

Basie Basics
by George Wiskirchen
Vol 4, #2, p.20 (Nov-Dec 1988)
[Complete article from BANDWORLD Magazine]

Recent adjudications of school jazz groups have reinforced my awareness that too many bands are deficient in a proper grasp and idiomatic execution of basics. I have called this article Basie-Basics for the obvious reason that the Basie Band is still a prime example to be emulated by school jazz groups.

The rhythmic feel of the Basie style and the phrasing of his band is the keystone of big band jazz ensemble performance. Because it is a pivotal style, it is essential that this style be grasped first by any band that intends to go off into modern jazz, free form avant-garde jazz or jazz/rock.

There will be nothing new in what follows, but it is nonetheless vital. Neither will it be mysterious. I will simply attempt to define and isolate some of the elements of the Basie style that can be adopted by all jazz groups regardless of age. These “rules” have been gleaned from listening to, analysis of, and teaching of this style over the years.

RULE I: Most faults occur in phrasing, and the most common errors here lie with articulation. (Please note that I did not mention tonguing.) Every note in a jazz performance must be articulated, regardless of any markings that appear over the note. The only exception to this would be passages where the speed of the notes makes articulation impossible.

RULE II: The slur line over a group of notes in jazz does not mean slur in the classical sense—that is, in connection of one note to the next without any separation or delineation by articulation. In jazz the slur line is a phrase marking and merely means that there should be no separation between notes which are meant to hang together and form a musical phrase. Each note under the slur line must be articulated and then shaped into a unified phrase by a continuous air-flow. Slurring in the classical sense deprives a line of definition and makes the syncopated accentuation, the drive or push, of a jazz line just about impossible.

Let's spend some time talking about the articulation that is needed in jazz phrasing. The hard and even explosive “tu” attack has no place in jazz and really very little place in music. The legato “du” or “lu” articulation is used almost exclusively in a mixture with breath pushes, tongue rollings, throat closures, etc. to provide the articulation and delineation needed in jazz. The techniques vary in the brass and woodwinds. The exact description of these techniques is difficult in print. Listening and imitation is the best teacher here.

Classical Slur becomes something like Jazz Phrase

RULE III: A continuous and supported air-flow must connect all notes in a phrase under the articulation described above. Authentic jazz phrasing demands the articulated line be bound together by this air-flow. It is this air-flow, varied in intensity by accentual pushes, that gives life and a jazz feel to this music.

Separations occur only where indicated by notes marked short, or by rests. In general, any note value more than a quarter note in length is played without separation unless a separation is indicated by an accent or unless a breath is demanded at the end of a phrase. The “slur line” and the legato or tenuto line are frequent indications of notes that are played together without separation.

RULE IV: If a note is to be played short or separated, it is articulated legato and then ended or clipped off with the tongue (“duht”). Students must be careful to avoid a distortion of the sound in this articulation. The important thing is that the articulation fore and aft is used to make the note “crisp.” This is especially important in playing final or release eighth notes.

How short is short? The speed of the piece and the style will determine the length of the note. Student bands frequently error in playing notes too short. Remember that the important thing is to round out the notes crisply.

RULE V: Short notes or notes with separations after them are generally indicated by some marking. Unmarked quarter notes are more often than not played short. (Style and phrase position will frequently indicate this as well as their length.) Any syncopated note of a quarter or less in value is normally played short unless there is a “slur line” or legato mark over the note to indicate a lack of separation.

RULE VI: Jazz is a syncopated music, and this accentuation or weight must be manifest at all times in the lines. Note that final eighth notes off the beat must be accented and clipped. They normally form the focal and release point of the phrase. The “kick” or “lift” note must be played with an increased intensity. The player must make no separation between the “lift” note and its release while making sure that the release note is articulated.

Stylistically there should be a short separation between a heavy sustained note value and its release note. Make sure that the release note is accented.

These are the basic rules for jazz phrasing. If bands use them, then stylistic modifications of the articulations and phrasings can be applied to all forms of jazz and rock. It is the only place to begin. Some excellent Basie arrangements by Sam Nestico with recordings by the Basie Band are currently available from Kendor. I suggest you get some of them for your band and get into the basics before going on. Remember: Destroy the slur and articulate!

George Wiskirchen's article, Basie Basics, appeared in issue #65 (1972) of Bandwagon Magazine. The Limits of Excellence, A Guide to Judging Wind Instruments, written by

A.H. Benade, was printed in issue #66 that same year. Produced and distributed free-of-charge by The Selmer Company from the early 1950ís through the late 1970ís,

Bandwagon articles are now reprinted here through the generosity of Selmer.

Source: 4•2•20