THE SAXOPHONE BOOK

by Jeff Coffin

“Bravo on a great book filled with pertinent ideas and a systematic approach to practicing and thinking about music. I particularly like your thoughts on playing. Very inspiring. Thanks for a wonderful book.”
- Bob Mintzer | Grammy Winning Saxophonist, Composer, Arranger, and Professor of Saxophone at the University of Southern California (USC)

“There's probably not a sax player alive who wouldn't benefit from the wisdom Jeff imparts in this book. The exercises and advice from a master like Jeff could only expand your imagination and dexterity at any level.”
- Steve Berlin | Saxophonist, Producer/Los Lobos
BOOK 3 - PAGE NUMBER / CONTENT

001) Book 3 - Table of Contents
003) Welcome Page
004) Disclaimer
005) Enharmonic Equivalence
006) ’Must Hear’ Sax Players
007) ’Must Hear’ Recordings
008) THE BIG 5 - Fundamentals
009) Fundamentals Are Fundamental
010) How To Practice
011) Strengths & Weaknesses / Short & Long Term Goals
012) Saxophone Equipment Tips
013) (F)* LISTENING - Thoughts
014) (F) LISTENING – Questions

(F)* denotes a fundamental

015) APPLYING THE INFO
016) INSIDE OF THE OUTSIDE analysis
017) (C)** THE INSIDE OF THE OUTSIDE
(C)** denotes a concert pitch chart

INTERVALLIC RELATIONSHIPS
020) Chromatic & Rotating minor 2nds
021) Chromatic Major 2nds
022) Chromatic & Rotating Major 2nds
023) Chromatic & Rotating minor 3rds
024) Chromatic minor 3rds
025) Chromatic & Rotating Major 3rds
026) Chromatic Major 3rds
027) Chromatic & Rotating Perfect 4ths
028) Chromatic Perfect 4ths
029) Chromatic & Rotating Tri-Tones
030) Chromatic Tri-Tones
031) Chromatic & Rotating Perfect 5ths
032) Chromatic Perfect 5ths
033) Chromatic & Rotating Augmented 5ths
034) Chromatic Augmented 5ths
035) Chromatic & Rotating Major 6ths
036) Chromatic Major 6ths
037) Chromatic & Rotating minor 7ths
038) Chromatic minor 7ths
039) Chromatic & Rotating Major 7ths
040) Chromatic Major 7ths
041) Tri-Tone combinations
044) Chromatic 4ths to minor 3rds descending
045) Major 6th, minor 3rd, Perfect 4th
046) Perfect 4th, minor 2nd, Perfect 5th
047) Perfect 5th, minor 2nd, Perfect 4th
048) Perfect 4th to minor 3rd
augmented root movement
049) Perfect 4th to Major 3rd
050) 3/4/1 Major Tri-Tone Substitutions
051) 3/4/1 Major Descending Chromatic
052) 3/4/1 Major Chromatic Half Steps
053) (F) TONE/DYNAMICS Thoughts
054) (F) TONE/DYNAMICS Questions
055) Thoughts On Improvisation
056) A JOE JONES analysis
058) (C) A JOE JONES
059) b7 1 #4 3 Pattern 1
060) b7 1 #4 3 Pattern 2
063) 4ths - Whole Tone Roots
064) 4ths - Diminished Roots
065) 4ths - Approached Chromatically/
descending
066) 4ths - Approached Chromatically
diminished Roots
067) 4ths & minor 3rds - roots in 4ths
068) 4ths & minor 3rds
diminished root movement
069) 4ths & minor 3rds / Chromatic

070) (F) ARTICULATION Thoughts
071) (F) ARTICULATION Questions
072) UNCLE SALTY analysis
073) (C) UNCLE SALTY
075) Chromatic major Pentatonics - descending
076) Chromatic major Pentatonics - ascending
077) Chromatic minor Pentatonics
descending minor b3
078) Chromatic minor Pentatonics
ascending minor b3
079) Chromatic minor Pentatonics
descending b3/b6
080) Chromatic minor Pentatonics
ascending b3/b6
081) Chromatic minor Pentatonics
descending b2/b3/b6
082) Chromatic minor Pentatonics
ascending b2/b3/b6

