

Improvisation, Part II
by Marvin Stamm

What happens when four or five musicians come together to play; what happens within their 'conversation'?

Quite simply, it is a 'call and response' to each other. What each musician plays elicits, in a millisecond, a response which then elicits a further response from his colleagues, each in their own way, and on and on. All of this is based on the musician's thorough knowledge of his subject matter, or, in this case, the tune he is playing.

Apply this to people talking together in which they exchange thoughts and ideas based upon their knowledge of a specific subject. In conversation, the more one speaks with others, the more they absorb and expand upon the knowledge and ideas of others. As they attempt to educate themselves and refine their own skills of communication, they, in turn, become better speakers with greater abilities to listen, respond and converse. This is the same process we use to become fine improvisers except that we use our instruments! Of course, we can only improvise to the level of mastery we have acquired on our instruments, a step not required in conversation.

Now having developed into a skilled Jazz improviser, one who has trained his or her ear and learned the theories of harmony and rhythm, how does one develop a solo? In my case, I first listen to the style and context of the music, then immerse myself into the feel of the rhythm and harmony and let that elicit a response from me. In a big band context, I listen to how the arranger has structured the setting into which I am being placed, the textures of the sounds around me, and then, based on the harmonies and rhythms, try to create my own melodic lines initiating a conversation with the orchestra while continually striving to find something original and new. In the process, I respond to all that surrounds me, the manner in which the rhythm section 'comps' underneath me, the backgrounds the arranger has written to accompany me and what the tempo, rhythm and style of the composition suggest to me. I try to create a discourse with the group I am within and say something expressive and musically appropriate.

In a small group, I'm less restrained, free of written frameworks where I can be more spontaneous in style, tempo, rhythm and harmonies, even, if I desire, to change the 'feel' and setting of the piece. For instance, I can play a composition in one style one evening, say a Bossa Nova, and the next evening play it in a 'swing' style. Even while continuing to play a piece in the same style, creative Jazz musicians strive not to be repetitive. They are always searching for new ways to express themselves and expand their ideas and skills of communicating.

In closing, it is difficult to put into words what prompts someone like me to play in a specific way at a specific time because I play extemporaneously, just as we talk extemporaneously.

Do we think about speaking? Or, is our speaking, often dictated by the situation at hand, based on our need to respond to that situation by expressing our own ideas and thoughts, which creates a dialogue with those who elicited that response. When we do this, we never think of syntax, grammar, or, even how we put the words together to form the thoughts we are trying to express. We just talk! The clarity with which we speak and express our ideas is based on our knowledge of the subject and our skill in speaking, which to a great extent rests with our exposure to the sophistication and skills of those from whom we have learned to speak. This too is a life-long process of absorbing and learning from everyone with whom we come in contact every moment of every day!

Jazz improvisation, like speaking, is just that, but even more. It is the eternal search for the holy grail of creativity which permits us to weave a musical mosaic of incredible beauty and symmetry that, while based on all that has come before, is yet unlike anything that has gone before!

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. Following a move to New York in 1966, Marvin Stamm played with such great performers as The Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra, Duke Pearson, and Frank Foster. With the advent of orchestral arrangements in rock, he recorded with Paul McCartney, the Rolling Stones, Paul Simon, and James Brown, as well as such legends as Barbra Streisand and Lena Horn. Marvin Stamm's solo recordings include Stammpepe, Bop Boy, and Mystery Man. 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.