How to Teach Improvisation and Integrate Into a Jazz Band Rehearsal

CLINICIAN:

Jim Snidero

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Teaching "Improvisation"

"Improvisation" may be the scariest word in music education. For the vast majority of educators, the notion of teaching improvisation, jazz or otherwise, is perceived to be so vague and susceptible to failure that most simply avoid the subject all together. But the word "improvisation" is fairly misleading, as much of what an improviser uses to create a solo is actually preconceived, and therefore can be taught beforehand.

When it comes to jazz improvisation, preconceived concepts regarding form, rhythm, melody, harmony and solo construction are just some of the elements that are tirelessly practiced and perfected by great improvisers (i.e. masters). This forms the basis for *what* will be played. In addition, masters have preconceived concepts regarding *how* they will play. Tone, technique, time feel, articulation, phrasing and vibrato style are often the thing that *most* identifies a master, being carefully formulated and developed, then repeated over and over again.

For example, if you've listened much to Charlie Parker, Miles Davis or Thelonious Monk, it would probably take you just a few seconds to identify them on the radio. The same can be said about virtually any historic jazz figure. The fact is that masters have a preconceived concept of what they're going to play and how they're going to play it.

The thing that separates a master from everyone else is a.) the quality and quantity of what's preconceived b.) art and c.) taste. The good news is that a. can be studied and practiced to the point that a student can gain control over a massive amount of preconceived concepts. The bad news is that not everyone can create a work of art, and not everyone has exquisite taste.

Masters strike a balance between preconceived concepts and going with the moment, letting their "spirit", for lack of a better term, lead them to very human expression. This creates a kind of inspired *flow*. And this sense of balance between essentially "knowing and not knowing", to quote Chick Corea from a 1976 *Keyboard Player* magazine article, is informed by incredible taste and yes, talent. But here's the thing: it's very tough to create b. and c. without a.! And a. is something that most definitely can be taught.

In *The Jazz Conception Company* multimedia course *"Jazz Improvisation-Part 1",* I don't focus much on chord/scale theory. In the beginning, it's just not that important. Three scale types and correlating chords are the only relationships I introduce over ten lessons. What I do focus on are the building blocks of melodies, timing and balance. This gives students defined material which they can then use to develop musical instincts.

The first step is to search out a bunch of melodies and melodic fragments, which I'll call "ideas". The best way to find great ideas is by listening to recordings of bona fide giants of jazz and transcribing them. In fact, these recordings are the best source for all elements of improvisation and jazz style. Listening is obviously paramount, and our improvisation course includes over 130 historic audio and video performances.

However, transcribing may be a bit daunting for many students, so in the beginning it's fine to use other sources, such as books or course material, to build a collection of ideas. An idea could be something as simple as one or two notes using a syncopated rhythm, a scale fragment or an arpeggio. It could be a blues idea or ideas utilizing timeless concepts such as enclosures of chord tones or lines guided by "goal" notes, all of which I discuss in the improvisation course. Students don't need a ton of ideas when starting out, but they should have a variety of ideas, mostly two measures or less, at their disposal so that they can assemble phrases that sound both interesting and logical.

The next step is memorizing these ideas. Students often memorize material in academic courses, so memorizing a musical idea shouldn't be any different than, for example, memorizing the sound and spelling of a word. An effective way to memorize an idea is to relate it to chord tones, for example 1, 2, 3, 5. Try to hear it and visualize either sheet music with the idea or fingerings, then play it. If a student can repeat an idea flawlessly ten times, they've probably got it. Repeat this process with about 15-20 ideas, all over a similar chord (e.g. F7 & Fmi7).

Now have students play over a simple form, in this case maybe a blues or an 8-measure section on F7 or Fmi7, inserting *one* idea every 2 measures. Some will be shorter than two measures, so they will rest. Some may be a bit longer than two measures, so after that idea, they might rest for a measure or so, or play a melodic fragment. But they should limit themselves to ideas that they've memorized, and they generally shouldn't be longer than two measures. Why two measures? In the beginning, it's a very natural way to group ideas and create symmetry. It's also much easier to keep your place in the form!

