth growing up in Louisville, Kentucky. He was member of several New York bands in the 1930s including those led by Benny Carter and Fletcher Henderson, but he is perhaps most well known for playing with the Count Basie Band from 1938 to 1950, with some interruptions. Dicky Wells's improvisational style is markedly different from that of J.J. Johnson. Where Johnson makes the trombone sound like a valve instrument through clearly articulated, eighth-note oriented bebop lines, Wells' style is more a demonstration of the natural characteristics of the trombone. Learning the solo to *The Dickie Wells Blues* will give the student a grasp of the jazz trombone as it was played in the pre-bop era. Lessons contained within the solo include development of the blues-oriented vocabulary of the swing era, as well as the vocal characteristics of the trombone such as vibrato and slide inflection.²²

²⁰ Dicky Wells, *Dicky Wells In Paris, 1937*, Prestige Historical Series, PRT 7593, 1955.

²¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Dicky Wells biographical information comes from the following article: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, online edition, s.v. "Dicky Wells."

²² Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

One of the most famous trombone sections in all of jazz history is the various iterations of the Duke Ellington Orchestra trombone section. Included in Gordon's recommended transcription list are two solos by Ellington Orchestra trombonist Lawrence Brown. Brown, born in Lawrence, Kansas in 1907, joined Duke Ellington's orchestra in 1932 and remained a member until 1951 when he left to join a band led by former Ellington sideman Johnny Hodges. Brown stayed with Hodges until 1955 before becoming a CBS session player. He later rejoined Ellington in 1960 and retired from playing in 1970, at the age of 63.²³ Brown is especially known for his melodic ballad playing and being "one of the first trombonists of the swing era to play with a very smooth, large, consistent sound ... [that] added a great deal of body to the sound of Ellington's trombone section."²⁴

As an introduction to Lawrence Brown's ballad style, Gordon recommends learning Brown's recording of *The Creole Blues*. *The Creole Blues* can be found on various Ellington compilation albums, including *The Duke: The Essential Collection (1927-1932)*.²⁵ Gordon also recommends learning Brown's solo on the tune *Black Beauty*. *Black Beauty* is a 1928 composition by Duke Ellington that Ellington often played at the end of intermissions, as his band members returned to the stage.²⁶ Brown's solo, which can be found on the three-disc compilation album *Never No Lament: The*

²³ *Wikipedia*, online edition, s.v. "Lawrence Brown (jazz trombonist)," by various authors (23 February 2020).

²⁴ Mark C. Gridley, *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis, ninth ed.* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2006), 113.

²⁵ Duke Ellington, *The Duke: The Essential Collection (1927-1932)*, Sony, 2000.

²⁶ *Wikipedia*, online edition, s.v. "Black Beauty (1928 song)," by various authors (25 February 2020).

Blanton-Webster Band,²⁷ showcases another, more aggressive, side of Brown's playing and provides additional insight into his improvisational style.

The Plunger Mute

A unique aspect of trombone playing in the jazz idiom, and an area that Gordon is an acknowledged expert in, is the use of the plunger and other mutes with the trombone. Some of the basic technical considerations for using the plunger mute were discussed earlier, in Chapter 5 (Instrumental Technique). Additional guidelines for utilizing the plunger mute can be found in method books such as *The Al Grey Plunger Method for Trombone and Trumpet*.²⁸ Al Grey is considered one of the all-time masters of plunger technique and his method book, according to Gordon, is a somewhat scientific approach to plunger technique, recommending the use of five different plunger positions ranging from fully open to fully closed.²⁹

However, Gordon says Grey is probably “not really thinking about that (five plunger positions) when he's playing.”³⁰ Gordon recommends aural transcription as the best process for learning the nuances of playing with the plunger mute. Simply put, traditional means of notation are grossly inadequate for expressing the wide range of nuance available when using the plunger. Gordon notes that there is a wide degree of

²⁷ Duke Ellington, *Never No Lament: The Blanton-Webster Band*, BMG Japan, 2003.

