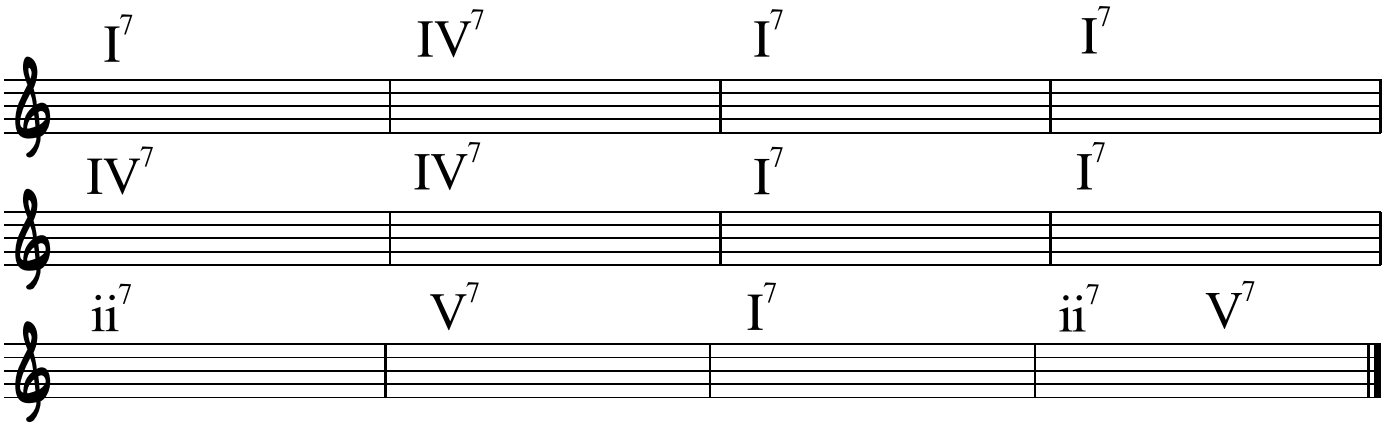
Teaching Jazz Improvisation in the Big Band Setting by Mark Dahl

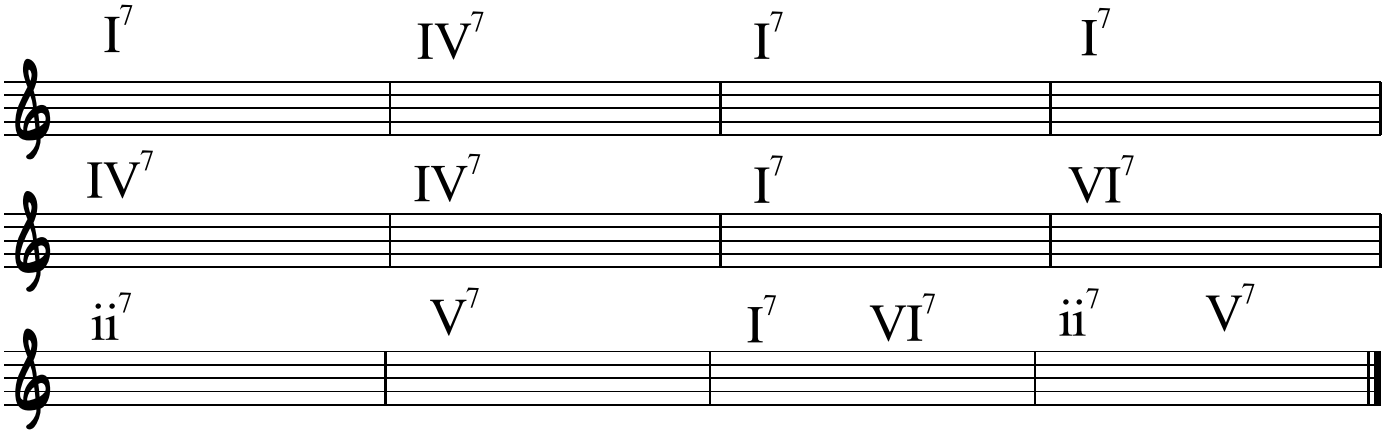
Session Outline:

