

**HOW TO PLAY PIANO BY EAR**  
BY WADE MCINTUIT



[pianochops.com](http://pianochops.com)

# CONTENTS

## Introduction...3

- Fill Your Bag with Chops...3
- What does it mean to play by ear?...3
- Note Readers vs. Ear Players...4
- What percentage of people are capable of playing by ear?...5

## Fundamental Chops...5

- Names of Notes...6
- Sustain Pedal...6
- How to Sit...7
- How to Hold Your Hands...8
- Roles of Hands...8
- Chords Around Middle C...9

## Chord Chops...9

### Charting Chops...11

- Listen to Bass Notes...11
- Chord Groups (Diatonic)...12
- Common Progression...13
- Nashville Numbers...13

## Style Chops...15

- Alter Notes...15
- Alter Rhythms...15

## Improvisation Chops...16

- Is Improvisation really Improvisation?...16
- What Patterns Are...17

## Enhancement Chops (Tricks)...18

## Music Theory Chops...18

## Success Tips...19

- Out of Site Out of Mind...19
- Beating the Learning Curve...19

## About the Authors...21

- Wade McNutt...21
- The Irreplaceable Cary Banks...21

**“Read this about  
not reading music.”**

**Ed Marsh**

**Professor of Commercial Music**

# CIRCLE OF PROGRESS



**THE  
BASICS**



**SONG & CHORD  
PROGRESSIONS**



**COOL  
TRICKS**



**ROLE OF  
HANDS**



**DIFFERENT  
STYLES**



**MUSIC  
THEORY**



**LEARN  
CHORDS**



**SWEET  
PATTERNS**

## Dear Student,

Some of these concepts are easier to see done than to read about them in text. Because of this I've included many video links for you to access. Also, don't get discouraged if some of the content makes your head feel dizzy. Learning is a process! Go at your own pace and move on when you are ready.

-Wade

## INTRODUCTION

### Fill Your Bag with Chops

Question: What are Chops?

Answer: Skill.

It is common for artists to use this word to describe someone with great skill. For example: "He has great blues chops!"

### What does it mean to play by ear?

I remember when I was a little kid and my Mom would play games with me on the piano. She would have me turn around and look the other direction, play a note on the piano, then I would turn back around and try to find it. I loved it! I got pretty good at it after a while where it would only take me pressing a note or two before I would play the correct one. I didn't know this, and I don't think Mom did either (although moms are pretty smart), that this game we played was the beginning process of me "filling up my bag".

It seems that the majority of people see those that can "play by ear" as special ordained creatures that possess a magical power. To be fair, it is pretty cool to watch someone simply listen to something and be able to recreate it quickly. \*Spoiler alert\* The truth is, the same way a magician doesn't really pull a goose out of thin air, a musician doesn't just make up everything on the spot. What?!

There is a great story about an artist that sat down and drew a picture of a lady that was so perfect it looked like a photograph. She asked how much it would be to purchase the picture, and to her surprise he was asking for a lot of money. She told him, "But sir, it only took you ten minutes to create the picture." The artist's reply was, "No, it actually took me a lifetime!" He had built up a big bag of skills.

Let's take a great sight reader (someone who reads notation), for example, and analyze how in the world they are able to look at all of those little dots and turn them into music in the blink of an eye. Are they really that good, or are they just using a big bag of tools they have developed over time? The truth is, it's the tools that give them the ability. They are reading things that have been read before in some way or another. The more they practice and

read—the more tools will accumulate their bag. After a while there is almost nothing that can trip them up. Their ability to see the notes with their eyes, the brain sending a message to their hands, and then playing of correct notes and rhythms appear instantaneous.

How about an Ear Player? Same thing. I have played a lot of blues piano in my lifetime. I can hear someone play a cool blues lick (pattern) and just play it back with no problem. Was I always like that? Nope. I remember spending a lot of time trying to figure out what in the heck they were doing. But, one tool at a time, I started filling up my bag. Now I have a pretty nice collection of skills that I can use with ease and precision.



Keep reminding yourself that you are “filling up your bag” each time you accomplish a new thing. It doesn't matter how small. Remember, it takes a lot of nails to build a house!