²⁸ Al Grey and Mike Grey, *The Al Grey Plunger Method for Trombone and Trumpet* (USA: Second Floor Music, 1987).

²⁹ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

³⁰ Ibid.

variation among plunger soloists and he suggests the student begin developing plunger technique by learning one to two solos, using those as a gateway to learn others.³¹

One of the most frequently studied plunger soloists is Joe “Tricky Sam” Nanton. Nanton performed with the Duke Ellington Orchestra from 1926 to 1946, providing Ellington with a unique timbre to include in his arrangements.³² Nanton used the plunger in conjunction with a small pixie, or *buzz*, mute placed inside the bell of the trombone. The use of the pixie mute, combined with Nanton’s unorthodox way of blowing the trombone, allowed him to come very close to pronouncing words with his trombone.³³ Gordon recommends learning Nanton’s solo on the tune *Chloe*, which can be found on the Blanton-Webster Band compilation mentioned earlier, as an introduction to Nanton’s characteristic growl and ya-ya sound.

Another plunger soloist Gordon recommends listening to and studying is Mitchell “Booty” Wood. Wood is a somewhat underappreciated trombonist who played professionally with Lionel Hampton, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and others in the 1930s through the 1980s.³⁴ Gordon recommends learning Wood’s solo on the tune *Sweet and Pungent* from the Duke Ellington album *Blues in Orbit*,³⁵ referring to it as “one of the most prolific plunger solos ever recorded.”³⁶ *Blues in Orbit* was recorded in 1958 and

³¹ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

³² Gridley, *Jazz Styles*, 113.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *Wikipedia*, online edition, s.v. “Booty Wood,” by various authors (25 February 2020).

³⁵ Duke Ellington, *Blues In Orbit*, Columbia, 1958.

³⁶ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

Booty Wood's solo on *Sweet and Pungent* covers a wide range of techniques and timbres available with the plunger mute.

Once the student has developed a basic understanding of the plunger sounds and techniques employed by Tricky Sam Nanton and Booty Wood through studying the solos mentioned above, they should then begin listening to and transcribing other plunger soloists, incorporating the techniques they have learned in their own improvisations. Some additional plunger soloists Gordon recommends checking out include trombonists Al Grey, Steve Turre, Art Baron, Quentin "Butter" Jackson, and Dennis Wilson. With patience and practice, the student will begin to discover the sounds and techniques they like and, as a result of their efforts, they will develop their own musical voice.

The Next Step

Transcribing the previously mentioned solos will provide the student with a solid foundation in the history and language of the jazz trombone. Once this foundation has been established, the student should feel encouraged and empowered to continue this process with soloists they admire. By continuing to transcribe solos chosen by the student, they will begin to absorb, internalize, and imitate the sounds they enjoy listening to. Eventually, the student will assimilate these influences into their own playing and, when combined with the student's own original improvisatory ideas, this practice will inevitably lead to the emergence of a unique and historically informed musical voice.

CHAPTER 7

Repertoire

What is the Goal?

In one of my earliest lessons with Mr. Gordon, he asked “what is the goal?” In Chapter 4 (Concepts and Philosophy), this interaction was mentioned to demonstrate Gordon’s tendency to ask questions of the student, rather than provide concrete answers, thus allowing the student to discover the answer to their own questions in due time. The answer to this question, as it relates to jazz improvisation, is likely to be somewhat variable from one musician to the next, based on their individual concept or definition of improvisation. Taking the time to clarify the answer to this question will provide a better understanding of how to proceed with learning the art of improvisation.

The goal, as it relates to jazz improvisation, can be understood by considering an experience Gordon shared in an interview with the author. Upon hearing Wynton Marsalis perform a virtuosic improvised solo on the tune *Cherokee*, Gordon wanted to know how Marsalis comes up with so many improvisatory ideas and executes them with such velocity and precision. So, Gordon approached Marsalis after the performance and asked, “How do you do that?” Marsalis’ answer was, “I’ll tell you like Dizzy [Gillespie] told me, you just put the horn to your face [motions his hands to face as if holding the trumpet] and [sings while moving fingers as if playing trumpet] do-dle-oo-dle-doodle-etc.”¹ In the most succinct description of improvisation possible, there is the answer. The goal is to speak, or sing, the language of jazz through your instrument. Or, to put it

¹ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

another way, the goal is to get together with a group of musicians and have a musical conversation that expresses something to an audience. If we can accomplish this goal, then the instrument simply becomes a vehicle for the expression of our internal musical voice.