1. Overview and Philosophy of teaching improvisation in big band setting
    a. Having multiple soloists, My Failures=Your Success
    b. Improvisation should be for everyone
    c. Method developed and used at a variety of levels and rehearsal settings
    d. Focused on everyone improvising right away in a safe environment
    e. Chart selection plays an important role
2. Begin with the Blues and Learning by Ear
    a. What is the blues?
    b. Sing the form, every rehearsal, 3 different blues based on ability and frequency
    c. Roots of the Chords
        1. Improvise immediately using rhythm
        2. Create warm-up sequence
    d. Learning Blues Heads by Ear: Sonnymoon for Two, Bag's Groove, Centerpiece – improvise immediately using melodies
3. Digital Pattern introduction with minimal jazz theory
    a. 121, 123, 12345, 321, 54321 – improvise immediately, add to warm-up sequence
    b. Additional digital patterns: 12345321, 1357, 13215431, 534531, etc.
    c. Alternate patterns, combine, write pattern solo
4. ii V I introduction and vocabulary
    a. Why this chord sequence is important and jazz theory of why it works
    b. Initial ii V vocabulary
    c. Mix patterns and ii V vocabulary, add to warm-up sequence
    d. Write solos utilizing melody, patterns, ii V licks and rhythm
5. Advanced Blues
    a. Tailor method and expectations to individual ensemble
    b. Adding Chords to the Blues (3 blues progressions)
    c. Additional blues heads by ear: Blues Walk, Tenor Madness, Blue Monk
    d. Additional Digital Patterns, advanced students can advance at their own pace
    e. Advanced ii V vocabulary – Tenor Madness lick as ii V
6. Chart Selection and Application
    a. Selected music should provide frequent opportunities to utilize concepts
    b. Real tunes recorded by jazz masters
    c. Real reference recordings, rhythm section model
    d. Teaching transcription through the reference recordings and selected charts
    e. Expanded use to other standard tunes and charts

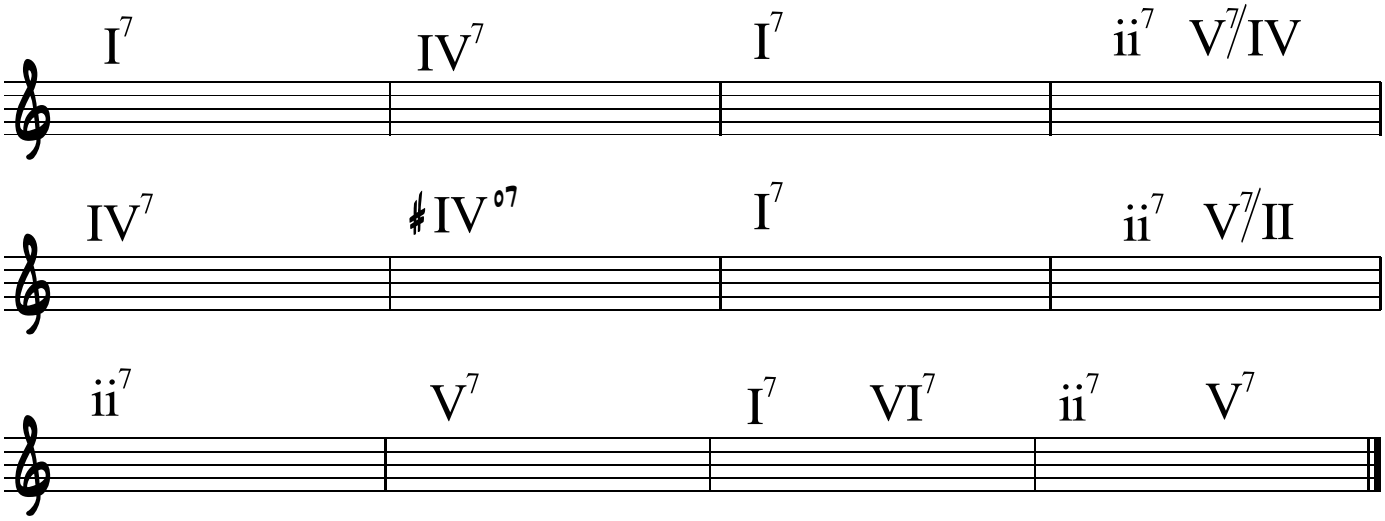
Blues #1 - Roman Numerals



Blues #2 - Roman Numerals (add VI)



