

The Art of Creative Exploration: Helping Students Discover & Explore Through Jazz Improvisation

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- I. *Diagnosing the Problem: Why Is Improvisation So Scary?*
 - A. *Individualism vs. conformity*
 - B. *The importance of the “right” way or “wrong” way to improvise*
 - C. *The pressures of competition*
 - D. *Scales, scales and more scale.*
 - E. *Theory = math*

- II. *Removing Barriers and Building Explorers*
 - A. *Free improvisation is not an advanced technique*
 - B. *Its not mode...it's mood: Teaching color and character*
 - C. *Moving beyond the notes of a solo*
 - D. *Teaching melodic direction*
 - E. *Turning improvisors into archeologists*

- III. *Exercises and Assignments to Build Creativity*
 - A. *Free improvisation exercises (See Handout)*
 1. *The Chase*
 2. *Speak your mind*
 - B. *Cut the stems*
 - C. *I played with Miles*
 - D. *Keep it Simple...keys and goal notes...harmonic generalization*
 - E. *YouTube as a teaching tool*

Free Improvisation (20 mins/day)-This may seem like a lot but you will have students tell you how quick the time goes. The purpose of doing free improvisation each day is to get the student creating. Through this process the student will discover melodies, rhythms and phrases that have been locked in their minds but have not yet come out through their instrument. This exercise allows the student to discover what they can do as well as getting the conscience mind out of the way. The student can go into sessions with a plan (e.g.-They are only going to play in the key of E or they are only going to play a certain articulation) but we don't want to limit them to the point where failure is more of a concern than exploration.

Free-Form Conversation (with teacher or peer)-This exercise should not focus on matching exact pitches or phrases...that will come later. Instead focus on the conversational aspects of speech. Player one plays a short musical fragment (again...it doesn't have to be tonal) and player two plays something in response. This is teaching the antecedent and consequent phrase structure of the melodic line. You can interrupt each other, mimic, etc. You can refine the focus to include articulation, volume, timbre, etc. Generally, this happens naturally.

Free-Form Imitation/Call and Response-This is like your typical imitation/call and response exercise but it doesn't focus on pitch. You can take a session and deal strictly with matching rhythms, volume, articulation, etc. As the student begins to refine their listening, you will be able to add more elements. You can take turns initiating the exercise, putting the student into the roll of the teacher.

The Pledge of Allegiance-Instrumental musicians have been trying to imitate the human voice since the dawn of time. The sliding, articulation, dynamic spectrum and syncopation of human speech is not only a great role model for the instrumentalist it teaches the musician how to focus their attention on how they "say" a musical idea, instead of the notes that make up the phrase. Have a person recite a speech pattern, like the Pledge of Allegiance. Have them pay attention to how they stress particular words. Have them focus on the articulation they use in their speech. Have them focus on the rhythm (notice how it syncopates naturally). Then, put on a blues play-a-long and have them play the tonic note. Have them duplicate the speech segment, this time playing a single note. Record them and you will see how they naturally syncopate against the blues progression. This exercise shows them that syncopation and rhythm is a natural part of their life already...it is just a matter of bringing it over to their jazz playing.

The Chase-This exercise teaches the student to feel the tension and release of intervals. Rather than labeling a note as "good" or "bad" in reference to another pitch, we need them to see intervals as varying degrees of tension and release. The goal of "The Chase" exercise is to have the student move to either a consonant or dissonant interval. Rather than saying one note is good or bad, we want them to hear the quality and move (usually by 1/2 step in either direction) to the desired outcome. Take two players and have them choose a note to play (make sure they don't tell anyone the note choice), then counting to three (1-2-3) they play their chosen notes. One student will be designated the "chaser" moving to the desired interval quality. I have found it best to start by having students move to the dissonant quality. This changes their view of

“ugly” notes and get them to experience the natural tension/pull they create. This exercise is particularly helpful when you move students into playing changes. How often do they land on a “bad” note only to freeze in fear. This exercise teaches them how to move the use the tension to their advantage.

Working with Drones-Like the exercise above, working with drones teaches the student the relationship notes have to one another. You can start by using a single note drone, using it as the tonic note (although this parameter doesn't have to exist). Have the student play diatonically, slowly, processing the color and character of the interval? You will find that the 4th (commonly labeled as an “avoid” tone) is a note the student will like. The next step is to move to chromatic pitches...they offer a completely different set of colors. You can organize your drones in such a way as to create a basic I-IV-V blues progression. As you progress in this exercise you can add two and three note drones (focusing on 3rd and 7ths or 3rds, 7ths and 9ths). This moves the student towards playing chord changes while at the same time, they are not thinking about playing changes.

SAMPLE YOUTUBE USE:

The following example was taken from one of my jazz pedagogy students. Andrew Janak, a junior music major, was assigned to search YouTube and to find videos that could be used as transcription models for a jazz improvisation sequence (you will note the focus is for a saxophonist). The original list was three pages in length.

Beginning Improvisation:

Ben Webster on "Perdido"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CeSrOAcTXI&feature=related>

-bluesy vocab over simple ii-V changes, can focus on how timbre/sound affect the solo

Miles Davis on "So What"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4TbrgIdm0E>

-swinging modal vocab, use of space and long/repeated notes, also nice to hear another solo besides the famous one on "Kind of Blue"

J.J. Johnson on "Now's The Time"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xWjYMG13DM>

-this could be an end of the semester transcription, a great combo of blues and bop vocab

Intermediate:

Dexter Gordon on "It's You or No One"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhSpXCe8i6A>

-lots of great straight ahead vocab and motivic development, as is common with his live stuff the solo is pretty long

Chet Baker on "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBILr6HBbu0>

-again just a beautiful example of straight ahead be-bop vocab, the way he articulates and phrases is also paramount; the vocal scat solo at the beginning is killing also and could be transcribed

Roy Hargrove on "Love For Sale"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8htJVyavMvo>

-soulful playing over standard changes, modern over the barline phrasing to make older vocab sound "new"

Advanced:

Joel Frahm on "I Mean You"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Hhb2bgh5r8&feature=related>

Masterful at going in and out of changes, as with all of Joel's solos everything is so well developed (some parts may be near impossible for trumpet/bones but I think at least the first chorus is worth analyzing) or this one Joel Frahm on "Take The Coltrane"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZcyYIU6coE>

MOTIVIC DEVELOPMENT at its finest, really fresh approach to a blues

Dick Oatts on "On Dominant"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd8AHwIHqX0>

This would be great for the students to transcribe the changes also, it is a tune Dick wrote that is an exercise in blowing of dominant chords. Classic Dick Oatts, obtuse phrasing and a mixture of pentatonic, bop, and "out" lines

Jerry Bergonzi on "Softly as in a Morning Sunrise"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4fOU-CyVjI>

sound/video quality isn't great, but Bergonzi's solo is NUTS, great for rhythmic displacement of lines

And a non-sax player:

Tom Harrell on Rhythm Changes

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlqSstDH8T8>

very cool use of superimposed pentatonic, along with some classic jazz trumpetisms

