

STRATEGIES FOR THE IMPROVISOR

FROM ERIC SCOTT REED AND THE TONEBASE TEAM

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Dear musicians,

I'm very proud to present one of tonebase's newest artists, Eric Scott Reed, the formidable, hard-swinging pianist and educator. While our focus at tonebase has historically been on crafting the finest courses in classical music, we are beginning to work within the jazz idiom with the upcoming release of tonebase Trumpet. My name is Ethan Chilton, I'm a professional jazz trumpeter based in Los Angeles who has been working with tonebase for almost 5 years. In August, my role shifted toward building the upcoming tonebase trumpet platform and, with that, curating the first few jazz courses on tonebase.

As I began developing a curriculum, it became clear that we need not only showcase great trumpeters. Many of the principles in learning jazz are the same regardless of what instrument you play. (Of course, there will be plenty of world-class trumpeters on the trumpet platform when it launches!)

Some of you will be familiar with Eric Scott Reed's piano playing through his solo projects, or his time in the band of Wynton Marsalis. I was lucky enough to work with Eric for two days at the tonebase studio, and we talked about a wide range of ideas for improvisors at all stages of their development. This document is the result of one of the courses we built. Titled *Strategies for the Improvisor*, it's a set of tools to use to build better solos. He talks about melody, how to solo with just one note, scales, the audience, using space, development, and much more. Hopefully, you'll find this as inspiring as I have!

Happy practicing,

Ethan Chilton

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About the artist: Eric Scott Reed

Eric was born in the musically rich city of Philadelphia, PA. He grew up playing in his father's storefront Baptist church: "My father was a minister who sang with a Gospel group called the Bay State Singers; he was my earliest musical influence. I was also hit heavily by everything I heard on the radio - James Cleveland, Edwin & Walter Hawkins, Andraé Crouch, Donny Hathaway, Earth, Wind & Fire." Soon after, young Reed was bitten by the Jazz bug after hearing recordings by Art Blakey, Ramsey Lewis and Dave Brubeck.

Eric started playing piano at the age of two and began private studies by the age of seven at Settlement Music School. However, he remained primarily self-taught, often confounding his instructors not by learning the written music, but listening to them play it first and memorizing musical pieces note-for-note: "I wasn't interested in practicing Bach; I was too busy digging Horace Silver!"

By age eleven, his family moved to Los Angeles and he continued his formal instruction at the Colburn School (formerly the Community School of Performing Arts) where his theory teacher, finally realizing that Eric was destined for swinging, turned him onto more recordings of great Jazz pianists. His research continued via records discovered at his neighborhood library.

As a teenager, he was already working with West Coast luminaries such as Buddy Collette, Teddy Edwards, Clora Bryant, Jeff & John Clayton. During his first year of matriculation at California State University at Northridge, he received a call from trumpeter Wynton Marsalis to do a tour of the Midwest. Leaving college life behind, Eric began touring the world both as a leader and sideman, making serious waves in the music industry. He garnered great notice as a permanent member of Wynton Marsalis' ensembles (1990-95), making countless recordings and TV appearances with him.

He also worked in the bands of Freddie Hubbard and Joe Henderson (1991-92) after which his résumé would flourish with names such as Wayne Shorter, Jessye Norman, Patti Labelle, Edwin Hawkins, Quincy Jones, Natalie Cole and numerous others. Eric has recorded over twenty chart-topping, critically-acclaimed, award-winning projects, supported by global performances to appreciative audiences. Such accomplishments and hard work have not gone unnoticed by legendary pianist Ahmad Jamal, who has called Eric "one of my very favorite pianists."

Beyond playing the piano, Reed expanded his scope to Hollywood, composing and arranging music for the Eddie Murphy comedy, *Life*, various other independent projects for *Fantastic Four* director and high-school chum Tim Story, plus commercials and TV spots. Annually, he serves as musical conductor for choreographer Alvin Ailey's classic *Revelations* with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, under the direction of Judith Jamison. An ardent educator, Eric served on the faculty of the prestigious Juilliard School of Music. He continues to perform worldwide master classes that cover the full spectrum of Jazz history and discography.