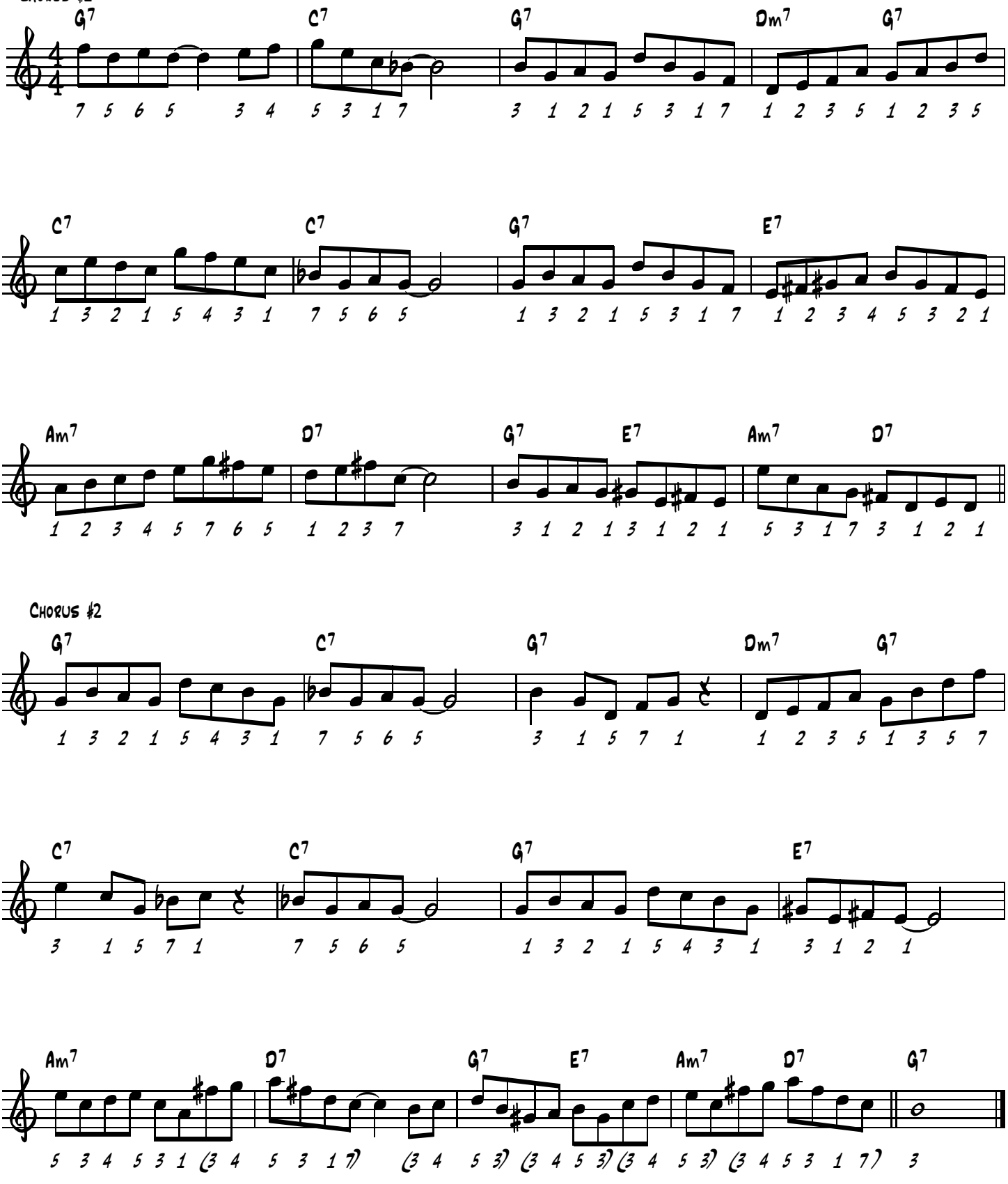
Blues #3 - Roman Numerals (add II V/IV, II V/II and #IVo7)



