

## ON IMPROVISING

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### Introduction

This book is a compilation of knowledge for the musician who wishes to practice the art of improvising. The art of improvising is as old as music. (Sic: See appendix on the History of Improvisation) There is no doubt that the beginning of intelligent musical sound organization was trial and error, keeping certain sounds that were distinguishable from others. Speech and musical pitches began together when humans began to group together. Communication/language for the common good was necessary. Musical sounds took another tangent. It associated itself with religious or supernatural activities. Certain sounds and percussion beats were used for communications and religious ceremonies. From this beginning, as the intelligence and social mores evolved, so did the cultural sense of early human society musical arts develop and mature.

To use the material presented in this book some proficiency on a musical instrument is needed. There will be explanations of musical clefs - basically the treble and bass clef. A knowledge of the piano keyboard is also important and a musical ear must continue to be developed. To further develop this ear training one must play and hear chord and improvise on these chord progressions when played by the pianist. A knowledge of the construction of scale will also be explained.

To be an effective creative improviser the text should be followed line by line. Do not skip to the next page until one has genuinely mastered the information and skills which are presented on the present page. Work slowly and carefully as improvising requires both a musical ear and a musical, theoretical knowledge as well as practice and perfection of these skills. After you have mastered the material presented I would advise you take the next step which will be the 'advanced aspects of jazz improvisation.

Practicing, performing, listening to record and going to 'live' performances are all encouraged and extremely important, with the greatest emphasis on playing and experimenting. A concept can be gained by listening to records but actual playing is the most important. The more proficient a musician you are, the more clearly you will be able to understand a jazz solo. The more familiar you are with jazz tunes and their chord progression the more easily you will detect the form and chord progression of tunes you have not played.

You should continue to develop musical proficiency and improvising skill and sharpen your sight reading. By doing so you will increase your confidence when attending jam sessions, getting together with a small group and playing/experimenting. This attendance will gain you confidence. (You should not be afraid to make a mistake or

miss meter as these are common errors when first beginning to improvise.). Joining a band or bands will help your progress as to musical experience. The jam session is the single most valuable situation for developing improvisational skills. Jam sessions usually do not just happen, they must be organized and planned. Students should join together and hold their own sessions as they are all in the beginning at the same level of ability.

### Scales, Intervals and Chords

One must have working knowledge of all the key signatures and accompanying scales (major, minor, modal, relative minor, various keys, scales, etc.), and make exercises out of them in constant, steady tempos. You will be practicing not only the notes but gaining a command of time keeping, a very important element in acquiring a swing feeling in your improvisational playing.

Western musical systems are built on these scales and how they are constructed; their intervallic arrangement and their importance in relation to active and passive tones; and being able to know what a 'flatted third or a augmented 5th is. This is the knowledge needed for the material for improvising. You must know all the chords that are built on each scale degree and the normal progression and construction of the correct chord progression. The most important beginning is the major scale because it guides one in defining intervals. (From C to D, for examples, is the interval called a major second. From C to F is called a perfect fourth. The first important intervals for chord building are those which correspond to the first, third, fifth and seventh notes in the major scale. Each note of a scale has an academic name: (Example: 1st note C is called the tonic, G is called the Dominant - see below.)

1)-Tonic, 2)-Super-Tonic, 3) Mediant, 4) Sub-Dominant, 5) Dominant, 6) Sub-Mediant, 7) Leading-Tone

Scale construction:

C D E / F G A B / C

Piano keyboard



Having a simple, workable knowledge of the piano keyboard will greatly enhance learning jazz improvisation. Having a keyboard is necessary for learning how chords sound. Fundamental musical concepts are easily understood by using the keyboard. A

visualization is needed when you might want to raise or lower a note by a half step. You will do this when constructing intervals such as minor thirds and augmented fifths, When raising and lowering intervals remember that Fb is E, Cb is B, E# is F and B# is C.

This knowledge, if known by the early jazz improvisers would have progressed jazz more rapidly into the art it developed. The early jazz players had great ears and could hear the notes that went with a certain simple chord progression. As jazz techniques developed and became more complex while progressing to a definite art, more musical knowledge was needed. The tune 'Cherokee,' by Ray Noble is played by New Orleans musicians without the 'bridge' as its chord progression is not easily heard. The tune's chord progression is built on the basic chords found in its key of Bb, but the 'bridge' goes into F# and its related chord progression, as well as modulating until it is back in Bb. These changes were difficult for some early jazz musicians so a musical knowledge was soon understood to be necessary.