Finally, have students focus on the timing of each idea and how they compliment each other (balance). If one idea is active, dense with notes or rhythms, perhaps the next idea should be less active, using just a couple of notes or rhythms. If the contour of an idea ascends, perhaps the next idea might descend, creating a peak. If an idea descends, perhaps the next idea will ascend, creating a valley. This helps students to develop a sense of balance, maybe even taste. All of this is discussed in the improvisation course.

When students can reliably execute ideas they've memorized, and have instincts that allow them to assemble ideas in a logical and musical manner, they can say something when "improvising". The more material they have, the more they can say. Eventually, their instincts will allow them to play *new* things that they just hear at a certain moment, or react to what their bandmates are playing, saying things they've never said. They will then be able to balance their improvisation between "knowing and not knowing". It's powerful stuff, not to mention a whole lot of fun!

Jim Snidero is a saxophonist, author and educator living in New York City. He is the president of *The Jazz Conception Company*, producing multimedia courses on jazz improvisation and performance. Go to www.jazzimprovisation.com to find out more.

Excerpts from
"Lesson 7- Improvisation-Part 1"
Rehearsal Integration techniques

This lesson is really about keeping your place in a form and putting together a wide variety of ideas that are both logical and sound good, as well creating small variations in ideas that give students more freedom. The trick is to do all of it simultaneously. How? One step at a time! Without question, on the high school level, there's at least a semester of material contained within this lesson.

The material in this lesson is based on one chord/scale, concert Bb7 using Bb mixolydian, so understanding chord progressions and scale theory per se is not mandatory. What is mandatory is memorizing vocabulary, either 2 or 4 measure ideas, which consist of short simple melodies, scale fragments and arpeggios.

When you put memorizing vocabulary in the context of what many students must memorize for a marching band show (7-10 minutes), this is extraordinarily modest, perhaps 2 minutes of material. Using memorized vocabulary to develop timing is the best and quickest pathway to logical improvising.

However, there's really a tremendous amount of vocabulary within this lesson, so the reality is that most students will just scratch the surface. All educators, especially at the high school level, understand this. The more interested, and motivated the student is, the more they will have to work with.

It's obviously very important to encourage students to use what they've learned in an actual rehearsal and performance. One way is to simply have the rhythm section play 8-measure phrases on a Bb7. If the rhythm section is not too experienced, the included play alongs are excellent. Even better, find a chart that has a solo section based on Bb7. Here's are two charts, the fist one being quite easy, the second more advanced on a funk groove:

-*Flat Tire Blues*- Dean Sorenson, Dean Sorenson Music

-*Freedom Jazz Dance*- Eddie Harris, arranged by Eric Richards, Marina Music
(solo section based on 8ms Bb7 and 8ms Ab7)

Contents of Lesson 7 and appearance in video

Improvising over one chord (Bb7), basic form, 2-measure phrasing, 4-measure phrasing, riffs, memorization techniques, timing, entrance variations

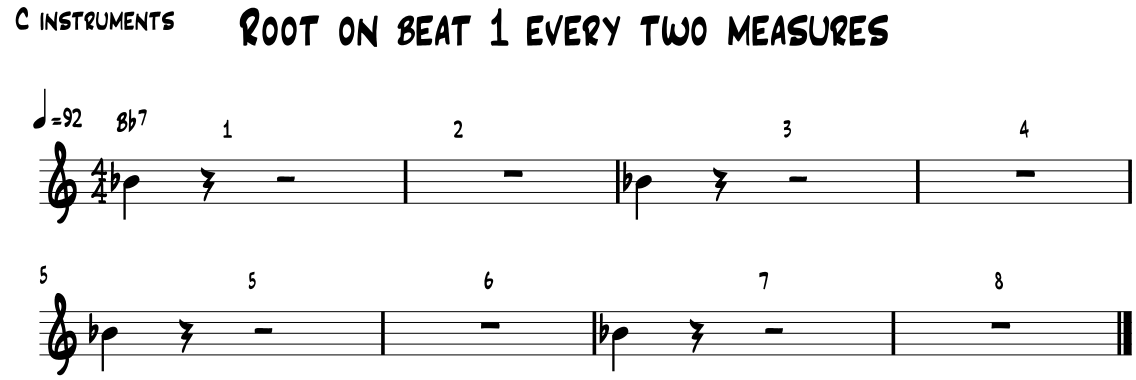
Play alongs-

-Play along 1- Awareness of form on medium swing (Bb7)
-Play along 2- Awareness of form on medium up swing (Bb7)

Two measure phrasing

1. Have students count 8 measures along with your rhythm section playing the 8 measure Bb7 form (or along with play along 1), two times through, 16 measures total.