Blues Solo: Patterns Only

Mark Dahl

Chorus #1

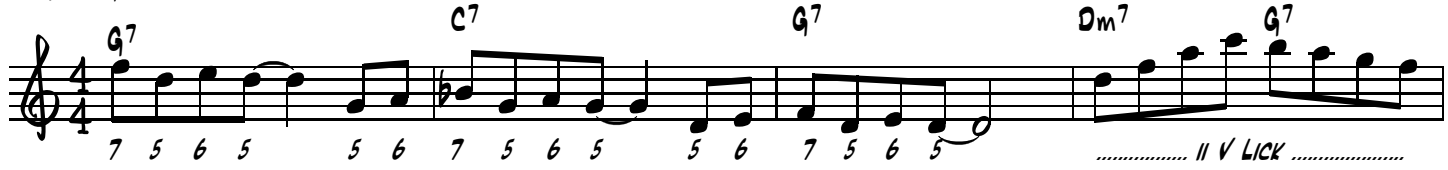


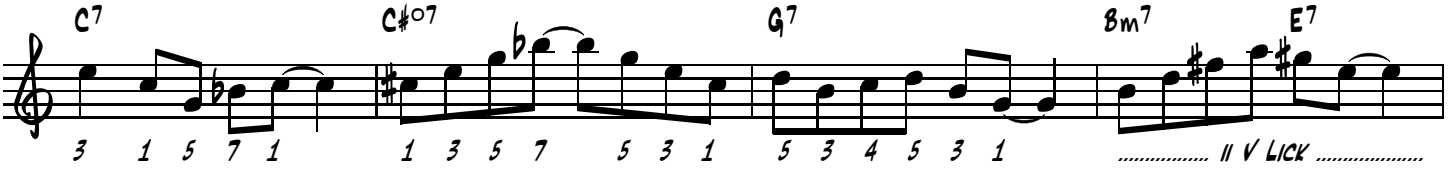
Chorus #2

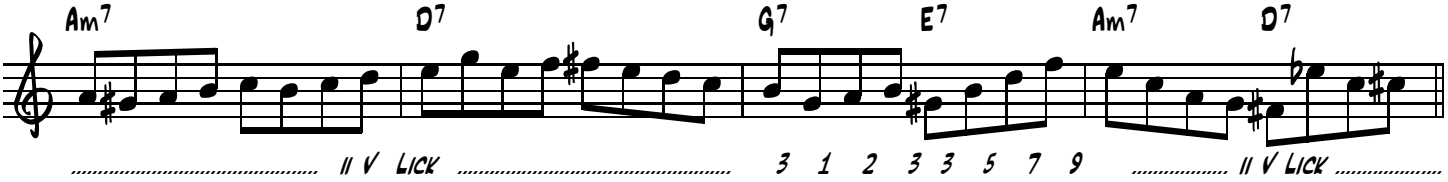
Blues Solo: Patterns and ii V Licks

Mark Dahl

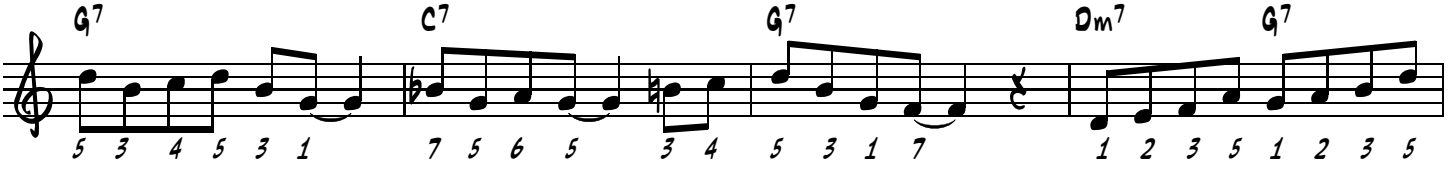
Chorus #1

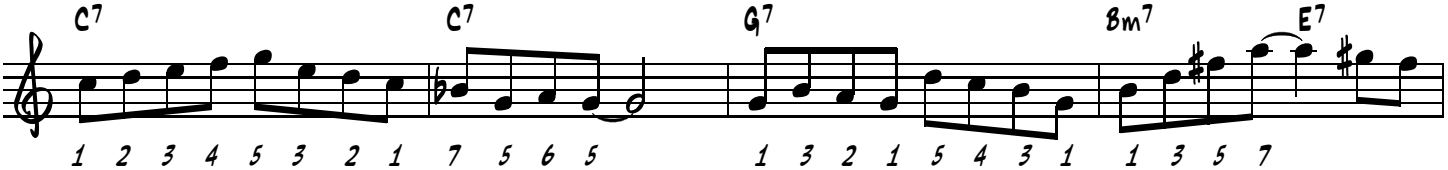


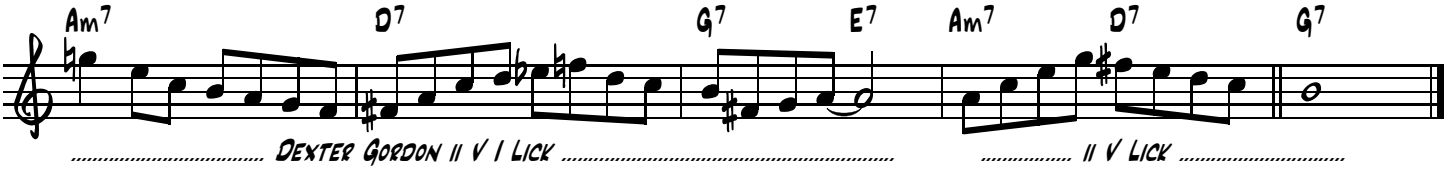




Chorus #2







Example Curriculum Sequence for An Ensemble That Meets Everyday

Week 1	M	• What is the blues? • Sing roman numerals and play roots in form
	T	• Sing roman numerals • Play the roots • Rhythmic improvisation
	W	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Wrote the form out on the board • Four bar solos
	TH	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Jazz Theory Lesson: Maj7, Dom7 and min7 chords
	F	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Theory review (3 chords in C) • Patterns: 123, 12345, 1235 and 12345321
Week 2	M	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Review: 12345321 and 1235 • New Patterns: 1357 and 13215431
	T	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Review: 12345321, 1235, 1357 and 13215431 • Blues 3 times worksheet
	W	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Review: 12345321, 1235, 1357 and 13215431 • Blues 3 times worksheet due
	TH	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Review: 12345321, 1235, 1357 and 13215431 • Blues 3 times worksheet review and redo
	F	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Review: 12345321, 1235, 1357 and 13215431 • Write your own blues chorus worksheet
Week 3	M	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Review: 12345321, 1235, 1357 and 13215431 • Break into small groups and perform worksheet solos
	T	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Review: 12345321, 1235, 1357 and 13215431
	W	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Review: 12345321, 1235, 1357 and 13215431
	TH	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Review: 12345321, 1235, 1357 and 13215431 • New Pattern: 534531
	F	• Sing it, play roots, rhythmic improvisation • Review: 12345321, 1235, 1357, 13215431 and 534531
Week 4	M	• Chord tone solos • Review 534531
	T	• Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • Voice leading

