



Luke Gillespie

# How To Listen to Jazz: a 10-Step Guide

In January 1977, the middle of my junior year at Indiana University School of Music, I was in the office of my jazz teacher and mentor, David Baker, and I noticed an LP on the turntable. The LP cover was so worn it was two pieces of cardboard making a kind of record sandwich (with no paper sleeve), and I could barely see that it was *Kind Of Blue* by Miles Davis.

Baker walked in and I said, "Wow, you have gotten a lot of mileage out of this record." What he said next changed my life: "Yeah, that's my seventh copy." "Seventh copy?" I gasped, knowing that it takes hundreds of

times to listen to an LP before wearing it out. He had listened to this album thousands of times. I thought I had listened a lot, but I had never worn out any of my records. I realized I hadn't even begun to really listen.

Duke Ellington once said, "I am the world's greatest listener," and the most important quality he looked for in a musician was the ability to listen. All music (even written music) is "played by ear" and needs to be studied by ear.

For the past 25 years, I have worked with students on their listening skills, in lessons, combos and Jazz Styles & Analysis classes, and about 15 years ago, I started to incorpo-

rate the following 10-step listening guide for my students.

**1. Overall sound and basic elements:** What is the mood (tempo/dynamics)? What are the primary rhythmic motives that occur? Determine the form and tune type: 32-bar AABA or ABAC, 12-bar blues, blues with a bridge, through-composed or something else (see Jerry Coker's *How To Listen to Jazz* for five tune types).

What is the meter, and does it change? Is it in a major or minor key, and does it change keys? How does the tune begin and end? Are there any interludes? What is the texture (monophonic/homophonic/polyphonic)? What is the instrumentation?

Can you sing along with any or all of it? Can you sing the rhythmic groove and comping patterns? Can you sing the melody?

**2. Listen to just the drums:** How do the drums play "spang-spang-a-lang" ride cymbal patterns? Do they play just quarter notes like Jimmy Cobb frequently does on *Kind Of Blue*? Notice how drummers switch from one cymbal to another for color variety, especially between soloists.

Pay attention to how various elements of the drum kit are used, including snare chatter, hi-hat, feathering the bass drum, sticks vs. brushes, and rim clicks (Jimmy Cobb plays rim clicks on beat 2 of the third chorus and beat 4 of the fourth chorus of Wynton Kelly's piano solo on "Freddie Freeloader" from *Kind Of Blue*).

Try to identify the time-feel, meter, groove, dynamics, style and form. Rhythmically speaking, can you detect any subdivisions, polyrhythms, syncopation, metric groupings (duple, triple, etc.), double-time/half-time, metric modulations or hemiolas? Does the drummer tend to play on top of the beat, behind the beat or right in the middle of the beat?

**3. Listen to just the bass:** Is there a walking bass line, or ostinato pattern? Does the bass line outline the chord changes? Does the bassist play mostly roots (and other chord tones) on downbeats? Are downbeats approached by a half-step above and/or below, or from each chord's dominant, etc.? Does the bassist play with conjunct (step or scalar) and/or disjunct (leap) motion? Listen for pedal points, time-feel, style, register, sound/tone, attack, length of notes, dynamics and legato versus non-legato. Does the bass play in "2"? Does the player make use of double-time or half-time feels? Does the bass play on the first, second or third part of the triplet?

**4. Listen to just the piano/guitar/vibes:** Pay attention to all of the following: comping

patterns, language/vocabulary, chord changes, textures (block, broken, etc.), range/tessitura, voicings, “voicing” in the classical sense (playing some notes louder and/or softer than others), sound and touch. Remember that all musicians must be “drummers”; rhythm is at the core. Does the piano/guitar/vibes comp differently for different soloists? Where and how does the comping instrument make use of space? If more multiple comping instruments are playing, how do they play together and stay out of each other’s way?

**5. Listen to the drums and bass together:** This is the most important “hook-up” in any jazz group. How do their quarter notes line up, and how are they hooking up together? How are they dealing with rhythmic subdivisions? If the bassist and drummer are not listening to each other closely, the foundation of the music likely will be unstable and lack organic energy and forward motion.

**6. Listen to the drums and piano together:** How do they interact? How is their mutual comping related (for example, the rhythms of the snare drum chatter and the piano comping rhythms)? Do they interact with or anticipate each other’s rhythms? Is there call/response?

**7. Listen to the bass and piano together:** How do they interact in their various roles? Do they employ chord substitutions? Does the pianist tend to rely on Bud Powell-style “shell” voicings or rootless voicings—or a combination? Do they play any lines or ostinato patterns together? How does the pianist comp for the bass solo? Some bassists prefer the piano to be less busy or even lay out during bass solos, while other bassists prefer that the piano comp for them like any soloist. Others prefer a mixture depending on the tune and what the textures were in previous solos (on that particular tune or previous tunes in the set).