How do we accomplish this goal of speaking through our instrument? First, jazz musicians must speak a common language in order to communicate with each other. The language of jazz, and a process for learning the language of jazz was discussed in Chapter 6. In addition to being fluent in the language of jazz, musicians need to develop a shared repertoire of tunes that will allow for a musical conversation to take place. According to Paul Berliner in *Thinking In Jazz*, “composed pieces or tunes, consisting of a melody, and an accompanying harmonic progression, have provided the structure for improvisations throughout most of the history of jazz.”² Standards are the shared repertoire of tunes commonly performed by jazz musicians.

Developing a repertoire of jazz standards allows improvising musicians the opportunity to have a musical conversation with any other musician around the globe who has developed the same repertoire. Although specific standards can go in and out of fashion and may vary slightly from one locale to another, there nevertheless exists a well-established repertory of tunes that any improvising jazz musician is expected to have at least some familiarity with. Many of these tunes are based on commonly used formal structures such as the repeating pattern of the twelve-bar dominant blues or the AABA structure of the tune *I Got Rhythm*.

² Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking In Jazz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 63.

Developing a repertoire of jazz standards can be a daunting task for the beginning improviser due to the large number of standards that jazz musicians are expected to know. Jamey Aebersold's *How to Play Jazz and Improvise*, volume one of his play-along series, lists over one-hundred-eighty jazz standards that jazz musicians will be expected to know for jam sessions and casual music jobs, describing them as the cream of the crop.³ The sheer volume of information can prove to be overwhelming for students, halting their progress before they ever get started. Wycliffe Gordon's recommended list of jazz standards is much more succinct and presents the student with a digestible selection of tunes that will help them develop a foundation in the most important theoretical elements of standard jazz repertoire, while also continuing the process of exposure to some of the most important recordings and soloists in the history of the jazz trombone idiom.

The *Sing it First* Approach to Learning Tunes

As with his recommendations for building instrumental technique and learning transcriptions, Gordon recommends applying the *Sing It First* concept to learning repertoire.⁴ He recommends first learning the melody by singing it. This can be done through a combination of listening to recordings of the tune to be learned in conjunction with obtaining a reliable lead sheet to the tune. The Jamey Aebersold play-along series provides a wealth of available lead sheets that are well-researched, generally accurate, and legally published. A piano and recording device can also be used to check for

³ Jamey Aebersold, *Volume 1: How to Play Jazz and Improvise, revised 6th edition* (New Albany, Indiana: Jamey Aebersold), 59.

⁴ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

accuracy in pitch and intonation. Gordon recommends playing and recording the melody, then listening to it several times while following the lead sheet in order to memorize the melody. Then attempt to sing the melody from memory. Repeat as needed to complete the memorization process.

Once the melody has been learned, Gordon recommends playing and recording the roots of the chords. Listen to, sing, and memorize the roots of the chords. Then record the chord changes at the piano, listen to the recording, and begin to sing the melody along with the chord changes. Also, try singing the roots of the chords along with the recording. Then play and record the chord tones by arpeggiating each chord, in quarter notes, from the root of the chord to the seventh. Listen to the recording and repeat the singing process to internalize the sound of the tune's harmony. This should all be done with a metronome, set at sixty to eighty beats per minute, keeping steady time to develop a sense of the harmonic rhythm of the tune. It may also help to break the tune into smaller, eight-bar sections where necessary.⁵ Finally, create your own play-along track by recording the chord changes, on the piano, at the desired performance tempo.

