

## 8 Things For Starters

### Musical Improvisation Basics - 8 Vital Things To Remember

This article discusses 8 basic paradigms and practices, which are really helpful for improvisers - whether advanced or just getting started:

1. Your technique is probably miles ahead of your ability to think.

This isn't just true for classical players. I've known lots and lots (and lots) of jazz players who have let their technique run the show as opposed to their brains. Happens all the time.

With players who are just beginning to improvise, this is vital to keep in mind. Slow down! Even at furious tempi, you can "long meter" melodic phrases that dance and skip over the fast tempo - thinking them in real time. And you can have great precision and musicality in doing so.

FYI, most players who play so fast you are asking yourself how can they think that stuff in real time - probably aren't really thinking that stuff in real time. Most are performing a memorized, yet impressive move. Sort of a human software, "sub-routine call." To me, not the real thing.

Personally, I'd rather listen to simple ideas that are inspired than impressive, over-thought, over-prepared ideas any day. Particularly when they are masquerading as "improvisation."

2. You will be playing unexpected notes (mistakes) in the best of situations.

Yes, I know, we're supposed to KNOW what we are doing. But to get good at anything, we have to stretch, and stretching means taking risks, and taking risks means making mistakes.

Over time, you really will be able to hear a melody and execute it flawlessly. But by then, you'll be stretching into new realms of harmony or rhythm and hearing more possibilities in melody - and making more mistakes. It really never stops, if you're doing it right.

3. Keep a music manuscript journal.

Write down any ideas that you have - chords, bits of melody, melodic shapes, anything. Use the notation system devised over hundreds of years. If you can't be precise, don't be. If all you can think of is a rhythm with undefined notes, write the rhythm with X's as the notes - defining them as non-specific. Non-specific is good.

4. Here's a big one - sing with your playing.

Start now. Start with your current repertoire. By doing so, we are unconsciously hooking up our brain with our voice with our instrument.

What we're reaching for is the ability to "sing" our lines as we create them, simultaneously playing the right notes on our instrument. That's a non-linear jump, but we can build the muscles for that now.

If you've ever heard a Keith Jarrett record, you've probably heard all the weird noises he makes with his phrases. Sounds like he's squeezing one out (and that's probably not far from the truth...). I think I can safely say that he is letting his phrases force the issue, physically and mentally. He doesn't sing perfect notes, but almost the intention of his lines - as I have said in the past, "riding the forward momentum of the moment's creation." You'll note that the intensity of his vocalizations seem phrase related, as opposed to note defined. He sure ain't singing melody.

So, if you can't sing your phrases, growl them. Get yourself to the next level by allowing the force of the music to drive the notes and phrases out of you. In time, they begin to align.

5. Here's a related one - Think in terms of phrases, as opposed to notes.

Be non-specific. Any way we can keep the big picture in mind is a very good thing. I have found that painting the big picture, tends to forgive the micro mistakes.

Another approach is to think in terms of texture as opposed to notes. This frees us from note definition and allows for us to discover the music that transcends note specific thinking.

6. Create some time every day for you to experiment and not sound good.

This process really does take a daily commitment to achieve. Spend a good 20 minutes playing stuff you are willing to sound outright "wrong." If you have to wear headphones with an electronic instrument in order keep the ego unmolested - so be it. But spend this time.

7. Mistakes often are the best means for discovering something that is unique to you.

This is a really big one. We are all shaped by a compilation of experiences, positive and negative, over the course of our life.

Why would music be any different?

When you make a mistake, you may find a new melodic idea, a new harmony, a new voicing. Write these down in your music manuscript journal (see above). They will become the basis for your own library of musical ideas that are unique to you.

A caveat. Your mistake generated idea may not be totally original. Your F minor 9 voicing may be the same one 40,000

other pianists may use. But it is your process that delivered the idea, and that process is entirely unique. It may make you write material that is particularly F minor 9 centric. Maybe that way, you'll write music that hasn't been thought of before coming from that point of view.

Music improvisation is a non-linear explosion of creative thought.

What makes us unique in life, works the same way in the music that we create. Even if you were an identical clone of someone, there is no one who has all of your experiences and made the mistakes you've made.

Use this.

8. Finally, build a safe space for this development so you aren't dissuaded from your path.

This process is a very personal one. Sharing your results may not impress anyone except yourself for now. That's fine. Keep it private as needed. The last thing you need to do is show your journal to someone who says, "Oh yeah, I've seen that before. So and so did it this way, and so and so did it that way." Deflation does not breed continuity.

It's almost as though you are building your "Chi." In martial arts, "Chi" is the life force that is released upon a move (maybe that's what Jarrett is up to...).

You are interested in building your musical "Chi," because that will permit things to happen that won't happen any other way. Deflating it by sharing with the wrong people is counter-productive and makes little sense.

I hope that this article has been helpful to you. If you like it, gift it to someone. I only ask that you credit me as below:

Â©2005 Ben Dowling, the author of "The Metaphysics of Improvisation" - is a pianist, composer and an authority on music improvisation who publishes Music-Improv.com, a web site that provides useful paradigms and practices for musicians interested in expanding their ability to improvise.

Learn more about the conceptual and metaphysical underpinnings of musical improvisation by visiting <http://www.music-improv.com>

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