When learning the scale construction you must also develop an ear for hearing intervals. There is what is called 'musical crutches.' These crutches are used to help distinguish the various intervals. As an example: the interval from C to F is the same interval as the beginning of 'Here Comes the Bride. Other intervals should be played and their related crutch tunes chosen. Play these intervals in all other keys. Sit at the piano and play an interval and knowing your crutch think of the correct nomenclature. Develop an ear by having others play intervals and you tell what they are. It is absolutely necessary to know each note in each major scale and know immediately what position it occupies in relation to the first note. This skill of identifying and constructing intervals not only helps when you want to build chords, but also when you are creating a line and wants to know what notes to use for a certain effect, perhaps the effect of the lowered third (also called the minor third or the blue note.). It helps when you are listening to others play and want to remember a certain 'lick' he played. Eventually the names and the sounds will work simultaneously in your head.

Chords are of four types: major, minor, augmented or diminished. From this concrete beginning all other chords are constructed - from Augmented 13ths, to quartel harmony to added tones to a chord given. This will lead to chord substitution and additions which further opens up more contemporary sounds in improvisation. While one can hear definite styles in various types of music using improvising (Dixieland, bebop, funk, etc.), one definitive element is that of the type of rhythm used. One can hear the rhythm of a cakewalk, and when comparing a solo from a Dixieland musician and a bebop musician both the rhythmic structure and the style of interval used will point out the difference.

First work on perfect 4ths, 5ths, major and minor thirds. Then move on to flatted fifths and other more difficult intervals to identify.

### How to construct Basic Chords

**MAJOR TRIAD:** constructed on the first, third and fifth notes of the major scale.  
(C,E,G - inverted: E,G,C and G,C,E)

**MINOR TRIAD:** Constructed on the first, flatted third and fifth (C, Eb and G)

AUGMENTED TRIAD: Constructed on the first, third and sharpened fifth (C, E, G#)

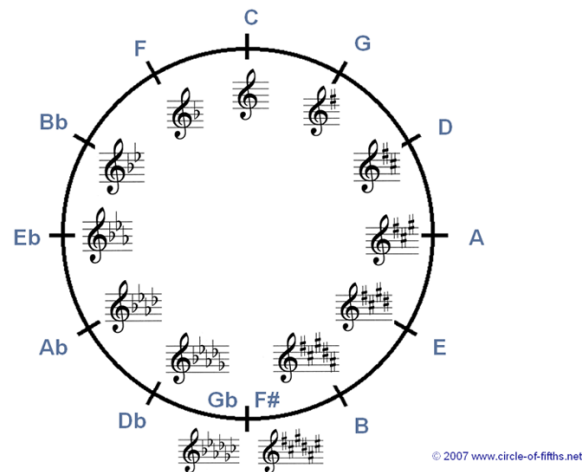
DIMINISHED TRIAD: Constructed on the first, flatted third, and flatted 5th (C, Eb, Gb)

The above chords can have added tones. One good example of an extra tone used is an added tone (A), to a major triad -called a major sixth chord - C6 - a C major triad with the sixth degree of the scale added (A). A knowledge of added notes and large four or more notes to a chord is a type of knowledge that will be necessary to learn.

Added chords discussed here.

Triads on scale degrees discussed here.

### Cycle or circle of fifths



Chord progress chart:

I  
V VII  
IV II  
VI  
III

Chord substitutions:

### IMPROVISING

It is recommended that you begin learning some jazz tunes - at least one a week. Remember that various styles of jazz music have different repertoire - the Dixieland style

plays certain tunes and the bebop style will have others and each group will not usually know the others repertoire completely. A bebop group would not play When the Saints Go Marching In and a Dixieland group would not call up Night in Tunisia.

Try and begin to add a new melody to the given chord progression. If you can find the tune on a Music Minus One record, play along with the record. Play the tune at jam session. If self conscious get together with the rest of the class and 'be self-conscious' together.

In the beginning I think it is fine to try creating lines based only on the actual notes in the chord given. Make up solos by arpeggiating the chord changes. You might be forced to do that anyway because it is the easiest way to avoid missing the chord changes. Later you will gain the confidence to keep track of chord changes without running arpeggios. When that happens, you can create lines freer of the underlying chords. Next think and play the scale represented by that chord. Example. if it is a C major chord, use the C scale notes, with emphasis on the 1,3,5,6 notes of the C scale. (Use these few tones now - later we will add more tones to our improvised melody.)

