

Better Jazz Improvisation Through Happy Birthday

by Michael Lake



If the title of this ebook intrigues you, great!

I believe this simple tune has the power to make you a better much improviser. Read through this introduction, play through the exercises, and let me prove it to you.

Your musical instrument can do two things: It can be a filter of your musical ideas, making it difficult to project the music inside your head through your instrument. It can be a frustrating piece of friction. For some, it might even feel like a cement wall.

For others, the instrument can be an amplifier of their musical ideas. The melodies and phrases flow out of the instrument taking the color of the particular instrument being played.



The difference between filter and amplifier is the connection between your mind and your instrument. Is your instrument connected well to your musical mind? To the extend it is, your instrument amplifies and colors your musical ideas.

So, how do you better connect your instrument to your mind? That is the point of this short ebook.

Start with music that you know well – a song that swirls around inside your head that you can easily sing all the way through on command.

Any tune will do, but I like to start with Happy Birthday since unlike Christmas Carols or children's songs, it is not derived from culture, and unlike patriotic songs, it is not derived from national borders. Everybody knows Happy Birthday. Oh, and I can record and publish it copyright free!

Once you find a song you know inside out—in this case, Happy Birthday—play it on your instrument by ear. Now, that can be very easy by starting out on a comfortable easy note. In fact, try it now. Play Happy Birthday starting on the note you would typically play it. Don't think about notes or intervals. Just let it flow as if you were singing it.

Is it easy? It probably is. But what happens when you move the starting note up a minor third? Does it flow like you are singing it? What happens when you start on the fifth of a difficult key like F# or Db? Still flowing?

Learning and having fun with the audio files

Four audio files are available to you, and each serves a different purpose.

1. Happy Birthday rhythm track in 12 keys w-tone The file consists of the simple harmony to Happy Birthday in 12 keys. One chorus is played for each key. A short synthesizer tone is given just before each new key. That tone is the first note of Happy Birthday (not the key). Hear that tone, find it on your instrument, and play the melody. Can you do that in time with track?

If not, listen for the first tone and stop the playback. Now sing just that first tone. Then find it on your instrument. Once you find it on your instrument, play the melody. Once you can find the notes of the melody, play the track from the place you stopped it.

2. Happy Birthday rhythm track in 12 keys - no tone This file is the same rhythm track of the first audio file, but with no synth tone. The challenge is to hear the key quickly enough to reach for the melody. You won't have the synth tone to guide you.

Be aware of how quickly you can find the key without that first tone. Once you find the melody, don't think your way through it. This is VERY important. Use your ear, not your analytical brain to think your way through the melody ("The high note will be G.")

Awareness is something you are building. Does your instrument seem to be playing itself? Is your analytical thinking difficult to turn off? Are you able to embellish the melody after a while - not as an excuse to avoid playing the melody, but rather an extension of your ability to clearly hear the melody.

Are you playing the melody musically as apposed to mechanically? Mechanical playing is a sign that you don't yet have the notes flowing out your instrument, or perhaps you don't yet have them in your ear.

3. Happy Birthday rhythm track in 12 keys - Michael playing the melody If you have difficulty picking up the melody with or without the synth tone, play along with this track of Michael simply playing the melody through the 12 keys.

4. Happy Birthday rhythm track in 12 keys - Michael improvising Michael recorded a simple improvisation over the rhythm track of all 12 keys without the synth tone. This is provided as a model to demonstrate examples of phrasing and moving between the keys. Feel free to transcribe portions of it or use it as inspiration for your own improvisation over the rhythm track.

The Audio Files

Each exercise in the book is associated with an audio file within Dropbox.

Simply click or tap the icon below that is associated with a file to bring it up in a Dropbox audio player window. The audio files stream from Dropbox. Play the files on Dropbox in your browser by tapping play, stop, pause and repeat. Download each file as you wish from Dropbox.

[Download a .zip archive containing all four audio files](#) if you would like them on your local drive or device.

