

Love the Melody and It Will Love You Back

Melodic-based improvisation strategy for drummers and all musicians

By James Dreier

Editing and Consultation: Dr. Fabio Augustinis, Texas Tech University

“Love the melody more than your instrument.”¹ —Matt Wilson

As drummer Matt Wilson’s emphatical quote above suggests, prioritizing the melody while improvising is a critical component of a successful solo. It is a well-established and continuous concept. However, this approach is not a given. Often, musicians work exclusively on fundamentals like patterns, time keeping, scales, reading, and technique. What may be overlooked is the connection to the melody.

As a drummer, my first exposure to melodic-centric improvisation came from my two-year study with jazz master-teacher Alan Dawson. His focus on the importance of singing and song form inspired me to develop the “Standard Tune Learning Sequence” (STLS) method. I have used it with my students at the University of Iowa and at jazz drumset clinics for many years. I first published the concept in a 2005 *Percussive Notes* article² and it has been revised and refined since. The STLS method is simply a one-page, codified list of exercises around the drumset, while vo-

calizing and internalizing a jazz-standard melody.³

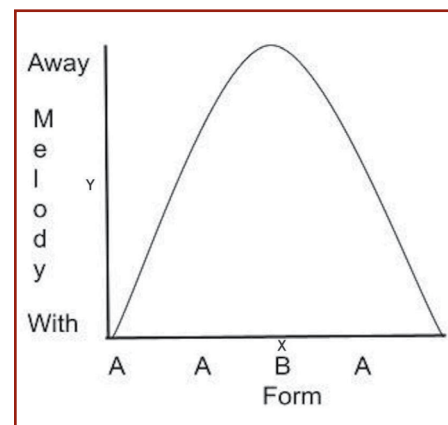
This effort to promote melodic improvisation also inspired my book, *Standard Tune Learning Sequence, a Musical Approach to Improvisation for Jazz Drummers*.⁴ A dozen improvisation strategies are also included in this book. Many of these concepts, designed for jazz drummers, can apply to any improviser on any instrument.

For this article, I will focus on one of these strategies called the “Melody Based #2,” Gradually Moving Away and Back to the Melody (graph based).⁵ The goal is for the improviser to be guided by the shape of a graph line, in relation to melodic reference.

Techniques used to “play away” from the melody can include longer, over-the-barline phrases, hemiola ideas, long tones (rolls for drummers), and distinctive rhythmic ideas. The goal is to be completely free of any melodic reference in the solo when the graph line is at its highest. The improviser moves “back” to the melody when the graph line is lower.⁶ The melody should always be playing in the improviser’s head throughout the exercise.

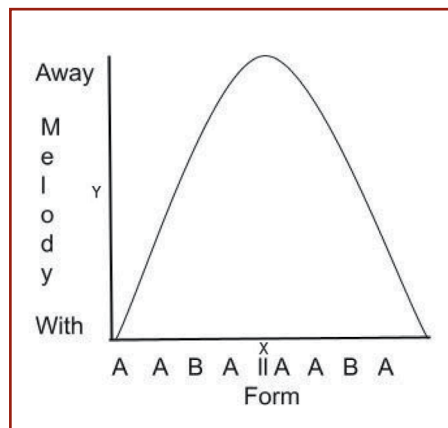
The example graph in Figure 1, using a standard AABA form on the x-axis, shows the improvisation moving furthest away from the melody near the beginning of the “B” section of the tune, then back at the end of the form, shown on the y-axis.

Figure 1



The graph in Figure 2 shows the same bell curve approach, but now over two choruses of an AABA jazz standard. Here, the improviser is furthest away from the melody at the beginning of the second chorus, returning to the melody at the end.

Figure 2



The graph in Figure 3 shows the improviser starting completely away from the melody and returning to the melody at the end of the last A section. The line can also be inverted so that the melody is presented at the beginning and slowly moves away.

Figure 3

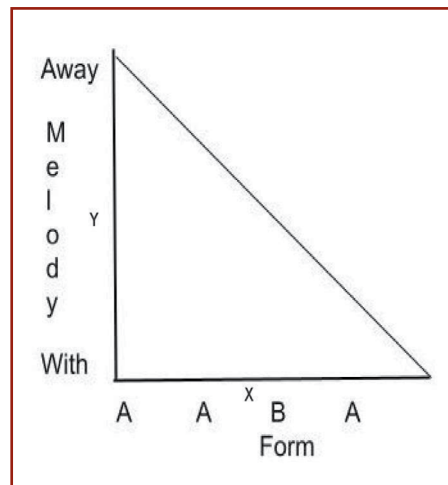
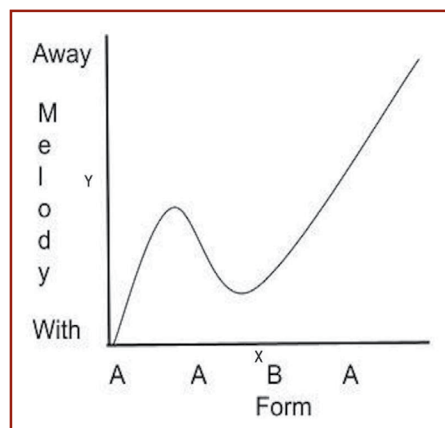


Figure 4 is an additional graph that provides a more nuanced and complex improvisational scheme.

Figure 4



Musicians using this graph-based idea can draw any number of graph lines as they continue to work on maintaining an accurate relationship to the lines drawn, while always “hearing” the melody in their heads. The concept can include as many variations as creativity will allow.⁷

Every great solo played over a jazz standard, no matter the instrument or the complexity, includes a connection to the melody. Whether listening to the music of such contemporary drummers as Allison Miller, Adam Nussbaum, and John Riley, or such legendary horn players as Paul Desmond and Chet Baker, the melody is ever present. A melodic solo makes a profound impact on the listener, above and beyond technical skills. Love the melody. It will be at the heart of your solo, and it will resonate the hearts of those who hear it.

ENDNOTES

1. Mathew Wilson, jazz clinic, University of Iowa. January, 2019
2. James Dreier, “Establishing a Sequential, Vocal-Based Pedagogy to Enhance a More Musical Drumming Vocabulary (i.e., singing and playing makes you a better drummer),” *Percussive Notes*, December, 2005
3. Interested readers can find the one-page “STLS” sheet on my website (www.jamesdreier.com)
4. James Dreier, *Standard Tune Learning Sequence, a Musical Approach to Improvisation for Jazz Drummers* (self-published, 2021)
5. *ibid*, p. 18

6. Drummers can orchestrate the melody around the drumset rhythmically.
7. Drumset video examples of the graph-based idea and all 12 improvisation concepts from the STLS book are available on the companion YouTube channel (<http://bit.ly/STLS-book>)

James Dreier is an Emeritus Associate Professor of Instruction (University of Iowa), a clinician, and a working musician.
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