

The Art of Jazz Transcription • Jared Hall, D.M.A.

Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival 2026 Workshop

SUMMARY:

Transcription, the act of memorizing improvised solos directly from source recordings without written scores, addresses two of the most important areas for a jazz musician: memory and ear training. This clinic will give you the tools to facilitate the transcription process which improves skills in improvisation, instrumental technique, tone development, expressive nuance, sense of rhythm, and comprehension of the jazz language. Recommendations on equipment, computer programs, digital applications and instrument-specific recordings will be given to aid in starting a transcription. Strategies on learning, memory retention and execution of a solo transcription, as well as direct application to enhancing one's vocabulary and finding an individualized voice, will be the focus of the workshop. Examples on each of the strategies will be given and demonstrated.

ARTISTS' QUOTES ON TRANSCRIBING:

"Imitate. Assimilate. Innovate." —Clark Terry, trumpet

"Transcribing is how I learned the language. It's like learning how to speak—you imitate first. It's not just about learning the solo. It's about understanding the sound, the articulation, the time feel... everything." —Melissa Aldana

"Again, before I even knew what transcribing was and before anyone told me that this was a means of learning vocabulary, I started playing all the solos, not only Miles' solos, but I would go into George Coleman's solos, Herbie's." —Nicholas Payton, trumpet

"I practiced the things I heard on records... I tried to learn them in all keys." —John Coltrane, saxophone

"So you really get a taste of the master taking you by the hand saying 'This is how you play music'...Feeling it physically in your hands, writing it down, contemplating it, trying to assimilate it into yourself so that it feels natural." —Mark Turner, tenor saxophone

"Transcription is an unbeatable tool as a means to an end. The end being artistic creation, musical freedom, and hopefully, a recognizable style of playing." —David Liebman, saxophone

"I can always tell who is transcribing and who is not. You know, you either have the language or you don't." —Avishai Cohen, trumpet

"My approach to developing some sort of thing that can be called 'your own voice' is really copy everything in the beginning and don't pay attention to people that tell you not to copy because 'you know, there's no sense in copying'. I think it's not true." —Till Brönner

STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL TRANSCRIPTION (Outline Summary):

- 1. Choosing a Recording:** Select solos within a reasonable reach, applicable to a tune you're learning, a musician on your instrument, a musician not on your instrument, a sound you desire to acquire or influence you, something you like (important). Don't pick something that is extremely beyond your technique or range. We want to choose something that we can play along with exactly.
- 2. Listen (Over and Over Again):** After you have selected an improvised solo that you are interested in learning, listen to it over and over again. Oversaturate your listening with this recording. Listen to it on the drive to school (work), at work, at home while cooking dinner, before you go to bed, in the shower, etc. You want to reach the point that you have listened to the recording so much that you know the melody to the tune and can sing along, mimicking the inflection and articulation of the solo. The musical skill you develop is being able to develop good relative pitch without your instrument in hand. This also reinforces a sense of rhythm, style and time feel from the solo.
- 3. Slowing It Down:** Feel free to use technology to slow things down and create loops to maximize your practice. Computer programs (Transcribe!), iPad application recommendations (Transcribe!, mimiCopy, Anytune Pro), etc. About 75% should be a good learning tempo at first. If you need to slow down further, pick another transcription. If you don't have to slow down, even better, etc. If you're not experienced transcribing, it can be best to choose a medium to medium-slow swing tune.
- 4. Work With Phrases:** Start with short phrases or break a longer phrase up. It is better for us to learn to hear phrases, which relates to improvising melodic phrases, rather than learning note-by-note. This is similar to learning words and sentences before learning paragraphs. Note-by-note (similar to words) may be needed for double-time phrases, but in general should not be used and is a rather unenjoyable experience. You eventually want to combine small phrases into larger portions of the solo to create choruses of the solo. Work towards two, four, then eight bars at a time.
- 5. Play & Sing:** And sing and play. For internal and long-term retention, you must be able to sing the phrases and eventually the entire solo. This aids in the memorization process and helps you recognize phrases in other jazz solos and improvisations. This process also strengthens your ear. For brass players, this is good too because we rest as much as we play, enabling us to build endurance and play longer.
- 6. Consistency:** I have found that it is best to practice a solo you're learning every single day. If you have limited time to dedicate to transcription, it can be best to aim for four or eight bars a day, but it is important that you do it every day! Then the next day review those bars (which shouldn't take too long if you really learned them) and add another 4 to 8 bars. This way you build memory of the solo and

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don't feel like you're starting over. Through my own experience, I have spent an hour or so transcribing a 32-bar solo chorus, let a week sneak by without practicing it only to find I need to work on it as if I had never learned hardly any of it.

7. **Play with the Recording:** Play the entire solo with the recording. This can be done at an altered tempo at first, but should be worked up to the original tempo. If you learned phrases at 75%, start by trying to play the entire solo at that altered speed. Once that is achieved, slowly raise the speed by 4 or 5 percent each time until you reach 100% speed and can match the recording.
8. **Play with the Metronome:** Play the solo with only the metronome. This is a challenging and important step because it requires you to fully know the solo by memory without aid of the sound recording. If it is a swing tune, we want the metronome to be emphasized on beats 2 and 4. This creates the feeling of swing with the metronome. If it is a straight-eighth tune, we want to conceive of the metronome on 1 and 3. Before we were leaning on the recording every step of the way, so I recommend a similar approach where you aim for a slower tempo at first to aid in accuracy. If you are able to complete this step, then you truly have the solo imbedded and internalized within you. This step will help your overall conception of time and rhythm. Hint: A step in between 7 and 8 is playing the solo with a play-a-long recording or program.
9. **Play the solo unaccompanied:** Be able to play the solo by yourself, in time without the aid of a metronome, play-a-long or recording.
10. **Write out the solo:** This is the last step, only to be done after you have completely learned and internalized the solo. If you do it beforehand, you may find yourself relying on the written page rather than your ear and memory. This is a very important step, as now you can start to see why certain notes and chords may sound a certain way or make sense. This is the theory part of music, which is important to understand why things sound good or dissonant. You'll also be able see patterns—often a player uses similar devices, patterns, shapes or lines on similar chords or in similar keys. This process will also help your sight reading, as you have to definitively write out the correct notes and rhythms used. You will start to recognize these in sight reading situations. I recommend using pencil and staff paper, doing all by hand, but you can use a music notation program such as Finale or Sibelius.

Other thoughts:

It can be very helpful to transcribe four, five, six or more solos of the same individual in order to get a sense of their overall style and sound concept. Many players use similar devices and techniques, so when you transcribe multiple solos, these start to reveal themselves. Similar patterns and variations will emerge as well.

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Social media links to videos demonstrating the end results:

[Instagram](#): @jaredhallways

[Facebook](#): @jaredhallways

For more information at www.jaredhall.net