

HOW TO LEARN JAZZ SONGS AND  
SOLOS BY EAR

**LISTEN  
SING  
PLAY!**



By Jeff Lewis

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Most jazz songs have a simple form.

## **AABA**

(Each A,B, and C section is usually 8 measures long)

## **ABAC**

## **16 bar form**

## **12 bar blues**

Form rarely ever changes. It is a kind of road map, not unlike a racetrack, that keeps the players and listeners in the same place. That's how they can all go on a musical journey together and not get lost.



In Jazz music, many people who are not already familiar with the melody, will oftentimes not be sure when the melody ends and the improvisation begins.

One way of helping to hear melodies is that they are usually played as an ensemble. That is, multiple horns or other instruments will all be playing at the same time. When they all stop, the improvisation starts.

For this listening example we will use the  
Kenny Dorham classic  
**"Blue Bossa"**

The version I use  
is from the Joe Henderson album titled  
**"Page One"**

I like to count the measures and try to identify  
repeated sections by ear.

This is how I count;  
1234,2234,3234,4234,5234,6234,7234,8234.

This is 8 measures. Most jazz song are  
written in 8 measure phrases.

Let's now listen to the song  
**Blue Bossa.**

This song has an introduction that is not part  
of the actual form.

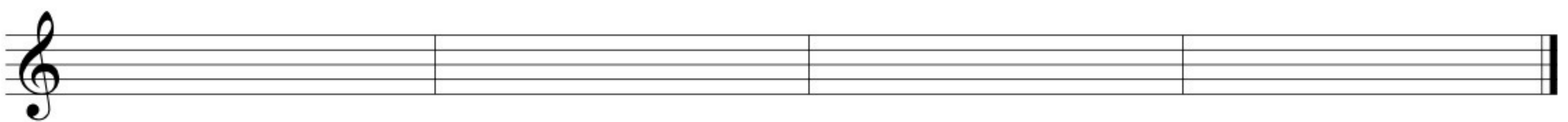
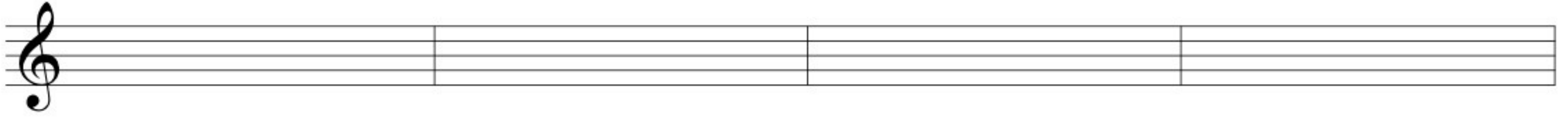
Can you determine how long the introduction  
and song form is? Try to do so before going  
on to the next page.

The intro is 8 measures long and the song is 16 measures long. So, we will call this a **16 bar form.**

Can you determine the key the song Blue Bossa is in? Usually, the first chord or last chord is the key of the song but not always. This can be difficult and takes practice to be able to hear keys and key centers.

Now that you can sing the melody, try to identify and match the pitch to your instrument or a piano. If you are trying to learn a melody by ear, I would avoid writing it down until you can play the entire melody in time by ear.

Once you can play the melody, write it down using the manuscript paper I have provided on the next page



Next, we are going to try and identify the bass notes (or roots) so that we can start building the chords by ear.

In jazz music, the bass usually plays the root on beat one of every chord change.

Now listen again to Blue Bossa and see if you can identify the bass notes as each chord changes. Then, write them down in the manuscript provided.

You can use an app to slow down the music if needed. Try "Anytune" or "Transcribe".

These are the two I use.

Now try to sing the melody. Once you can do that, you are ready to figure out the notes like we did with the bass part.

Because of copyright infringement, I will give you bass notes and only the target notes or "guide tones" of the melody.

Guide tones are the 3rds and 7ths of the chord. They determine chord function as in major and minor

The image displays two musical staves in treble clef, numbered 1 through 8. The first staff is for a D-7 chord. The notes are D4 (beat 1), E4 (beat 2), F#4 (beat 3), G4 (beat 4), A4 (beat 5), B4 (beat 6), C5 (beat 7), and D5 (beat 8). The 3rd and 7th notes (F#4 and C5) are highlighted with yellow boxes and labeled "Guide tone". The chord symbol "D-7" is written above the staff, and a fingering diagram (7, 5, 3, 1) is shown below the staff. The second staff is for a C-7 chord. The notes are C4 (beat 1), D4 (beat 2), E4 (beat 3), F4 (beat 4), G4 (beat 5), A4 (beat 6), Bb4 (beat 7), and C5 (beat 8). The 3rd and 7th notes (E4 and Bb4) are highlighted with yellow boxes and labeled "Guide tone". The chord symbol "C-7" is written above the staff, and a fingering diagram (7, 5, 3, 1) is shown below the staff.

# Bass Notes

Bb part

The Bb part consists of four staves of music. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The notes are as follows:

- Staff 1: Four measures, each containing a single quarter note. The notes are G2, F2, E2, and D2.
- Staff 2: Four measures, each containing a single quarter note. The notes are G2, F2, E2, and D2.
- Staff 3: Four measures, each containing a single quarter note. The notes are G2, F2, E2, and D2.
- Staff 4: Four measures, each containing a single quarter note. The notes are G2, F2, E2, and D2. The final measure ends with a double bar line.