### Note Readers v. Ear Players

There is an old story about a famous guitar player being asked if he knew how to read music. To which he responded, “Yeah, but not enough to hurt my pickin'!” (FYI – Pickin' is what stringed instrument players call it when they strike a string with their pick) Many people take offense to this story (because it makes notation reading look as though it's a bad thing), but it does shine light on something that is very common in the musical world. Most people are either great ear players or great readers. There are a blessed few that can do both at a professional level. The comical thing about this is that both sides are typically astonished at what the other can do.



### A CARY STORY

In my early 20's I had a friend, Susan, who was working on her PHD in piano performance at Texas Tech. Her husband was a “wanna-be” guitar player. He and Susan would throw these great parties at their house and invite all his local musician friends and all of her Tech music major friends. Susan was an amazing pianist who could sight read the most complex Bach two-part inventions or the most complicated Stravinsky pieces. Many times when I would sit down at her beautiful grand piano and start banging out the latest Elton John, Leon Russell or Paul McCartney song, she would stand there with the most bewildered look and ask, in the most exasperated tone, “How do you know how to play like that?” She was a fantastic music reader but simply could not grasp the idea of how to just listen to a song and figure out how to play it.

I know Cary felt the same way about her sight reading those Stravinsky pieces. I know I do!

## What percentage of people are capable of playing by ear?

What percentage of people are capable of playing by ear?

As a musician I notice many things other people don't. For example, have you noticed that most people can sing the lyrics and melodies of some of the greatest hits in history? How about an old tune like "Happy Birthday"? Nobody has to stare at a piece of music in order to get the melody correct. If most people can repeat something with their vocal chords...maybe they could repeat it with their hands on a piano as well. Think about how much more practice the average person has with using their vocal chords. We sing in the bathroom, in the car, at church and so many other places. I would bet that if people spent as much time on the piano training their hands that there would be so many more pianists in this world.

There is no doubt that we all have our special gifts. For some people it does come more naturally to use their ear to play the piano. But most people do not completely lack the ability besides a select few...like the people that sing the same note over and over during "Happy Birthday" and don't realize they are doing it. The good news is that it's really not that common as far as I've seen.

So what percentage of people are CAPABLE of playing by ear? I would say most people. Playing on a professional level is a different story, but in my experience most people don't want to be professionals (people that make a living playing the piano).

So, let's dive into the "Bag of Chops" and see what's in there.

## FUNDAMENTAL CHOPS



### The Basics

If you're going to cut down a tree with a chainsaw...then you'd probably want to know how to start the chainsaw...or what button to push in order to make the chain rapidly move and cut. Everything has its fundamentals.

When I lived in Austin, Texas, I became very interested in chainsaw art. It's a fitting hobby for a professional musician who needs all of his fingers, I know! None the less, I had little experience in operating a chainsaw. I didn't know any of the parts of the tool. I wasn't even sure how to start the darn thing. I kept flooding the saw over and over leaving me sitting there waiting for hours until I could try and start it up again. Then I had to learn to hold the saw correctly while creating good safety habits. I had to build up muscle in order to hold the saw for long periods of time; and get used to the pull of the blade as it ripped away the wood. So many different things had to be developed before I could become comfortable enough to relax and create. Learning some good fundamentals will save you a lot of grief and frustration in the long run.

It's easy to tell when someone has not developed good fundamentals. I've watched many

students struggle because they had to think too hard about things they shouldn't have had to think about at all. At some point things have to simply become automatic, and that takes a little bit of work. Sorry, I said "WORK"...get over it. Could you imagine watching a basketball player stop, get their arm into position, look down to check the stance, and then slowly take a shot. Unless they are on the Free-Throw line it would be impossible to even get a shot off without it being stuffed back in your face. You just have to shoot the ball when the chance presents itself. If you have good fundamentals then there will be a higher chance for the ball to go in.

Let's talk about some of those fundamentals for playing by ear.

## Names of the Notes

Know your notes! You can't waste time trying to figure out what the notes are on the piano. You have to be able to look at any note and automatically know what it is. Don't get stuck by using a note as a reference point and then saying the alphabet. A lot of people will know where C is and then say the alphabet up to find the note they are on. "C, D, E, F...I'm on F!" It works, but it's too slow when playing.

**PRACTICE**

Take time to look at random notes on the piano until you can automatically know what they are. Start with a few first, then add in the others one at a time.



## Sustain Pedal

If you are playing a real piano and not a digital keyboard then you will typically see two or three pedals at your feet. The far right pedal is always the sustain pedal. As long as you hold this pedal down any note you play will hold out until you release the pedal.

