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Jazz Improvisation and Practice Techniques

Big Band Blast 2015

Today's Clinic

Showing you today, some of the things that I practice, and how transcription can be used as a means to develop your jazz vocabulary, and as a result, influence your own artistic voice.

Main Theme: Building Jazz Vocabulary

Quick General Overview Of Things To Practice And Consider:

- Long tones.
- Scales/arpeggios.
- Transcriptions.
- Learning tunes.
- Everything in 12 keys.
- Rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic concepts.
- Jamming with each other.
- Playing with people better than you when possible.

Jazz Improvisation Approaches For Today's Focus:

1. Jazz “alphabet”/“grammar”:
 - chord/scale theory.
 - building technical facility.
2. The “Jazz Language” (Steinel 1995, 3) (today's main focus):
 - improvisation in terms of “Jazz Vocabulary” (Steinel 1995).
 - *telling a story* (Harker 2011, 39).
 - coherence.

These are only **some** of many approaches – these are what I'm discussing today.

Other Areas Of Improvisation To Consider (though, not specifically discussed today):

- **Ensemble improvisatory interaction.**
 - e.g. **Miles Davis' 2nd famous quintet; Keith Jarrett Trio.**
- **Rhythmic/time/pulse concepts.**
- **Melodic/motivic concepts.**
- **Harmonic concepts.**
- **Dynamics/articulation/accents.**
- **Leaving space.**
- **Phrasing and emotional content.**
- **Taking risks.**

...the list goes on!!!

All of these are highly important in good jazz improvisation and performance. However, today's clinic is focusing on transcription as a means to cultivate your aural skills and develop your jazz vocabulary. You should include the above topics in your further study and exploration.

Some Scales

(these are what I practice every day, as a basic scale repository for jazz improvisation)

- **Major Modes:**
 - Ionian (Maj7).
 - Dorian (Min7).
 - Lydian (Maj7#11).
 - Mixolydian (Dom7).
 - Aeolian (Min7b6).
 - Lochrian (Min7b5).
- **Melodic Minor Modes:**
 - Jazz Melodic Minor (Min-Maj7).
 - Sus b9 (Min7b9).
 - Lydian Augmented (Maj7#5).
 - Lydian Dominant (Dom7#11).
 - Mixolydian b13.
 - Lochrian #2 (Min7b5).
 - Altered (Dom7#9#5).
- **Harmonic Minor Modes:**
 - Harmonic Minor (Min-Maj7).
 - 2nd Mode Harm. Min (min7b5).
- **Harmonic Major Modes:**
 - Harmonic Major (Maj7).
 - 3rd Mode Harm. Maj. (Dom7b9#9).
 - 5th Mode Harm. Maj. (Dom7b9).
- **Diminished Modes:**
 - Diminished (Dim7).
 - Half-Whole Diminished (Dom7b9).
- **Bebop Scales:**
 - Major Bebop (Maj7).
 - Melodic Minor Bebop (Min7/Min-Maj7).
 - Dorian Bebop (Min7).
 - Dominant Bebop (Dom7).
 - Dominant 7 Diminished Bebop (Dom7).
 - Dom 7 b5 Diminished Bebop (Dom7).
- **Pentatonic Scales:**
 - Major Pentatonic (Maj7).
 - Minor Pentatonic (Min7).
- **Blues Scales:**
 - Major Blues (Maj7).
 - Minor Blues (Min7).
- **Other Scales:**
 - Whole Tone (Dom7#5).
 - Spanish Phrygian. (Dom7b9b13).
 - Double Diminished.
 - Messian Mode 3.
 - Augmented (Maj7#5).
 - Chromatic.

Sources:

- Haerle 1980, 10-1, 21-2, 27-8, 34-5, 42-4, 51-2;
- Harris 2007;
- Leali 2013;
- Mackey 2000; and
- Smith 2006.

Practicing Scales

(my daily warm-up)

- Choose two keys per day.
- Practice all scales in chosen two keys, full range.
- **WITH A METRONOME!!!**

Practicing Scales & Arpeggios

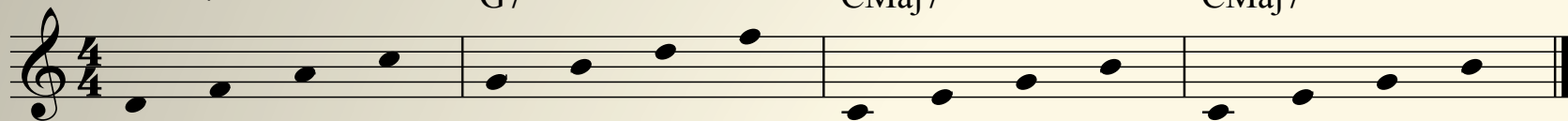
- Practice the Chord Tones/Arpeggios.
 - 24 different possibilities for every 4 note cell (Bergonzi 2000, 11; Mackey, 2000).



