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JazzEd

THE JAZZ EDUCATION MAGAZINE

Jamey Aebersold
The Man Who Taught
the World to
Jam

Basic Training:
Latin Music – A Primer

Focus Session: Learning Swing
via Afro-Cuban Style

The Official Publication of

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JAZZ EDUCATION NETWORK

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A photograph of a cluttered room, likely a home office or a music room. In the foreground, a red patterned stool sits on a green carpet. To the right, a black Steinway grand piano is visible. The background is filled with shelves and surfaces covered in books, papers, and various small objects. A vertical strip of photographs is visible in the center background. The title text is overlaid on the image.

The Man Who Taught the World to **Joan**

by Matt Parish



Play-A-Longs Innovator and Jazz Camp Chief Jamey Aebersold On Decades of Simple Educational Greatness. In a small town in southern Indiana, a small publishing company called Jamey Aebersold Jazz runs quietly out of Jamey Aebersold's basement.

The 72-year-old jazz vet lives a block from where he was born and an hour's drive from all the places he used to give private lessons as a music school graduate. He operates his famous Summer Jazz Workshops just across the river at the University of Louisville.

But with his ever-expanding *Jazz Play-A-Long* book series, which is topping 130 volumes, Aebersold has influenced several generations of jazz musicians, young and old, across the world. Virtually every jazz student has spent time in the pages of one of Aebersold's books, working out new theory ideas and experimenting over their trusty recordings of patient rhythm sections. A lifelong jazz educator who has worked with students of all ages, Aebersold pioneered the idea of teaching students to improvise using scale and chord structures as melodic blueprints and has steadily refined his approach to the series as ages of his students have grown both younger and older. His efficient summer workshops have remained largely the same, focused boot camp-style on getting new jazz students on their feet with music theory and improvisation and, above all, learning how to listen to each other and to great jazz masters of the past. It's a formula that's worked for decades.

JAZZed recently had the pleasure of

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speaking to Aebersold from his home in New Albany, Ind. about the development of the long-trusted Aebersold approach to jazz education.

***JAZZed:* You've built a long career changing the way musicians educate themselves. How was your experience as a young musician trying to wrap your head around jazz back in the '50s?**

Jamey Aebersold: Coming up out of high school, I wanted to go to New York – the Manhattan School of Music, which I applied for. I waited several months until I finally got a letter back that was one sentence long. "Dear Mr. Aebersold: We do not offer the saxophone." My dreams were crushed because at that point I'd been reading *DownBeat* and *Metronome* magazine, listening to records, and I had a little

band going writing some arrangements and trying to improvise. I didn't have any direction. So I went to Indiana University because I heard about it through my older brother, who played some trumpet and wasn't a jazzer, but I had heard him say that they were jamming in the halls all the time at IU. I went there and then found out they didn't have saxophone program either.

***JAZZed:* Did you have a preference for performing or teaching?**

JA: I was going to be a jazz musician and make a record for Blue Note at some point in my life, and when I got to school I heard other people who were in music education practicing in the little rooms next to me. I never heard anybody play who I thought sounded very good. So I told everybody that I wasn't going to be a music educator. I made sure everybody knew that, too. "I'm not going to be

even getting into improvising. So on certain days, instead of having three or four kids for a half-hour lesson after school, we'd have a combo. Saturdays would also be combo day. Then after while I got it down to where I didn't really teach any private lessons at all – all I was doing was combos in my basement. Many of those people coincidentally went on to become professional musicians in New York or teaching at various colleges. They really got into it.

***JAZZed:* With your background in a program that didn't have a full saxophone program, how did you hook up with the concepts being explored by people like David Baker at the time?**

JA: After I enrolled, Roger Pember-ton – who's a very fine saxophone player – came there for his Master's. They



like these other people."

Four years later, an oboe player named Gene Montooth came up to me in the parking lot and he said he taught privately in Seymour, Ind., about 50 miles away, every Saturday. He had a high school job that fall and he was going to stop teaching in a few weeks and wondered if I wanted to do it. Of course, immediately my mind said, "Jamey, you told everybody you would never teach!" I'm standing there in the parking lot thinking, "I'm going to get married and I could use the money. Is private teaching *really* teaching?" I decided it wasn't, so I took the job. It was one of the best things I ever did.

I eventually got students who were playing well and some of them were

asked him to teach me the saxophone. Then, at some point, I began taking private lessons from David Baker. I'd drive up to Indianapolis for that and that was when he was studying with George Russell and played with the George Russell Sextet. So David Baker passed on the information to me and I'd try it out and come back. I was like a guinea pig for him.