Your goal for the sustain pedal is "seamless connection." The two most common mistakes are leaving a gap between chords, or overlapping them. The technique is a little odd because it is the opposite of what you really want to do. Instead of raising your foot off the pedal when you are raising your hands up to play the next chord, you need to keep your foot down on the pedal until you play the next chord. Once the chord is played, then raise your foot up and down very quickly to create the "seamless connection."

Some people avoid using the pedal completely which makes the music disconnected. Some have a “lead foot” and never release the pedal resulting in a “muddy” sound...kind of like mixing all of your water colors together and you get that brownish black look. Now, there are some styles that really don't require a lot of sustain pedal, but the ones that do require it need us to use it in the same way.

**PRACTICE**

Choose just two chords to go between. Just spend time trying to seamlessly connect those without gaps or muddiness. Then add a third chord. After a little time you will never have to think about this again because your body will do it on its own.

## WEBLINK

VIDEOS for all of the “Basics” can be found at:  
<http://www.pianochops.com/lessons/piano-basics/>



### How to Sit

Believe it or not, a poor posture at the piano can cause your arms, neck, and back to hurt. I definitely don't want you to look like a stiff at the piano, but learning a comfortable effective way to sit will go far for you. Don't sit too close (where your arms look like you are doing the chicken dance), and don't sit too far (where you look like Frankenstein). If your arms can hang down naturally at a 90 degree angle, then you are going to be doing just fine. The same rule applies if you are standing as well.

## SITTING AT THE PIANO

- +BACK STRAGHT
- +ARMS RELAXED AT 90 DEGREES
- +ELBOWS SLIGHTLY HIGHER THAN KEYS
- +FEET ON FLOOR





## How to Hold Your Hands

Here is another thing that can bring you pain if you are not careful. The most common thing I see is wrists that drop below the keys of the piano. This puts a lot of strain on the tendons in your hands. The best way is to pretend like you are holding a baseball in your hands with straight wrists, then place the tips of your fingers on the piano keys.



### How to hold your Hands

+PRETEND TO HOLD BASEBALL  
IN HANDS WITH STRAIT WRIST

+TIPS OF FINGERS  
ON PIANO KEYS

**DO NOT LET WRIST  
FALL BELOW  
KEYS**

## What Do My Hands Do?

**RIGHT HAND:** Your right hand can have many different rolls while playing a piece of music. I've always thought of your right hand as the guitar player. Think of a guitarist and how sometimes you might see them strum cool chords and rhythms. Other times you might see them rip out a sweet melody or solo. It's pretty much the same for the right hand of a piano player depending on the style of music you are playing.

Sometimes I play three note chords and my job is to just keep the rhythm/groove of the song. Other times I might play some kind of melody for an intro or interlude/solo. If I'm doing a solo piece it is common for me to play chords and melody at the same time. How is that even possible?! Well it is. You basically start with the chord—then move around one of those notes as your melody. The outcome is quite beautiful.

**OBSERVE** – Take time to watch a piano player and see what they are doing with their right hand. Chances are if they are playing more than two notes at a time then they are playing chords/rhythm. If they play only single notes then they might be playing a melody or solo.

**LEFT HAND:** Most of the time your left hand will be the bass player. If you are playing with a big group of musicians that already have a bass player—you might not even want play at all so that you don't interfere with the bass tones.

There are exceptions to what the left hand typically does. It can play chords/rhythm while the right hand does the melody like you see in jazz or classical music. Many classical songs have the right and left hands both playing a trading melody at the same time. As far as commercialized music goes, most of the time you'll simply be playing bass notes.

**OBSERVE** – Watch the left hand of a piano player and see what they are doing.

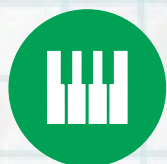
## NOTE

I have a lot of students that worry about their left hands. They ask me what else they can do to improve. The answer is, “play different styles”. If you play a style where the left hand only does simple bass notes—then that is all you'll need to know. If you want to improve then find a style that makes the left hand do something different like funk, jazz, or classical.

