

JAZZ: THE NATURAL MUSIC

Improvising, playing jazz, is the most natural way to make music. Long before the printing press was invented people played music on various instruments and all were thought to be creative musicians. Through the ages the art of improvising on a musical instrument gradually lost favor to the printed page. In the twentieth century the art of improvising has been kept alive by the jazz musician.

Today's jazzer is not the same as the musician of the thirties, forties or fifties. The influence of jazz education, sound recordings, videos and jazz festivals has allowed the music to reach many more people and to be experienced by almost anyone who is willing to give it a try.

For years the myth "you either have it or you don't" was prevalent in music circles around the world. If you wanted to play jazz you had better get adopted into a musical family or by the "luck of the draw" find the right environment for your early years so by osmosis you could pick up on the hot licks and at the same time develop a great jazz ear so that when you played your instrument, you would sound like a jazzer.

Time has proven that these ideas which were very popular are not true. They never were true but many musicians thought they were and that's what gives an idea it's longevity. Once people from non-musical backgrounds in non-jazzy environments began playing the music and playing it well, everyone had to take another look at what goes on when someone stands up and improvises a good solo over a standard chord progression such as *Green Dolphin Street*, *Confirmation*, or the blues.

Here are several ingredients that go into making a good jazz soloist/improviser:

1. Desire to improvise
2. Serious listening to jazz via recordings and live performances
3. A method of practice - what and how to practice!
4. A rhythm section with which to practice and improvise (via live group or play-a-long recordings)
5. Self-esteem, discipline, and determination.

When I was a teenager, I wondered if I'd ever be able to play on my instrument the melodies I was hearing in my head. I didn't have a jazz teacher so I would listen to the radio or records and try to take off the ideas of the jazz greats such as Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Stitt, Sonny Rollins and many others. If I were to start again here's how I would do it:

I would begin by playing on my instrument simple little melodies such as *Happy Birthday*, *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, and *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*. I would pick a note in my middle register say, G#, and begin playing one of these songs. When I finally played it correctly ONE time, I would pick a new starting note say, Eb and play the same song beginning on that note. Do this over and over beginning on different tones until you can play the song starting on different notes without mistakes. Then try a different song and get so you can play it starting on any of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale. This is an excellent way of conditioning your fingers and mind to work together to produce the sounds you are hearing in your head. It shortens the distance from mind to fingers.

Jazz musicians have always played the music of their mind—what they hear in their head. They aren't special, gifted people who were born with more talent than others. They just had more desire and discipline than others. Their ability to mentally hear an idea and then play it comes from practice.

When you run out of ideas to practice you listen to other musicians. The joy of listening to others, coupled with your imagination, will lead to fresh musical ideas. The answer to every musical question may be found on recordings. That is why listening is so important for the beginning improviser.

Usually, we begin improvising on songs like blues in Bb or F, *Satin Doll*, *Maiden Voyage*, or *Summertime*. Songs like these don't contain tricky rhythms or difficult harmony (scales and chords). This makes it easier to make sense of the song and feel relatively good about improvising over the harmony. These songs (and many more) are on the Vol. 54 "Maiden Voyage" play-a-long.

Here are several exercises every professional jazz musician has probably played at one time or another. Play these over the harmony (changes, chord/scales) to whatever song you are working on. Do this before you try to improvise.

1. Play the first five notes to each chord/scale.
2. Play the triad (notes 1,3, and 5 of the scale).
3. Play the entire scale from the root (first note) to the 9th and back down.
4. Play the 7th chord up and down (1,3,5,7,5,3,1).
5. Play the 9th chord up and down (1,3,5,7,9,7,5,3,1).
6. Play the scale up to the 9th and then come back down the **chord**.
7. Play the chord up to the 9th and then come back down the **scale**.
8. Play the scale in thirds up and down.

If you were to take numbers 1, 2, and 3 from above and apply them to the first four bars of an F blues, it would look like this:

The image shows three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, illustrating a blues progression. The first staff starts with an F7 chord, followed by a Bb7 chord, and then an F7 chord, ending with 'ETC.'. The second staff also starts with an F7 chord, followed by a Bb7 chord, and then an F7 chord, ending with 'ETC.'. The third staff starts with an F7 chord, followed by a Bb7 chord, and then an F7 chord, ending with 'ETC.'.

I once heard trumpeter Woody Shaw warming up before a concert in the above manner. It impressed me because I thought only beginners used this type warm-up. After thinking about it, I realized it was the most practical way to approach any new song. When you do this you are conditioning your mind and fingers to the scales and chords which you will in turn improvise over. It makes good sense!

You should be able to do this to the chord/scale progression to any song you are going to improvise over. This is standard practice and has been for some time...know your scales and chords before you play. Memorize them, too! Memorizing melodies, scales and chords gives courage to your imagination.

Now, some will feel that to play jazz, you don't study or practice scales and exercises, "you just play." I ask, what does that mean? Who can "just play" over *Giant Steps*, *Tune Up*, *Confirmation*, *Star Eyes*, the blues or a thousand other tunes with interesting chord progressions? The famous alto saxophonist Charlie Parker in his own words said there was a period of 3 to 4 years where he practiced 11 to 15 hours a day. If Charlie Parker was, as many say, a genius, he got that way by practicing. I have a recording of him saying this in an interview with Paul Desmond. I also have a recording of him saying at age 16 (after having gotten laughed off the bandstand for not knowing you're suppose to play the same song the band is playing!), "I never stopped to think about there being other keys or nothin' like that." So, he began like most of us but eventually discovered that HE was master of his own ship. He took the bull by the horns and dove into the marvelous world of jazz—the world of improvisation, harmony, rhythm, melody, creativity, imagination and life.

If you've ever wondered why teachers begin students with fingerings, tone production (wind instruments) and scales, I feel it's to form a strong foundation for the students' creativity. Your instrument reflects your musical personality.

Transcribing solos or portions of solos off recordings is one of the best ways to find out what the professional is doing to make things sound so good. By analyzing a solo you can find important facts:

1. What note of the scale do they begin phrases with?
2. What note of the scale do they end their phrases with?
3. Do they use a wide or narrow range, (tessitura)?
4. Do they use chord tones in their phrases?
5. Do they use scales or bits and pieces of scales?
6. Do they have favorite licks that pop up over and over?
7. Do they use chromatics (notes outside the basic chord/scale)?
8. Do they use passing tones?
9. Repetition: do they use it and how...rhythmically, melodically, harmonically?
10. Do they use space, rests, silence? How often? Is there a pattern?
11. Do they build their solo? Does the solo seem to tell a story or go somewhere?
12. Do they tend to place chord tones (1,3,5) on beats 1 and 3 (in 4/4 time).
13. Do they incorporate substitute scales over the basic chord/scales?
14. Do they double-time any phrases (this usually means playing in 16th notes)?
15. Do they use the blues scale? How often?
16. Do they use sequences in their playing?

Having spent over 35 years working with musicians of all levels, I find that one of the fundamental needs is to express themselves in an improvisatory manner on their instrument. Playing jazz, in this century, has been the route those musicians have taken.

Creativity and use of imagination is essential to our well-being as humans on the planet Earth. We are creative beings. With a little guidance everyone can learn to improvise and enjoy the fruits of self-expression in music. There's really nothing to be afraid of. Life is exactly what you make it to be. -- **by JAMEY AEBERSOLD**