

Let's Play the Game "Jazz Improvisation"

Dr. Aric Schneller

When asked to write an introductory article based on my recent presentation at the 2014 Texas Bandmasters Association Convention/Clinic, my immediate response was, "Yes, I'll do it!" Like a jazz musician improvising a solo, I responded before I had any time to really think about what I would write down in prose. When thinking about this topic, I am always reminded of how much "fun" it is to improvise in the jazz idiom, but I am also reminded of how intimidating or overwhelming it can be for musicians who are already accomplished in other genres of music, but don't want to sound "bad" learning this skill. Not knowing what to play or worse yet, not having anything to read except

a lead sheet or chord changes, this can be an intimidating venture.

First of all, I am a firm believer that jazz improvisation can be really fun because there are no wrong notes when creating a solo. Melodically and harmonically speaking, there are only consonant and dissonant pitches being played and, for the most part, one is usually only a half or whole step away from consonant

sounding notes. This is especially true when playing or jamming on such great standards as "Take the A-Train", "Autumn Leaves", and "Satin Doll", for example. These tunes exhibit simple yet sound structural forms (e.g., 12-bar blues, AABA 32-bar song form, etc.), lack of modulation into remote keys, and ii-V-I chord progressions in major or minor keys. Of course, there are many great tunes that explore chromatic melodies, altered harmonies, modulations into remote keys and/or bridges, and complex rhythms, but for our purposes we'll focus on the more simple structural forms.

As an illustration, just recently the 2014 World Series of Poker finals took place. It was pretty exciting watching nine individuals, who made it to the final table out of 6000-plus players, play "Texas Hold 'Em Poker" for many hours on live television. Needless to say, I got hooked on the game, even bought a fold-out playing table, chips, cards, and a couple of books and then invited some friends over to play. It was quite simple to learn the basics of the game, and then jump in and start playing. We really had no idea what we were doing, but we all had a lot of fun. There's a wealth of history to the game loaded with communication, technique, strategy, nuance, bluffing, and luck!

Let's use the above analogy to recap the exercises that were discussed and demonstrated at this summer's clinic by playing a cool game called "Jazz Improvisation." First, the object of the game is to have fun. Second, you are the winner if you accomplish the object of the game. In this game everyone who plays and has fun is a winner every time! Third, we must learn the following rules:

Rule 1: In reference to the tune in question (i.e. as mentioned earlier with commonly played jazz tunes with simpler forms, harmony, etc.) we must ask before we begin to play, "What key is this in?"



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Rule 2: Remember, there are no wrong notes when improvising a solo. There are only consonant or dissonant notes and remember that we are only a half-step or whole-step away from a consonant note at any given time on any given tune, so don't panic. Just stay on your dissonant note and then let your ear guide you quickly (in either direction, up or down) to make it sound consonant.

Rule 3: During your solo, feel free to play the melody as much as you like. When it's your turn to solo again, try and embellish it a little.

Rule 4: Play major scales over a ii-V-I progression in a major key area (e.g., play a C major scale over a Dmi7 – G7 – Cmaj7).

Rule 5: Play a harmonic minor scale over a ii7(b5) – V7(b9) – i in a minor key area (e.g., play a C harmonic minor scale over a Dmi7(b5) – G7(b9) – i).

Rule 6: Play a blues scale over a minor or major ii-V-I chord progression (e.g., over a C major or minor key center play the following blues scale: C, Eb, F, F#/Gb, G, Bb, C).

Rule 7: Play your scales (i.e., or just one note if you like, etc.) with the 4-step rhythm exercise: 1) Play quarter notes on the beat; 2) Play quarter notes off of the beat; 3) Play eighth notes as if combining the on/off quarter notes (which hopefully should now sound like swinging eighth notes); and 4) Play sixteenth notes (i.e., which should sound like double time).

Rule 8: Feel free to scat-sing a solo as a break from one's wind instrument or to generate new ideas. Louis Armstrong loved to scat-sing!

Rule 9: Choose a leader to play a short idea (i.e., short blues cell or lick), and then everyone else copy

it. This is a "Call and Response" exercise. Be sure to change leaders from time to time.

Rule 10: When possible play with a rhythm section (i.e., bass player, drummer, pianist and/or guitarist). However, you can play with any Jamey Aebersold play-along CDs, iReal Pro, or other proprietary programs.

Rule 11: In the beginning, if possible, try and learn to play-by-ear before reading chord changes. It will help to focus on listening instead of focusing on reading.

That's all there is to it and you're ready to play! During my presentation at the convention, one of the first things we did was invite a handful of high school band directors, with varying degrees of experience, to play the afore-mentioned exercises on instruments provided for them for this clinic by Yamaha, Inc. I believe that these participants really enjoyed learning these basic techniques. The other clinic attendees also had very positive reactions as well. I encouraged the participants to learn Milt Jackson's, "Bags Groove" by ear and then everyone participated in a call and response scat-singing session with me as the leader.

As a final note, in order to teach beginning jazz improvisation, I believe it's important to experience this process to a degree, so as to be a role model for one's students. One does not have to be totally proficient, but only to have experienced the jazz improvisation process. I find, more often than not, that these types of exercises dispel the fear associated with improvising when there is no written music. My hope is that you get "hooked" by the jazz improvisation bug like I got hooked on "Texas Hold 'Em Poker."

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