## Chord around Middle C

If you are going to play chords in your right hand and bass notes in your left, it is a good idea to keep your right hand as close to middle C as possible. As long as it is overlapping middle C you will tend to have a nice and thick chord that is not too muddy (low) and not too thin (high). I see a lot of beginners play way too high with their right hands while playing low notes in the left and it ends up sounding odd. Now, there are times where you will want to play higher, but as a general rule when just chording rhythms try and stay around middle C

## CHORD CHOPS



If you've ever seen a house being built you'll notice that there is a point when the house is just a skeleton/frame. It may just be lumber, brick or steel—but there is nothing else there at that point. This is what your chords are. If you can have a good understanding of chords then you can build everything else on top of them and construct your house to display whatever unique look you desire.

The next two steps (Learning Progressions and Learning Styles) are VERY IMPORTANT and cannot happen unless you know your chords.

## PRACTICE

Learn the Triads (three note chords). The foundation of all of your chords, big and small, is learning the major and minor triads with your right hand. I didn't learn until later that the bigger chords were just made up of smaller ones. Once I learned how to look at them in this way it became easier for me to play them quickly without much thought.

# WEBLINK

VIDEOS for all of the “Major and Minor Chords” can be found at:  
<http://www.pianochops.com/lessons/chords/>



**PRACTICE  
MORE**

After you learn the major and minor triads you'll need to learn how to play their inversions. Inversions are taking the notes of the chord and playing them in different orders. For example, the C major triad is C E G. You can invert it to E G C or G C E. This step is important because it helps you connect chords together without having to jump around the piano—and it sounds way better too! Here is how you practice the inversions:

## **FIRST: Get use to moving between chords in time**

Playing triads alone without rhythm is pretty boring—so choose a chord or two and go back and forth between them in time. You have to get to where you can quickly see/feel chords and move between them easily. Your goal is to practice them so many times that you create “muscle memory” and you no longer have to think about what you are doing. Your hands will eventually have a mind of their own.

# WEBLINK

Take advantage of the many **FREE LESSONS** and **TIPS** on the  
“Piano Chops Youtube Channel”:  
<https://www.youtube.com/pianochops>



**GOAL**

**Moving between chords with ease.**

**SECOND: Play bass notes with the chords**

Once you are feeling comfortable with your right hand playing some chords you'll want to add in a bass note in the left hand. A lot of players will use octaves in their left hand (play the same note one low and one higher with your thumb and pinky finger). Get to where your hands are starting to work together before moving on.



**PRACTICE**

**Bass Notes With Chords:** Depending on the style your left hand might do different things, but playing octaves is a good starting place. Playing a 5th with your thumb is a good thing to practice too. This works great unless you are real low on the piano...then it just sounds "muddy". A 5th is 5 notes up a major scale. If in the Key of C you would count (C, D, E, F, G) and land on G.

**CHARTING CHOPS**

**Chord Progressions &  
How to Chart a Song**

**Listen to the bass notes**

I remember when I first went to college for music. I was not in a "normal" music program by any means because the entire department was not focused on classical music. Our department (at South Plains College) was called the Creative Arts department and focused on commercial music. What? Do you learn to make commercials? No, it means commercialized music—like what's on the radio. One morning I sat in my class and watched the teacher listen to a song and chart it on the spot. He was writing all of these numbers on the board (called Nashville Numbers...we'll talk about that later) as the song played out. It started to look like a big math problem. Then, when the song was done he walked over to the piano and played it exactly like it sounded on the track. WOW! It really opened my eyes...and made me a little nervous at the same time. Does he expect me to know how to do this? How in the world could he have done that so quickly?

Fast forward a few years later and there I was, now the teacher in front of the class doing the same exact thing. I discovered over time that one of the big tricks is learning what NOT to listen to. Take any given song and you might have drums, bass, piano, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, lead vocals, and harmony vocals. So many things going on at once. Where do you start? Well, I answered it for you in the title. Listen to the bass notes (the lowest note). The bass note is typically the foundation of everything else you hear. Learn to block out everything else besides the bass note, then add a little music theory, and you'll have yourself a recipe to impress some friends and bystanders. The next step is knowing what the heck the word "diatonic" means.

## Learn about Chord Groups (Diatonic)

*"If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and talks like a duck then it might just be a duck!  
(Wait, when did ducks learn to talk!?)" -Wade*

I told you before how important bass notes are. They can give a lot of information away about what is going on in a song. If you know what key you are in, and can figure out the bass note, then 90% of the time you'll be able to know what chord is being played. The POWER of Diatonic Chords! So what exactly is a diatonic chord? Fine, I'll tell you. Each key signature has a group of chords that are naturally created by it. For example, the key of "C" has these diatonic chords: C Dm Em F G Am Bdim. (In case you are really new, the "m" means minor, "dim" is diminished, and if it is a chord alone it is major.) Notice the combination (order): Major, minor, minor, Major, Major, minor, and diminished. No matter what major key you are in you will always get that same combination.