***JAZZed:* Were you doing a lot of private lessons at the time when you developed the first *Play-A-Long* book?**

JA: Yes and, in fact, it was through different private lessons that I found out the mantra I have – "Anyone can

improvise.” Through those lessons, I found out that if you played a little background for people over one scale, they could actually improvise and play what they hear in their head. They weren’t afraid of it at all. I was baffled because I thought that in order to play jazz, you had to have a big stack of records that you listened to all the time, drink coffee, and be kind of grumpy. That was my view of jazz going through college. That’s what I saw other people doing, and I didn’t drink coffee.

JAZZed: The books are known for using the chord scale system that was getting developed back then. How did you first pick that up?

JA: I first picked it up from David Baker. He was stressing learning each scale and each chord. I’d never really thought that way before. When I played, it was kind of by the seat of my pants. I’d look at the chord symbol and if it said “G,” I kind of knew the G chord and so forth and I’d listen to the sounds on the piano or bass and it was kind of hit or miss for a long time.

Back in the ‘60s, if someone wanted to play jazz, you’d have them play the blues right off the bat. But if you play the blues scale, it’s got a couple minor thirds in there and if you’ve only gone up and down major and minor scales, to play the blues scale is kind of difficult, especially if you haven’t listened to any records. So you don’t even know what this scale sounds like.

But I tried it, and it wasn’t until I got them to play on one normal scale that it was easy and they felt some confidence. That’s how I got it going and that’s why on the *Play-A-Longs Volume 1*, several of the tracks are on Dorian minor scales as opposed to starting out with the blues or with “Just Friends,” or “Have You Met Miss Jones” or something like that, you know.

JAZZed: That must have felt like a revelation.

JA: Once I started centering in my saxophone on the scales and the chords – ah, there were many more possibilities. When you’re playing music that’s based on harmony and standards and

blues and “I Got Rhythm” and “Cherokee” and so forth, the melodies that come to your mind are based on bits and pieces of scales and chords. Then you intersperse chromaticism, rests, leaps, held notes, repetitions – things like that to give variety to your solo. When people are just singing in their head, they’re going up and down bits and pieces of scales and chords. You can’t avoid it.

JAZZed: So right around then, you decided to make play-along records for your students to practice this method over.

JA: Yeah, it was around 1962. The Play-A-Longs came along because the students needed something to practice with at home. So I made the first record, then I said, “Oh my gosh, if someone buys this LP, they won’t know

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what to do with it because there's no melody. I better write a book." So I labored with the book for months and finally put out the first version – *Volume 1: A New Approach to Jazz Improvisation*. And it was new.

So I think the Play-Along records and the concept of scales and chords was not mine, but it was new back then in the late '50s and '60s. Russell is to be credited for his transcription

of solos and so forth where he realized that Charlie Parker and Dizzy and Monk and Bud Powell were playing bits and pieces of scales. He got things started. That was like kindergarten. David Baker came along with his interpretation of it and gave it to me and then various other people picked up on it and next thing you know, we're all kind of teaching similarly.

JAZZed: In addition to the large collection of *Play-A-Long* books, you've also stocked thousands of other supplemental education books along the way. What's the general goal of the company?

JA: The main thrust of the company is to allow people to practice jazz at home on their own with the Play-A-Longs. Then with the several thousand books that we sell from other publishers, we help them understand jazz and have fun playing music. All the other books we've taken on little by little over the years are items that help people to understand harmony, theory, ear training, arranging, playing in a combo – everything that applies to getting a person to the point where they can get up and take a solo on something and to play the music that they hear in their head.

JAZZed: As time has gone on, have you thought of new ways to improve that system?

JA: When we got to *Volume 24*, I slowed everything down and made a lot of the tracks bossa nova because we learned that the bossa nova beat relaxes the left brain, which is the thinking side, and makes things appear easier to do. Educators have taken jazz down to people who are very, very young, so I'm thinking about doing a new Play-A-Long called something like "Easy Aebersold" or "Easy Jazz" and make the examples slow and not taken to all 12 keys and just make it simple and fun for people that are nine to 12 years old and maybe have never listened to a jazz record.

JAZZed: In those early years, was it just you at the company?

