

# Developing & Maintaining Your Jazz Band Program


Roger Groth – Clinician

NSBA 2017 Convention, March 3, 3:30-4:15 pm

Westbrook Music Building Room 119

Featuring the Omaha Westside High School Jazz Band, directed by Tommy Krueger.

A brief overview of what I did and found useful and helpful in building and maintaining a consistent quality jazz band program. Some subjects addressed will be rehearsal techniques, common problems and solutions, what to look for when selecting contests and festivals, literature selection resources, generalities every jazz band director should know, a grading system that works, a few “tricks” of the trade and many more.

- I. Set-up
  - A. Performance
  - B. Rehearsal Box
- II. Rhythm Section
  - Volume Control Knob of the Band
  - Long Term Dynamics
  - A. The Bass – Time Master of the Band
  - B. Drums – lead hand, Earning the trap set
  - C. Piano – Less is more
  - D. Vibes – best use of
  - E. Guitar swing style, hollow body vs hard body
- III. Jazz Articulation (swing style)
  - A. Brass (non reed)  
Doo (unmarked) Dah ( > ) Daht ( ^ ) Dit ( . )
  - B. Saxes  
The “Back Accent”
- IV. Balance Lead  
  
Full Ensemble – Trombone & Saxes – Saxes (note: unison passages are Tenor dominant)
- V. Releases
  - A. Two Types = Tongue and Air
- VI. Creating Intensity at Soft Volumes
  - A. Shout a Whisper
- VII. Saxophone – Unison Balance
- VIII. Hold & Release
  - A. Using Daht = Brass
  - B. Tongue & Reed Release = Saxes
- IX. Improvisation
  - A. Tune of the Week
  - B. Jazz Combos
- X. Performing
  - Paid and not paid
  - Big Band Dance
  - Dinner Dance
  - Jazz Combos
  - School Hallway
  - Basketball games
  - Community Functions

Attend as many Contest/Festivals that offer reputable judges and clinicians as possible. I preferred events that included both a performance and separate clinic segment. This offered a more hands on experience for both myself & my students. It proved to be the most beneficial.

To keep my students on task at these events I had them use the exact same judging sheet we were being critiqued on while listening to other bands. Their task was to critique the performing band of their choice using the following criteria; 1) what they are doing well. 2) what needs improvement with suggestions on how that can be accomplished.

### **Other Considerations:**

**Time** Time provides a level of excitement that no other musical property can give. It is important for you to require all of your performers to physically display (toe tapping) the beat. It is very rare for a high school or younger student to successfully internalize the pulse or beat. Our first step is to think a subdivided beat with the hope that it can eventually become internalized. Only through subdivision feel will the pulse be maintained successfully throughout the piece. Time is every performer's responsibility.

**Recordings** Always have something on the stereo while students enter. Using good recordings of the music you are working on is and should be an important part of your classroom plan. I would play a short recorded excerpt of the music we were performing asking my students to listen for specific performance skills and interpretations, then allow them the opportunity to perform and copy what they just heard. As a their teacher it was my job to help guide them on what they should be listening for by being as specific as possible. Recordings were also used quite often for motivation. Professionals enhanced their learning by listening & copying from others.

**Literature** I bought many wonderful arrangements and compositions from jwpepper. Great music from Hal Leonard, Sierra Publications, etc., are readily available. Other Publishers used were UNC Jazz Press from the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Walrus Music, Composers websites & many others. Some composers and arrangers I have used are: Mike Tomaro, Bob Brookmeyer, Eric Richards, George Stone, Maria Schneider, Sammy Nestico, Bob Curnow (Sierra Publications), Matt Harris, Fred Sturm, Bob Minzter, Alan Baylock, and many more. Choosing the right music and level of difficulty is key to performance success and improvement. It is also imperative students experience Swing, Latin, Rock, Fusion (if you can find one easy enough to perform well) & Pop. To me there are only two kinds of music: Good & Bad.

**Pedagogy** It is imperative to have a good working knowledge of the physical needs of each instrument. Sax embouchure (weight from the top, pro players embouchure is on the flat side – C, D, A mouthpiece pitch match, etc.). Brass & woodwind air flow needs, embouchure, etc., Drum set, Bass, Piano, Vibes, Guitar and Auxiliary Percussion instruments. All too often we ask but fail to provide a physical solution...that is key for success for both the band and the player. Bringing in experts on a regular basis will help you and your students discover what really works.

**Maintaining Long Term Consistency** Tom Osborne set it best "you will be fine as long as you understand that whatever decisions you make you have to live with for the next 25 years." Student ownership is key. We do this better in marching band than most any other performance venue. Give students the chance to make musical decisions and act on them.

**Auditions** When selecting the band members I used the NMEA All-State Jazz Etudes. After many years of listening and judging students myself I decided to spend a little of our band activity money and hire 4 qualified adjudicators to do the job. I used judging forms developed from NMEA and others throughout the years. I ran it just like we used to when we recorded NMEA auditions at 10 different sites around the state.

**Trumpet Range** is one of our biggest challenges. One of my college friends and fellow trumpet class member Laurie Frink helped me to realize what I could really accomplish on my instrument (trumpet). Her work with Carmine Caruso and her eventual expertise as the foremost authority of his method is what I used to help most of my instrumentalists (especially my trumpet players) to achieve better physical performing capabilities. This session is way too short for me to address this development process and concept (perhaps another time). I did have my lead trumpet players use a lead mouthpiece. However a good solid embouchure is paramount, otherwise damage may occur.