Don't let me confuse you. If it is too much for your brain, don't worry. So let's go back to listening to the bass note. Say you know you are in the key of "C", and you hear a bass note that turns out to be "C". Chances are you just heard a C Major chord. Maybe you heard an "E" bass note. Chances are you just heard an Em chord. That is the trick that works 90% of the time! There are a few exceptions...but learn the 90 percent and the other 10 will be easier to find later.

## WEBLINK

<http://www.pianochops.com/lessons/chords/c-diatonic-chords-basic/>

See a VIDEO about  
Diatonic Chords at:



**PRACTICE**

Start memorizing your major scales. Also take time to add the combination of Major, minor, minor, Major, Major, minor, and diminished to them so that you get use to thinking about your diatonic chords.

## WEBLINK

<http://www.pianochops.com/lessons/scales/>

Learn the Scales at:



## Common Progressions

The other thing that is really helpful in charting songs is understanding common chord progressions. What this means is that there are certain combinations of chords that happen a lot together...and in a certain order. One thing that really helps with this is understanding Nashville Numbers. Once you start to recognize these patterns you'll almost be able to predict many times what chord is going to come next. If I said the words "Happy Birthday to..." it would be easy predict that the next word will probably be "You". Eventually chord progressions start to become predictable in the same way. Next I'll talk about Nashville Numbers so you can see how all keys are similar when you see them as numbers.

## Nashville Numbers (Number System)



### A CARY STORY

I was accompanying a men's quartet at church who were attempting a very complicated version of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot". The sheet music they handed me was about 16 pages long, with repeats and key changes galore and I found myself flipping back and forth constantly trying to keep up with the written arrangement. It occurred to me that I could write a Nashville Number Chart of the song (a system of writing chord arrangements that gives each chord a number). I asked the guys to give me a couple of minutes to write this new chart and as I was finishing up the arrangement I noticed two of the group members looking over my shoulder with puzzled looks on their faces. These gentlemen were not professional singers and had never seen this style of music writing before. I heard one of them say to the other "What's he doing?" To which his friend replied "I don't know, but I think the answer's 11."

What do these groups of chords have in common?

Key of C: C Am F G

Key of D: D Bm G A

Key of Eb: Eb Cm Ab Bb

Don't worry if you have no idea...but if you know the answer there is a good chance you have been playing music for a while!

The Answer: They are all this Nashville Number progression: 1 6- 4 5

Why? I'll explain.

There are twelve different major scale patterns to learn. What if you only had to know one? Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm pleased to let you know of something amazing and it's called Nashville Numbers. If you can train yourself to think in numbers then you will be able to pick songs out easier, chart faster, and be able to recognize chord progressions like a champ! We spoke earlier about the "C" scale and diatonic chords. C Dm Em F G Am Bdim. Now let's change that into numbers. Instead of "m" for minor we are going to use "-". 1 2- 3- 4 5 6- 7dim. The 1 = C, 2- = Dm, 3- = Em...and so on.

**EXAMPLE:** If we had a song that the chords went C Em F G...then in numbers it would be 1 3- 4 5. Now let's say that the key of "C" is too low for the singer (diva... just kidding). Let's move the song up to the key of "D". The D scale is D E F# G A B C#. By using numbers you'll know to play D F#m G A. D = 1, F#m = 3-, G = 4, and A = 5. The important thing is to see what the numbers are telling you. You'll start to see those chord progression patterns in the numbers...and BOOM! charting just got a little easier.

Nowadays, I don't even think about the key of a song when writing it out. I will listen to the song and write everything out in numbers. After that I go and find what key the song is in and replace the numbers with chords, if necessary. (Sometimes the entire band reads numbers).

**PRACTICE**

Take a major scale or two and start thinking about them in numbers. Write the letters of the scale out first then write the numbers 1-7 on top of them. If you come from the choir world you might want to think Do Re Mi...and so on, Do = 1.