2. With the rhythm section playing the same 16 measures, have the band play a concert Bb every two measures on beat one.



3. Do the same thing but stop the band in random places and ask them which measure they were on within the 8-measure form. This will force them to keep track of where they are while playing the Bb. Awareness of form and logical placement of vocabulary begins here.

4. Have students memorize the four 2-measure ideas at about 10:04 until they can play them in any order;

Two measure phrases # 1-4

1,2,3,4
2,1,4,3
3,2,1,4
and so on...

If possible in your classroom, write random orders of the 4 ideas on the black/smart board. If not, verbally tell them a random order. On the 8-measure form along with the student rhythm section or play along, see if the band can play each random sequence.

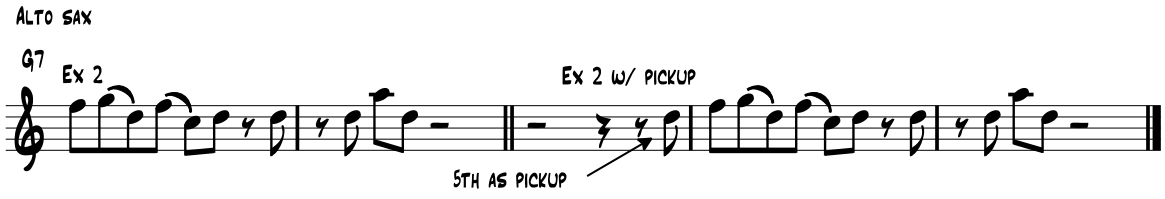
5. As a fun alternative to the entire band playing each sequence, have each section play one sequence along with the rhythm section. This becomes a bit of a game and challenge between sections.

You can also use the same method with the 4 riffs and 6 four-measure ideas, which would give students a wide variety of ideas to base their solos on. It's really up to the amount of time and enthusiasm of both the teacher and students.

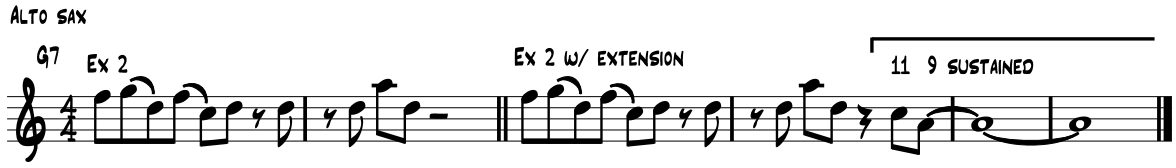
Adding pickups and extending 2-measure phrases

At about 10:52 in the lesson, the concept of adding notes to a 2 measure phrase is introduced. This technique allows an improviser to vary pre-determined material to greater musical effect. It gives students more freedom, but not too much freedom.

1. With or without the rhythm section or play along, ask individual students to add a *one-note* pickup to ideas that they have memorized. It can really be any note, either ascending or descending. Here's an example used in the lesson;



2. Now ask them to extend a ideas by two measures, using *1-3 notes* eventually connecting to a sustained note. This creates a four measure phrase that will generally sound logical in most forms. Here's the same example with an extension;



3. There are endless possibilities using these techniques, but some may be better than others within the context of a solo. Along with the student rhythm section or play along, have individual students solo over the 8-measure Bb7 form, using these rules as a guide line;

- Solo based exclusively on memorized 2 measure ideas
- May add a one-note pickup to memorized 2 measure ideas
- May extend a memorized 2-measure idea to create a 4-measure idea
- Ideas must be used within 2 or 4 measure "chunks" from the beginning of the form
- If teacher stops rhythm section, student should know where they are in 8-ms form
- Student should try to anticipate ideas with their ears and play musically
- Ideas should be in time with good phrasing and articulation.

