

Solar

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Content Area: High School Jazz Ensemble with flexible options for wind players (Not just limited to trumpet, trombones, and saxophones, any melodic instrument can be included), with a rhythmic focus on the drumset, piano, and bass

Description: Students learn and perform *Solar* by focusing on form landmarks, groove, and jazz style through flexible options (listen, clap/sing, then play). The rhythm section supports time and harmony, while the winds lock in melody, articulation, and phrasing, culminating in a performance take and a short reflection.

Estimated Time: 3 Rehearsal / Lesson blocks, 1 Hour Each, with 10-15 minutes of warmup time to start each lesson.

Step 1: Clarify Purpose

Learning Objective

Students will perform *Solar* together with accurate notes/rhythms, correct form/entrances, and jazz-appropriate articulation, showing expression through planned phrasing and dynamics.

Why This Matters

Professional musicians are expected to:

- Understand form and harmonic structure
- Listen and respond in real time
- Make musical decisions that serve the ensemble
- Prepare independently using strategies that work for their musicianship

This lesson mirrors how real musicians learn and rehearse, by offering multiple ways to access, practice, and demonstrate understanding while holding everyone to a shared performance standard. Students understand why the learning matters beyond compliance.

Success Criteria

Students will be able to:

- Identify the form using phrase landmarks (ex, top, transitions, “danger spots”), not just bar counting.
- Re-enter correctly after rests/space because they know where they are in the tune.
- Perform the melody with accurate rhythm and entrances. Keep time internally (steady subdivision) and stay aligned with the rhythm section during transitions, tempo changes, and ensemble hits.
- Demonstrate harmonic understanding at an appropriate level by completing one of the following: outline roots, outline guide tones, or apply a simple improv/comping constraint that fits the changes.
- Perform with jazz-appropriate articulation and time feel (consistent swing feel/placement) that matches the ensemble.
- Make and perform planned choices in phrasing, dynamics, articulation, and shape (not random—repeatable and audible).

Rhythm section role clarity

- Drums: keep the groove consistent and clearly support form/landmarks.
Bass: outline time + harmonic motion so the form is “hearable.”
- Piano/Guitar: comp in a way that supports the groove and soloists without clutter.

Performance Level	Holistic Description
Exceeds Expectations	Accurate notes & rhythms with steady time; characteristic tone and strong intonation; consistent jazz articulation/style; phrasing and dynamics are intentional; stays locked with the groove and responds musically to the ensemble.
Meets Expectations	Mostly accurate notes & rhythms with generally steady time; tone and intonation are solid with minor lapses; jazz style/articulation is present; some clear phrasing/dynamic intent; aligns with the rhythm section most of the time.
Developing	Inconsistent note/rhythm accuracy and/or time feel; tone and intonation vary; jazz articulation/style is inconsistent; limited phrasing/dynamic shaping; often drifts from the groove or needs external cues to stay together.

Beginning

Frequent note/rhythm errors and unstable time; tone/intonation issues noticeably affect performance; limited jazz style/articulation; little to no intentional phrasing; struggles to stay aligned with the ensemble/groove.

Step 2: Anticipate Variability (Strengths + Needs)

- Some students internalize music through notation, while others learn primarily through listening and imitation
- Students equate accuracy with 'not making mistakes', leading to fear of risk-taking (especially during improv, soloing, or leadership roles)
- Some kids lock in when they're given a solo spot, while some will be nervous to take a solo
- Some are motivated by tracking growth and improvement
- Some are more creative than technical at first
- Some are technically strong players but struggle with confidence form and feel
- Some rhythm section players may be nervous to be so exposed in the music
- Some aren't exposed to enough Jazz, specifically Blues

Potential Barriers	Options to Eliminate Barriers
Some students internalize music through notation, while others learn primarily through listening and imitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lead sheet in any key to be provided• Let everyone listen to a recording and take suggestions from students' favorite recordings (Miles, or any version that really grooves)• A bass-line outline or guide-tone map instead of full chord symbols for rhythm section members who struggle with reading jazz notated chords, or anyone who would find it helpful• A backing track at different tempos that can alter the volume of different rhythm section instruments to help them really hear their part
Students equate accuracy with 'not making mistakes', leading to fear of risk-taking (especially during improv, soloing, or leadership roles)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Normalize multiple 'correct' musical pathways by modeling different valid interpretations of the same phrase or chorus. (Different variations of rhythm can be interpreted.)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Offer low-risk entry points (rhythm-only improv, guide-tone solos, one-note constraints) before opening up solo sections ● Build choice into participation roles so students can demonstrate musicianship without forced exposure. If they just want to play the melody, go ahead. ● Use process-oriented language (“What choice did you try? Instead of “Was it right?”)
<p>Students rely heavily on the teacher or the strongest players to “carry” the ensemble, limiting independent musical decision-making.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assign rotating ensemble roles. If the ensemble is larger, randomly assign groups of 3-4 and have them perform and solo for each other; let everyone have a chance to play a lead part. ● Embed authentic checks for understanding ● Use peer-to-peer rehearsal structures ● Design moments where students must initiate, not just respond, instead of the director saying when to stop repeating a section, let the student drummer drive the band.