JA: Basically for the first ten years, it was just me. I was still playing jobs, working at night, teaching privately after school, filling the orders as they came in. Then I got a fellow named Matt Eve and he's still working here after about 33 years. He started when he was in high school, coming in after school. He and I just kept going and then finally we needed somebody else. Now we're up to 7 or 8 people



The poster for the MEIEA LA 2012 Summit features a dark background with a city skyline and palm trees. At the top, the MEIEA logo is displayed in white, with the text "MUSIC & ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY EDUCATORS ASSOCIATION" below it. A quote in orange text reads: "Bringing together educators and leaders of the music and entertainment industry". Below this, the text "INDIVIDUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL MEMBERSHIPS AVAILABLE" is shown. A central grid of orange buttons lists activities: Education, Research, Paper Presentations, Keynote Speakers, Roundtable Discussions, and Topical Sessions. At the bottom, the MEIEA LA 2012 logo is prominent, accompanied by a QR code and the text "SCAN FOR MORE INFO". The event details "The Music and Entertainment Industry Educators Association Summit LOS ANGELES | MARCH 30-31 2012" and the website "www.meiea.org" are at the very bottom.



that work, including myself. And we're shipping stuff all over the world.

Over these 40 years, it was never supposed to be a business. It sort of just evolved into it and at some point I realized there were other people working here and they depend on this and they've got families and people seem to really want this.

JAZZed: What do you find are the differences in students now and back in, say, 1967? Are they looking to accomplish different things?

JA: I think so. I do my Summer Jazz Workshops and we have 250 or 300 people in each week and we get a lot of adults. It's amazing – the adults who listen to music want to play simple tunes like "Perdido" and "Honeysuckle Rose." The younger students – five, ten years ago, the one that have been practicing on jazz – they want to play the more adventuresome jazz tunes, the ones that are really jazz tunes. So many people have absolutely no idea what jazz is even when they come to the camp. You have them playing and they don't know that it would be helpful to know those scales and chords and the order of the tune.

JAZZed: How are the camps set up?

JA: The students come in on Sunday, have a quick audition, take a theory test, go eat supper to live music, hear three groups play that night, and hear the rules given to them and so forth. Monday morning, we dive right in with theory. Then we have a listening, a jazz musicianship class, then they're in combo at 11 o'clock. They have master class at 1:30 and combo again at 3 o'clock. Then they hear three more groups that night. By the time they get to Friday and you can hear the students play, you can definitely hear improvement when each one of them stands up and takes their solo.

JAZZed: Do you feel that there's a certain principle that's most important to get young students something to stand on first?

JA: I think the idea of what I do is to prepare the students to become individuals. That's the goal. Of course, if they gain independence and play with the *Play-A-Long* records at home, they develop the desire to play with humans.

And I think listening is the key element. If they're not listening to records, they're not practicing. I don't see how they're going to end up being a jazz player. For instance, you have people that come in and can play pretty well and play the chords and so forth. But say they're tonguing all the notes. You'll ask them if they've ever listened to Cannonball. They'll say, "Yeah." Charlie Parker? "Oh yeah, I've got several records by him." I'd say, "Have you ever noticed that they don't tongue every note like you're doing? You're playing like you're in a marching band or a rock'n'roll band." It's an issue with articulation, which can be slow and difficult and exasperating, but if they make that transition, they'll make it into the jazz arena.

JAZZed: How many students are at a typical workshop?

JA: We have had as many as 400 a week. This last time, we had 338 the first week and about 310 the second week. Plus, we had 50 faculty and 18

staff, with students from 21 different countries.

JAZZed: How often do you reassess the way those camps are run?

JA: We've found the best thing to do with the camps is to just leave it the way we have it. When we started the first combo camp, me and David Baker and maybe Jerry Coker and Dan Hurley, we got together and said, "What will we do?" Someone said, "How about theory?"

I know I said this: "Ugh, no theory. We don't need that." For me, five and a half years of theory was the most boring class in college because they didn't talk about anything I was interested in. It was music of 100, 200, 300 years ago. But we did agree that we needed it. As soon as we did it, my brain said, "We need more theory." The students didn't have an understanding of any of it, so we needed to talk about it and then turn right around and try it in Combo classes. When we set up that first session way back there, we talked things through and there have been things we tweak a little bit but it's basically the same.

JAZZed: The general idea seems to be a classic one at this point – master the notes and study the greats, and students will be able to find their own voice.

JA: I think we have a holistic approach. No good educator is trying to make them sound like them or someone else on the record. It's impossible. I had students at camps where you'd say, "Hey, you've got a nice sound there. Who do you listen to?" They'll say, "Well, I don't really listen much to records." "Do you listen to Clifford Brown or Miles or Kenny Dorham?" "Well not really. I don't want to sound like them – I want to sound like myself."

To that, I say, "You think you can listen to a Kenny Dorham record and then you'll end up sounding like Kenny Dorham? I think you're making a mistake." If it were that easy, everybody would sound like him.