083) (F) RHYTHM/TIME Thoughts
084) (F) RHYTHM/TIME Questions

085) The Transparency Of Sound
086) Taking Your Improvisation To The Next
Level in 10 Steps

087) Major b9 (b2) Triads - chromatic roots
089) Major b9 (b2) Triads (5/8)
090) Major 7 b9 (b2) Arpeggios - diminished
roots (5/8 & 6/8 alternating)
093) Major 6th, Whole Step, Tri-Tone
094) Major 6th, ½ step, Perfect 5th

095) (F) HARMONY Thoughts
096) (F) HARMONY Questions

097) Lydian Dominant Scales (Dominant 7 #11)
099) Dominant 7th Chords - fully altered
101) Dominant Chords - fully altered/scale form
103) Dominant 7th & Dim 7th
   partially inverted
105) Close Major Chromatic Arpeggios
   in inversion
107) Same Root/Different 7th Chord
119) Tone Rows

120) Various Elements Of Improvisation

ii/V/I Patterns
WHOLE TONE Patterns
DIMINISHED Patterns

122) ii-V7-I Arpeggios (Major)
123) ii-V7-I Pattern 1
125) 1 2 3 5 Pattern (ii-V7-I major)
126) ii-V7-I Pattern 2
127) Whole Tone Arpeggios
128) Whole Tone Arpeggios - ascending
129) Whole Tones in 3rds - ascending
130) Whole Tone in Tri-Tones - ascending
131) Diminished Pattern
132) Thoughts…
133) Influences
135) JC Answers Fundamental Questions
143) Thanks
WELCOME!

I wrote this book with hopes of helping you become a better saxophonist as well as a better overall musician and improviser. This book contains exercises that are both rudimentary as well as advanced. These exercises will further open your ears and they will help you become a better listener and improviser. Consistency is key. Practice slowly and gradually.

I have designed these exercises for saxophonists but they can be practiced by other instrumentalists as well. For non-saxophone players, I recommend practicing the exercises where they best fit the range on your particular instrument. Experiment with them. I encourage you to play them in different ways. This book is meant to guide you - not to box you in.

There will be questions for you posed throughout the book and I have provided my own answers to them to give you some of my personal insight. Mine are not meant to be a definitive answer but, maybe, more a way of looking at the question through an answer.

*FOR ALL PLAYERS…

Start slowly at first and use a metronome…this develops good muscle memory and consistency of time. Be sure to extend the exercises throughout the full range of your instrument.

Saxophonists, use as much of your range as is possible for you. Begin or continue to expand your “altissimo” range through these exercises. *FYI, “altissimo” is not an Italian word for “beautiful sound” but, rather, “in the highest” and is used to describe notes above the “normal” upper range of the saxophone. If you are not familiar with the altissimo range fingerings, you can find great resources and videos online and on my website www.jeffcoffin.com

Section 4 - (ii/V/I’s, Whole Tone, Diminished) is brief on purpose. My idea is to show how to put a pattern together and then let you do the work on your own. Find unique and melodic ideas that appeal to you. Experiment with different combinations of rhythms, melodies and harmonies and the ideas you come up with will stay with you more than if I tell you what I think sounds good. My ultimate goal is to teach you how to teach yourself.

Discovery, imagination and curiosity are essential to becoming a better musician.

I hope that through developing your “roots” and opening up the many possibilities of listening, tone/dynamics, articulation, rhythm/time, and harmony that this book will also inspire a search for your own personal musical voice and that you find the endless artistic potential within yourself.

Once again…Welcome!
“Disclaimer”

This is not a book of exercises to be “regurgitated” during a solo.

Its purpose is to help you develop your musical fundamentals and to open you up to different possibilities of sound, ideas, concepts, improvisation and the beauty and potential of your instrument.

Becoming a better musician is a lifelong process.

It’s the time, space & effort between reaching your goals that’s so important.

PRACTICE SLOWLY, CONSISTENTLY & WITH INTENTION.