Drive home the point that flow and context of ideas are important. This will help students to think in the abstract and make musical choices that have the potential to tell a story. It's very powerful stuff.

Introducing scale and arpeggio material on Bb7

Scale ideas

At about 17:27, a variety of ideas using both the ascending and descending Bb mixolydian scale are introduced (note; for the time being, this scale is explained as being a major scale with a flat 7, not as a mode of a major scale).

Scale ideas are a crucial element utilized by master improvisers that add a linear component often linking melodic material (e.g. a 2-measure non-scale idea). It is often missing in inexperienced improvisers, resulting in solos that sound fragmented and lack flow.

Introducing *vocabulary* utilizing the Bb mixolydian scale, instead of just the scale itself, puts the scale in a musical context that allows students to add a variety of linear ideas to their repertoire of 2 or 4 melodic, non-scale ideas.

1. Have students memorize the eight 2-measure scale ideas introduced in this section.

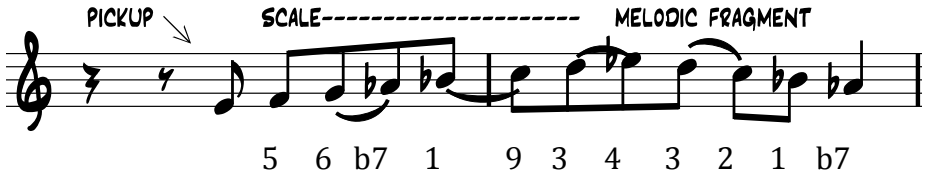
All of the ideas are organized by inversions (root, 3rd, 5th, etc...). Some have approach tones or extensions with a melodic fragment to put them in a more musical context, but the core concept of the idea is from a particular inversion.

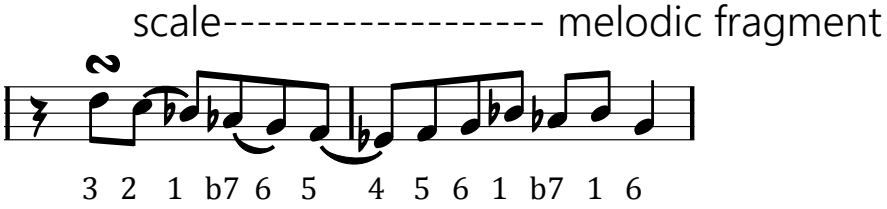
You can begin a scale from any inversion. Here's how the examples are organized;

Ascending;
-Root to 7
-3rd-9th
-5th-11th
-7-13

Descending;
-13-6th
-3rd-4th
-9th-3rd
-7th-6th

2. Use the same random-order method along with the rhythm section or play along to drill students on the eight 2 measure scale ideas. One good way to remember ideas is the scale degree on which they begin.

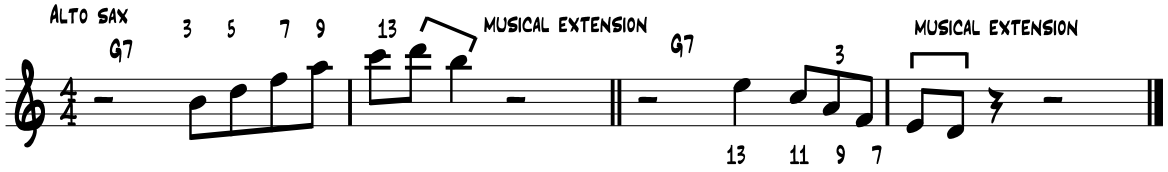




Arpeggio ideas

The same concept is used to understand and integrate arpeggios; ascending and descending from different inversions, adding pickups or extensions, all within the context of vocabulary.

1. Here are two examples from different inversions ascending and descending;



2. Use the same random-order method along with the rhythm section or play along to drill students on the eight 2 measure scale ideas. Once again, scale degrees are the easiest way to remember these ideas.