You will find that much of improvisation skill consists of developing extended concentration and fluency. Concentration applies to ignoring all the distractions of the playing situation while listening, thinking, and playing simultaneously. Fluency applies to picking the notes out of the chord symbols and hearing them in the accompaniment chords. usually you will read and hear at the same time;. later you can get along on either one or the other by itself. After you have passed that level of skill, you will find it possible to concentrate on both the chord changes and your lines.

Start simply and concentrate on syncopating your lines. Practice these lines using 'swing eighths. (o o). Eventually you may decide that you do not want to swing a certain phrase but if you have not mastered the skill, you will not have the freedom to choose between the alternatives of swinging and not swinging. Do not attempt to play quick or intricate lines, Emphasize slow, clearly thought out lines which fit the chord progression and have melodic value of their own.

"It is not the amount of notes you play but the notes you play."

(Quote from: the good Doctor KK.)

After you gain confidence and fluency, start adding notes to the simpler chords. Add sixths to major triads and ninths to dominant seventh chords. Then try flat ninths and augmented elevenths. hear how they sound, then use them whenever you think they might be appropriate.

Another approach in discovering additional notes compatible with chords is that of chord scales. Each chord has one or more types of scale, all the notes of which are compatible with it. Entire books are devoted to the subject. Here are three very brief tricks you can apply:

1)When you see a dominant seventh chord, run the major scale named for the note a fourth up from the chord root. For example a C7 would dictate the F major scale. An A7 would dictate the D major scale.

2)When you see a minor seventh chord, run the major scale which begins on the lowered seventh of that chord. For example a Cm7 would dictate a Bb major scale. An Am7 chord would dictate a G major scale.

3)When you see an augmented chord, begin with its root and play a sequence of notes separated from each other by whole steps. Use no half steps. The sequence is called a whole tone scale.(There are only 2 whole tone scales.)

Remember that one reason for learning chord changes is to give you lead time while improvising. This lead time comes from the skill of predicting how a note will sound in context. You can predict better if you know what chords are coming up next. Once you have experimented with sixths, ninths, augmented elevenths, etc., you can plan ahead intelligently. Plan your improvisation as though you were a high speed composer.

Chord changes help make music sound good when more than one person is playing at once. They also give your music a bit of pre-set continuity even if you are using them alone in your practice room. Chords provide basic sounds (major, minor, augmented, diminished, for example) against which and with which you can create musical lines. But if a line's own direction dictates including a note not represented in the chord progression, go ahead and play it anyway. If the resulting line sounds good, your decision to deviate from chord notes was a good move. Most competent jazz pianists will alter the chord progression instantaneously to accommodate the sense of your line. That is just good composing - guitarists and bassists do it also. The same thing should happen on a rhythmic level also, not only with the drummer, but also with the rhythmic way in which the pianist plays chords.

Try to improvise a line so catchy that a listener will want to remember it, hum it, write it down or put words to it. If you do succeed at inventing attractive phrases ('licks') try to remember them, write them down, learn them in every key. Build a collection of them so that you have a pool from which to draw for your next solo improvisation. (This is developing your own style of improvising.) once you have accumulated a few good ones, you will find that it is easy to extend them by altering their rhythmic construction, placing them in different parts of a measure, playing them twice as long or twice as fast, transposing them or playing them backwards. There are certain musical construction elements - repetition, imitation, sequence, etc. that can be used.

Do not be afraid of simplicity. There is nothing basically wrong with simplicity and nothing basically good about complexity. Listeners react to varying degrees of each in ways which depend on their own personal preferences. Although complexity might be your ultimate goal, you should be careful not to get too involved too early. When building a repertory of phrases and creating an improvisatory style, remember, it is easier to play fast, flashy lines that make sense if you have first mastered the construction of slow, coherent phrases. When your fingers have gotten comfortable with slow, coherent phrases, little difficulty will arise in combining the phrases and speeding them up. Keep your lines simple and swinging, at least until you have developed strength in your playing and confidence in your musical imagination. Do not be sucked into playing in a way which is uncomfortable for you. Assert yourself and play what you are capable of playing at the time you are capable of playing it.

