

100 Things on a List For Aspiring Jazz Singers

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"Jazz vocal technique has been the foundation for most commercial and vernacular music during the last century. These techniques have entered the mainstream of music, but without the jazz vocal tradition so many of them would never have evolved -- for example, bending notes, behind-the-beat phrasing, rhythmic displacements, singing that emulates instruments or conversational delivery, microphone manipulation, etc. We take these for granted, but any singer who wants to master these essential skills needs to study the jazz vocal heritage." – Ted Gioia

1. The opportunities to “learn on the job” are not as plentiful as it used to be. Look for educational environments that have experienced, professional vocalists teaching. Enrolling in a vocal jazz program offers a solid foundation for most commercial and vernacular music as well.
2. Listen to every jazz singer you can - at least 20 or 40 of them. Know, historically, who all the essential male and female singers are. Be an archeologist -- unearth as many as you can find. Fall in love with a few and identify why you are drawn to them.
3. Imitating other singers is one way to start, but then you should move on. We want to hear you, not a copy of someone else. However, being influenced and inspired is an essential part of the process and carries on the historical elements and development of the music.
4. The voice is an instrument, take care of it, it’s “one of a kind” and precious. Every voice is unique, and everyone’s life experiences are unique. These are two of the ingredients that go into developing a style and sound.
5. Listen obsessively to at least 10 instrumentalists and fall in love with at least 5 of them. Then find another 10 to obsess over. Hopefully, this will not feel like work, instead, something you can’t imagine living without.
6. Know where the top (the beginning) of the tune is.

7. If you don't or can't feel where the song starts and ends, and can't naturally follow the song form, it's possible to learn, but it should come with some ease. Time will tell.
8. Sing in tune.
9. If you can't sing in tune, study technique. It's usually a technical problem. If not, time will also tell.
10. Practice will help all of the above, singing in tune, feeling the time, and having a strong sense of the form. Being a professional musician means mastering these basics.
11. Of the three components of music: melody, rhythm, and harmony, rhythm is the most important as it helps to feel and identify the form of the tune, and creates a connection to the other players.
12. Collaboration is one of the best parts of making music. Listen to the band so you can respond and interact. They are not there to "serve you." If you want to be a jazz singer, it's a collaborative affair – this is one of the best parts of the whole deal.
13. The "quality control" of record labels, the fact that they signed people they felt were talented, was not entirely a bad thing. You will probably not be signed to a record label in this current iteration of the music business. That's okay. You can start your own label, but wait until you are ready. Putting mediocre music into the world is not good for you or anyone else. Wait until you really have "something to say."
14. Some great and talented singers were never recorded or acknowledged. You may never be acknowledged. There are no guarantees in the arts. It's a risky business. Know this going in, and then any success or recognition you get is the "cherry on top."
15. It's not about you; it's about the music.
16. Let the lyrics inform the phrasing.
17. Look at the lyric, say it out loud, what's it about? Do you care? If not, find another song.

18. Use space. See #16.
19. Find the right key. Singing at the highest or lowest part of your range is not recommended. Find the sweet spot. Now and then, a half step one way or the other is like the Grand Canyon. Sometimes the sun, moon, and stars appear when you sing a melody in just the right key.
20. Some keys are more user-friendly than others for many jazz musicians. Simply speaking: keys with more than three sharps tend to be less friendly to the instrumentalists. If you are the bandleader, you can do your songs in any key you want. If you are at a jam session or doing a “casual” (West Coast term) or a “club date” (East Coast term), then try to keep the keys user-friendly. It will be appreciated. Vocalists have a terrible reputation – which, sadly, has been earned -- for not knowing their keys or calling songs in an obviously wrong key. Be the exception.
21. Know the lyrics and melody before attempting to sing it with others. Since gathering a group of musicians together is not always easy with busy schedules, it’s a poor use of everyone’s time (and also a little aggravating) if someone has to help the singer learn the song in a rehearsal.
22. Have about 50 standards you like and can sing by heart.
23. Better still, 100 standards.
24. Explore the universal stories found in the Great American Songbook; it is fertile ground for interpretation containing many common experiences, especially about love. It’s not “what” you sing, but “how” you sing it. See #16.
25. Learn the piano so you can play through your tunes.
26. Stop listening to singers.
27. Use dynamics. See #16.
28. Write your own lyrics to melodies by various composers, including all the great instrumentalists. There are publishing issues with recording your lyrics to many of the legendary composers (Monk, Shorter, Coltrane) but this