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About this course

In this course, Eric Scott Reed provides a thorough overview of useful ideas and practice strategies for any instrumentalist who wants to build better solos (trumpeters, saxophonists, pianists, harmonica players - all are welcome!) Any level of aspiring improviser will find highly inspiring material here.

Eric likes to think about “parameters” or boundaries that can structure his practice sessions. Far from being limiting, introducing structured parameters can help us learn to do more with less. Giving ourselves a smaller scope in which to work can actually help us expand our capacity for creative ideas. Let’s dig in!

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Melody

What is melody? How do we learn to play melodically? The word “lyrical” is often used to describe a good melody, and this word gives us a clue. A good melody is typically one that can be easily sung, hummed, and remembered – like the lyric of a popular song, or many of our beloved jazz standards.

Eric directs your attention to Miles Davis’s solo on the 1959 recording of “So What” from *Kind of Blue*. Over just two choruses, you hear simplicity yet genuine melodic and rhythmic creativity. Go listen to this solo (and learn it on your instrument, if you’re able!) Relatability with creativity is the essence of what makes a melody great. The more you listen to great singers and great instrumentalists and internalize their compositions, the more natural it will feel to produce a melody on your instrument.



Miles Davis photographed by Herb Snitzer, 1959, Copyright The Artist

Ideas

We often idolize the great jazz musicians – we assume they simply invented their ideas out of thin air. This couldn’t be further from the truth. All of our favorite musicians (Monk, Parker, Gillespie, Armstrong, Coltrane, Miles, many more!) were highly educated practitioners of music. They studied on their own, read scores, listened obsessively, and talked about music with one another all the time. They were constantly borrowing ideas from others and putting their own spin on them.

Bill Evans often spoke of writing ideas down and continuing to work on them until they suited you. This is especially helpful if you find yourself using the same idea over and over again. Perhaps there’s one chord where you’re stuck. Slow down, isolate that chord, and force yourself to play something drastically different. Write out some of your favorite ideas that you come up with this way, and return to them often.

Depending on the instrument you play, certain ideas will feel good in the fingers. This isn't always a bad thing, but it can make our playing start to feel repetitive if we re-use the same ideas all the time!

There's one lick that Eric plays almost from habit *nearly every time* he gets to an A $\flat$ minor chord. Eric learned this particular lick from Ahmad Jamal and fell in love with it. Nevertheless, when he practices, he'll slow down and try to think of new ideas over A $\flat$ minor chords so his playing isn't too predictable!

One approach that any instrumentalist can use is to re-contextualize the harmony. If you move the bass note around in an A $\flat$ minor chord, you can generate all sorts of different chords and contexts, but the notes are unchanged. (A $\flat$ minor uses the notes as B $\flat$, D $\flat$ 13 $\flat$ ⁵, or G7 altered.) See if these other harmonies trigger alternative ideas in your brain. Your fingers may just start *wanting* to do something different.

Listening

It's impossible to emphasize the value of listening enough! Jazz is a language, just like anything else, so learning it well requires us to constantly listen. Like a very young child, we start out by copying that which we hear – everything from tone quality to the dynamics of band interaction. Survey all the decades of jazz, too, since the fads of one year might not apply to another.



Start with One Note

One simple way to start improvising is to begin with just one note. (Check out *One Note Samba* by Antônio Carlos Jobim, a tune where the melody pretty much uses only one note!) It's certainly possible to use only one note for an extended period and still produce an interesting solo. We do this by looking for ways of using rhythm, color, dynamics, or other parameters to create interest. An advanced example of this is the beginning of Wynton Marsalis's solo on "Cherokee" from *Marsalis Standard Time*. He starts the tune by playing a concert B♭ for almost the entire first A section, using hip rhythms to create the drama.

An example of using two notes is "C Jam Blues", a tune by Duke Ellington based on a repeated riff. You might even try taking a solo using just these two notes!

In his upcoming course for tonebase, Eric demonstrates the one-note-solo approach using *Stablemates* by Benny Golson with a full jazz trio, as well as over a twelve-bar blues. To try this yourself, take the blues progression below and start by crafting a chorus of solo using *only* a concert C. How hip of a solo can you make with just concert C? Then, do it again with a few different notes: G, D, B♭, E♭ ... what other notes can work?