**PRACTICE MORE:** Take a chart with simple chords and see what numbers those chords would be.

**START TO THINK IN "NUMBERS"...A NEW WORLD WILL OPEN UP!!!**

**NASHVILLE  
NUMBERS**

**STORY: Learn 40 songs in 1 day**

I did it! I learned 40 songs in only 1 day. How? When you play music long enough you start to see how much things really are the same. In most songs you are just playing a simple background rhythm and trying to keep everything solid so that the lead singer can do their job. The things that are different are typically the intros and outros. This is how I was able to "learn" 40 songs in a day. Really, I just learned what intros and outros that I needed to know...then I read the Number Charts on the spot. In other words, you play the unique intro and then do simple chords the rest of the time. Depending on what type of music, this really is possible.

I told one of my students about this and thank goodness he listened. He is a guitar player that moved to Nashville and was lucky enough to land a gig pretty quickly. Guess what? He had to learn 40 songs...and quickly. I got a message from him and he thanked me for that advice. He said, "It Worked!"

**Disclaimer:** It would not work if you were playing very specific music like classical tunes...or strait piano solos. This works best when playing with a band that does commercialized music (including worship).

## STYLE CHOPS



I spoke about building a house...and how chords are the skeleton of the house. Now, you've probably noticed that most houses look different. Even if the frame of the house is exactly the same, the way the house is painted and decorated can bring a whole new feel and vibe. Altering just little things here and there will give you a different result. That result is called "Styles" (Blues, Country, Worship...)

### Altering Notes

I've seen a lot of people get stuck in something I call the "Basic Chord Zone" where all they can do is play simple chords in a repetitive rhythm. Eventually everything starts sounding the same and the result is pretty boring. When you start learning how to alter notes you'll discover a whole new world of awesomeness! In fact, the difference between sounding bland or colorful is a lot of times just one note away.

**FOR EXAMPLE:** Play a regular old root C major chord (C E G) with your right hand. Now add "D" in with those notes. Notice how different it sounds? Now, instead of adding in "D"—change the E to F. Now you are playing C F G.

Styles are made up of many of these little changes that are based off of the simple chords that you already might know. Alter the chords AND the rhythms...and you are really on to something! It's kind of like dressing up for Halloween—if you understand the little changes that make you look like a cowboy, then you can easily look very different. We dressed our kids up to look like characters from the movie Star Wars and we were so surprised everything we needed was already in our closets.

Pay attention and learn the subtle differences that make up a style.

### Altering Rhythms

In addition to altering a note or two, the other big change is the alteration of rhythms. You might be playing the exact same notes you would for a church song—but after altering the rhythms, the song suddenly sounds funky, country, or folky. It really is amazing how the same exact notes can sound so different when you alter the rhythms.



In your learning journey try not to only play one style. Strive to learn many different styles! Even if you never plan to use the others...they will make you a better player in the style that you love.

You are always one note or new rhythm away from playing a new style...explore!



## IMPROVISATION CHOPS



## A CARY STORY

On our second Mercury Records album, The Maines Brothers Band recorded a song from the movie "48 Hours" called "The Boys Are back In Town". Our recording featured some local horn players playing a rock, R&B styled horn section part. When we were invited to perform the song on the Nashville Network's "Nashville Now" television show, we wanted the Nashville Now Stage band horn players to play with us on the song. So, on the tour bus ride all the way from Lubbock to Nashville, I labored to write horn chart arrangements for our song for the Nashville Now horn section, two trumpets, two Saxes and a trombone. Not having access to a copy machine, I meticulously hand copied 5 complete arrangements for the song. When we got to the set for our rehearsal, eager to show off my arranging talents, I proudly approached the lead trumpeter and band leader of the horn section and told him that we would like for him and his horn players to play with us on the show and I showed him my glorious arrangement. He took one look at it and said, "Man, this is not an arrangement, this is a damn career". He smiled at me and said, "thanks, but we'll just do a little head arrangement (they would just make up their parts by ear) while you guys are doing your sound check". I was both flattered by his compliment on my arranging abilities, and pissed I had put in so much time and effort and they weren't even going to look at the arrangements. All these guys were superb professional musicians who could read quite well but were also great ear players. We did the show and, of course, the horn section sounded great.

## Is improvisation really improvisation??

I've always been amazed when watching a person ride a unicycle. Then you try it yourself and become even more amazed! How in the world could they balance like that? Of course, no one is born riding the unicycle. It takes a lot of falling down and training the body for you to uniquely balance yourself on just one wheel.

