



Leila J Viss, MA

## Is Your Box Holding You Back? Build a Bridge and Get It Over It

Graduating with a masters degree in piano performance and pedagogy sealed my “box” of musical skills with a lovely bow thanks to a good deal of diligent work, practice, and more practice. How unsettling it was to find that some basic skills were not safely



deposited within my “box”; specifically, improvising, reading lead sheets, etc....Ever since, it’s been an interesting journey of untying this bow, taking the lid off and finding ways to explore music-making *ON AND OFF* the page.

Is your box holding *you* back from playing in various styles, improvising and enjoying music beyond the printed page? Here are some tips to *building* a bridge to your creative side and *getting* over it in style.

### 1) Benchwarmers or students who are eager to move off the page

- Embrace them as students
- Engage them with activities off and on the page
- Encourage their innate skills and you will develop yours along the way

### 2) Borrow from the pros

- Rely on Resources:
  - [That’s Jazz](#) by Bradley Sowash
  - [Pattern Play](#) Forrest Kinney:
- Copy and Paste: Nothing is “original” so copy, paste and transpose favorite patterns into your own playing. Some who inspired me in my formative years:
  - [Lorie Line](#)
  - [Jim Brickman](#)
  - [Heather Sorenson](#)
  - [Mark Hayes](#)

### 3) Back Pocket Patterns

- Copy from others (see Sowash and Kinney Books)
- Heart and Soul: (C, Am, F, G or I, vi, IV, V) besides being a social “must”, this pattern is THE secret behind every (most) pop songs. Impress your students with your wisdom.

#### 4) Off-the-Bench Activities

- Paper Plate Dance: use paper plates to encourage movement and listening skills. See blog at [88pianokeys.me](http://88pianokeys.me) for details
- Paper Plate Rhythms: rhythms are tricky in pop and jazz. Divide paper plates to provide tactile and visual explanations of rhythms. See [88pianokeys.me](http://88pianokeys.me) for more information

#### 5) Tech-Savvy Tools

- Clavinova: the styles, incredible speakers and versatility with other tech gadgets makes this an essential studio tool
- iPad: revolutionize your studio with an iPad. Life will never be the same.
- YouTube: unlock the secret of pop music with this video: [Axis of Awesome](#)
- iReal b App: morph your iPad into a lead sheet and a back-up band
- Anytune App: slow down any tune in your iTunes playlist to expand playing-by-ear skills

#### Leila Viss

**Bio:** Owner of independent piano studio featuring private piano lessons and lab-assisted instruction, full-time organist and accompanist, adjudicator, clinician, co-author of **Double Click Curriculum** at [Keys to Imagination](#).

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**Blogs:** [88pianokeys.me](http://88pianokeys.me) [88creativekeys.com](http://88creativekeys.com) [musicteachershelper.com](http://musicteachershelper.com)

**Author:** **The iPad Revolution: Plug into the Power of Apps for Your Music Studio** to be released late 2013.

**Business Partner:** *Creative Keys*, a business venture with Bradley Sowash to further the cause of creativity. The intent of the *Creative Keys Camp, Workshop and Clinic* is to balance eye and ear skills so you and your students can enjoy making music in a variety of styles and settings without limitations. The Colorado *Creative Keys* is a pilot program to be launched in other locations, stay tuned. Check out [88creativekeys.com](http://88creativekeys.com) for more details.



**Two Typical Teachers Gone Jazz**  
**Music Teachers National Association Conference**  
**Pedagogy Saturday March 9, 2013 Anaheim, CA**  
**Marti Mortensen Ahern, presenter**

**Introduction:**

Marti gravitated to 'the piano bench' at the age of two, played songs by ear and added 'notes that sounded good'. She started formal piano lessons at the age of 5. Her first teacher, Genevieve Johnson, had a challenging time trying to teach her to 'read notes', count, and observe the musical markings, etc. Eventually she learned 'to read', but continued to play by ear.

Marti was first introduced to reading chord charts/lead sheets in the 7<sup>th</sup> Grade playing 'keys' for the Stage Band. That opened a whole new world for her. She listened to many different styles of music at home and also enjoyed playing Musical Theater and Pop tunes (sometimes more than practicing her weekly piano assignments...!).

