

## Jazz Improvisation as a Language by Mike Metheny



Mike Metheny solos on the EVI in 1994 at  
Jardine's Jazz Club in Kansas City, MO.  
(Photo by Beverly Rehkop)

At my clinics, workshops, and summer camp classes, I usually begin each jazz improv session with this question:

"How many of you are studying, or have studied, a foreign language in school?"

And, of course, most hands are raised.

It then becomes my goal to illustrate how that endeavor is very similar to learning the language of jazz improvisation. Both have much in common.

I have a hand-out I like to use that breaks this noble journey into three main parts or "legs," each of which are made up of various essential components.

### **Part One**

- a) Technical requirements for respective instruments.
- b) Developing aural skills.
- c) A study of the vocabulary of jazz improvisation.
- d) Many hours of practice.
- e) Learning the repertoire.
- f) A study of jazz history.
- g) Many diverse influences.

## Part Two

- a) Experience.
- b) Instincts.
- c) Growth, curiosity, and evolution as a musician.
- d) A constant search for a personal musical style.

## Part Three

...and the final destination, which is often elusive and reserved for the elite: An individual musical style or identity used to communicate to maximum effect with other musicians as well as members of an audience.

\* \* \*

The importance of dealing with the **technical requirements** of our instruments (and that includes voice) goes without saying. One way or another, formally or independently, we must achieve a level of freedom and mastery that enables us to explore the musical possibilities without excessive concern about chops, fingerings and fundamentals. Keith House, my brilliant high school teacher in Lee's Summit, MO, always used to say, "Master the instrument. Don't let it master you."

Concurrent with acquiring technique is the development of strong **aural skills** from various ear-training exercises and/or transcription. Today you can buy books full of ready-made solo transcriptions, but I still suggest doing it "the old fashioned way." Also, "a picture is worth a thousand words," as the old saying goes. Just the simple act of listening to great artistry can do wonders when it comes to charting and navigating the course.

A study of the "**vocabulary**" of **jazz improvisation** is where the foreign language analogy really begins. The more sophisticated your choice of notes ("words") in an improvised solo the more stimulating the dialogue will be. There's an expression I first heard in college (it could have been directed at me!): "He plays white note jazz." That's when the note choices tend to stay safely on the white keys of the piano rather than utilizing hipper upper structure tensions such as altered 9ths, 11ths and 13ths, the "black keys." It is when attempting to expand this part of your vocabulary that a better understanding of chord structures, scales and modes becomes vitally important. Either by direct academic study or focused ear training and imitation, this aspect of developing a growing jazz vocabulary is a must.

(A sidebar about imitation. We learn to speak before we learn to read, and that is because we are around adults whose speech we can imitate. In jazz our "parents" can be recordings -- or live performances -- of jazz masters who lead the way by example, which is why constant listening is so crucial.)

And let's not forget about an effective use of space in an improvised solo. Just like your sentences and paragraphs in spoken conversation have commas, periods and pauses, so must your jazz solos. "It took me 30 years to learn what NOT to play" is a favorite quote attributed to Dizzy Gillespie. And it is a reminder that even the legends have to resist the temptation to run their words and sentences together and play everything they know, rather than picking and choosing with measured discretion. (Looking for a role model here? Miles Davis.)

**Many hours of practice** is another no-brainer. And for we aspiring jazz improvisers the advent of the play-alongs has been a blessing. To this day I'm still coming up with new twists and turns as I practice with some of the earliest Jamey Aebersold recordings. I strongly recommend that entire series. (And you only have to pay "the band" once!)

And one more note when it comes to practice in general: I will never forget something the great trumpeter Doc Severinsen said to me several years ago: "I figure that between now and the day I die I can always try to improve." Doc was 70 years old at the time and was still spending many hours a day in the woodshed. That puts some things into perspective, doesn't it?

**Learning the repertoire** begs the question: what *is* the repertoire? For the purpose of this discussion let's limit it to the blues (in the keys of Bb and F to start, others eventually), several blues heads ("Freddie Freeloader" and "Blue Monk" in Bb, "Now's the Time" and "Straight, No Chaser" in F, "All Blues" in G), and those timeless "standards" that will make anyone's short list. "Blue Bossa," "All the Things You Are," "Stella By Starlight," "There Will Never Be Another You," Jobim's greatest hits... Rest assured, if you plan to sit in at jam sessions, those tunes will be called up. And if you don't know them your time on the bandstand will be limited. (You might even have a cymbal thrown at you, if legend is true about a young, unprepared Charlie Parker.)