The image shows a 12-bar blues progression in treble clef, common time. The progression is divided into four measures per bar line. The notes are represented by slanted lines. The chords for each measure are: Measure 1: C7; Measure 2: F7; Measure 3: C7; Measure 4: Gm7, C7; Measure 5: F7; Measure 6: C7; Measure 7: Em7(b5), A7(b9); Measure 8: Dm7, G7; Measure 9: C7, A7; Measure 10: Dm7, G7; Measure 11: C7, A7; Measure 12: Dm7, G7.

When we're performing, we don't have to limit ourselves like this, of course! But you may be surprised how far you can get. Using just one note can be a great way to develop an idea and build tension. If you must, you can add other notes as fills around a basic skeleton that consists of the one note.

Developing a Melody

After a jazz musician plays the melody, they are not starting the solo from scratch. The melody is played for a reason! Think of a solo as a chance to compose a variation in real-time, where the theme is the melody. There are different ways we can expand on the melody to make our solo interesting and relatable to the composer's source material.

One way is to loosen the melody, or begin rhythmically displacing phrases. Make some notes shorter, some notes longer, or push everything by some number of beats. Syncopate a phrase that isn't normally syncopated, or put a phrase on the downbeat that's normally on an upbeat. Delete some phrases all together.

Another option is to pick one motif from the melody and develop it. This can be as simple as re-stating the motif over and over, changing the notes as the harmony changes underneath it.

Eric demonstrates this with a performance of Benny Golson's *Stablemates* (available once tonebase Trumpet launches in April!) For now, try to develop the melody on your own in as many ways as you imagine.