Tap to play the audio file



Happy Birthday rhythm track in 12 keys w-tone



Happy Birthday rhythm track in 12 keys - no tone



Happy Birthday rhythm track in 12 keys - Michael playing the melody



Happy Birthday rhythm track in 12 keys - Michael improvising

Solo Transcription

Below and on the following three pages is a transcription of the first two keys of Michael's solo on the Happy Birthday improvisation on the **Happy Birthday** rhythm track in 12 keys - Michael improvising audio file. Each of these four pages contain the solo's first two choruses

in each of the four instrument keys and clefs.

It is highly recommended that you transcribe further into the solo since transcribing is a powerful tool for learning about note choices and phrasing throughout an improvisation.

C INSTRUMENTS IN TREBLE CLEF

The musical notation is presented in six staves, each containing a line of music in treble clef. The notation includes various chords and measures, with some measures containing triplets. The chords are labeled as follows:

- Staff 1: Fmaj7, C7, Fmaj7, Bbmaj7, F/C, C7, F7, A7
- Staff 2: Dmaj7, A7
- Staff 3: Dmaj7, Gmaj7, D/A, A7, D7
- Staff 4: Gmaj7, D7, Gmaj7
- Staff 5: Cmaj7, G/D, D7, G7, E7
- Staff 6: (No chord labels)

The measures are numbered 1 through 21, with some measures containing a double bar line (//) indicating a repeat or end of a phrase.

B $\flat$ INSTRUMENTS

Handwritten musical score for B $\flat$ instruments, featuring six staves of music in G major. The score includes various chords and measures, with some measures containing triplets.

Staff 1: Chords: Gmaj7, D7, Gmaj7. Measures: 1-4.

Staff 2: Chords: Cmaj7, G/D, D7, G7, B7. Measures: 5-8.

Staff 3: Chords: E7, B7. Measures: 9-12.

Staff 4: Chords: E7, A7, E/B, B7, E7. Measures: 13-16.

Staff 5: Chords: A7, E7, A7. Measures: 17-20.

Staff 6: Chords: D7, A/E, E7, A7, F#7. Measures: 21-24.

E^b INSTRUMENTS

Handwritten musical score for E^b instruments, featuring six staves of music in D major (two sharps). The score includes various chords and fingerings:

- Staff 1:** Chords: Dmaj7, A7, Dmaj7. Notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C#5, D5. Fingering: 3 (on B4).
- Staff 2:** Chords: Gmaj7, D/A, A7, D7, F#7. Notes: G4, A4, B4, C#5, D5, E5, F#5, G5.
- Staff 3:** Chords: Bmaj7, F#7. Notes: B4, C#5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5.
- Staff 4:** Chords: Bmaj7, Emaj7, B/F#, F#7, B7. Notes: B4, C#5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5.
- Staff 5:** Chords: Emaj7, B7, Emaj7. Notes: E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C#5, D5, E5.
- Staff 6:** Chords: Amaj7, E/B, B7, E7, C#7. Notes: A4, B4, C#5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5.

Measure numbers are indicated at the start of some staves: 5, 9, 12, 17, 21.

BASS CLEF INSTRUMENTS

Handwritten musical score for bass clef instruments, featuring six staves of music in 4/4 time. The score includes various chords and melodic lines, with measure numbers 5, 9, 12, 17, and 21 indicated at the start of their respective staves.

Staff 1 (Measures 1-4): Chords: Fmaj7, C7, Fmaj7. Includes a triplet in measure 4.

Staff 2 (Measures 5-8): Chords: Bbmaj7, F/C, C7, F7, A7.

Staff 3 (Measures 9-11): Chords: Dmaj7, A7. Includes a sharp sign (#) in measure 10.

Staff 4 (Measures 12-16): Chords: Dmaj7, Gmaj7, D/A, A7, D7. Includes triplets in measures 13 and 15.

Staff 5 (Measures 17-20): Chords: Gmaj7, D7, Gmaj7. Includes a double bar line in measure 19.

Staff 6 (Measures 21-24): Chords: Cmaj7, G/D, D7, G7, E7.