During the time you are learning chord based improvisation skills, take time out periodically to practice improvising without pre-set tempo or without chord changes or without either. Just get your instrument and play. In addition to being fun, these free-form sessions should loosen up your imagination because you have nothing to keep track of except your own sound, no chords, key signature, chorus lengths, other players, swinging, etc. it should help you feel at ease playing both within and without tempo. Musicians might refer to the two situations as playing "inside the time," and "outside the time." This open situation is also convenient for practicing different tone colors, inventing new ones, bending notes, trying out a variety of attack and decay styles, altering the rate of vibrato, etc.

Eventually you should be able to invent your own chord progressions as dictated by the mood of your playing and the directions your lines take. You might also mix your progressions with established progressions. These progressions need not be four, eight, twelve or sixteen measures and they need not repeat. You can also use constant tempo at your own discretion. Use it only when you feel your improvisation requires it. Use tempo instead of letting it use you. Just because you are able to keep time is no reason to be a slave to it.

This free improvisational style became, during the 1960's and 70's almost as common among modern jazz combos as the approaches based on chord progressions and constant tempo. Many of the best free form improvisers are also solid, conventional-form players. The skills required for conventional improvisation and those required for free improvisation have more similarities than differences. The technique and feeling of free improvisation can enhance conventional improvisation. The techniques of conventional improvisation can help the free player spontaneously structure his improvisations.

There is nothing basically good or bad about pre-structured improvisation (the most popular kind and the one most often used in jam sessions) and nothing basically good or bad about free jazz. The two approaches simply represent different techniques for creating music. Which ever technique creates the best music in a given situations, for that situation, the best techniques. By "situation" I mean particular players, mood, musical goals, etc.

Once you have tried both you will be more able to create freedom for your own style. Freedom of choice only comes through having solid alternatives from which to choose.

## COPYING RECORDED IMPROVISATIONS

Acquire and/or copy and learn the solo improvisations of famous jazz players, with emphasis on your personal instrument. Copy them, not necessarily for the sake of imitating their styles, but rather to figure out what they are doing, how they create the musical effects they do, how the lines are structured, what intervals are used, how the line relates to the chord change, etc. The skill involved in playing the phrases you hear on a record is a skill you will need when trying to play phrases you hear in your head. Phrases you invent yourself may be conceived in your imagination rather than in your fingers. The phrases seemingly invented by your fingers are often not as interesting as those that require imagination and considerable work in being transferred from mind to fingers. It is advisable to frequently practice the process of taking a recorded improvisation into your

mind and out through your fingers. If you play several instruments, do it only on the instrument you play best. After a few years, try it on the instruments with which you are less proficient. But give yourself a break at first by working out your ear training so that the horn plays the sound you hear and not a transposed sound or a sound that has a different feel under your fingers. It is also a good practice to learn to accurately sing or whistle each improvisation that you copy.

Solos that are too fast to copy at their recorded tempo can be copied by setting the turntable at  $16 \frac{2}{3}$  r.p.m. That speed is exactly one half the standard  $33 \frac{1}{3}$  speed, thus producing the same notes one octave lower. The same effect can be achieved by tape recording music at the standard  $7 \frac{1}{2}$  inches per second, produced by reel to reel tape recorders, and then playing it back at  $3 \frac{3}{4}$  inches per second.

You might learn a great deal by carefully copying a few good solos. This knowledge would then be available to you when you improvised your own lines. You could also learn to play within the conception of your favorite player. Most instrumentalists begin this process by learning how to produce the tone quality of the player. Then they accumulate the phrases he favors. Finally they duplicate entire recorded solos. From there, you can add your own touches or drastically depart from that style, having used it only as a basis for your own development.

On the other hand you may wish to play totally within the style invented by your favorite player. You may feel that the style he invented is a perfect expression of what you have always wanted to say musically. That is fine. If you are most comfortable playing with a set style rather than trying to invent a new one, it is all-right. That is one of the virtues in jazz. It allows you to choose the way you want to play.

Try to check a common belief that says what is most current is most valid. It is quite common to say that what is happening today is all that is happening. You can see for yourself from a brief introduction to jazz history that a Louis Armstrong or a John Coltrane do not come along automatically every five years. If you are going to spend your time learning someone's solos, why not choose those of masters rather than those of mere craftsmen. Choose a model because it is good, not just because it is fashionable.

Jazz represents a terrific variety of changing styles and almost complete freedom for an individual to go his own way. Please yourself. The joy jazz gives you is joy on your own terms. You make your own decisions. You can alter your style however and whenever you wish.