

# Tackling Tough Licks

Learning it all backwards

By Ted Eschliman



## The Challenge of Bebop

**Bluegrass** and **Bebop jazz** are both notorious for lightning fast tempos and blistering riffs. Learning to play accurately and with precision, the head on some of the classics of **Charlie Parker**, **John Coltrane**, and **Thelonius Monk** can be a challenge, even at medium tempos, and many musicians do them an injustice by never really learning them well. This sloppiness in annoying and universally intolerable in classical music; audiences really anticipate virtual perfection.

Way too many amateur musicians fail to polish (even Bluegrassers), and make the mistake of thinking all they have to do is play inaccuracy faster and no one will notice. So what can the conscientious musician do to break out of this pattern? Nothing short of *woodshedding*, taking apart complex parts, peeling back the layers of thick weeds will make these passages righteous and true. Let's get this straight right now, blind repetition is not the answer--not if all you're doing is drilling the same mistakes over and over again.

## First things first.

The best thing you can do is **isolate problem spots**, and if you're working from print music, a pencil is your best friend. Be honest with yourself. Play at the tempo you aspire to and mark parenthesis around anything you can't play flawlessly, and only then are you ready to start down the path to perfection.

Second, here's a great trick to transcend simply slowing things down with mechanical repetitious drilling. Understanding the system in which our brain absorbs information, we can unlock an effective technique in practicing and devouring new literature. Good old fashioned "woodshedding" need not be painful if we take a smart, efficient "mental process" technique.

Our brains tend to "fry," the neural wirings get "crossed" with informational overload when we come across long, complicated passages, so we have to not only break them into "bite-size" chunks, eventually reordering them back into context again, back to their original setting. The idea being to spend more time on the hard, not wasting precious time on what you already know,

though it is quite human to want to play what we can play well already. Unfortunately, that just wastes the time you could be "perfecting."

Again, isolate the hard parts, and start with a digestible piece, a couple sixteenth notes, a four-note arpeggio, **but start with the LAST nugget**:

- 1) Beat out the final measure, work it, pound it into submission, and don't leave it until you have it down.
- 2) Next, go to the **PRECEDING** chunk. Same idea, work it until you have it inside. Add it to the first you perfected.
- 3) Move another preceding chunk into the chain; now you have three to play in sequence. Continue working backwards, adding chunks until you have the whole passage.

What will amaze you with this approach is how much faster you can master music this way. It's all about being efficient, and capturing information in a way your brain wants to learn. Tackle each portion until it becomes subconscious, until it goes from cognition (thinking) to tactile (fingering). Don't engage in the next until executing it has become "involuntary" or intuitive.

Let's show you what we mean with a look at a brisk up-tempo, rhythmic jazz tongue-twister, **Sonny Rollins' "Oleo."**

### Oleo

The tune is typical of many Bebop standards, an **AABA** form based on what's called "**Rhythm Changes**," the entire chord progression from the Gershwin "**I've got Rhythm**." If you're ever in a jam session, some happens to call "**Rhythm Changes**," THIS is what they mean. The Bebop equivalent to the **12 Bar Blues**, commonly played in the original key of **Bb**. We're going to do a little study on the A section as a demonstrating this nifty learning technique.

♩=240 Oleo Sony Rollins

B♭Maj7 G7 Cm7 F7 B♭Maj7 G7 Cm7 F7

Mandolin

Fm7 B♭7 E♭Maj7 E♭m6 B♭Maj7 G7 1 Cm7 F7 2 B♭Maj7

Mdn.

## Begin at the end

Start your "evisceration" in the first ending:

1  
Cm7 F7

Work from the pickup to the third beat through and play these five notes 5 to 8 times, until your and are on "autopilot," eventually adding the

the end of the measure, fingers memorize them first note of the measure.

B♭Maj7 G7 1 Cm7 F7

Next, add the *preceding* measure. Your brain comprehends the *new* measure, but your fingers already have a tactile grip (pun intended) on the situation. Same process--drill both measures 5 to 8 times, to perfection until they becomes intuitive.

Now woodshed the measure before, by itself:

E♭Maj7 E♭m6

Tackle this portion until playing becomes subconscious, and it goes from thinking to *tactile* (fingering). Don't engage in the next until it has become "involuntary" or intuitive. (And of course, flawless!)

Another 5 to 8 times in succession, when you have it down your ready for all three of the last measures:

E♭Maj7 E♭m6 B♭Maj7 G7 1 Cm7 F7

Notice how you are not even "thinking" the last measure, because by now, it's so burned into your synapses. Keep adding preceding measures in this method, one motif at a time.

**Continue moving. Backwards.**

**Measure 3** of the A part introduces a rhythm unlike the rest of the section, so now spend some time isolating it:

B<sup>b</sup>Maj7   G7   Cm7   F7



Again, play it 5 to 8 times, until it's performed with your fingers and not your brain. Then, continue on through the rest of the section. By now, the "struggle" is gone, and you're able to actually think ahead to the next section (while performing the current section!), and that's absolutely critical in a fast moving, hard swinging jazz performance. You should be ready for the whole A section now!

This approach works well in very technical jazz pieces, and it's critical for best results mastering classical literature. It's always tempting to just "blow" through music, never stopping to perfect the hard parts. Using this learning process of learning measures from the end to the beginning will decrease your frustration level when trying to tackle new pieces, and enable you to perform with precision and finesse!

Important: Start at the end and work your way forward. In the end, you spend LESS time perfecting pieces.

By the way, if you ever want a title summary of all the **JazzMandology** topics (over three dozen, now!) here's a page that lists them: [http://jazzmando.com/mandolin\\_sessions.shtml](http://jazzmando.com/mandolin_sessions.shtml). There's a lot to uncover there, and **Mel Bay Publishing** has brought these all to you for free. Share them with your **Facebook** and **Twitter** friends. In case you are completely new to the aforementioned **FFcP** concept referred to in previous **Jazz Mandology** articles, here's a good primer on the JazzMando site:

[http://jazzmando.com/ffcp\\_studies.shtml](http://jazzmando.com/ffcp_studies.shtml)

Take a few moments to check out the wealth of inexpensive resources you can buy at **Mel Bay Express**, many resources now available (immediately!) in an e-format.



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