ENJOY THE PROCESS.

USE A METRONOME AND A TUNER.

DON’T CONFUSE ACTIVITY WITH PROGRESS.
ENHARMONIC EQUIVALENCE

You will likely notice that, in some exercises, I use what’s called the enharmonic equivalent of certain notes. An enharmonic equivalent is the same sound written a different way. For example, A# and Bb are the same sound but they are written as a different note. I use enharmonic equivalents to avoid writing double flats and double sharps when possible - you will find double sharps occasionally but only when I felt it necessary.

Personally, I much prefer to see an E rather than an Fb written. Same with seeing a B rather than a Cb, and so on. I made decisions on certain exercises that could be argued for or against what I decided to write in the end. It was a judgment call on my part.

Regarding the mixing of sharps and flats in the same bar - I come across flats and sharps in the same bar frequently on sessions or when I’m reading someone else’s material (sometimes even my own) and I think seeing those here from time to time will help prepare you for those occasions when you do come across them. In the end, it’s good to know about enharmonic equivalents and their application and use.

Here are a few things to ponder.

Do you consider an Eb to be the same note as a D#?
Is an A# the same note as a Bb?
Is Gb the same note as F#?

It’s the same sound but is it the same note?!
MUST HEAR SAX PLAYERS

Sidney Bechet/Coleman Hawkins/Lester Young/Ben Webster
Benny Carter/Charlie Parker/Marshall Royal
Dexter Gordon/Johnny Griffin/Sonny Rollins
Stan Getz/Eddie Harris/Hank Mobley/Gene Ammons
Julian “Cannonball” Adderley/Paul Desmond/Lee Konitz
John Coltrane/Wayne Shorter/John Gilmore/Joe Henderson
Eric Dolphy/Ornette Coleman/Dewey Redman
Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis/Archie Shepp/Yusef Lateef
Rahsaan Roland Kirk/Charles Lloyd/Albert Ayler/Pharoah Sanders
Michael Brecker/Joe Lovano/Dave Liebman/Steve Grossman
Branford Marsalis/Chris Potter/Seamus Blake
Ravi Coltrane/Mark Turner/Greg Obsy/Steve Coleman
…and so many more!!

These are a handful of players you need to know about and be somewhat intimate with their playing. You have to listen with the idea of learning a bit about who they were/are through their music.

Find the players who you like and check out who influenced them!

Do your homework. Be informed.
‘MUST HEAR’ RECORDINGS

Charlie Parker - Bird With Strings
This set a precedent for everything else to follow. Obviously, one of the great geniuses of any style of music; I believe that Bird's music and playing should be studied like Mozart, Beethoven or Bach.

John Coltrane - A Love Supreme
This is a pivotal recording on SO many levels. Everyone's playing, not just John's, exemplifies the 'spirit' of music and of the humanity of great artists. This recording is extraordinary in its breadth and scope of influence.

Johnny Griffin - Introducing Johnny Griffin
This is a recording that will alter your concept of the way a saxophone can sound. All you can do is laugh out loud and realize you'll never be this good! His sound, his concept, his drive and spirit come through on every note and phrase he plays. Everything about this recording is amazing. It's searing!

Ornette Coleman - The Shape of Jazz to Come
When I 'got' Ornette, it was like the sun came out from behind the clouds. I nearly drove off the road...no kidding. This is an ambitious title for a ambitious and innovative music (recorded in 1959) that has truly become the 'shape' of modern jazz. I feel like I am listening to an Alan Lomax field recording of blues hollers when I hear Ornette.

Cannonball Adderly - Something Else
This is an incredible recording that Miles Davis basically 'gave' to Cannonball. This was Miles' working band but the recording is under Cannonball's name. A generous gesture to be sure. This is some of the most beautiful and, dare I say, happy sounding music I have heard. It sounds like it is all moving upward into the sky as they are playing it.
And, technique aside, which was impeccable, what a sound Cannonball had!

Charles Lloyd - Forest Flower
One of the greats! Listening to him play is like listening to a great poet recite Rumi. His spirit shines through on everything he does and this recording is awesome! He has ALWAYS played with the best cats. His tunes are not overly complex but what he makes out of them is remarkable...I love what he brings to the table every time.

