

Teaching Basic Jazz Improvisation

Teaching students about jazz improvisation can be a difficult task for the most experienced of jazz educators, let alone those with less knowledge in the jazz idiom. Since formal jazz education has been around for a relatively short time, methods in teaching the *art* of jazz improvisation are still in their infant stages, though jazz theory has pretty much been established. Essentially, the goal of this workshop is to focus on the art of constructing a solo.

There are three basic things that come into play when someone improvises well-

1. Theory
2. Vocabulary
3. Timing and pacing

Theory gives you the harmonic guidance system, vocabulary the actual language or building blocks. Timing is how one idea connects to the next (micro) while pacing is the way a solo progresses overall (macro). The art is in how all three things inter-act to create a meaningful statement.

Theory

There are many great books on jazz theory, and a comprehensive discussion is beyond the scope of this workshop. The aim here is to focus on a few things that are used all the time. Chord-scale relationships and chord function are key.

Most students know some, if not all, their major scales. The trick is to get them to learn some of the modes of the major scale. In fact, if they can learn the 2nd mode (Dorian) and the 5th mode (Mixolydian), they will have the scales they need to improvise on many types of tunes, including modal tunes (i.e. So What, Maiden Voyage, etc...) Blues (Tenor Madness, Billie's Bounce, etc...) and standards (Autumn leaves, Just Friends, etc...). In addition, many students know the blues scale.

The major scale is used on major chords, the dorian on minor 7 chords, and the mixolydian on V7 chords. The blues scale is usually used on either a V7 or minor7 chord.

Chord function is a system of relating a chord progression to a key. The most basic is V-I, followed by II-V-I. Phil Woods told me a long time ago that 80% of jazz is II-V-I, and he's definitely got a point, especially relating to basic jazz improvisation. In any case, chord function is the harmonic structure that gives the form of a tune logic.

Vocabulary

Now we get into things that involve a bit more art. You can find vocabulary (jazz musicians sometimes call them licks or ideas) in a number of places, including recordings (the best), books and other musicians. There are certainly thousands of licks. The trick when starting out is to memorize a few ideas and work them to death. This means not just memorizing the notes, but also making the idea more flexible for use

when improvising by practicing the idea on different beats.

Many jazz improvisers practice constructing solos with a finite set of ideas, then improvise off of those when performing, creating a good flow. They then combine that with the spirit of the moment, timing, musicality (i.e. art) to create something both improvised and unique.

Ideas can be just about anything, from lyrical melodies, artful use of scales, arpeggios, patterns, etc. . . One great source of ideas for beginning improvisers is the music of Miles Davis, especially his recording 'Kind of Blue'. Between all the great solos played by Miles, Coltrane, Adderley, etc... you get literally hundreds of ideas. Miles' solos are especially good for young students. They are lyrical, timed beautifully, and perfectly demonstrate the use of scales, blues ideas, arpeggios, and how they compliment each other. They are also not too technically demanding, and work on most any instrument. I highly recommend that teachers use this as a major teaching resource.

Ultimately, you want students to figure out ideas and even whole solos from a recording. This is the best, and in fact only, way to become a improviser. Transcribing is another huge topic that is also beyond the scope of this workshop.

It's a good idea for the student to have a manuscript book with all of the ideas they've learned written down. This is their "dictionary" of licks, so to speak. If they are really into it, have them start learning some of the licks in other keys.

Timing and Pacing

First of all, students have to remember that they are improvising within the framework of time, both rhythmic and harmonic. Therefore, it's critical that they know where the time is. In other words, know where one is, and where they are in the form.

Once students have really memorized the above mentioned scales and a few (the more, the better) ideas, the next step is to learn how to put them together, which is an abstract concept more dependent on experience and taste than creating vocabulary is. Have them pick a tune (i.e. So What' from 'Kind of Blue'), and using their dictionary of licks, along with scales and arpeggios, write out a chorus or two. Have them listen to a great improviser (i.e. Miles) for ways of timing things, especially the use of rests. The goal is to write out an ideal solo and memorize it. By doing this, they are developing their improvisational instincts, getting a feel for how things are put together.

Next inter-change, or graft, sections. For example, play the 2nd chorus, then the 1st chorus. Or switch around A sections (2nd A section, 1st A section, 3rd A section). This greatly increases the flexibility of the vocabulary, better enabling the student to use it off the cuff. In other words, they're not locked into one way of playing something. This goes a long way towards creating a more artful improvised solo.

Recommendations for students

1. Build a small collection of great jazz recordings. There are very few things that turn aspiring musicians on more than great recordings. This is not only true of jazz, but with all types of music. When it comes to studying jazz improvisation, there is absolutely no substitute, but it's more important to have a few great recordings than a lot of mediocre ones. You can't go wrong with Miles Davis between 1955 and 1964, but most of the recordings by these artists are classics. Oh course, there are many other artists-

- Miles Davis- Kind of Blue (Columbia)
- Miles Davis- Milestones(Columbia)
- Charlie Parker- The genius of Charlie Parker (Savoy)
- Charlie Parker- Bird with strings (Verve)
- Sonny Rollins- Saxophone Colossus (Prestige)
- John Coltrane- Blue Train (Blue Note)
- Bud Powell- The amazing Bud Powell (Blue Note)
- Wes Montgomery- Full House (Riverside)
- J.J. Johnson- The Eminent J.J. Johnson (Blue Note)

2. Transcribe solos! For younger students, this may mean learning a few ideas from solos. More mature or enthusiastic students should try to learn whole solos. Transcribe not only the pitches, but how the notes are actually played (i.e. style).

3. Learn the basics of theory. The two most important aspects of theory are chord-scale relationship and chord function. An excellent book is Jazz Theory by Mark Levine (Sher Music) or The Jazz Language by Dan Hearle. The best place to find jazz books are at Jamey Abersold's website (www.jazzbooks.com).

4. Memorize tunes. The basic categories are-

- Blues
- Standards
- Latin tunes
- Modal tunes
- Tunes written by jazz musicians

An excellent source for tunes is the many play-a-longs by Jamey Aebersold, but there's no substituting hearing a master play the tune on a recording

5. Practice ideas, patterns, etc... from jazz books. Patterns for Jazz (Coker, etc...) Around the horn (Weiskopf) Jazz Conception (Snidero) are popular choices.

6. Jam with friends. There's no substitute for experience, and working things out with friends in an informal setting builds both knowledge and confidence.

7. Take private lessons with a real jazz player. They will help guide students through the language and concentrate on the essentials.