

Improvisation Part I

by Marvin Stamm

How we do what we do. Jazz solos! Jazz improvisations! What are they? How are they done? What is a musician thinking about when he or she plays a solo? What makes us do what we do? Go where we go? What is it that keeps us racing down that long and wondrous road of exploration so our musical ideas remain fresh, vital, and full of energy and fire?

These are questions I am asked frequently. To most people, what I do as a Jazz improviser is sometimes mysterious, often times magical.

Without taking any of that away, I believe I can explain what is involved in the fine art of improvisation and the process of executing it to perfection.

In truth, improvisation is a musical language with which Jazz musicians converse with each other. They learn this language just as anyone learns to speak any language; not from books, but by ear!

How did you learn to speak your native tongue? Did someone teach you to speak? No, of course not! You learned by hearing that language spoken by people around you, usually family members. By the time you were a year or older, you had begun to speak that language, and, by the time you actually studied the grammar and had assimilated the syntax of that language, at approximately age eight, you had been fluent in the language for about six years!

Consider, for a moment, how many people have studied a foreign language in school for three or four years but are still unable to speak that language? Yet, if for a period of time you were placed among those to whom that language is native and you had to speak that language, your ears would become attuned to it. You would quickly develop a vocabulary and learn how to put words and phrases together in order to speak it with ease. The longer you remained immersed in that situation, the more fluent and sophisticated your skills in that language would become.

How does this apply to Jazz improvisation? And what motivates a musician to begin improvising? Usually a young musician will hear a particular track on the radio or CD which inspires him to grab his instrument and attempt to duplicate what he just heard. Initially, it takes a good bit of time to relate what he heard to his instrument as his ears are not accustomed to this process. But as he continues this ear-conditioning process through a protracted period of time, he will rapidly improve his skills. In the course of learning to do this, he constantly finds himself hearing new things he wants to try and play, thereby further developing his ear and adding to his musical vocabulary. All the while, he is learning from those who came forth before him and established their own individual musical voices. In my experience, no player who has not gone through this process has ever developed into a skilled and creative improviser! One cannot over-emphasize the importance of training the ear in this process!

This process of training the musician's ear is like learning to talk, and, as the player copies other people's style, articulation and phrasing, he is also exercising his or her technical abilities by just playing the music, not focusing on his instrument. Combined with the player's normal classical approach to practice, this enables him to further refine the skills necessary to master his instrument, this being so important to improvisation (instant composition). And, while developing the ear to be able to imitate the passages one is trying to learn, he also is familiarizing his ears to hear how the harmonic sounds of one chord move to the other. This all takes place because the player hears something he wants to play and takes up his instrument with the intent to learn to play what he is hearing.

Simultaneously, the young musician develops a vocabulary and learns the intricacies of the language, the phrasing, articulations, rhythms and harmonic approaches in order to clearly express himself. The more he applies himself, the broader his skills become, the more expansive his vocabulary and the more fluent he becomes in the language. Eventually, as he becomes unfulfilled with imitating others, he begins to use his recently acquired skills to put forth his own ideas and to express his own personal feelings. Sound familiar? Just like learning to talk and developing one's speaking skills!

Over a period of time, the neophyte player develops into a full-blown Jazz linguist, and, if perceptive, realizes this is a life-long task in which he will constantly participate in to become more fluent, enhance his musical vocabulary, find his own highly-individualized voice, and establish a niche for himself with his music. This is the long, and sometimes winding road he must travel to become an articulate Jazz improviser.

Marvin Stamm has long been praised for both the art and the craft of trumpet playing. His career began when he was discovered by Stan Kenton while a student at North Texas State University. After graduation, he became Kenton's trumpet soloist for two years, recording five albums with the orchestra. Committed to helping young musicians develop their own voices, Mr. Stamm frequently visits colleges and universities across the U.S. and Europe as a performer, clinician, and mentor, perpetuating the traditions of excitement and innovation that jazz represents.