Completing this process will ensure that the student has learned the tune aurally, physically, and intellectually before attempting to improvise on the tune. This is a crucial first step that often gets overlooked in improvisation classes. Too often, students are handed a lead sheet and, after a brief overview of what scales may fit the chord changes, they are asked to begin improvising with a pre-recorded play-along track before they have done the work of learning and internalizing the tune. This creates a disconnect

⁵ Wycliffe Gordon, *Singing Approach to Ear Training for Jazz Improvisation masterclass handout*.

between the tune being played and the improvisation that will take place on that tune. Before you can improvise on the tune, you must first learn the tune.

After recording the changes, Gordon says to listen to the recording several times and begin to sing the melody on the first chorus, then follow your ear and sing what you naturally hear for the second and third choruses.⁶ After trying this a few times, record what you sing. After taking a break, return and listen to the recording of what you sang. Transcribe what you sang. Gordon says, “this is what and how you naturally hear.”⁷ Repeat the process with other tunes. The more you do this, the more you are shrinking the gap between what you hear and what you can play. Eventually the two will merge, thus accomplishing the goal of singing through your instrument.

Regarding this tune learning method, Gordon once advised me, “they’re not all going to be good ideas.” An additional step he recommends taking is to transcribe as many versions of the tune as possible. Transcribing several versions of the same tune will deepen the student’s understanding by providing historical perspective. Learning the recorded history of the tune will also introduce the student to varied conceptual approaches and additional vocabulary ideas to assimilate into their playing. When these ideas and historical perspectives are combined with the student’s original ideas, a unique and relevant musical voice will emerge.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Recommended Repertoire

Gordon's list of recommended repertoire consists of fewer than twenty-five tunes. The tunes are divided into four categories including thirty-two-bar song form, rhythm-changes, blues, and ballads. The thirty-two-bar song form category includes the tunes *All the Things You Are*, *(Back Home Again in) Indiana*, *Donna Lee*, *How High the Moon*, and *Ornithology*. Rhythm changes tunes include *I Got Rhythm*, *Oleo*, *Cottontail*, *Rhythm-A-Ning*, *Anthropology*, and the Dizzy Gillespie tune *Ow!* The blues category is divided into three subsections including dominant blues (*Sonny Moon for Two* and *Blue Monk*), Bird blues (*Blues for Alice* and *Freight Train*), and minor blues (*Mr. P.C.* and *Little Stevie*). The final category of ballads includes *I Can't Get Started*, *Lament*, *Misty*, *Sophisticated Lady*, and *In a Sentimental Mood*.⁸

The first tune on Gordon's recommended repertoire list, and a tune he likes to use for demonstrating the *Sing It First* approach to learning tunes, is *All the Things You Are* (1939) by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II.⁹ Jazzstandards.com ranks *All the Things You Are* as the second most frequently recorded jazz standard available on compact disc.¹⁰ There are numerous musical lessons contained within this one tune. Improvisation teachers may, at first, be hesitant to begin with such a seemingly complex tune. The form of the tune is quite long, thirty-six bars, and the harmony is fairly sophisticated as it moves through several key centers and presents a wide variety of chord qualities including major, minor, dominant, diminished, half-diminished, and even a

⁸ Wycliffe Gordon, *Recommended Tune List from private lessons with the Author*.

⁹ Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

¹⁰ <www.jazzstandards.com/compositions/index.htm> (27 February 2020). Jazzstandards.com ranking based on number of jazz artists who have recorded a standard tune available on currently issued CDs.

V7 \flat 13 chord. Applying a chord/scale approach to learning this tune may indeed prove to be too complex for a beginning improvisation student, who will likely suffer from paralysis by analysis when trying to apply a different scale to each and every chord. The first eight bars would require seven to eight different scales. However, by applying Gordon's *Sing It First* approach to learning the tune, the student needs only to know enough music theory to spell basic seventh chords at the piano and be able to match pitch with their voice, in order to discover and develop improvisatory ideas for this seemingly complex jazz standard.

By beginning with *All the Things You Are*, the student is immediately introduced to one of the most common musical forms in jazz. The underlying structural framework of *All the Things You Are* is a variation of the common thirty-two bar (AABA) song form. The form of *All the Things You Are* is perhaps best represented as A1-A2-B-A3 due to the changing key centers and the slight variation in the return of the A section following the bridge. The melody is relatively simple, but genius in its construction, moving in parallel motion with the harmonic root movement. Additionally, the melody is easy to sing because of its emphasis on the third of virtually every chord within the structure of the tune (Ex. 7.1).