Concert pitch

The concert pitch part consists of four staves of music. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The notes are as follows:

- Staff 1: Four measures, each containing a single quarter note. The notes are G2, F2, E2, and D2.
- Staff 2: Four measures, each containing a single quarter note. The notes are G2, F2, E2, and D2.
- Staff 3: Four measures, each containing a single quarter note. The notes are G2, F2, E2, and D2.
- Staff 4: Four measures, each containing a single quarter note. The notes are G2, F2, E2, and D2. The final measure ends with a double bar line.

Notice how by looking at the bass notes and the melody you can fill out the rest of the chord. Chords are made up of the 1357 of the scale theory used in that chord. Blue Bossa is in the key of C minor.

# Bass notes with Guide Tones and partial melody

Bb part

The Bb part is written in C minor. The first staff shows a melody with guide tones (3rd and 7th) for the first two measures. The second staff shows the bass notes and guide tones for the first two measures. The third staff shows the bass notes and guide tones for the last two measures. The fourth staff shows the bass notes and guide tones for the last two measures, with a final chord marked with a double bar line.

Concert pitch

The Concert pitch part is written in C minor. The first staff shows a melody with guide tones (3rd and 7th) for the first two measures. The second staff shows the bass notes and guide tones for the first two measures. The third staff shows the bass notes and guide tones for the last two measures. The fourth staff shows the bass notes and guide tones for the last two measures, with a final chord marked with a double bar line.



# Chord symbols and scales

Dm7 Gm7

Em7(b5) A7(b9) Dm7

Fm7 Bb7 EbMaj7

Em7(b5) A7(b9) Dm7

Cm7 Fm7

Dm7(b5) G7(b9) Cm7

Ebm7 Ab7 DbMaj7

Dm7(b5) G7(b9) Cm7

As you can see ,and hear, this can be very difficult at first. It does take practice. Don't give up! I would suggest being familiar with the piano, chord and scale theory, and being able to play ii V7 I chord progressions (both major and minor).

So, just to recap, this is how I approach learning a song by ear;

1. Listen and sing the melody from memory
2. Learn the form
3. Identify the bass notes
4. Try to fill in the guide tones from the melody with the bass notes to identify chord type (this takes practice and also knowledge of jazz chord types)

If you are looking for more help in the area of Jazz Theory, I recommend the "Mark Levine Jazz Theory Book". He also has an excellent Piano book as well!

# Bonus Section!

## How to transcribe jazz solos

1. Listen to the solo many times so that you can scat sing the solo.
2. Try to identify the pitch of each note of the solo on your instrument (try transcribing a solo from a different instrument other than yours). Also, I would suggest NOT writing down the solo until you know it from memory on your instrument. As a side note, some teachers/players are against using slow down software to help with the faster passages, I am not one of them. Try using a slow down software like [Anytune](#) or [Transcribe](#).
3. If it is very difficult at first, try one note at a time and build on that day after day.
4. After you can play the entire solo, or as much of it as you want, then write it out.
5. If you can, try to identify the chords and form of the tune first before you transcribe the solo. Knowing the chords can help you determine the notes of the solo (if you are familiar with chord and scale theory).
6. Now analyze what the soloist is doing by looking at the solo against the chord changes. Does the player play outside of the changes? Why does it sound so good when it *looks so wrong*? What does the soloist do that intrigued you to learn the solo in the first place?

I posted a play along of Blue Bossa on my  
YouTube channel at;

[Jeff Lewis Trumpet](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...)

**JAZZ PLAY ALONG**  
**"Blue Bossa"**  
**JeffLewisTrumpet.com**

A banner with a black background and a green diagonal stripe at the bottom. The text is in white and blue.

I also posted an easy solo based on the  
chord changes to Blue Bossa

**Easy Jazz  
Trumpet  
Solo**  
**Bossa  
Nova**

A black banner with white and blue text.

Trumpet/Tenor/Clarinet  
**Easy Jazz Trumpet Solo**  
**Bossa Nova**  
Jeff Lewis

Dm7 Gm7  
Em7(b5) A7(b9) Dm7  
Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7  
Em7(b5) A7(b9) Dm7 Em7(b5) A7(b9)  
Dm7 Gm7  
Em7(b5) A7(b9) Dm7  
Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7  
Em7(b5) A7(b9) Dm7 Em7(b5) A7(b9)

JeffLewisTrumpet.com

A musical score for trumpet/tenor/clarinet in 4/4 time. It features a melody with various chords and rests. The chords are: Dm7, Gm7, Em7(b5), A7(b9), Dm7, Fm7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, Em7(b5), A7(b9), Dm7, Em7(b5), A7(b9), Dm7, Gm7, Em7(b5), A7(b9), Dm7, Fm7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, Em7(b5), A7(b9), Dm7, Em7(b5), A7(b9).

**JeffLewisTrumpet.com**

You can learn a lot from the masters on your instrument when you transcribe them by ear.

It's almost like taking a free lesson!

Go slow at first. It can be difficult and frustrating if you have never done it before.

The first solo is always the most difficult!

Trust me, it gets easier. Soon you will be hearing things better and will be able to play them upon hearing them one time. Try practicing your listening skills by seeing if you can hear the chord changes of your favorite pop tunes. They are usually simpler and more repetitive than many jazz tunes.

Have fun and I wish you all the best!

Cheers,

Jeff