

COURTESY JIM SELF



Playing Jazz & Improvising Freely on the Mighty Tuba

I play tuba and I love jazz. I want to play as free on my instrument as any other jazz player. When I was 38, I decided to commit 25 years to becoming a good jazz improviser on the tuba. That was 35 years ago. Since then I have produced 19 solo CDs, 14 of which are jazz tuba. Each one took me to a new place,

and I became a better improviser with each.

I mention this because I have really learned how to deal with the inherent problems of playing jazz on the tuba. I thought that it would be impossible at my age to learn to do it, but my persistence proved me wrong. Along my journey, I learned what works best and what to

avoid. This is my impetus for writing this article: to help the aspiring jazz tubist.

The two main ways tuba players play jazz are as bass-line players and melodic playing. I am mostly concerned here with the latter: playing and improvising in a practical and useful way that works for the player and sounds good

to the listener. I am addressing this to the tuba player who wants to play as a “horn” in a small group with rhythm players — playing the melody and improvising on songs from the Great American Songbook, Latin jazz and the blues — on the tuba.

Play in Your Lane

Because tubas play so low, the main obstacle is acoustical, both to the player and for the listener. I started out on BB \flat and CC instruments but soon found things work better on an F or E \flat tuba because the tessitura is higher and it's easier to be freer in the notes I chose. For me, it was the F tuba. I wanted to play all of the hippest tunes. Many of those have melodies with notes from altered chords (flat and sharp fifths and ninths), but when playing a flat ninth low, it could be a half-step above the bass — and sound like a sour note.

Some jazz tuba players play very loud and very high to get above those acoustical problems, or play on boring C minor funk grooves ad nauseum. But for me, I want to play mostly in my comfort zone, melodic and pretty. Some tunes still seem impossible to play down low, like “Giant Steps,” where many of the melody notes are extensions of the chords and altered notes).

While occasionally people have tuba players in their bands, I have usually had to form my own bands. Choosing the right rhythm section is extremely important. The string bass and the left hand of the piano are problematic because tubas solo mostly in the two octaves below middle C. It is critical to choose players who listen and will stay out of the way, or will re-voice chords to allow low, hip notes to sound good.

Choosing the best instruments to blend with the tuba is important, too. I prefer guitar, vibes or Rhodes piano to acoustic piano. Depending on the concert venue, playing with a microphone might help, assuming the sound person is sensitive to your sound and balance.

Jazz Tuba Tips

Here are some additional tips, hints and suggestions on how to play jazz and improvise freely on tuba:

- The F tuba has a similar range as the baritone saxophone. Copying the jazz giants on that instrument will give tuba players an easy introduction to jazz.
- In a jazz combo setting, ask the bass player to play mostly in his low register, with an occasional high fill. If he walks all the time, a lot of notes could clash with the tuba.
- Playing with another horn (saxophone, trombone, trumpet), both in octaves or in harmony, can cover such clashes.
- Practicing with computer-generated rhythm section programs is a great way to

learn and hone your jazz tuba skills. Be careful, though. It's so much fun that you can play for hours without a break. That could damage your classical playing. Take lots of breaks and stop if it hurts.

- Having classical training helps to play in tune and with a good tone. Playing in tune will make everything, including any “close” notes between tuba and bass, sound better to the listener. Playing lots of fast bebop notes on tuba requires the kind of dexterity and clarity that comes from years of practice and study.

- If you play bass lines as well as melodies and improvise, it can be very tiring to play “all of the time.” I recommend keeping it rather soft with as little mouthpiece pressure as needed to get a good sound.

- Emulating other valve brass players like Art Farmer, Bob Brookmeyer and Bobby Shew sounds good on the tuba.

- Learn to read treble clef fluently (for fake books and lead sheets).

- Seek out musicians who share your musical sensibilities, and when you find one, keep him/her close and play together as much as possible — as I do with the great guitarist John Chiodini.

Highly Melodic Music

In my experience, tuba players are usually bad at playing melodies by ear. I insist that my students learn lots of melodies and even do some beginner-level improvising to help them get away from written music and learn how to internalize ideas and sounds. In the last 50 years, tubists have made huge progress in technique, range and flexibility, rendering them much more capable of playing challenging, highly melodic music.

Jazz is in my soul. I love it, and playing and recording it has been the musical highlight of my life. I love the feeling of playing live for people and showing them how beautiful the tuba can be in jazz. **DB**

Jim Self is a Los Angeles-based freelance and studio musician, a veteran of thousands of motion picture soundtracks, TV shows and albums who has been featured as a tuba soloist in many prominent movies. His tuba was the “Voice of the Mothership” in Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. For many years, Self was first tuba for John Williams, James Horner, James Newton Howard, John Debney and other esteemed composer/conductors. Jim has recorded with hundreds of artists including Plácido Domingo, Mel Tormé, Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand and Don Ellis. He is principal Tuba/Cimbasso with the Pacific and Pasadena Symphonies, the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra and the Los Angeles Opera Orchestra. Early in his career, Self was in The U.S. Army Band in Washington, D.C., and was a tuba professor at the University of Tennessee. He holds a DMA from USC’s Thornton School of Music, where he is an adjunct professor of Tuba and Chamber Music. His compositions and arrangements include works for solo tuba, brass quintet, other brass, string and woodwind chamber music, wind band and orchestra. He has produced 19 solo jazz and classical recording projects that feature such jazz greats as Gary Foster, Pete Christlieb, Francisco Torres, Ron Kalina and Warren Luening. Many feature his own unique instrument, the Fluba (picture a tuba-sized flugelhorn). Self’s latest CD, *Hangin’ Out* (Basset Hound Music, 2022), is a tuba/guitar duo with guitarist John Chiodini. His music and recordings are available online at jimself.com.

REEDGEEK. MADE IN USA. www.ReedGeek.com

The “Black Diamond” by REEDGEEK

“It’s the only reed tool that’s ever worked for me.”

—David Sanborn
Six Time Grammy Award Winner

PHOTOGRAPH BY [unreadable]