is a different (and complicated) topic. Just write lyrics to songs you like and don't worry about recording them. It develops your craft and helps you, as a vocalist, become intimate with the great jazz compositions. It's like the sculptor and a piece of marble — there's a story in the song, and as a singer, you can bring it out by writing lyrics.

29. Singing wordlessly is great as well. Even without lyrics, there are stories to be told.

30. Learn every song on the "Kind of Blue" record and be able to sing along with all of the horn solos.

31. Learn 10 Charlie Parker tunes.

32. Then learn 5 Wayne Shorter and 5 Thelonious Monk tunes.

33. Learning the instrumental tunes in jazz is as important as learning the standards. One of the easiest ways to learn instrumental jazz is to dig deep into the repertoire of Lambert, Hendricks & Ross (as well as King Pleasure and Eddie Jefferson.) Vocalese singing (lyrics written to pre-existing instrumental solos and songs) will help you to develop an authentic jazz vocabulary and better articulation.

34. Have mentors or other musicians who are honest with you about your singing.

35. If you have some success and are interviewed about your musical life or have a bio on your website, make sure to acknowledge your mentors and teachers. You did not do this alone.

36. Do the work and know that some things will come easily and other things will be a challenge. Practice the challenging stuff. Singers are musicians and should take practicing and working on music as seriously as the instrumentalists. Unless, of course, you don't want to. Then don't. But don't expect anyone to roll out the red carpet because you have a "nice voice."

37. Not sure if this quote came from Miles or is paraphrased, but consider that "Your style is developed around your weaknesses."

38. Know your weaknesses.

39. A good voice doesn't mean much.
40. Talent is important, but it's not everything.
41. Showing up on time is important.
42. The jazz world is small, and everyone talks about everyone else. This is a fact.
43. If you are uncool in any way (mean-spirited, sexually inappropriate, showing up late and unprepared or being loaded and/or drunk on the gig...plus a lot of other things) the word gets around.
44. No one wants to have people that behave like #43 in the band.
45. If you show up on time, have good charts, know what you want and understand how to communicate as well as being sincere, passionate and humble, you will have gigs and opportunities. That's because of #42.
46. Make sure your sheet music is organized, and the charts are impeccable. With the electronic notation programs, this should be easier than hard copies. Don't forget to back up to your hard drive and/or to the cloud.
47. Think twice before getting intimately involved with band members – you will see them for the rest of your life in one club, recording session, festival or the other.
48. We are all human so, you will sometimes get intimately involved with other musicians. But it's not a dating service.
49. Don't blame other musicians when you have a bad performance.
50. You will know the musicians you meet in college for the rest of your life—if you all stay musically active. Some may become performers, others might go into education and other might become presenters. Stay in touch with them – it's so easy now with social media!
51. Be a composer and lyricist, even if you are not very good. At the very least it will help you pick out the best songs by other composers. At best, you

will have original material.