Sonny Rollins - Saxophone Colossus
Does any saxophone player NOT have this recording? If you don't have it get it NOW! Sonny is the total package with his tone, rhythm, articulation, harmonic vocabulary and wide style of playing. Sonny is one of the greatest!

Eric Dolphy - Out to Lunch
Dolphy provides an insight into taking what Charlie Parker said about using the upper extended notes of the chords and playing melodies off of them. This recording broke ground on many levels including bringing classical influences further into the music and also what I call 'fractured' harmonies. Such an inspiring player and writer.

Albert Ayler - Goin' Home
This recording on Black Lion is as profoundly beautiful as anything I have heard. Albert Ayler playing spirituals. It doesn't get any deeper than this...his sound and spirit drips through each phrase and melody. It's liberating to listen to his music and very different than what most people think of when they think of Albert Ayler. Check it out!

Wayne Shorter - Speak No Evil
Gorgeous playing, gorgeous writing, incredible tone. 'The Wayne' is a singularity in the world of saxophone playing. Genius? Certainly. Poet? Yes. He seems to combine vocabulary that is detached but also completely connected at the same time. He is such a beautiful enigma. He continues to unfold for me every time I hear him play. One of our great composers in all of jazz/improvisational music.
THE BIG 5
FUNDAMENTALS

Below are what I consider to be the 5 basic fundamentals of music. By working on these five areas you will develop the skills and most of the technique you should ever need. I feel these are the most important skills we should worked on.

The fundamentals will be the “roots” of your playing. Just like the roots of a tree

LISTENING
This HAS to be at the top…the most important fundamental!

TONE/DYNAMICS
Your personality/emotional content

RHYTHM/TIME
Groove/feel/phrasing

ARTICULATION
Clarity

HARMONY
The relationship between sounds
FUNDAMENTALS ARE FUNDAMENTAL

To work on becoming a better musician and improviser you need desire, self-motivation, clarity of practice and a willingness to be willing. There are certain disciplines that must be worked on and eventually memorized in order to take the next steps…you must have your basic fundamentals together!

Why do you need to know the fundamentals? I think of the fundamentals as the roots of a tree. Have you ever tried to uproot a tree? You will find it to be nearly impossible. Remember, the tree’s root system is much larger underground than what you see up above. The same applies to music. Your understanding of your instrument and of basic fundamentals must be strong enough to give you the roots necessary for your “tree” to stay grounded and strong even in the most adverse conditions. Always have more together on your instrument than you need.

You must use a metronome when you practice and you need to work with focus and precision. Go through the exercises SLOWLY and CONSISTENTLY and be sure to listen to what you play and try to understand how things relate to one another. All fundamentals are connected in some way and that will eventually be clear.

Through repetition there comes magic…
HOW TO PRACTICE

• Decide what you need to work on (identify your strengths & weaknesses)
• Make a game plan on how to get it done
• Start with mapping out 1 hour of practice time
• Multiply it by the number of hours you have to practice
• Your 10-15 minutes of long tones should NOT be included in the hour

example practice hour

15 minutes - Scales (w/metronome)
15 minutes - Transcribe Solo
15 minutes - Pattern Memorization (ii/V/I’s)
15 minutes - Play tunes/freely improvise - YOUR time to explore

It is essential to use a metronome when you practice. We are ALL responsible for keeping the time, not the drummer or the bass player…everyone.

Practice slowly and take breaks when you feel tired or overly distracted. A good rule is to take a 5 minute break every hour. Don’t confuse activity with progress.

You’ll get out of your practice what you put into it.

Keep a practice log of what you have been working on. Be specific!

Work hard and stay focused…Self discipline is essential for growth.

There are 168 hours in a week. If you have an hour lesson weekly, you are still on your own for 167 hours. It’s up to you how good you get.
EXAMPLES OF STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES, SHORT & LONG TERM GOALS

STRENGTHS:
I love to practice
I have a good understanding of harmony
I like the sound of the saxophone
Good technical facility
I’m self-motivated

WEAKNESSES:
intonation is poor
lousy articulation
I’m undisciplined
unfocused sound
following chord changes

Work to get your WEAKNESSES into your STRENGTHS column.