**8. Listen to the whole rhythm section:** How do they hook up and play together as a section? How do they interact with the horns during the melody, interludes and solos (this overlaps with the next step).

**9. Listen to the horns, melody instruments and soloists:** How do they interact with the rhythm section? How do they interact rhythmically with each other, and how do they interact harmonically with bass/piano/guitar/vibes? What about sound, blend and intonation? What chord substitutions do the soloists play? My college schoolmate, saxophonist Ralph Bowen, often would ask me to surprise him with different chord substitutions when we practiced, and he would do the same for me, to help improve our ears.

What chord/scale relationships are involved? Are the solo changes the same changes as the tune? Are the solo changes the same for each soloist? Do the piano and guitar alternate comping for soloists or do they comp

at the same time? This step will take multiple listens to understand what the soloists are playing (rhythm, melody, harmony) and how they are interacting with each other and members of the rhythm section.

**10. Repeat Step 1:** You will be surprised how much depth in listening awareness you have acquired by just listening to a recording 10 times (or more) like this.

## Your main teacher for studying music is always going to be the music itself: recordings and live performances.

In addition to listening alone, get together with your musician friends and listen to recordings together. Another college schoolmate of mine, bassist/educator Robert Hurst, wrote an outstanding *DownBeat* article (January 2018) on this kind of “communal listening.” Learning collectively and understanding how others listen will enhance your own listening skills and make you a better team player.

Other jazz artists/educators have offered excellent listening advice, including pianist Fred Hersch. Check out his online article “Active Listening” (Jan. 12, 2015, [jazzpianoschool.com](http://jazzpianoschool.com)).

Enjoy the listening process, whether you do it by yourself or communally with others, and also during your own performance. Notice how many musicians make “ear” contact when they play together, and how they

often are looking at each other. My colleague, drummer Steve Houghton, always looks at the other musicians on the bandstand, supporting the music and the musical process with his ears and eyes. In a sense, we should learn to hear synaesthetically with our eyes and watch with our ears.

Listening is a kind of sacred ritual that should be part of our lives on a daily basis. We can only learn through listening. Listen actively with full concentration. That means not doing email, social networking or something else that will distract from your full attention while you listen.

When I recorded my *Moving Mists* CD last year, I noticed my colleague, tenor saxophonist Walter Smith III, was listening carefully to the rhythm section and using his surroundings to generate and develop his improvisations. This was also true with my other colleagues. In my duo with vocalist Tierney Sutton, she phrased in ways to converse with the piano accompaniment perfectly. Every musician on the recording was careful to blend, listen to each other and play as a collective, not just as a soloist. This allowed for musical conversation and dialog to take place as the musicians wove musical fabrics to create a colorful sonic tapestry.

Your main teacher for studying music is always going to be the music itself: recordings and live performances. Active and close listening will help you to imitate and assimilate all of the elements at work in any piece of music you encounter. **DB**

Pianist/educator Luke Gillespie is a professor of music at Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. His latest CD, *Moving Mists* (Patois), features current and former colleagues Jeremy Allen, Steve Houghton, John Raymond, Walter Smith III, Tom Walsh, Dave Stryker, Tierney Sutton, Pat Harbison, Wayne Wallace, Todd Coolman and Brent Wallarab. Gillespie’s book *Stylistic II/V/II Voicings for Keyboardists* is published by Jamey Aebersold, and he recently adapted Aebersold’s classic *Play-A-Long Volume 1* for jazz piano. Visit him online at [lukegillespie.com](http://lukegillespie.com).

### SUGGESTED READING

#### Books by jazz educator David Baker:

- *A New Approach to Ear Training for Jazz Musicians* (1975)
- *Jazz Improvisation: A Comprehensive Method for All Musicians* (1969, rev. 1988)
- *Modern Concepts in Jazz Improvisation: A Comprehensive Method for All Musicians* (1990)
- *How To Play Bebop, Volumes 1, 2, 3* (1988)
- *How To Learn Tunes, Jamey Aebersold Play-A-Long, Vol. 76* (2000)

#### Books by jazz educator Jerry Coker:

- *How To Listen to Jazz* (2010)
- *Elements of the Jazz Language* (1991)
- *Hearin’ the Changes* (1997)

#### Other recommended publications:

- *NPR Curious Listener’s Guide to Jazz* (2002), by Loren Schoenberg
- *How To Listen to Jazz* (2016), by Ted Gioia
- *The Primacy of the Ear* (2011), by Ran Blake
- *Deep Listening: A Composer’s Sound Practice* (2005), by Pauline Oliveros
- *The Jazz Musician’s Guide to Creative Practicing* (2007), by David Berkman
- *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (1994), by Paul Berliner
- *What to Listen for in Music* (1957), by Aaron Copland