The image shows a musical staff in bass clef with a 4/4 time signature. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The melody consists of the following notes: Measure 1: whole note F (below staff); Measure 2: quarter note B-flat, quarter note B-flat; Measure 3: quarter note E-flat, quarter note E-flat; Measure 4: quarter note A-flat, quarter note A-flat; Measure 5: quarter note D-flat, quarter note D-flat; Measure 6: quarter note G, quarter note G. Chord symbols are placed above the staff: Fm7 above the first measure, Bbm7 above the second measure, Eb7 above the third measure, Abmaj above the fourth measure, Dbmaj above the fifth measure, and G7 above the sixth measure.

Figure 7—*All the Things You Are*, mm.1-6

The first four measures of *All the Things You Are* utilize one of the most common harmonic progressions in jazz, a vi-ii-V7-I chord progression in the key of A \flat . This harmonic progression is repeated in the second A section, this time in the key of E \flat major, and yet again in the return of the A section, where it returns in the key of A \flat major. The student who first learned to approach improvisation from the viewpoint of applying various scales to each chord of the tune may find themselves suffering from a glut of information. Within the first eight measures, the chord/scale approach would require the student to change scales every measure. This would require thinking of seven to eight different scales within the first eight measures of the tune depending on whether or not they chose to include a one bar ii-V7 progression in measure six (Dmi7-G7), or treat the entire measure as a single G7 chord. The second A section, measures 9 through 16, would require another seven to eight scales.

Applying the chord/scale approach to improvising on this tune would require the student to apply fourteen to sixteen different scales before reaching the bridge of the tune. At a moderate tempo of 126 to 132 beats per minute, this means the student needs to focus on a new scale every two seconds, or sixteen scales within approximately thirty seconds. With this vast amount of information to process, the student is likely to become so overwhelmed with music theory that they find themselves unable to produce a sound of any kind. Jazz saxophone legend Sonny Rollins has famously said, "When I play, what I try to do is to reach my subconscious level. I don't want to overtly think about

anything, because you can't think and play at the same time — believe me, I've tried it (*laughs*). It goes by too fast.”¹¹

Applying Gordon's *Sing It First* approach to learning the tune simplifies this theoretical complexity and encourages the student to develop their improvisatory ideas by working more within the realm of sound, as opposed to the realm of pure music theory. By applying the *Sing It First* approach to learning the tune, the student is likely to discover, through aural means, that the first four measures of *All the Things You Are* is simply in the key of A \flat major, as opposed to being four different chords requiring four different scales. The melodic ideas that the student will undoubtedly come up with when attempting to scat sing, or vocally improvise, over the chord changes to the tune in real time will primarily be ideas that exist within the various key centers of the tune. This is because, quite simply, those will be the ideas that sound correct to the student's ears after they have put in the work of learning the harmony through singing and internalizing the sound of the harmonic progression.

When approached in this way, *All the Things You Are* becomes a simple tune. The first four measures of the tune provide an opportunity for the student to discover, through experience, the concept of key centers. The harmonic material contained within this one tune covers a significant portion of what the jazz trombonist can expect to encounter in any jazz standard. Learning *All the Things You Are*, through the application of Gordon's recommended *Sing It First* approach, will provide the student with original improvisational ideas that they can use to navigate several key centers, chord qualities,

¹¹ NPR Staff, "Sonny Rollins: 'You Can't Think and Play at the Same Time'," *NPR: All Things Considered* (3 May 2014), < <https://www.npr.org/2014/05/03/309047616/sonny-rollins-you-cant-think-and-play-at-the-same-time> > (27 February 2020).

and common harmonic progressions. Once the student has gone through this learning process with one tune, they should then begin applying the concept to other tunes within the standard repertoire. Using this approach, even a tune that many musicians consider to be extremely harmonically challenging, such as *Giant Steps* by John Coltrane, becomes a simple tune that anyone can learn to play.¹²

