



Developing the Sound and the Language of Jazz

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2012 TEXAS BANDMASTER'S CONVENTION
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For many years now, I have been in search of a method that could encourage a solid foundation of harmony in an improvised jazz solo but at the same time, be generated by a very simple concept. My desire for such a concept was based on what I felt was a fundamental approach to improvisation that was established by such original jazz masters as Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Jellyroll Morton, Johnny Dodds, Bix Beiderbecke, Kid Ory, Frankie Trumbauer, Benny Carter and Coleman Hawkins. All of these players created solos that serve as the backbone of the language we know of as the jazz improviser's vocabulary. Their body of work is unprecedented, since there are no significant recordings of authentic jazz before their collective output. We spend endless hours imitating, copying and transcribing their solos, but not as much time examining and studying the actual musical fabric that spawned their original work. These players did not have the advantage of being able to hear someone playing jazz and then copying it – they were the ones inventing the music at that time. With this in mind, I thought about the musical elements that existed in the early 1900s that all of the original jazz masters would have had in common as influential factors. These elements include the basic musical structures known as major and minor scales, triads and cultural affectations and performance practices that came from Blues music.

The Blues

Unfortunately, too many modern-day jazz educators and jazz musicians believe in a theory that the blues is a rudimentary form of "pre-jazz" music and therefore a point eventually arrives where one graduates or "moves on" from this element as a major source of jazz material. **There is no such dichotomy.** The blues and jazz are permanently linked, from both a cultural and musical standpoint. The sounds, colors, phrasing, rhythms, style and improvisational approaches incumbent to jazz all come from the blues. To think of "weeding" out these elements in lieu of what some deem to be a more

sophisticated matrix is as ridiculous and disastrous as seeking to eliminate the work of J.S.Bach from the study and practice of Classical music. Many also are confused by a philosophy that the sound of the blues is generated solely by the elements of the blues scale. However, the blues scale is a derivative of the **minor pentatonic scale**, which is a structure that is far more flexible in a broader view of jazz improvisation. It is this scale and its major equivalent, combined with the **Locrian scale** that I have used as a portion of my approach.

The Locrian Scale

In simple terms, the Locrian scale is a reconfigured major scale, which generates from the leading tone (seventh scale step). When used as source material for melodic lines, it is a very effective mechanism in being able to outline and suggest the standardized chord progressions and cadences common to jazz. It is commonly taught to many jazz musicians that the major scale itself presents problems when played over a major chord built from the same root as the scale. **The sound of the fourth scale step when emphasized melodically clashes with the third of the chord.** This is a very confusing concept to beginning soloists, because it seems illogical that a major scale does not fit a major chord. It was this very problem that led me to a point of discovery. What would happen if we were able to learn to improvise using a combination of the first things we learn in music?

Getting Started

Regardless of our instrument, we all start learning music through a set of common practices. As wind players, we learn how to produce a sound, and then we start learning to produce notes through a fingering sequence that we must memorize. This quickly results in a scale, usually C Major. Quite often our teachers will also show us the same scale on the piano (all white keys, no sharps or flats) and encourage us to play it and compare it to our C scale. Additionally, through such an example, or personal discovery, we find that the sound of the black keys played consecutively (the pentatonic scale) produces a very different sound, which we then compare to the sound of the major scale as well. We quickly recognize the sounds of each of these two scales to be very familiar to us through the majority of the music we hear daily and quite often, some teachers may even teach us a simple tune that can be played inside each scale. In my case, I use Duke Ellington's **C Jam Blues** and I show the students how to use the major and minor pentatonic scales to improvise over the simple blues progression (C7-F7-G7-C7). This also is a very effective tool in

encouraging the student to practice more to become fluent in all 12 keys. Since the sound of the blues is strongly suggested by the presence of the minor pentatonic I avoid teaching the blues scale until after this has been learned thoroughly. Once a student has a strong foundation in the performance of the pentatonic scales (in all keys), I introduce other chord structures over which they should improvise. These include the chord types of MA6, m6, MA7, m7, m7 (b5). I have them play in 16 to 32 bar vamps on each of these chords to help the reach a high level of skill and comfort in all 12 keys. Once this has been done, we play through a select group of standards that use a limited amount of chords in the progression and this allows the players to be successful very quickly.

After a detailed study of the aforementioned devices, it is time to apply the pentatonic scales combined now with the locrian scales over some of the more commonplace progressions in jazz. The first of such should be the **iim7-V7-I progression**. All exercises used should be learned in all keys.

You should remember that the locrian scale is simply the major scale of the chord of resolution (of a iim7-V7-Ima7 progression), starting on 7 and ending on 7. The ear does not perceive the conflict of the 4th scale degree with the third of the chord because the sound of the major 7th is a dominant force throughout the progression. The tonal center of the locrian scale is a critical note in each chord of this progression and it enhances the chordal accuracy of the subsequent lines played by the soloist. When you improvise, create lines that revolve around this note as your tonal center. In other words, even though you are in C Major, your tonal center is B. As you play it, make note of how it sounds against the chord.

The next step will be for you to create an improvised line from the scale that is similar in style. Keep doing this type of thing until you are very comfortable with doing so in all keys.

It is now time to repeat this process using lines based on the pentatonic scale. However, with the pentatonic approach there are two initial options, using scales built from the root and the fifth of the chord. You will notice that each pentatonic approach creates a slightly more angular type of line, in comparison to the more linear locrian based phrases.

After becoming comfortable with this concept, play through the progression of a standard tune using the scale devices previously discussed and then using your own ideas as developed from the same system. No matter how complex this tune is, it becomes much more manageable with a system as simple as this and you can use this method to master at least 85% of the standard jazz repertoire. This system provides a solid foundation for beginning improvisers or can aid more experienced players with bringing more clarity and definition to their solo work. The merging of these two sources can create a very spontaneous improvised solo that is rooted in the sounds of the origins of jazz. At the same time, it also exists as an “in the moment” experience for the listener and the performer. By definition, that is what Jazz is.

Horace Alexander Young is a multi-instrumentalist, vocal musician, composer-arranger and author. He is currently the Interim Director of Jazz Studies at Texas Southern University and teaches additional courses in Improvisation, Songwriting and Woodwinds at Houston Community College (Central Campus). His most recent recording, “Acoustic Contemporary Jazz”, is available on Pacific Coast Jazz.

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