

BEGINNINGS:



# A Process to Jazz Improvisation

by Bobby Selvaggio

**H**ow do we go about becoming spontaneous improvisers? How do we achieve this while adhering to the traditions of jazz music? How do we take jazz language and not purely imitate, but develop and make it a point of inspiration? How do we create technique that helps our creation of ideas, not just our ability to play patterns in all 12 keys? These are questions students have to deal with as they develop their improvisational skills.

Part of the foundation of improvisation is built by learning the language of jazz and understanding how it works – by immersing ourselves in the music, transcribing jazz language, and imitating the sounds and shapes we hear. This is an essential part of the learning process. The next question is, after we have started building our foundation, how do we use that knowledge? Or, how do we break free from the restraints of that knowledge? Do we use language as a final say and have it dictate how we improvise through repeating

**“ As a jazz musician, individuality is stifled by the limitations of sounds you hear. ”**

or regurgitating it? Or, do we use language as a starting point to inspire us and help us to create our own identity?

Too often, I hear students practicing patterns, or “licks,” over and over in different keys, *but* without any variation. There is no development of the idea, only the one idea. As a jazz musician, individuality is stifled by the limitations of sounds you hear. If all you hear is that one idea, then all you will play is that one idea. If all you hear is someone else’s language, then all you will play is someone else’s language.

What we should be concerned with is what is there after that one idea. I’ve found that no matter how complex or intricate you try to play, it usually comes from very simple and basic ideas. I truly believe it’s not about bold new ideas that no one has ever heard before, but about the individual. What can *you* do with the music? How many ways can *you* turn something around? Then you’ll play things no one has ever heard before.

## Diatonic Technique

scale motion - C major scale up to the 9th



intervals - C major scale in 3rds



C major scale in 4ths



C major scale in 5ths



C major scale in 6ths



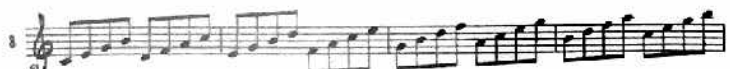
C major scale in 7ths



triads - C major scale



7th arpeggios - C major scale



# basictraining

## Building a Strong Foundation

If you are looking to learn how to be a jazz improviser, there are some things you need to do. First, make sure you are studying with an experienced teacher. Second (with an understanding that this is a long process), there are things that you should do, and skills you should be mastering, that are fundamental to the whole process.

C major scale in 3rds up, up



C major scale in 4ths down, down



C major scale in triads up, down



C major scale in 7th arpeggios down, up



**Listening/Transcribing:** Listen to jazz music every day. Immerse yourself in the sounds and shapes of jazz improvisation. I can't stress this enough. It is essential to listen to all sorts of music, from jazz to classical to rock to pop to Middle Eastern to African, and so on. You will find inspiration from all of them. But, if you are going to build a *jazz sense*, you have to listen to *jazz music*.

If you have not done much listening yet, my suggestion would be to listen to players on your instrument to help give you a sense of elements like sound, time, phrasing, and language. You should listen to players on all instruments as you progress, but it's a good starting point to begin with your instrument. Also, start with masters of the past (such as Charlie Parker, John Coltrane – early Coltrane to start, Clifford Brown, Bud Powell, Max Roach, Paul Chambers, and so on).

Transcribe, or write down what you are listening to. Learn tunes, the melodies and harmonies, by ear and write them out. Only use a fake book as a last resort to learning a tune. Find the improvisations that really knock you out and write them out. Analyze what they are playing (with the help of a teacher, if needed). Steal what they are playing to help build a strong foundation of jazz language.

C Major scale in 3rds: root position



C Major scale in 3rds: 1st inversion starting from the 3rd



C major scale in triads: 2nd inversion starting from the 5th



C Major scale in 7th arpeggios: 3rd inversion starting from the 7th



## Imitation, Assimilation, Innovation

Believe me, all the modern players we love to listen to and imitate went through the same process when they were getting started. It is important to build a strong foundation of Tradition, History, and Language. You can progress to more modern players as you go along. You don't build a house from the roof down! Also, as part of the listening process, you should transcribe as many solos as possible, gaining inspiration for the improvisational process. There are books of transcribed solos out there, but it's more important to go through the process yourself. Listening over and over to get it in your ears will help to give you a good jazz sense.