Further investigation into the available recordings of *All the Things You Are* will lead the trombone student to discover one of the most famous improvised solos in the recorded history of the jazz trombone. Frank Rosolino's solo to *All the Things You Are*, which can be heard on the album *Fond Memories Of...Frank Rosolino*,¹³ is one of the most well-known and impressive improvised trombone solos ever recorded. On this recording, Rosolino plays a virtuosic ten choruses of improvised solo before trading fours with the drummer. If the student is struggling to find their own original ideas to play on this tune, Rosolino's solo provides plenty of material for the student to transcribe and assimilate into their own playing. Even if they do not take on the challenge of learning Rosolino's solo, in researching the tune *All the Things You Are*, the first tune on Wycliffe's recommended repertoire list, they have been introduced to yet another historically important jazz trombonist and another style, or school, of trombone playing.

All the Things You Are serves as only one example of the many lessons contained within Wycliffe Gordon's recommended repertoire list. Gordon's pedagogical genius lies not in telling the student what lessons they are supposed to learn with each tune, but rather in allowing the student to investigate the material and come to their own

¹² Wycliffe Gordon, Interview with the author, January 13, 2020.

¹³ Frank Rosolino, *Fond Memories Of...*, Double-Time Records, DTRCD-113, 1996.

understanding of the material assigned. Gordon may, upon further assessment in private lessons, provide additional hints to what the lessons are, but he has a unique penchant for saying only enough to allow the student to do the work of learning the assigned lessons through their own experience. Further study of the tunes listed above will reveal additional lessons in melody, harmony, and musical form, as well as introduce the student to additional schools of trombone playing, important trombone soloists, and recordings that are essential listening for a well-rounded jazz education.

Gordon's recommended repertoire list is, of course, not exhaustive and it only serves as a foundation for further study. Once the student has a firm grasp of the lessons contained within these recommendations, they should continue to build upon their base of knowledge by learning additional repertoire from the standard jazz repertory and exploring the vast world of jazz improvisation through further listening and study. According to Jerry Coker, the average four-hour gig will require about thirty to forty tunes before needing to repeat tunes already played.¹⁴ Gordon's recommended repertoire list provides the student with a little more than half of that number; and it covers the general tune categories of standards, bebop, ballads, and blues. His recommended *Sing It First* approach can just as easily be applied to more modern jazz styles such as modal and avant-garde jazz.

¹⁴ Coker, *How to Practice Jazz*, 28.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

As with any virtuoso musician, the sound of Wycliffe Gordon's trombone playing is instantly recognizable. Likewise, his artistic voice shines through in his work as a multi-instrumentalist, vocalist, composer, and arranger. Like many of the great jazz masters throughout history, Gordon has internalized and mastered the music that has come before him, using that as a springboard from which to embark on an innovative solo career. This development of a personalized sound and style, combined with a thorough understanding of the history of the art form, is one of the most sought-after goals of any aspiring jazz musician. Gordon's pedagogy will help the jazz trombone student to accomplish this goal in the most direct way possible.

Gordon's recommended materials and methodology provide a foundation from which students can build upon for the rest of their lives. His recommended solo transcriptions and repertoire choices provide the jazz trombone student with an understanding of the history of jazz and its greatest practitioners. The *Sing It First* approach to mastering those materials teaches the student to internalize and speak the language of jazz. Additionally, his pedagogy encourages the development of a student's unique artistic voice.

Once the student has mastered Gordon's recommended transcription and repertoire lists, they should continue the process by learning solo transcriptions and repertoire that are representative of their personal musical tastes. In doing so, they will naturally transition from the imitation and assimilation phases of learning improvisation

into the innovation phase, thus achieving the ultimate goal of emerging as a unique musical artist with an informed, expressive and relevant voice within the jazz tradition.

Wycliffe Gordon has influenced an entire generation of jazz trombonists through his live performances and recorded repertory; and through his pedagogy, his legacy will continue for generations to come.

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Appendix

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