Regarding **jazz history**, I've lost count of all the times I've heard veteran musicians say, "You must know where the music has been to know where it is going," or words to that effect. When I was teaching at Berklee 30 years ago -- a school that is heavily populated by guitar players -- my classroom students were sometimes surprised to learn (from an eyewitness) that, as a kid, my brother Pat was a dedicated student of past jazz greats, owning and studying his first Wes Montgomery records while still in junior high school. Today's jazz students have the added advantage of living at a time where most anything you'd ever want to check out can be found on the internet. If you are just beginning as an improviser, ask your teacher to give you a list of suggested listening. And make sure it's not limited only to the instrument you play. I've learned as much, if not more, from non-trumpet players.

Which segues nicely into the importance of having **many diverse influences**. Did you know that Charlie Parker was influenced by Igor Stravinsky? Neither did I until Dr. Billy Taylor (who played with 'Bird) mentioned it to me. There is a danger of limiting influences to safe and familiar favorites. Keep an open mind. There are inspiring musicians out there you haven't heard of yet who will turn your musical life around in ways you never imagined.

\* \* \*

Part Two of the journey gets into nebulous areas that have more to do with the individual musician and his or her cumulative **experience** than anything you can get from reading this article or going to Berklee. I think it was the pianist Bill Evans who once said (I'm paraphrasing), "I'd rather not listen to anyone under 30. They haven't lived enough life to have anything interesting to say." Maybe yes, maybe no on that. We've all heard amazing jazz improvisers who were quite young. But do they bring as much poise, soul and humanity to the music at 20 as they will at 50 or 60? See above under "Dizzy Gillespie."

Another way to describe "**instinct**" could be the term "natural talent," which gets into murky and somewhat subjective areas. One person's perceived lack of natural ability could actually be potential genius in disguise waiting to blossom. That said, there are those among us who clearly have more of the gift for music than others. (And why is it that the ones most lacking in talent tend to have the most confidence? Never mind. That's another essay.)

**Growth** combined with **curiosity** and **evolution** is an ongoing process that never ends, that is if we want to sound fresh for the duration of a career. (See above under "Doc.") And again it's an individual thing. Without naming names, think of musicians who peaked at a certain point and never really grew beyond that. Now think of those who were never satisfied, never stopped learning, and remained curious explorers 24/7. (See above under "Pat." Oops, sorry. I just named a name.) I'm recalling the time I had the pleasure of meeting the great classical French hornist and brass teacher Philip Farkas. It was the summer of 1992, I was dealing with some chops issues, and I contacted Mr. Farkas about a lesson, knowing that he was one of the world's foremost authorities on embouchure. Long story short: At that time Mr. Farkas was 78 years old, still passionately interested in all forms of music, and after our three-hour "lesson" -- with me mostly asking him tons of questions about his amazing life -- he walked me to my car so he could get a look at the EVI (electronic valve instrument) that was packed in my trunk. We talked for another half an hour about that, this time with Mr. Farkas asking all the questions. He died four months later, curious to the end.

\* \* \*

What is a **personal musical style** or "**identity?**" As easy as it is to list the elements that comprise it -- tone, touch, note choices, space choices, time, pitch, vibrato, phrasing, accuracy, influences -- it can be far more difficult to achieve a recognizable style of one's own.

I'm remembering another saying from my youth that was fairly common back in the days of turntables: "You can drop a needle on a record and know who it is after one note." Today you would "drop a laser on a CD," but the point is still the same. And when you think about the notable stylists who would be members of that elite group, there aren't that many. Dizzy, Miles, 'Bird, 'Trane, Ella, Sarah, Chet, Clark, Freddie... (interesting that one name is all we need). And let's not forget Stan Getz, Paul Desmond, Art Farmer, and all the other one-note needle-droppers who shaped the history of jazz. These are the icons we still study and enjoy and whose shoes may never be filled. On some powerful, almost intangible level, each captured the ultimate essence of jazz as a language, which is to tell a story ("My horn is an extension of myself," said the Father of Jazz, Louis Armstrong) and to communicate on the highest level. Not just with the other musicians, but

with those who want to hear what is being expressed. What *needs* to be expressed.

"The audience is the fifth member of the quartet," Dave Brubeck once said. And it is my wish that, as you hone and refine your own take on the language of jazz, your audiences will be attentive, appreciative and hip, your musical conversations soulful, uplifting and deep, and your journey rewarding, worthwhile, and most of all, great fun.

\* \* \*

Mike Metheny performs on flugelhorn, cornet and EVI in the Kansas City area. He also spent many years living in Boston where he led his own quartet and taught at the Berklee College of Music. In addition to being a performer and educator, Mike is a professional writer and a past editor of JAM, Kansas City's "Jazz Ambassador Magazine." He has recorded eight solo albums and has appeared on many others as a sideman.

URLs of possible interest:

<http://www.mikemetheny.com>

<http://www.methenymusicfoundation.org>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TOd6iOO05Q>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyKqwy06QdM&feature=related>

(c) 2009

---