

Using Motivic Development and Other Compositional Devices in Improvisation

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The great soloists in jazz have the ability to tell a compelling story that commands the listener's attention. Qualities that are immediately noticeable are honesty, enthusiasm, and an interesting story line that moves from moment to moment with connectivity as well as an element of surprise. Honesty and enthusiasm eventually come from hard work and self reflection. What I would like to talk about is some of the things I worked on to hone the ability to tell a convincing story in my blowing through considering certain compositional devices.

As a young aspiring saxophonist I was confronted with learning repertoire, language, learning my instrument, coming at the music from melodic, harmonic, and rhythmical angles, and how to play with the "band". I was confronted with the playing of Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins (and all the rest!), playing that was virtuosic, dynamic, and so very powerful to say the least! At times a large amount of notes would fly out of the horns of my favorite players I wanted to emulate that intensity vis a vis playing lots of notes too, usually at a loud volume. Like most of my contemporaries, we were following the quest of emulating Coltrane, Joe Henderson, Sonny Rollins, Stanley Turrentine, King Curtis/Junior Walker.

I soon discovered that emulating the current players without studying the players and music that preceded them was very much like building a house on quicksand. Buddy Rich called me out for playing like Coltrane in a superficial way. He told me to listen more to Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins. I am forever grateful to Buddy for pulling my coat! In this study of some of the older players I began to identify a continuity to their phrases and a keen use of space between the phrases. More on that later.

Another pivotal moment in my career occurred on a gig where the guitar player came over to me on a break and stated that he had a hard time playing with me because I did not leave enough space when I soloed to allow him to contribute to the musical conversation. After a good deal of thought and a conscious attempt to leave more space in my blowing I discovered that my ideas didn't always connect logically. At times I was jumping from idea to idea in rapid succession without a clear direction and story line.

Here then are some of the things I have and continue to work on to give my soloing a better sense of purpose and clarity.

1. Repetition. Most of the great solos in this music are full of motifs that repeat several times. Take for example George Coleman's solo on There is No Greater Love on the Miles Davis "Four and More" recording. He plays the anthemic line below 3 times consecutively with some variation and ends his thought with a wind up line. This sequence happens twice. The compositional impact is striking. The band rallies around George's playing and turns the moment into a joyous shout chorus. (Example 1)

Most of the great popular songs written in the 40's and 50's have the same level or repetition. Take "All the Things You Are. Firstly, the first 8 bar phrase repeats note for note, albeit down a 4th. Secondly bars 3-4 have the same rhythm as bars 5-6. And thirdly, pretty much all of the melody notes on strong beats in this tune are the 3rd degree of the designated chord.

(Example 2) First 8 bars: cadence to A flat
Second 8 bars: exactly the same as the first 8 transposed down a 4th cadence to G major
Third 8 bars: 1st half: 2-5-1 in G 2nd half:same phrase transposed down min. 3rd cadence to E major.
Fourth 8 bars: first half same as first 4 bars of the tune second four bars the wind-up- cadence to tonic key of A flat.

Wow! What a brilliantly constructed tune! The right amounts of simplicity and interesting twists and turns. One of the great tunes to use as a model for developing a compositional approach to improvising.

A nice exercise to practice is to establish a short rhythmical motif that repeats three times with a wind-up on the third one, changing pitch to conform to the chord changes. Lets try a few different rhythmical motifs over a blues progression.

By repeating the same rhythm you create a strong sense of connection and structure to your improvising. If you practice doing this for a while it will eventually work its way into you blowing and get to a point where you don't have to think about it.

(Example 3)

When you displace a motif you can establish an interesting shape that has an "over the bar line" quality to it, and is less predictable sounding. The motif is quarter note-two eighth notes.

(Example 4)

Another technique one can use to create structure and composition in an improvisation involves using a pivot tone. Let's go back to the blues progression and choose the dominant 7th of the tonic as the pivot tone. In the key of B flat that would be A flat. This A flat is the sus 4 of the 4 chord (Eflat7), and the sharp 9 of the 5 chord. So this pivot note is a colorful note against the various chords of the blues progression. The idea is to keep returning to the pivot note while choosing a variety of other notes that conform to the chord change you are on. This will create a sense of suspension and tension.

(Example 5)

You can actually use any note for a pivot note if you are playing with a pianist who knows how to alter his comping to accommodate the dissonance created by your note

choice. A cool note to use is the flat 6 of the tonic B flat chord (G flat). This note winds up being the #9 of the 4 chord and flat 9 of the 5 chord, again colorful notes.

(Example 6)

If we come at this way of practicing from a melodic slant we might select a melodic motif and find a way to move it sequentially through a harmonic setting. I've selected a triadic 3-5-3-1 shape to move through the blues progression.

(Example 7)

Whenever you are presented with musical information, be it from a book, article, or off a recording, it is advisable to not stop at playing the information verbatim. Try to use this information as a jumping off point and see if you can take the concept at play and plug it into other situations.

My friend Mike Brecker played a shape back in the day that caught my attention. It was very "singable", and easily identified with his way of playing. I'm certain he stumbled onto this shape inadvertently, and realized it felt good to play on the horn. I took Mike's shape and deconstructed it slightly, which suggested a few other possible shapes. After a while it no longer sounded like the original, and sent me down a road of discovering new shapes and patterns. Mike's shape is a 6 note line that creates a nice feeling when played in 4/4. I took the first 5 notes and, in groupings of 5, moved the pattern down in minor thirds. This line can be used in many different settings, as it doesn't really have a specific key center. You can float this shape over a one chord vamp, a blues progression, or a standard, for that matter.

(Example 8)

In closing, we all listen to lots of great players and through some level of mimicry, emulate things that they play. If we are thorough, and listen to a vast cross section of music, we will have a rich vocabulary and generally not sound like any one player. The next level of coming into your own as a soloist results from taking the compositional approach, finding, practicing, and implementing new devices into your playing. The implementation is perhaps the most crucial part. Playing with others is the laboratory for developing new ideas. The good news is that this process goes on for the rest of your life. A good reason to get up in the morning!