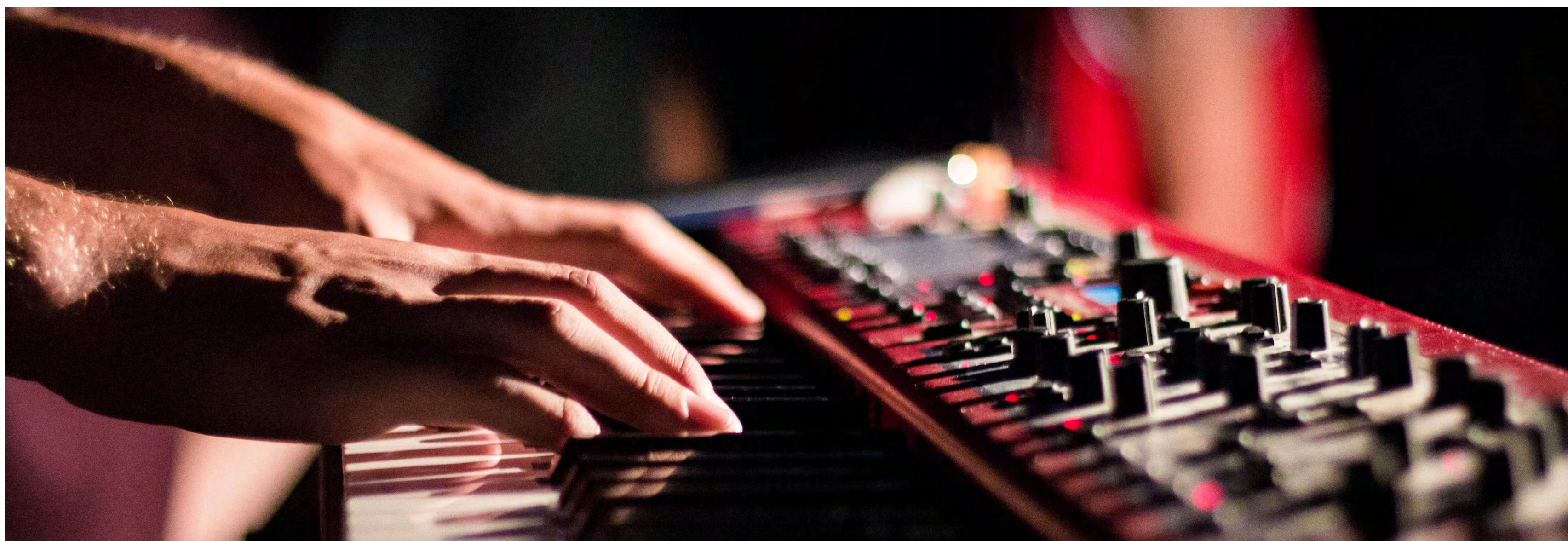


Three Notes

Let's explore the idea of playing a solo with only *three* notes. Eric gives us the analogy of trying to make a sauce out of ketchup, salt, and water – how can we possibly make that taste good?! It may not be ideal, but it can certainly be done. In much the same way, we don't always want to rely on playing just three notes, but it certainly will develop our creative capacity to learn to do more with less.

Try this concept over any tune you're working with right now.

It's OK if you end up adding a few extra notes, but try to make them purely decorative. For the purposes of the exercise, the skeletal notes should be limited to three.



Modal Playing

You're probably familiar with the modes of a major scale. In jazz, playing "modally" often refers to the style introduced by Miles Davis, where the sound of one scale (often a Dorian scale) persists for an extended period. *Stablemates* is certainly not modal, but we can impose the notes of D $\flat$ major scale over the entirety of the form if we so choose (the chord progression for this tune is printed on page 12). Not all notes will fit with the harmony at all times, but there will always be some note that fits.

Why give ourselves this constraint? Turning a non-modal tune into a modal one can greatly simplify our improvisations, just as using one note or three notes can. It's another exercise in doing more with less. Then, when we want to open ourselves back up to more colors, we can go back to playing the original harmony.

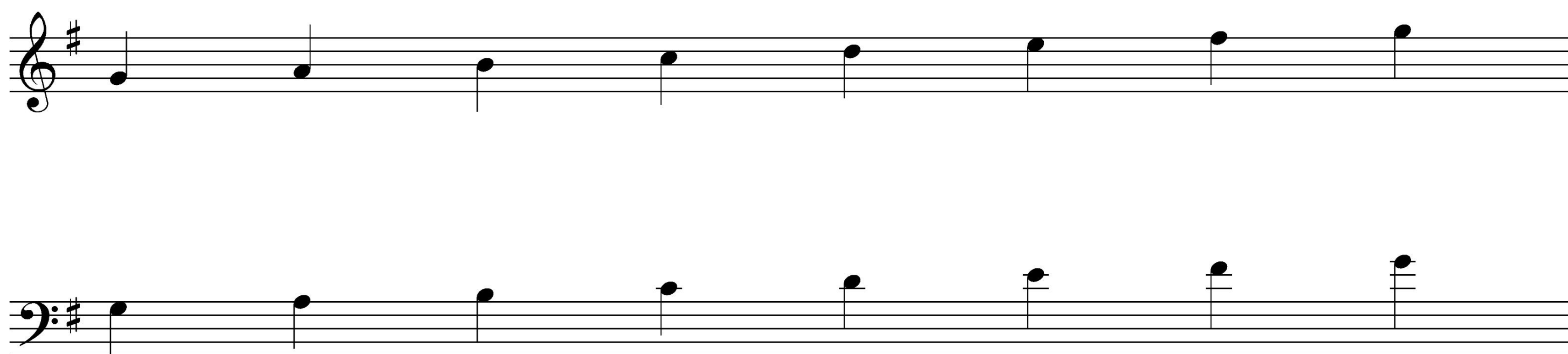
Some people find playing over “real” modal tunes, such as *So What* or *Impressions*, to be easier, but it can still be difficult for other reasons. We have to rely on our own melodic and motivic inventiveness to create interest, as the harmony won’t do that for us. Consider adding some modal tunes to your practice routine at this stage, and look for ways to use rhythm and motivic development to keep the improvisation interesting!

Scales

Scales are obviously important to all of tonal music. Every chord has at least one corresponding scale that suggests itself (though we are never fully limited to using these notes in our solos). The word “diatonic” refers to notes inside the “correct” scale of a chord, where “non-chord tones” or “non-diatonic” (or “out”) refers to notes that technically aren’t part of the chord. Intimate knowledge of some of the most common scales (**major, modes of major, minor, diminished, altered dominant, and whole-tone**) gives you a foundation on which to master almost any progression of chords you’ll encounter in jazz.