She continued playing for Stage Band throughout Middle School/High School, played for the first show choir formed at her high school – in a trio. Lots of fun! Throughout, she was still 'reading'. Marti is a classically-trained pianist and received a Bachelor of Music Degree from Westminster Choir College, Princeton, NJ.

She continues to play and teach all styles – enjoying all of them. Though no formal 'jazz training', she likes to say 'I learned it on the street'. Until recently, she also played for a top-40 cover band, 'Heavenly Blue', performing for community and church events.

**Studio activities:**

We have a 'keys of the month club' – everyone studies and learns the Major/minor keys throughout the school year. Requirements are based on levels and experience, with expectations of 'more' the next school year. I have a chart with students' names on it, boxes for stickers that can be placed beside their name as they've completed the requirements for each key. We study all the MAJOR and minor keys (all 3 forms) throughout the school year. Here is an example:

- September: C and G Major – includes 5 finger patterns, scales, tonic and dominant notes, chords (root and inversions), basic I IV I V7 I progressions (Again, all based on the level of the student)

- We select several tunes (public domain, pop, musical theater, whatever they choose) and play them – sometimes by ear – the entire school year in all the keys learned every month
- Every month we try to embellish and add ‘new’ things (different LH rhythm pattern/style, filled out chords in the RH, new harmonies, ‘added’ fill notes, whatever)
- I try to have an ‘ear’ exercise each lesson – be it playing a new song by ear, playing a newly-composed piece by the student, transposing a current piece, or just go through a chord change duet – student and teacher switching places. I also encourage ‘play’ at the piano, what I call ‘noodle doodle’ at appropriate times during the lesson (when I’m not trying to teach a new concept).

### **Teaching tips to reading lead sheets:**

- Determine the key, then play that scale and chord progression to get it in the fingers and the ear.
- Learn RH melody; include ‘target zones’ for tricky fingering and phrasing.
- Play RH melody with I V single notes in the LH at first until the ear hears the harmony changes, and the finger co-operates. Add root position chords to those changes/inversions if ready.
- Write in chords if needed (discussing both Roman Numerals and chord symbols/letters). Advanced students can also learn how to play, recognize, and notate 9th, 13<sup>th</sup>, diminished, and augmented chords.
- Practice ‘quick’ chord changes in LH.
- Add RH melody and LH chords together – work on smooth transitions.
- Once the simple block chord pattern is complete, try adding different LH accompaniment patterns such as quarter note block, 4-beat (root – 3<sup>rd</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup>), 3-beat waltz (root – 3<sup>rd</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup>), Alberti Bass, broken triplets (all 3 chord notes on one beat), boogie bass, broken quarters, Latin rhythm, or simple pop styles. Some of the LH chord rhythms will require a different rhythm in the melody – fun to play a 4/4 meter in a 3/4 meter!

## Simple Gifts

*Joseph Brackett, Jr., 1848*



## Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho

*Traditional Negro Spiritual, 19th Century*

*Chorus*

**Em** **Am**

Josh - ua fit the bat-tle of Jer-i - cho, Jer - cho,

**B7** **Em**

Jer - i-cho, Josh - ua fit the bat - tle of

**B7** **Em**

Jer - i - cho, And the walls come a - tumb - lin' down!

## Comments:

As with learning any new skill, it needs to be practiced – lots! I encourage my students to play many things by ear, and ask them to add chords to the melodies. Below are some resources and websites that include additional public domain melodies that can be printed. I keep a few selections in a binder in the studio, arrange in order of difficulty, and ‘pull them out’ at lessons to include as one of the ear training activities. I own a ‘Fake Book’ that I use when playing gigs, and I sometimes pull that one out for my advanced students for a little challenge.

## Resources:

[www.pianimation.com](http://www.pianimation.com) – site includes harmonization worksheets to print. Students are given a simple, short melody and asked to fill in primary chords to create an accompaniment.

(Jen Fink)

[www.colorinmypiano.com](http://www.colorinmypiano.com) – site includes lots of worksheets, ideas in teaching various concepts. (Joy Morin)

[www.music-for-music-teachers.com](http://www.music-for-music-teachers.com) – site includes public domain tunes (hymns, some folk songs) in lead sheet format.

[www.music-folk-play-hymns.com](http://www.music-folk-play-hymns.com) – another site that includes public domain tunes in lead sheet format.

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