		• Review 534531
	W	• Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2), voice leading long tones (2) • Review: 13215431 and 534531
	TH	• Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2), voice leading long tones (2) • Review: 13215431 and 534531
	F	• Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2), voice leading long tones (2) • Review: 13215431 and 534531 • New Pattern: 7565
Week 5	M	• Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • Jazz Theory Lesson: ii V I • Learn four ii V I licks by ear
	T	• Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • Review ii V I licks • Play ii V licks in blues form
	W	• Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • Review ii V I licks • Add ii V to IV and ii V to II
	TH	• Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • Arpeggios and ii V licks in form
	F	• Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • Review ii V licks • 7565 and ii V licks in blues form
Week 6	M	• Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 7565 through form with ii V's
	T	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 534531 through form with ii V's
	W	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 3 choruses of one digital pattern with a different ii V each chorus
	TH	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 3 choruses of one digital pattern with a different ii V each chorus
	F	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 3 choruses of one digital pattern with a different ii V each chorus
Week 7	M	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 1237, add new short ii V (1357,3217,3)
	T	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 1237, with new short ii V (1357,3217,3)
	W	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 1237, with new short ii V (1357,3217,3)
	TH	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 1237, with new short ii V (1357,3217,3)
	F	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 1237, with new short ii V (1357,3217,3)
Week 8	M	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 31571, with new short ii V

		• Write Your Own Blues Solo Worksheet
	T-F	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 31571, with new short ii V
Week 9	M	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 31571, with new short ii V • Students perform their solos in class
	T	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 31571, with new short ii V • Learn new Dexter Gordon ii V I
	W	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 31571, with new short ii V • Review Dexter Gordon lick, place in form
	TH	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 31571, with new short ii V and Dexter Gordon ii V • Discuss enclosures (beginning of Dexter lick)
	F	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, chord tone solos (2) • 31571, with new short ii V and Dexter Gordon ii V • Review enclosures

Example Curriculum Sequence for An Ensemble That Meets Once or Twice Per Week

Rehearsal 1	• What is the blues? • Learn/review heads to Sonnymoon for Two and Bag's Groove • Sing roman numerals and play roots in form • Sequence: play head, root long tones, improvise (rhythmically on roots), head
Rehearsal 2	• Review what is the blues? • Sing roman numerals, play root long tones, improvise on roots • Review heads • Learn/review head to Centerpiece • Four bars solos using melody notes • Maj7, Dom7 and min7 chord intro • 123 & 321 through chord changes
Rehearsal 3	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, melody note improvisation (2) • Review heads (3) • Review Maj7, Dom7 and min7 formula • Review 123 and 321 through the form • Learn 12345, 12345321, 1235, 1357
Rehearsal 4	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, melody note improvisation (2) • Review heads (3) • Review Maj7, Dom7 and min7 formula • Review 12345321, 1235 and 1357 through the form • Learn 13215431
Rehearsal 5	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, root rhythmic improvisation, chord tone solos • Review 12345321 and 13215431 • Learn ii V lick #1 and use in form with patterns
Rehearsal 6	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, root rhythmic improvisation, chord tone solos • Review 12345321, 13215431 and ii V lick #1
Rehearsal 7	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, root rhythmic improvisation, chord tone solos • Review 12345321 with ii V lick #1 • Learn ii V lick #2, play with 13215431 in form
Rehearsal 8	• Four Chorus Warm-up: Sing, root long tones, root rhythmic improvisation, chord tone solos • Review ii V lick #1 and #2 • Learn 1237 and play ii V I lick #1 and #2 in form

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Mark Dahl holds a Bachelor's Degree in Saxophone Performance and a Master's Degree in Music Education from Northern Illinois University. He also holds certification in Educational Leadership from Concordia University. He has studied conducting with Steven Squires and Dr. Ronnie Wooten and jazz pedagogy with Ron Carter.

Mark is in his 26th year of teaching and his 21th year as Band Director and Assistant Division Chair of Fine Arts at Lyons Township High School in LaGrange, Illinois. Groups under his direction have been selected to perform at the Illinois Music Education State Conference, as finalists for the Illinois Super State Band Festival and the Essentially Ellington Jazz Competition hosted by Jazz at Lincoln Center. In addition to his school responsibilities, Mark is a featured clinician for Carter's Jazz Clinics and was a contributing author to *Teaching Music Through Performance in Jazz, Volumes 2 and 3*. He has guest conducted several ILMEA all district jazz groups and was guest director of the All-State Jazz Band in Rhode Island and the All-State Jazz Band in Illinois. He is a content creator for Ensemble Block, and has been on the staff of the Birch Creek Summer Jazz Camp and the Northern Illinois University Jazz Camp.