

Jazz Improvisation – Frequently Asked Questions, Practice Suggestions, and Resources

-compiled by Mark Flaherty

How do I go about learning to improvise?

- 1) Listen, listen, listen!!!! – Take advantage of any and every opportunity you may have to listen to jazz musicians improvising live or on recordings.
- 2) Develop a basic understanding of jazz theory – i.e. how chords are constructed and how progressions work.
- 3) Put yourself into situations where you will be forced to improvise on a regular basis.
- 4) Practice diligently. Even more importantly, know what to practice...

What kinds of things should I practice?

- 1) Scales
 - major & minor scales
 - blues scales
 - modes (esp. dorian and mixolydian)
 - bebop scales
 - whole-tone & diminished scales
- 2) Patterns
 - ii-V patterns
 - major chord patterns
 - seventh chord patterns, etc.
- 3) Guide Tones
 - particularly 3rds & 7ths
- 4) Transcriptions
 - Write down your favorite solos from recordings. Learn the solos and play along with the recordings. Pick out phrases or “licks” that you feel are particularly effective and learn them in all twelve keys.
- 5) Repertoire

How do I go about constructing a solo, particularly on a complicated tune?

- 1) Make sure you understand the form of the tune.
- 2) Sticking close to the melody (particularly on ballads) is always a safe bet!
- 3) Leave space in your solo. You don't have to be playing all of the time.
- 4) Keep things simple. Focus on one or two basic ideas.
- 5) Give your solo a sense of shape – build to a climax.
- 6) Write out a few ideas ahead of time to serve as an “outline.”

Where can I find more information?

Here are a few sources to get you started:

- *Jazz Play Along Sets* (Jamey Aebersold)
- *How to Play Bebop Volumes 1, 2, and 2* (David Baker)
- *Band in a Box* (PG Music) – computer software
- *Improvising Jazz* (Jerry Coker)
- *Patterns for Jazz* (Coker, Casale, Campbell & Greene)
- *Voicings for Jazz Keyboard* (Frank Mantooth)
- *Jazz Keyboard: For Pianists and Non- Pianists* (Jerry Coker)
- *The Jazz Piano Book* (Mark Levine)