SHORT TERM GOALS
memorize all major,
harmonic minor,
melodic minor scales
learn a ii/V/I pattern in all 12 keys

LONG TERM GOALS
transcribe a Lester Young solo
learn 10 standards
learn blues in all 12 keys
Set up a local weekly jam session
Compose & record your music

Keep your list close by and continue to re-evaluate your playing.
SAXOPHONE EQUIPMENT TIPS

• Have a few goods reeds ready to play at all times. Break them in a few at a time.

• Keep your horn in good repair.

• Get a small bottle of key oil from your local music store (or online) and oil the key joints regularly…place a towel under the horn first.

• Choose a mouthpiece because it works for you and is comfortable and easy to play, not because a “name” player plays the same kind. Experiment.

• Keep the neck clean inside at all times…use a swab or neck brush.

• Keep your mouthpiece clean. NEVER USE BOILING OR HOT WATER! You can let it sit in a cool basin of water for a few minutes and use a SOFT toothbrush or cloth to clean it out.

• Soak your reeds for a couple minutes in warm water before you play so they are uniformly wet. This will really make a difference.

• Be careful with your instrument. The saxophone is delicate and can be damaged easily. Treat it with respect and care.

• Wash your neckstap in Woolite every now and then. They get smelly!

• Keep a tiny flathead screwdriver in a bag in your case. The rod and key screws can loosen over time so check them occasionally.

• Do NOT use brasso or any kind of “polish” on your horn. EVER!

• Don’t do any repairs on your horn by yourself. Have a trained professional do it. Repairing is as much an art as playing an instrument.

• When your pads are sticky, you can use a dollar bill and place it between the pad and the tone hole, push the key down and pull the bill from between the pad and the horn. Avoid sugary drinks when you play or practice.

• Don’t let other people play your mouthpiece without first cleaning it thoroughly. Be sure to clean it again when they are done. It’s like sharing a toothbrush.

• Don’t just lay your horn on the floor or a chair, it could get stepped on or fall off the chair…buy a sax stand and use it!
LISTENING

~ HOW TO EXPAND YOUR LISTENING SKILLS ~

Practicing the Art of Listening.

Pick one instrument and listen to it all the way through a tune.
Listen again and listen to another instrument all the way thru.
Pick one part of the drums, i.e. the hi-hat or ride cymbal and do the same.
Repeat.

I think of it as Active (= the act of) Listening.

Listening with other people can be helpful because others will hear differently than you do. Talk about what you hear.

Listen to music you know NOTHING about. Do some research.

Go to a concert at a mosque, temple or cultural center and listen to their music and experience their language and dance.

Listen for the form (or non-form) of a tune.

Feel the mood and emotion a piece of music invokes. Be aware of your own experience when listening...
(...do you experience colors, taste, visuals, etc...)

Listen to the space BETWEEN the notes.

Listen to something other than the solo or vocal line.

Listen beneath, above, through, around, behind, and under the music.
LISTENING

What do you listen for in your favorite music?

What can you learn from listening?

Close your eyes, be silent and just listen. what do you hear? Write them down...

Does slower music appeal to you more than faster music? Is the opposite true?

Do you prefer music with or without lyrics?

When was the last time you recorded yourself and listened back?

What can you do if someone disagrees with what you heard?

What is the most unusual music you have heard? What was your reaction?

Have you heard music you didn't like at first listen but after listening more, came to like it? If so, how and why did this happen?
How I apply the information in this book…

You might be asking yourself ‘How do I use this material when I play or compose? How can I approach all this information in a way that makes musical sense and that sounds good?’ I have included three original compositions that show how I use these concepts and ideas. The Inside of the Outside, A Joe Jones, and Uncle Salty are three very different original compositions in scope and style.