52. Be a fan of the music. Go out to hear live performances whenever possible. Listen critically.
53. Remember who you are.
54. Forget who you are and attach yourself to the mystery and power that fuels creativity, love, magic, and sound.
55. Explore subtlety and tiny details.
56. Don't forget the big picture.
57. Be ready to put aside everything you've practiced and be in the moment, ready to respond and improvise. The things you've worked on (above) will create a sturdy foundation and become instinctual.
58. Take your time. This is not a race. You can sing well into your 80's, and many singers don't hit their prime until their 50's.
59. Stay completely focused on stage. Listeners will be drawn to this.
60. Make a 5-year plan, a 1-year plan, and a 30-day plan. It's nice to check the boxes when you follow through.
61. Daydream.
62. Go to a museum. By yourself.
63. Keep a journal and notice the world around you.
64. Find interesting people to collaborate with. Have interesting friends that are not musicians.
65. Get over yourself.
66. Get over everyone else.

67. It's not about you or other people—it's about the music. This puts "principles before personalities" and can help you explore aspects of spirituality. This is a good thing.
68. Remember that most people don't care what you went through to sing a song well; rather, they just want to hear you sing the song well.
69. Remember, also, that "singing a song well" means that the listener is not (only) impressed by your technique or acrobatic ability, rather, is moved by the delivery and authenticity.
70. Authenticity matters. Treasure it in yourself and others.
71. Over-emoting is dangerous territory.
72. Less is more...more or less.
73. Every time you sing, sing like it might be the last time.
74. Don't worry about other people's careers – it's a poor use of your time.
75. Be inspired by other people's careers – if they achieved something cool and interesting, it could mean the doors are easier for you to walk through.
76. Don't steal other people's ideas. Remember #42.
77. Drink a lot of water.
78. Exercise.
79. Record yourself when you are practicing.
80. Don't apologize when you make a mistake, just fix it.
81. Put yourself in a variety of musical situations: choirs, background singing, wedding bands, avant-garde soundscapes, singing in the subway, doing house concerts, teach, take lessons from different people, etc. There's a lot to keep you busy but it's on you to find these situations. No one will knock at your door with a gig.

82. Know how to count off a tune and direct the band.
83. #82 is one of the hardest things to teach, but it can be learned.
84. Most of the iconic vocalists were not taught how to lead a band. They learned through direct interaction, observation and being connected to the time, to their bodies and to the other musicians.
85. Since many of the important bandleaders are no longer living, be grateful you have endless videos of people like Betty Carter leading a band. Watch carefully.
86. Ambition is good. Arrogance is poison.
87. Fame, money, notoriety, and awards should not be motivating factors. Strong relationships with other musicians and their respect are better things to go for.
88. Support other singers, especially your contemporaries.
89. Watch yourself in the mirror or record yourself, so you know what you look like when you sing. Make adjustments as necessary.
90. Stop worrying about what you look like and just sing.
91. Wear clothing and shoes that allow you to be comfortable for as long as you are on stage. Suffering for fashion is okay, but constricting the diaphragm or having shoes that throw off your balance will compromise your performance.
92. When it comes to promoting yourself, really good color photos are essential. Journalists and people who put together advertising or stories about a concert often pick the most creative or inviting photo rather than the best or most important artist.
93. You never “arrive” as a musician; enjoy the process; it’s where you spend most of your time.
94. Have a good website that truly reflects who you are. Hire someone to help you.

95. If you are on stage, you are not like everyone else. The audience expects you to be different and as a singer, you are fronting the band, whether you like it or not. People look at you even when you are not singing.
96. Be mindful of what you are doing on stage when you are not singing.
97. Closing your eyes when you sing is okay. Keeping them open is okay, too.
98. Making a connection with the audience should happen through the music as well as between songs. “Entertaining” while singing is tricky. In jazz, think of the audience as participants who complete the circle i.e. they are actively listening and witnessing the performance, which gives energy to the performer. Be gracious and grateful for this.
99. Listen to every style of music. If there are genres that are natural to you or part of your heritage, the time has never been better to integrate these into a jazz setting. Jazz singing is increasingly about “genre-bending.”
100. Remember that much of our humanity is reflected in the voice. The ability to touch someone with a song is a great honor. When you have someone’s attention, you have a unique opportunity. Honor yourself and the listener.

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