We often practice scales as fast sequences of notes, up and down, to build instrumental technique – nearly until we’re dizzy. But a great songwriter can use the notes of a scale to create beautiful heartfelt melodies, relying on the natural tensions and resolutions of the tones to chart a thoughtful progression from one beat to the next.

Improvising is not the regurgitation of scales. In Eric’s words, play as if you’re trying to say “I know what this scale is, but I have an idea of how to create something new and personal with it.” Right now, try to invent a melody using just the G major scale on your instrument. No accompaniment – no time – no chords. Just freely improvise a melody that sounds beautiful to you. Then, try and capture this spirit over a tune, when the harmony is changing more frequently.



Playing Within an Octave

Another fun parameter is to just play within one octave of your range. You'll be surprised – a lot of your licks may not work anymore! Pick a tune of your choosing (Eric picked *Stablemates* again) and play a solo that stays entirely within one octave (D $\flat$ to D $\flat$, or A $\flat$ to A $\flat$, or whatever note makes sense to you). There's no shame in slowing the tempo down significantly so you can concentrate. How creatively can you use the notes within that one-octave range?

Harmonic Exploration

At the end of the day, practicing improvisation is about expanding the number of possible things we can play. As we're practicing with parameters or constraints, it's also important to practice the inverse – to remove the limitations and simply *play*! See how far you can stretch rhythm, time, harmony, melody, range, and introduce all the other forms of inventiveness that you've picked up over this course.

If you're a pianist, guitarist, or bassist, Eric encourages you to think about reharmonizations, substitutions, new bass lines, and other polyphonic concepts. If you play a single-line instrument, it's still useful to think about how you can push the harmony. Go through each chord and examine ways of extending it, what alternate chords or shapes you can imply with your lines, and how you can create contrast by using different options on each chorus. You might want to play more of these "parameter" games with the things you discover! Found a hip shape over a certain chord? Force yourself to play *only* that shape over every chord in a song until you've mastered it and it's integrated into your vocabulary.



Harmonic Substitutions

Eric provides some specific harmonic suggestions for the instrumentalist over the tune *Stablemates* by Benny Golson. One of the most common is the tritone substitution, where instead of the diatonic ii-V chords, an improviser or rhythm section player can replace the ii-V with chords whose roots are a tritone away. In the lead sheet below, some of the original chords are struck out with red, and some of Eric's suggested alternatives are written in! There's no need to play every substitution every chorus. The purpose is to experiment!

A

Em⁷

A⁷

Ebm⁷

Ab⁷

Dbmaj⁷

Cmaj⁷

~~C⁷(#5)~~

Abm⁷

Dm^{7b5}

~~D^{b7}~~

G^{7b9}

Gbmaj⁷

Gm^{7(b5)}

C⁷(#9)

two major chords back-to-back

Fm⁷/B

Bb⁷

Em⁷

~~Ebm⁷~~

A⁷

Ebm⁷

~~Ab⁷(b9)~~

Ab⁷

half-step bass motion to next chord

progression from opening

G^{7b13}

~~Dbmaj⁷~~

C⁷

B

Fm⁷

F#⁷

instead of resolve to D^b, add II-V to Fm chord

G⁷(b¹³_{#9})

C⁷

F#m⁷

~~B⁷~~

B⁷

Fm⁷

~~B^{b7}~~

Bb⁷

Em⁷

~~A⁷~~

A⁷

Ebm⁷

~~Ab⁷(b13)~~

Ab⁷

A

series of ii-V

Em⁷

A⁷

Ebm⁷

Ab⁷

Dbmaj⁷

Cmaj⁷

~~C⁷(#5)~~

Abm⁷

Dm⁷

~~D^{b7}~~

G⁷

two major chords back-to-back

tritone substitution with ii and V

Gbmaj⁷

Gm^{7(b5)}

C⁷(#9)