From the 1st	From the 3rd	From the 5th	From the 7th
1 3 5 7	3 1 5 7	5 1 3 7	7 1 3 5
1 3 7 5	3 1 7 5	5 1 7 3	7 1 5 3
1 5 3 7	3 5 1 7	5 3 1 7	7 3 1 5
1 5 7 3	3 5 7 1	5 3 7 1	7 3 5 1
1 7 3 5	3 7 1 5	5 7 1 3	7 5 1 3
1 7 5 3	3 7 5 1	5 7 3 1	7 5 3 1

ii-V-I Chord Progression (most common chord progression in jazz repertoire): Arpeggios.

ii-7 D Dorian Dmin7	V7 G Mixolydian G7	IMaj7 C Ionian CMaj7	IMaj7 C Ionian CMaj7
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ii-V-I Chord Progression: Scale Choices.

ii-7
D Dorian
Dmin7

V7
G Mixolydian
G7

IMaj7
C Ionian
CMaj7

IMaj7
C Ionian
CMaj7



Pros of Chord/Scale Theory

- We have to know our scales, arpeggios and chords – our musical “alphabet”.
- A good and effective standardized way to conceptualize, catalogue and compartmentalize jazz theory (Marsalis 2014, 84).
- Highly practical way to learn and remember repertoire (Marsalis 2014, 84).
- An easy way to begin the intimidating practice of improvising (Marsalis 2014, 84).

All of this is good, and a necessary part of jazz improvisation. However, if this used as an end in itself, there can be limitations.

Limitations of Chord/Scale Theory

- We can become in danger of sounding like we're simply we're playing scales over tunes (Leali 2012).
- We can become in danger approaching (and ***learning***) jazz in a visually-oriented way, without really listening (Soph 2014).
- Can potentially have very little reference to the overall historical context of jazz and the great musicians that have shaped this art form (Marsalis 2014).

Cultivating a Jazz Language

- Jazz is an *aural* art form – we need to switch on our ears.
- Approach jazz in terms of “vocabulary”.
- Make our solos coherent:
 - *Telling A Story* (Harker 2011, 39).
 - Play identifiable music phrases, gestures and motifs.
 - Learn historically significant jazz vocabulary (i.e. solos from other great players).

Branford Marsalis' *DownBeat* Article On The Importance Of Listening

“There are so many books and curricula to assist in the study of jazz—particularly soloing— it can be mind-boggling. Yet, I’m continually amazed that with all of the development in jazz education in the last 40 years, there is almost no discussion regarding the value of listening to historical jazz recordings” (Marsalis 2014).

This entire article is well worth checking out:

<http://www.branfordmarsalis.com/press/melodic-study-deep-listening-and-importance-context-downbeat-master-class-branford-marsalis>.

Creating Our Own Voice

- “Imitate; Assimilate; Innovate” – Walter Bishop Jnr. (Berliner 1994, 273-5).
- Transcribe by ear and learn different solos (vocabulary) of your favorite players.
- Play lines/licks from their solos, in your own – this means that you’re **internalizing** their vocabulary which, in time, will be a part of yours (Berliner 1994, 138).
- Manipulate and experiment with these lines/licks and integrate them in you’re your own playing – make them your own (Berliner 1994, 138).
- The fusion of all of your influences, becomes your own voice (Berliner 1994, 138)
 - this takes years – be patient and **enjoy** the process 😊

Cultivating Our “Inner Ear”

- Sing it before you play it – similar to knowing what we’ll say before we say it (which is still improvisatory and interactive).
- “Inner ear” (Liebman 1994, 6).
- “Aural imagination” (Leibman 1994, 22).
- “Tone Imagination” (Raschèr 1983, 8).
- Link our motor skills to our “inner ear” or “tone imagination” (what we internally hear in our minds) – we want to have the same ease of expression/execution on our instrument as we do when we talk (Liebman 1994, 6, 8, 15-22).

Playing by ear in 12 keys

Practical Demonstration

- Sing a tune that you already know, and play it in different random keys. Sing it in the new key first, then play it (Morrison 2014).
- Why do you already know that tune?
 - Because it's already internalized in your memory.

Applying This To Transcribing

Practical Demonstration

- Transcribe by ear, to the point that you can sing the transcription – this is ***internalizing*** the vocabulary.
- Take one line from that solo, and sing it starting on another note.
- Play by ear (slowly and patiently), that line from the solo in different keys (random keys – learn lines in each key, without a reference point from a previous key).
- Play these lines in your own solos over the same or similar tunes.

This is meant to be challenging and frustrating 😊

Extended info on this topic: *Thinking In Jazz* (chapter 4) – Paul F. Berliner

Striking The Balance

- Both chord/scale theory and transcription/vocabulary are essential components to approaching jazz improvisation.
- Theory explains and defines music, but not necessarily always dictates it (Palma, 2012).
- Learn theory (musical alphabet) to help you learn and understand the music language/vocabulary.

Practice Attitude

(how I try to approach practicing)

- Keep a practice journal/log.
- Always go to the practice room with a set plan and goals – avoid wasting time.
- Be mentally present in what you're doing, relax, and take regular breaks.
- Practice more of less; don't practice too many things at once – there will *always* be something that you still need to practice, so keep notes to revisit other concepts later.
- Set short, medium, and long term goals.
- Practice to improve your weaknesses – embrace mistakes and learn from them.
- Record yourself.
- Break up your practice sessions – for example (and this is a bare minimum):
 - Long Tones: 30 mins
 - Scales: 30 mins
 - Tunes/Repertoire: 30 mins
 - Transcribe: 30 mins
- Reward yourself for hard work to stay motivated ☺
- Stay hungry! (i.e. keep yourself inspired to continue working hard).

Sources/Influences: Mackey 2000; Smith 2006; Leali 2012; Liebman 1994, 41-3.

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