A lot of people see those that can improvise very well on an instrument as a person that just jumps on the unicycle for the first time and rides it. Not true. I'm good at improvisation

because I've done it a lot—in certain styles. In those styles I've developed patterns that sound really sweet...and my hands can play those patterns without any effort. The styles that I have not spent much time on, honestly, sound pretty bad.

In the blues I might jump between 10 different patterns during the same solo, but they are still just patterns. All this makes me believe that improvisation is a lot less about making something happen out of thin air and more about pulling from your abilities (bag of tricks) so quickly that it seems like "Magic".

Even great jazz artists are pulling their "improvisation" from somewhere. The brain is only so powerful and unless our bodies are thinking ahead and somewhat working on autopilot then we would for sure fall of the unicycle.

### What Patterns Are

I've played so much blues piano now that it is rare that I hear something a player does and can't visualize what pattern they are playing.

I've seen some teachers tell their students to use the pentatonic scale to solo. They show them the notes then say "Go". This is not a pattern yet, it's just some random notes. Which fingers do you play them with? What order sounds the best? You need to know how to set your hand on the notes and what order to play them in.

Patterns are a specific path that your hand can learn and repeat over and over. It wouldn't make sense to hand someone who couldn't read or write a bag of letters and then tell them, "This is what you need to write a book. Go!" No, we have to learn one sound, then one word, then create sentences with those words.

Patterns are the words. Put them together to make musical sentences. Once you know enough musical sentences you can put together a great sounding solo.



**WATCH**

Become aware of your own patterns you already play on the piano (if you already play of course). It's easier to develop than you think (that's why so many people can play "Heart and Soul" and "Chop sticks") you just have to put in the time.



**PRACTICE**

Put on a movie and practice a pattern. What?! Yes, if you can turn the volume low on your keyboard or play quietly while watching an entire movie then all the sudden you've practiced one pattern for more than an hour! It can be mundane to develop these patterns to muscle memory...a movie will help!

## ENHANCEMENT CHOPS (TRICKS)



Just like patterns...there are “tricks” that musicians use to sound amazing.

Have you ever seen a magic trick that just blew your mind, then...found out how it was done and you were surprised how easy it was? That's how it is with many things in music. Musicians amaze people, but sometimes what they are doing is pretty simple. Now don't get me wrong, it still might take time to get a simple magic trick down so that you don't mess it up in front of everyone! There is still work involved. But once you know the trick and learn how to perform the trick, it is not that difficult anymore.

Tricks are similar to patterns because you still need to practice them and develop them under your hands; but they are usually something that you “add on” to what you are already doing.

**FOR EXAMPLE:** If you are playing a “C” chord (C E G) with your right hand and shifted the top two notes up (now playing C F A) and then returned to the “C” chord...you just did something “tricky”. You were working off of the C chord and manipulating it to create a cool sound. This example is a common movement for blues and gospel players.

Each style has its tricks. Learn enough tricks and you'll fool people into thinking you are doing something very difficult and amazing. Actually, I've even fooled myself a time or two. After listening back to a recording of mine I've even caught myself thinking about how tricky sounding my playing was.

## MUSIC THEORY CHOPS



Most teachers explain theory at the beginning--which can be a total turn off--but this TRULY is where you end up if you keep playing music over the long run. I'm not talking about fundamentals like note names and such because those are the necessary things you have to learn in order to play (actually there are probably people that can play without even knowing the notes names...but I digress). By theory I'm talking more about the analyzing of what you are doing, the ability to understand it, then create new music from it. If you learn theory at the right time in your journey you just might enjoy it much more!

This is the final step...and the thing that makes everything else make since. Not necessarily the last thing you should study in your music career, but the last thing you look at when learning each new skill.

Let's say you have a good golf swing...and then you learn WHY your golf swing is good...then you become even better because now you know how to adjust the swing to make the ball do cool amazing things!

At the beginning of your journey you might be satisfied with being able to play a major chord. If you find yourself asking, "What is this major chord made up of and how can I create others from that formula?" then you are doing theory.

**NOTE:** Music Theory can really be learned at any point. Some teach this successfully and have great results with beginners. My opinion is derived from teaching college for eight years and what I saw from my students. It is not a rule of thumb, just something I like to do.