Fm⁷

Bb⁷

Ebm⁷

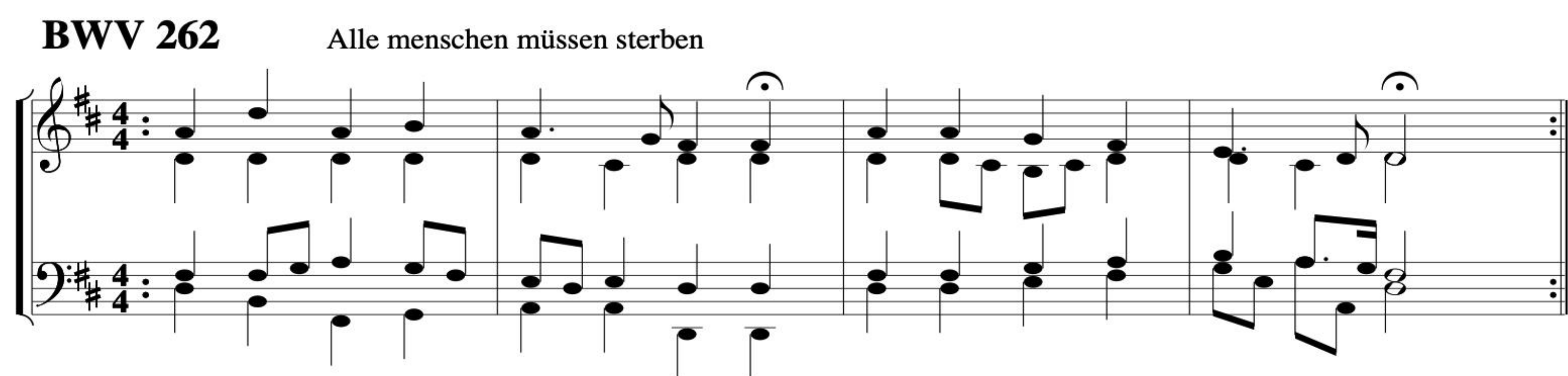
Ab⁷(b9)

Dbmaj⁷

Voice Leading

Voice leading is the practice of writing or playing smooth linear melodies. In European common-practice harmony, a composer exhibits strong voice leading when each voice moves by the smallest interval possible. Smaller intervals are easier to sing, but also easier for a listener to follow, and, as we learned with the word “lyricism”, equally apt for a compelling melody in jazz.

Good voice leading is more than just playing melodically. It’s having a sense of smooth melodic motion in your playing, regardless of your role. Even if you’re an accompanying instrument (piano, guitar, vibraphone, bass), your function is still a melodic one. When Eric is comping, he is forming melodies with the voices of his chords, especially the top note, which is most audible. Take the tune *Body and Soul* (chord progression shown on the following page), and if you play an accompanying instrument (or even if you don’t), try to play through the chords in a way that the top voice produces a smooth melody.



Chorale by JS Bach showing strong voice leading in 4 parts

Space

Let’s talk about what happens when we don’t play anything. This lack of activity, or *space*, is an essential part of any solo – just as essential as the spaces between these words or the pauses between spoken sentences. Using the ever-important idea of lyricism as our guide, think of space as the quick breath a singer must take, or the time between the end of one phrase and the beginning of the next. More philosophically, space gives us room to contemplate what we’ve just heard and provokes an inner response to the sound. Just listen to virtually anything by Miles Davis, and you’ve taken a masterclass on the artful use of space in a jazz solo.

Eric uses the song *Body and Soul* to demonstrate his use of space, and his commitment to not overplaying. We often play more when we’re nervous or uncertain, but we’ve already seen in this course how much can be achieved by just a few notes, if we’re thoughtful. Trust your body, trust your instrument, trust your ideas, and trust the space you’re in to do the job. Let the idea really sit in the room before moving on. Sometimes the lack of a response is a suitable response! Try playing through *Body and Soul* in this way now:

A

Ebm⁷ Bb^{7(b9)} Ebm⁷ D⁷ Dbmaj⁷ Gb⁷ Fm⁷ E^{o7}

Ebm⁷ Cm^{7(b5)} F⁷ Bbm⁷ Eb⁷ Ebm⁷ Ab⁷ 1. Db⁷ Bb⁷ 2. Db A⁷

B

Dmaj⁷ Em⁷ D/F# Gm⁷ C⁷ F#m⁷ Bm⁷ Em⁷ A⁷ Dmaj⁷

Dm⁷ G⁷ Cmaj⁷ Eb^o Dm⁷ G⁷ C⁷ B⁷ Bb⁷

A

Ebm⁷ Bb^{7(b9)} Ebm⁷ D⁷ Dbmaj⁷ Gb⁷ Fm⁷ E^{o7}

Ebm⁷ Cm^{7(b5)} F⁷ Bbm⁷ Eb⁷ Ebm⁷ Ab⁷ Db⁷

It can sometimes feel that we're boring or losing the audience if we play with too much space. But this mindset doesn't acknowledge what an audience is truly capable of! If people are there to hear you play, they are voluntarily subjecting themselves to your idea of a beautiful experience. Let them in on your process of creating beauty, even if this means playing less.



Coleman Hawkins

Photo by Herb Snitzer

Audience

What is the relationship between the audience and the performer in jazz? Some jazz has a more commercial bent to it, where the goal is to appeal to a very wide audience. Other styles of jazz are played almost without any regard to the audience whatsoever. The vast majority of artists fall in the middle ground, where there is a combination of artistic integrity and the expectation of having an enjoyable concert.

If you find yourself in a situation where you're playing for an audience, consider *their* expectations. Do they know you, or the performer you're with? Do they expect a certain type of music to be played? How can we be courteous to them? (Showing up on time for the gig is an obvious one!) In Eric's case, people who come to hear him play know they can expect zero shenanigans, a few ballads, some swing, and that he'll be affable on the microphone. Eric considers this when he puts shows together.

As you build up your reputation as a performer, people begin to associate you with a certain standard of performance. Even on your very worst nights, you'll want to be able to sound at least *good*, even if not great.

This doesn't mean that one should obsess over the audience when they're performing. Eric closes his eyes and focuses more of his energy inward when it's time to play, trusting that the audience will respond in kind to what he has to offer: authenticity and genuineness.

Organic and Academic

There is no single way to approach jazz improvisation. There is, however, often a continuum established between the theoretical and the emotional. But the two should not be mutually exclusive. It's certainly possible to bring both together to inform your craft. In fact, one cannot even function to produce a truly musical result without both!

If we approach a blues from two sides of this continuum, we consider an earthy, gut-bucket blues next to an angular blues that evokes more abstraction. In both examples, the emotional component is as strong as ever. Perhaps the emotion has changed a bit, but we aren't dealing with any less of it. Play through a blues on your instrument and try to straddle both of these approaches.

Final Thoughts

Wherever you are now, that's your starting point. There's no "best" place to start. Just dive into something new and exciting to you. Synthesize everything as you learn it, into an individual approach that works for you.

Bring ideas out of the practice room and into a real performance setting as quickly as you can. In order to really see if an idea is going to work, we must try it out in front of an audience. Where will this idea land? What will the response be from the rest of the band? Just like a stand-up comedian has to learn the perfect way to time a joke, we have to get comfortable knowing how to communicate our intended musical idea in just the right way.

Constantly listen to recordings of past and present. They're an endless source of ideas, since none of our ideas are truly new, we're just recontextualizing them. Never stop searching and developing your process for learning music. The challenging part is going beyond what you know, but that's also where the joy comes in. This is what made Miles Davis so iconic as an artist – he was always pushing for new things.

Keep your mind open. Learn things, read books, try new hobbies, and be restless for adventure. Herbie Hancock titled his auto-biography "Possibilities" for this very reason. Consider *your* possibilities. Anything that allows you to express your full, beautiful, positive self is going to nourish both your music and your soul.



Famous image of 58 jazz musicians taken in Harlem by Art Kane on Aug. 12, 1958

Conclusion

I hope you have enjoyed this brief sneak peek into Eric Scott Reed's full course for tonebase Trumpet, coming out in April. Now that you're on the email list, we'll be sharing occasional updates of our process as new things happen. Whether you play in an orchestra, a marching band, or a salsa band on the weekends, there's going to be something for you on tonebase!