C Major scale combined with 3rds



C Major in triads with scale motion



C Major scale in 7th arpeggios with scale motion



C major in 3rds and triads



C Major in triads and 7th arpeggios



**Technique:** You *have* to have command of all 12 major scales, all minor scales, diminished, and whole tones (to start with). These are the basic tonalities you will run into when you are improvising over standards. Being able to play the shapes of all the basic musical elements is vital to creating music: scale motion, intervals, triads, and arpeggios.

For us to get to a point of being able to play anything we hear, which is essential for spontaneous improvisation (which allows for total interaction with the musicians around us), we have to have a certain level of technique, virtuosic technique – you’re playing should be effortless and having an immediacy. Again, this is a life-long goal. Don’t expect to gain that kind of technique instantly. It comes from patient, disciplined, and even/steady practice. It helps to be organized when you practice.

C major scale in triads: 351



C major scale in triads: 3531



C Major scale in 7th arpeggios: 37531



**Theory:** You need to have a strong sense of outlining chords (functional, nonfunctional, modal, et cetera) using chord tones, the understanding of jazz language and how it works, and the history and tradition of jazz – learning repertoire; unconsciously knowing what all the jazz chord symbols mean and what tonalities go with them. To get started, you need a basic knowledge of jazz theory, such as modes of the major scale, the diatonic ii V I progression, and chord tones. These ideas are the building blocks to jazz improvisation. You will eventually need to be unconscious with all of these elements.

Spontaneous improvisation isn’t about thinking through what you are playing as you are playing. When you are playing a Dmin7 chord, you unconsciously understand the notes you can use, how

C Major Scale

ii - D Dorian ( 2nd scale degree of C Major scale ) - ii minor 7 - D minor 7

V - G Mixolydian ( 5th scale degree of C Major scale ) - V Dominant 7 - G 7

to use them, and then respond to the shapes and sounds you are hearing with the technique available.

There have been various ways of learning how to improvise throughout the history of jazz. Reading biographies (which you should do) of the jazz legends can give some very insightful approaches to how they went through the process. Some people have the adaptability to learn in a more traditional way and have a natural sense of creating lines and language in general.

One thing I’ve noticed with your typical high school and early college-age student is there’s something missing from the ears (probably because of the musical environment they have grown up in) that would normally lend a player the ability to hear, understand, and play certain types of sounds and shape. Today’s younger generation isn’t growing up with jazz music as a major musical force in their existence. Sometimes they are steered in that direction by a teacher, but often it’s not part of their everyday life. I also see a lack of an improvisational nature in the student.

Sometimes you should just pick up your horn and play anything that comes to you, no matter what it is. Do not be shy about playing anything just because you think someone else doesn’t want to hear it. There are many ways of approaching improvising, from traditional to very modern, but the knowledge of how jazz language works will open up the doors to all of the other possibilities. Take your time with everything you do. There is not a magic wand that you can use to make you an instant master and speed up the process.

Part of the beauty you hear in Coltrane, Charlie Parker, and the countless other masters is the struggle they went through to get to where they did. Struggling through the process is part of the point. I believe there are three ways you learn things. The first one is the most obvious: going through the technical process on whatever medium you are dealing with. The second is going through the process of explaining how you do something to someone else. The third is living with it day in and day out. Having the passion and drive to want to continually learn new things and get better, for yourself.

It’s on *you* to create your energy and passion for this music. No one else will create it for you. Don’t write everything out. Try playing by ear and let that guide you. Only write out things to document your progress. And, it’s not my job to write it all out for you. If you want to become a true spontaneous improviser, you’ll have to be able and want to do the work for *yourself*.



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