As mentioned, it's really up to the amount of rehearsal time and enthusiasm of both the teacher and students. However, scale and arpeggio ideas are fairly easy to learn (they're based on logical, simple math), especially on a Bb7, and will add quite a bit to a young improvisers repertoire. It's an easy way to add vocabulary.

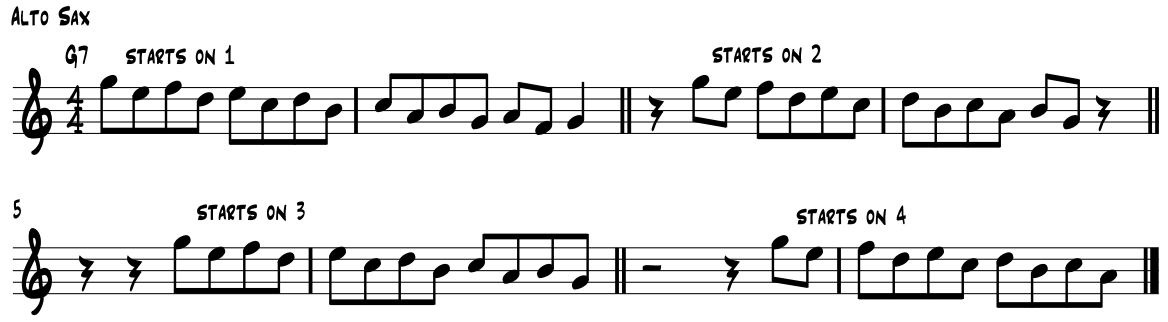
Timing Variations

The last segment of the lesson touches on two simple techniques that can be used to vary the timing of pre-conceived ideas;

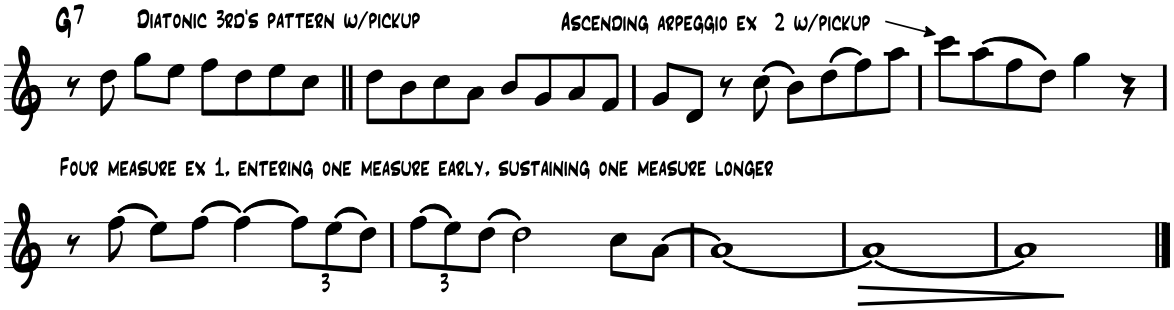
-Inserting rests within an idea or phrase
-Displacing the entrance of an idea

There are specific examples within the lesson that demonstrate displacement, but let's use a one of the patterns provided in the lesson as an example;

Displaced entrances on 3rd pattern



This pattern is included in the last section of the 32-measure study at the end of the lesson;



Putting it all together and improvising

1. The 32 measure study demonstrates how concepts within this lesson, including displacement, can be put together to create a musical statement. If students memorize this study (it's about a minute's worth of music, much lesson than any marching band show!) they will get a feeling for solo construction, timing and variation, all using material from the lesson. Have students play this study along with the rhythm section, big band solo section or play along.

2. Now ask them to improvise, using as much as they can from the lesson. There's really enough within the lesson to build a solid foundation for improvising on Bb7. The goal is for students to recall as many ideas as possible, sections from the 32 measure study, putting them all together to create a logical and musical solo. Encourage students to more-or-less stick to lesson material, but remind them that they can displace ideas as long as they don't lose their place in the form.

3. While one student solos, have the other students listen, and maybe even critique the solo. How much vocabulary could they recall? How much variation? How musical was the solo? Then have another student solo with students listening again. The better improvisers will try to create even better solos, and the less-experienced improvisers will begin to think in the abstract.

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