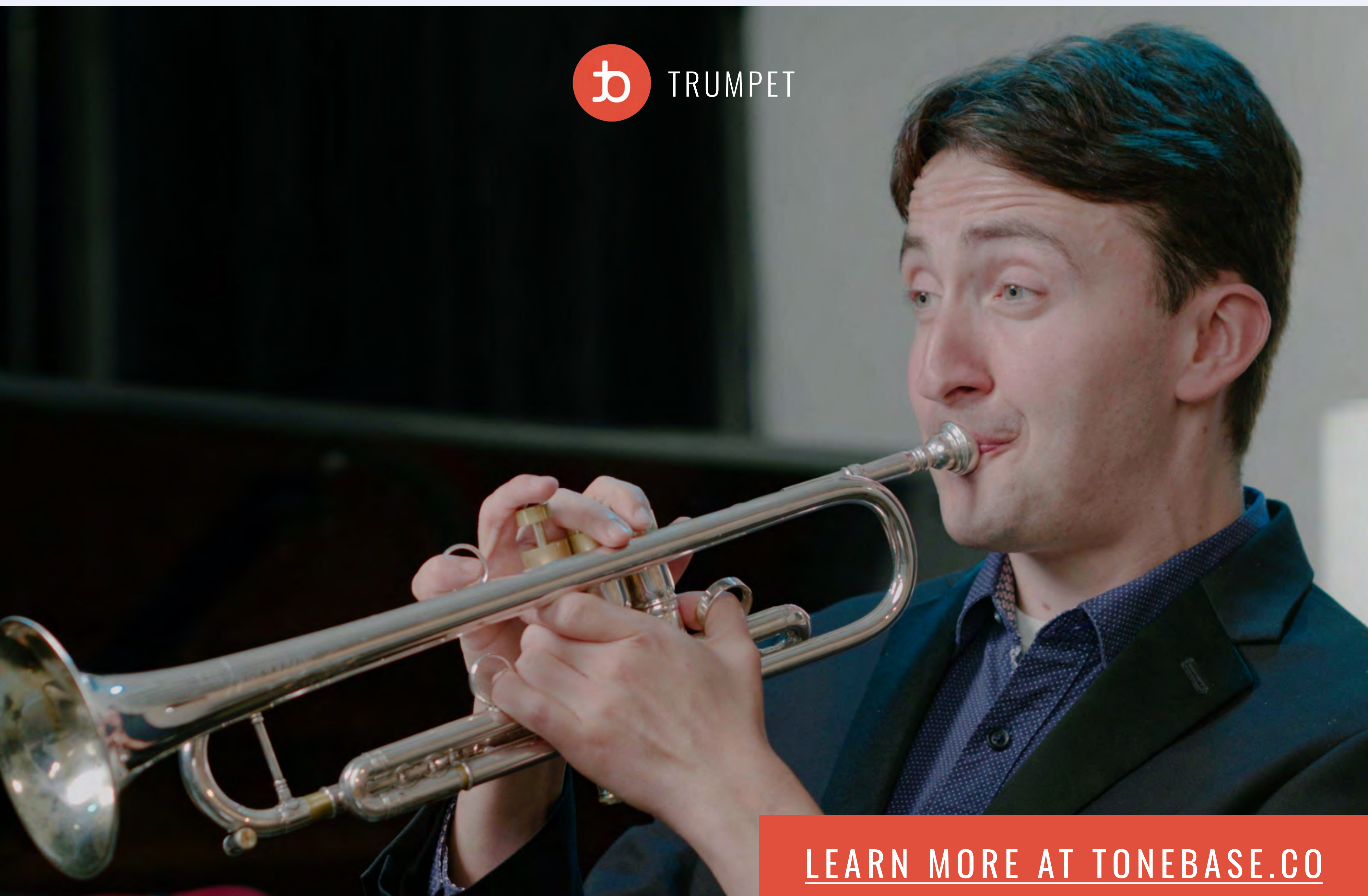
Feel free to write me with questions, comments, or corrections. I can't wait to share with you all what we've been working on!

Peace, love, and double high Cs,

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