Step 3: Build a Welcoming Start

Warm-Up Options (students choose one from each instrument-specific and jazz-specific):

Begin with a brief, inclusive welcome that invites students to set an intention and feel a sense of belonging in the ensemble. Next, ask students to select a warm-up aligned to the day’s focus (form, feel, harmony, articulation). Normalize choice as a musicianship skill, not a differentiation label

- Instrument Specific Warm-ups: Brass players do lip slurs, woodwinds do scales, drums hold down a simple beat, bass, piano, and other melodic rhythm instruments do scales and variations of scales
- Jazz Specific Warm-ups: Play a lick, have others play it back, hum melodies from ear
- Listen to a recording and guess the form
- Focus on intonation and tuning

Step 4: Design/Embed Flexible Assessments

Because of *Solar’s* 12-bar form, its simplicity is a strong foundational checkpoint and gateway into more complex tunes. While students rehearse, this is an opportunity for ongoing formative assessment, with the teacher observing and conferring throughout the process. Students demonstrate their understanding through musically authentic evidence, such as:

- Play the melody from memory
- Play chord tones
- Improvise using only chord tones
- Improvise freely
- Record and reflect on a take

Students then make intentional choices about how they will demonstrate their understanding:

- Whole ensemble (everyone): completes the same ensemble checkpoints during full-group reps: entering correctly after the melody, maintaining style/time feel, and staying oriented in the 12-bar form.
- Each individual student: chooses one of the options above to demonstrate understanding (students do not all have to choose the same option).
- Sections (optional): a section may choose the same option together for efficiency, but individual students can still choose a different option if needed.

Assessment remains authentic and varied (reflecting real ensemble musicianship, not a single performance task), such as:

- Entering correctly after the melody
- Cueing the ensemble into the head
- Comping accurately through the turnaround
- Explaining where the form tends to break down
- Maintaining style and time feel across sections

Step 5: Design Flexible Learning Experiences

Students engage in a sequence of learning experiences that build toward improvisation with increasing complexity. Each section provides a different entry point and level of support, allowing students to choose a pathway that aligns with their readiness while working toward the same musical goal. In practice, this includes intentional teaching moves that support all learners: teaching concepts through multiple modes without labeling students, building ramps before the performance cliff, preserving rehearsal flow while embedding choice, and allowing students to show learning in musically real ways (see below).

- Section 1: Rhythm-only improvisation (one pitch)
- Section 2: Chord tones only
- Section 3: One scale option (blues or dominant)
- Section 4: Improvisation with a constraint (motif development)

Step 6: Create Space for Student Ownership

To support ownership and agency, students choose how they will engage in the work:

- Their entry point into the work (learn Solar primarily through the lead sheet, a recording, a simplified roadmap of the form, or a bass-line outline)
- Their role within the ensemble (take a solo, serve as form captain, cue entrances, anchor the groove, or support with comping or time feel)
- How they practice and build toward performance (work with a play-along track at a chosen tempo; loop challenging sections independently or with a partner)

Note: Students revisit and adjust their choices over time as their understanding deepens, reinforcing that ownership is part of musicianship, not a one-time decision.

Step 7: Plan an Intentional Close

Students complete a brief reflection using writing, audio, or video, responding to the following prompts: (reflection is flexible in format but consistent in depth and expectation)

- Form check: Where did you feel most confident in the form, and where did you almost lose it? What landmark helped you recover (or what will you use next time)?
- Rhythm + groove: What part of the groove felt easiest to lock into, and what rhythm change/kick was hardest? What did you do to stay aligned with the rhythm section?
- Listening: Name one moment you adjusted because of something you heard (drums, bass line, comping, another wind). What did you change and why?
- Musical choice: Describe one intentional choice you made (phrasing/articulation/dynamics). Did it come through in the performance? What will you keep or change?
- Practice plan: What is your one specific next step before the next rehearsal (ex: loop measures __, clap the rhythm, sing guide tones, slow play-along tempo)? Why that?
- If you improvised (optional prompt): What constraint/scaffold did you use (motif, guide tones, limited notes)? Did it help you follow the changes? What would you try next time?

Next Steps: Differentiated Instruction

Learner Readiness	Potential Next Steps
Students who have fully mastered the content or skill	Find tunes with different forms other than 12-bar blues, more complicated chord tones, and a higher tempo (<i>All The Things You Are</i> and <i>What is This Thing Called Love</i> are great next steps). Focus on ear training and improvisation work in both group and solo settings.

Students who have a basic understanding of the content and/or skill

Focus on the details of what you are hearing, specifically in the rhythm section, how do these chords differ from each other, not just literally how the notes differ, but how they sound different, and how can this directly apply to my improvisation?

Students who do not yet have an understanding of the content and/or skill

Focus on rhythmic clapping of beats and where things land in the melody. Before we can get into the details of how things sound, we need a good foundation of how they feel. Are these harmonic changes happening on a downbeat or an upbeat? How many bars is one form?