## Success Tips

**ALL OF THE ABOVE** creates your ability to play by ear.

Again, you can only play from what you already know. If you hear something in a gospel style and you have experience playing gospel shapes and patterns, then chances are you'll be able to hear it and play it pretty quickly.

The more you develop all of these categories, the better ear player you will become.

### Out of Sight Out of Mind

One thing that has also helped me on my many journeys is understanding what keeps me making progress. It is an old saying, but "out of sight out of mind" is very true. If you want to learn something, you can't box it up and put it in the attic. It takes too much energy to go up into the attic and bring it down every time you need to work on it.

If you want to lift weights, put them in plain sight. You'll see them all the time. It will remind you of your goals. If you want to learn the piano, place your piano or keyboard 'in the way' or where you walk by it all the time. You'll find yourself sitting down instead of passing by. Keep the music you are working on out on the stand, don't fold it up and tuck it away. When you sit down to play you'll look at it and practice.

We have to keep our goals obvious and in the open...or they will be forgotten.

For my kids school work we bought a white board and write down current things that they are working on. The white board stays by the kitchen table so that when we sit down we have no choice but to stare at it. Guess what happens? We start quizzing the kids on information.

Most things in life are not that difficult...we just don't put in the time needed to learn them

### Beating the Learning Curve

*"Great things are not done by impulse, but by a series of small things brought together."*  
-Vincent Van Gogh

Ok, fellow humans, let's be honest with each other for a moment. When the going gets tough, it's easier to just give in than to power through and finish. I grew up with an amazing example from my mom. She could do anything she wanted to (and still does)! I never realized how amazing that quality was until later in life. I remember one time where she was hired to create a magazine for our town. She agreed to do it. The problem was that she had never even used a computer program for graphic editing. It didn't stop her! She bought instruction books and got to work. Sure enough, she struggled and worked her tail off, and in the end had a completed magazine for the town.

She has always told her children, "Most people don't get past the learning curve". Over time I really started to understand what she meant. There is a part of every journey that is difficult. A part where you have to make the choice to keep going or just give up. I've found that in every part of my life I get to the point of the road where I can either quit or keep going. When I choose to keep going, that's when the magic happens.

Teaching piano at college for eight years I found this to be completely true for my students as well. The ones that could beat the learning curve always had success. I used the word "always" for a reason. If you don't ever give up, then it's impossible to fail.

Take it one learning curve at a time. The fundamental curve, the chord curve, charting curve, styles curve, patterns curve, tricks curve, and theory curve...and before you know it you will really be on your way! Truthfully, it doesn't become fun until you cross a few of the initial curves, so don't give up before it really gets interesting!

**Beat the Curve!!! YOU CAN DO IT!!!**

## About the Author



### WADE MCNUTT

FOUNDER/TEACHER

Wade is a born musician, teacher and entrepreneur. Through the years he has become a "musical chameleon" being able to understand, play, and teach almost any musical style. As an instructor in commercial music at South Plains College for eight years he had the joy of preparing students to head to Nashville and other music cities to pursue their musical careers. Before instructing at the college, Wade took part in the Austin, Texas music scene growing his own Piano Chops while traveling as a professional musician. For the past 14 years he has aided worship at Church and continues to give Glory to God with his musical talent. He has released many volumes of piano albums and is blessed to earn a living through his passion. In the Fall of 2014 he launched a member site showing everything he knows about playing by ear called [pianochops.com](http://pianochops.com).

THE IRREPLACEABLE

### CARY BANKS

TEACHER



Cary is a professional musician, songwriter and music educator. As a member of the Maines Brothers Band, he was inducted into the West Texas Walk of Fame in Lubbock Texas, and recorded albums with Mercury Records and Texas Soul Records. As a songwriter he's had songs recorded by The Maines Brothers Band, Jerry Jordan, Cheyenne Ward, Jeremy Crady, Floyd Brown and many others. Cary's song "Lay It Down" won first place in a National Song Contest in Los Angeles, California. He's also received a Silver Telly Award as a featured artist and co-host of the Public Broadcasting series "Storytellers & Music Makers." Cary also worked at South Plains College and was responsible for hiring Wade while he served as Department Chair. Eventually Cary stepped down as Chair around the time when Wade moved up to Department Coordinator. Cary often tells the story, "Wade was once my student, then I hired him, and later he became my boss."