

## **Jazz Improvisation: A Four-Prong Attack**

The second paragraph of my book *Jazz Tactics* is sub-headed "Why I Can't Teach You To Improvise". This is a disclaimer based on the premise that nobody can be 'taught' to play jazz; you must discover it for yourself. Still, students need a plan of attack, a way to practice and study jazz. I have formulated a four-prong daily study plan, one that will lead to an understanding of the basic language of jazz improvisation. Once you learn to speak the language, your growth will be stimulated and furthered by your interaction with other jazz musicians, and from there, the path is limitless.

The jazz musician needs two basic abilities in order to improvise a solo:

- You must be able to play what you hear.
- You must be able to hear something worth playing.

The following approach to practicing jazz will develop both your ability to play what you hear, and to hear something worth playing, each day you must:

- Learn music by ear (transcribe solos)
- Memorize tunes
- Develop your key fluency
- Study musical theory and harmony

### **Learning And Playing By Ear**

Ideally, all music should be taught by ear. Explaining to a student that a C7 (b9) chord calls for a diminished scale is virtually useless until she not only recognizes the sound of that chord and scale, but also has heard it used in context. Every day you should learn something by ear, simply trying to reproduce on your instrument what you hear. This is the way all the great jazz musicians learned to play, and even today, when most jazz musicians have had the benefit of jazz education, most will tell you that they really learned to improvise by listening and copying, rather than by reading jazz improv texts or practicing scales and patterns.

Start with nursery rhymes or *Happy Birthday*, a melody that is already deeply ingrained in your mind. Pick a starting note, and sing the melody, since that puts the tune in your ear without worrying about which notes to play, then try to figure out the notes on your instrument. It doesn't matter how many mistakes you make, as long as you eventually get it. Once you figure it out, pick another starting note and try it in another key, remembering to sing it first. (Brass players can try playing it on the mouthpiece.) Eventually you'll get over your initial fear of trying to play something without music in front of you.

Now it is time to try transcribing a jazz solo. I consider solo transcription the crux of learning to improvise. Just as an author gets ideas and inspiration from reading books by other authors, the jazz musician gets it from listening to great solos—listening to them over and over until she can sing them in her sleep and eventually play them on her horn. If you do nothing else but transcribe solos, you will learn to improvise. If you do everything else but do not transcribe, there is NO guarantee you will ever sound like

anything other than a robot, spitting out scales and patterns but not making any real music.

Which solos should you transcribe? That is up to you. You will develop your own musical vocabulary based on the players you listen to. It behooves everybody, however, to spend some time studying players who speak the straight-ahead vocabulary of jazz, clearly delineating the chord changes. If you love late-60's Miles, you must realize that he didn't learn to play the way he did on 'Bitches Brew' without first knowing how to play on 'Stella By Starlight', and neither will you. Learn the basics of the language before veering off towards the outer fringes. Besides, there will be a lot more gigs playing 'All The Things You Are' than 'Ascension'.

Initially, choose solos that are simple to hear and to play; it is important to be successful in your first attempts at transcription, not get bogged down trying to figure out a pile of 16th notes in the first bar. If you come to a section that is too difficult to hear, skip it and move on. A year from now you may find that you can hear it without difficulty. It is the process of transcribing, not the end result, that is important. Chet Baker is my choice for initial attempts at transcription, since his solos are generally not very complicated, but are always melodic and lyrical. Some of Miles' solos on Kind of Blue are also good to start with. (This shows my trumpet-bias, but the fact is that a solo played on trumpet is probably playable on other instruments, but the reverse doesn't always hold true.)

Whether to write the solos down is a subject of some discussion. It is most important to get the solo into your head and then out your horn, but trying to notate what you hear is good for you. Also, you'll have some record for posterity of all your hard work. If you get really good at it, perhaps you can publish your work and earn some of those big jazz-transcription dollars! Learn chunks of the solo (or the whole solo) by memory first, and then write it down, rather than jotting down each note as you get it. This forces you to learn phrases and improves your powers of memorization. Don't fret about whether the solos are perfectly notated—the written transcription serves primarily to remind you of what you already have in your head.

Once you have transcribed the solo, play along with the recording many times, trying to match the soloist as closely as possible. In this way, you'll get the feeling of playing a great solo, and will gain insight into the mind of a jazz soloist. After I have learned a solo, I go back and 'trade fours' with the artist. Just think how much you'd learn by trading fours with Charlie Parker or Clifford Brown! (You'll have to ignore the fact that they play right through your fours.)

By copying your musical heroes, you will learn from each one. Little by little, your style will emerge as a product of your influences.

### **Memorization Of Melodies And Tunes**

It is important to memorize tunes for two reasons. One, every jazz player needs to have a repertoire of tunes that she can play without resorting to a fake book. At U. of T. we have compiled a list of about 200 tunes that we feel every jazz player should know. This is the standard repertoire, and allows a group of jazz players to get on the stand, call a tune, and away they go. This always amazes people who do not understand jazz, that we can 'spontaneously' play music. It is because we have a common understanding of the framework of a tune, and how to create within that framework.

Two, the primary goal of a jazz improviser is to compose new melodies. To learn what makes a good melody, study songs that have stood the test of time (standards). When

you learn a tune, learn the correct melody, preferably from several sources. Always try to have both a recording and a lead sheet for a tune that you are learning, comparing the way the melody was originally written with at least one player's interpretation of it. It is best to learn tunes from vocalists, since their use of words promotes good phrasing. Besides, a melody is quicker to learn with words than without, and it will be easier to recall the melody if you can think of the words. You will always play a tune better if you know the words.

### **Developing Key Fluency**

A jazz player must be comfortable in all keys, since any chord might occur at any time. For most players there are roughly 7 or 8 'easy' key signatures, and 4 or 5 'hard' keys. They are not really harder, just less familiar. To improve your key fluency, take a short phrase, lick or pattern through 12 keys every day. This may seem onerous at first, but you will get better at it quickly. Try to identify the melody as chord tones, rather than specific notes, and transpose the chords, rather than the notes. When you learn a tune, play the melody up and down a half-step from the original key. This ensures that you really know the tune, and forces you to deal with some of the less-familiar key signatures.

### **Studying Theory And Harmony**

This is where aspiring jazz players often start out—learning about scales and chords. Frequently, it is where they give up, as the whole process seems just too complicated and academic. While it is crucial that a jazz musician understands music theory, it should be taught in a practical context, always associating a sound with the theory. Being told that the notes of a Cm9 chord are C-Eb-G-Bb-D is just rote memorization. Playing those notes on the horn while the piano plays the chord provides immediate gratification. A player should be told the 'name' of a sound AFTER he has learned what the sound is, rather than be expected to learn a pile of theory with the assumption that he will eventually connect it to the resulting sound. Sound is sound, theory is just that—a theory.

So there you have it: learn tunes and solos by ear, practice in all keys, and digest jazz theory a spoonful at a time. Listen to recordings, and especially get out to hear live jazz, so you can see as well as hear the interaction between the musicians. If you do this on a regular basis, you too can learn to speak this language; fame and fortune are sure to follow!