First off, you should realize that when I write or play, I am not thinking about all the different patterns and sequences and trying to play them verbatim. Far from it. I am not interested in playing specific patterns as improvisation or writing them as composition. I don’t consider that to be creating. I am trying to hear melody, harmony and rhythm in relation to what I am playing, and in relation to the musicians I am playing with, I am trying to serve the music with what I play and compose. I feel the music knows what it wants and I am trying to discover what that is through the process of musical dialogue in a solo or by sculpting it through a composition. Either way, it’s a process and one that needs to be encouraged and fostered as you develop as a musician.

I started to explore these different intervals in the mid 1990’s after I got out of college. (Yes, back in the 20th Century!) I got into exploring these intervallic relationships as a way to expand my playing, composing and listening. When I played with Bela Fleck and the Flecktones (1997-2010) I brought in a 12 tone row with wide intervallic leaps that became the backbone of our tune ‘Huckleberry Row’. I realized that by spreading out the intervals, I listened more carefully to be sure of what I was playing. So, it made me a better listener as well! I also had to play the exercises slower because I wasn’t as familiar with the patterns. The ear has more difficulty identifying wider intervallic leaps than shorter intervallic leaps. By practicing these sequences slowly, it gave me an opportunity to listen in a different and more expansive way. Practicing and playing this way were what really opened me up to the music of Ornette Coleman. When I ‘heard’ Ornette for the first time, I mean, when I really GOT IT, I nearly drove off the road! No kidding. It was like the sun came out from behind the clouds. So, again, I come back to that word ‘process’. We are all in process.
Let’s talk about the composition **The Inside of the Outside** first.

*ALL pitches and chords I write about will be concert pitch.*

If you look at the first two bars of the tune, you will see that the intervals in the bass line start on the root (Bb), a perfect 5th up, a major 3rd down, a whole step down, a 5th up, a 4th down, a minor 3rd up, a 6th up, a 5th down and a minor 3rd up! That could easily be a pattern that is found in this book because Book 2 explores the relationships between sounds (aka harmony)!

When you listen to the tune, you might notice that I bend the whole note in bar 4. This is coming directly from the blues. I am actually trying to imitate a guitarist bending a guitar string. I like to emulate other instruments to find out what the saxophone CAN’T do. I haven’t found anything yet.

Moving on. There are clear blues licks in bars 5 and 6 of the letter A melody. The intervallic relationships in the melody range from a half step (in numerous places) to two and a raised 5th octaves (from low Bb to high F#) at the beginning of letter B (the bridge). Now, if you look at the melody of the bridge, you can see that I ‘close in’ on the melody from below as well as above and I meet up at the F# on the top line of the staff in the 4th and 8th bars of letter B. The rhythm at letter B is sort of a Cuban montuno but it’s only influenced by that – it was not a conscious decision to try to write a montuno figure - it came out in the composition because of the music I listen to and have played through the years. Again, what you listen to and play really matters!
THE INSIDE OF THE OUTSIDE

Piano

\[ \text{\( \frac{d}{dt} = 116 \)} \]

\[ \text{Bb}^{7}\text{alt.} \quad \text{Bb}^{7}\text{alt.} \quad \text{Bb}^{7}\text{alt.} \quad \text{Bb}^{7}\text{alt.} \]
Chromatic Rotating minor 2nds
Chromatic Rotating Major 2nds
Chromatic Rotating minor 3rds
Chromatic minor 3rds
Chromatic Major 3rds

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Chromatic Rotating Perfect 4ths
Chromatic Rotating Tritones (#4)
Chromatic Tritones
Chromatic Rotating Perfect 5ths
Chromatic Perfect 5ths
Chromatic Rotating Augmented 5ths
Chromatic Augmented 5ths
Chromatic Rotating Major 6ths
Chromatic minor 7ths
Chromatic Rotating minor 7ths
Chromatic Major 7ths
Tritone Combinations with inversions

Bb & E

B & F

C & F#

C# & G
Chromatic 4ths to minor 3rds descending
Major 6th, minor 3rd, Perfect 4th
Perfect 4th, Minor 2nd, Perfect 5th
(chromatic roots)
Perfect 4th to minor 3rd - Augmented roots