**Loud vs soft** Velocity of air determines volume: fast air = loud, slow air = soft. Control is the performer's ability to be able to adjust the air speed as the dynamic dictates. The air "chamber" always remains the same. I used a "Sigh" for a way to understand how the air chamber remains open for soft volumes.

**Vocalist.** I would always have each and every year a vocalist both male and female (if possible). Hopefully you are friends with your vocal director. I always asked them for recommendations. More often than not some of the best vocalists from choir or show choir were not always the best candidates for the big band style. I made sure to run a very informal audition before offering them a chance to perform with the band. Many wonderful arrangements are now available for vocalists. Arrangers / Composers I have used most often are: Roger Holmes, Paul Murtha, Dave Wolpe, George Stone and many more. Check [jwpepper jazz section vocal solo with band accompaniment](#) for more options.

**Doubles** It was very rare when I had a saxophone section that could play another woodwind instrument. It was almost just as rare to find a student who would be willing to do the work involved in learning another instrument. However there were a few years where I was lucky enough to have students who were able or willing to put the work in to make the use of doubles possible. Frankly I tried to stay away from any literature that required doubles unless I had the horses to do so.

**Instrumentation Challenges** I have had a bunch of them, not so much with the top group but certainly with the 3<sup>rd</sup> or AM Jazz Band (as they were called). This group was primarily for the 9<sup>th</sup> level but did include all other grade levels of students who had the desire to experience performing in a jazz band. This inexperienced band did have, at times, more nontraditional instrumentation. My long-term goal for those playing nontraditional instruments was to provide opportunities for learning a more traditional big band instrument as the year progressed. Keyboard Bass – works when no other option is available (it happened to me too). When this was necessary I made sure to take the time to find the best synthesizer bass sound and envelope I could. Finding bass players can be a challenge. Ask your orchestra director (if you lucky enough to have one) is a great resource. Students in your Tuba section are also great candidates. Checking with students outside your program that might be playing in a rock band is another good place to look. I believe all jazz band bass performers should have the ability to play on both electric and acoustical bass. MEL BAY'S bass books are good method resources for both the beginner and the more advanced player.

**Bass** Bus Driver for Time...Drums amplifies the pulse as dictated by the Bass. Swing = all notes as long as they can be (one note ends when the other begins). Speed of left hand (and accuracy) is necessary therefore good body and hand position is paramount for success. Push for acoustic. Note: I moved to an electric upright bass for transportation (plane ride) reasons and volume reasons when performing in large venues. However a lot of improvement has been made on acoustic pickups. The Fishman brand is one of the most coveted (about \$230). A good amp is vital.

**Drums** One of the most often ignored instrument (next to guitar and vibes) in the band. Good equipment is a must...spend money...you won't regret it for it will last longer! No pillows, or blankets in the BD! Buy a muffler made for ring control. I prefer 18" BD, 14" floor tom, one shell mount, good dry and definitive ride 20", two crash one 16" one 14" or smaller (16" can serve as an additional ride for variety. Ride cymbal should be placed where the 2<sup>nd</sup> shell mount of a rock set is placed. You can buy a suspended cymbal bracket to fit onto the shell mount rack..works well, offers great ride placement & less floor space used. **Swing** = Ride Cymbal copies the bass line, hi-hat or sock cymbal provides the basic accent of 2 and 4, Ride cymbal is A 4 BEAT PATTERN. The triplet played dotted 8<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> note rhythm is there to provide rhythmic diversity (with the exception of some literature that requires this repeated pattern for stylistic and historically correct interpretation).

**Guitar players** Most are self taught and if they have studied privately more then likely they have only worked on the rock style. Most of my guitar players could not read musical notation. I taught my students that Swing Guitar used only the top 4 strings, with a down stroke motion only (as established by the famous Count Basie Guitarist "Freddie Green"). I usually turned the amp down and let the performer supply most of the energy with their down stroke motion. The guitar's role is mostly rhythmic. Using your guitarist for comping during solo sections adds a wonderful variety well worth using. For those students who only have a solid body (rock style) guitar be sure you look for a mix that best replicates the sound of a hollow body guitar. If your budget allows I would strongly urge your school to purchase a good hollow body guitar. Encourage your guitar players to more then just 1<sup>st</sup> position. Providing a good guitar chord book will help expand their chord voicing abilities (Mel Bay has a good one).

**Piano** Never use any pedals unless it's a ballad. Let the fingers sustain the sound length. Use of the sustain pedal will usually cause the sound to bleed into the next chord change creating a clarity issue. AGGRESSIVE hands are a must. LESS IS MORE is the concept your pianist must learn. Help your piano player create proper rhythmic comping style for the music performed. Chord voicings on the music are sometimes good, but not always. My chord voicing resource was "Voicing for Jazz Keyboards by Frank Mantooth"..

**Vibes** Most bands I have heard do not use their vibraphone correctly. When you have Piano, Vibes and Guitar (unless guitar is playing the typical swing pattern) comping all at once will create a great deal of clarity issues. If piano and vibes are playing together they should be doing exactly the same thing. Using your vibes, at times, as a melodic instrument by copying the lead line is a great way to add sound more variety. Using vibes for replacing the piano in your solo section is another sound color option not usually explored. Do insist that your vibe performer play with all 4 mallets.