



## Approaches to Jazz Improvisation

Author: John Clarke

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At a recent club night, several members posed the question – ‘How do you improvise?’. Having learned some chords and scales, how does that knowledge help you play a good improvised chorus on a jazz tune ?

We would all like to hear the definitive answer to that question. A few people can improvise great jazz intuitively, without any deep knowledge or understanding of how they do it. For the rest of us, some knowledge and guidance can only be helpful, and in this article I will attempt to pass on some insights I have gleaned in my long and undistinguished guitar playing experience !

Improvisation does not uniquely define jazz. Baroque music, for example, frequently directs the soloist to improvise over a ‘figured bass line’, something akin to a chord sequence, I understand.

The pianist Bill Evans is quoted as saying that jazz is a ‘how’ rather than a ‘what’, and I would definitely agree with that. In other words, the techniques for improvising are the same as for improvising in any style of music. What makes an improvised chorus a jazz improvisation is how it is played.

Paul Desmond, alto-saxophone player with The Dave Brubeck Quartet for many years, and composer of one of the most well known jazz pieces ever, ‘Take Five’, noted the following :

*"(The poet)Milton, of all people, gave the most perfect definition of the state of mind required to play jazz: 'with wanton heed and giddy cunning': that's how you play jazz."*

The words Milton used were not about jazz, and have other meanings in contemporary language, but after checking the words in my Thesaurus, I think I can explain exactly what Paul Desmond understood from them in the jazz context.

The closest I got for ‘wanton’, was ‘un-fettered’. In other words, when you are improvising jazz you need to ‘let go’. ‘Heed’, in this context means ‘being watchful, careful, taking note of, etc’, so you still have to watch out for those avoid notes, what doesn’t fit the style of the tune, what the others in the band are doing, etc.

‘Giddy’, was harder to relate to, but I think in this context it means something like ‘staggering’ or of exceptional magnitude, as in ‘giddy heights’. ‘Cunning’ is easier, and I think it means making the not so obvious connections, being inventive, and thinking on your feet. Jazz improvisation is not about churning out pre-rehearsed licks, or other players’ solos you have learned.

I also think of it like running across a river very quickly using stepping-stones. You know you have to step on the stones, but not exactly which ones – you have to just go for it, and let your subconscious mind and feet make the decisions.

Hopefully, this points you in the right direction in terms of the frame of mind you need to cultivate when improvising i.e. ‘the how’, but some suggestions regarding specific techniques i.e. ‘the what’ are also put forward in this article.

So what are the pre-requisites for being able play improvised jazz ? You don’t have to know all of the following, but the more you know, the easier improvising will become.

- what the notes are on all strings and frets
- chord shapes for all major, minor, and dominant chords and their alterations e.g. C7 b5, G7#9, etc in all positions at least up to the 12<sup>th</sup> fret
- for each of these chords, knowing which finger is fretting the intervals of the chord i.e. the root, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, maj7<sup>th</sup>, etc.
- major, melodic and harmonic minor scales, starting on various frets and strings
- the major and melodic minor scales starting on each of the notes other than the first e.g. the notes of the major scale of Bb, starting with C, generates a minor scale known as the Dorian minor scale
- some 'licks'. These are little phrases you collect by experimenting and listening. If you get your licks from just one source, that's plagiarism. Get them from a wide range of sources, and the set of licks you like will define your style – that's OK !

A good starting point is to take a tune with a simple chord sequence, or a blues.

Work out the chords in different positions, and visualise the shapes at each position. The fretted strings are your 'stepping stones'. Next, try making up little phrases just using these notes. Just the notes from one chord position to begin with, then using notes from the other positions. Have the original tune's melody in mind when doing this. If your phrases hint at this, that's good.

To expand the scope of this improvising technique, try approaching each chord tone from the note above or below it. This will give you more stepping stones, and most of these notes will sound fine against the underlying chord.

Still sticking with improvisation based on chord tones, use the same stepping stone technique, but using the chord tones of chords that substitute for the original chord. So over 4 bars of a G major chord, you can substitute Gmaj7, G6, Em9, Am7 or Bm7 chords, for example, and use the notes in these chords to expand the number of stepping stones you have available.

To further expand your awareness of the available stepping stone notes you can choose for your improvised phrase, you can use the scales applicable to each chord. That's a subject in its own right, but to begin with, take the notes of, say, a G major scale played over a G major chord. Phrases using any of the notes in this scale will sound OK against the chord. Sometimes a 'run' using the whole scale will sound good, but too much of this, and your solos will sound correct, but boring. Use the notes to make up interesting sounding melodies, phrasing them in a 'jazzy' way.

What do I mean by this, and how do you do it? That's difficult to describe in words, but if you like jazz and have an ear for it, you will know what I mean. You can develop your sense of jazz feeling by listening to jazz. There's such a wide spectrum of it, played on all kinds of instruments, so even if you don't like ALL jazz, listen to as wide a cross section as you can of what you like. Listen to pianists, sax, trumpet, and the other major jazz instruments, not just guitarists, to develop your ear for good jazz phrasing. Good big bands and jazz vocalists can also provide further inspiration for good jazz phrasing.

Use the chord and scale based stepping stone techniques to expand your awareness of the notes available to you, and from that build-up your own phrases and licks over the tunes and chord sequences you know, piece by piece.

You can do this on your own, but you'll find yourself being far more innovative if you're playing with someone else, or against chords you have pre-recorded, or against a backing tape/CD (many available from Jazzwise and music shops, or for the computer equipped, 'Band-In-Box'). As your ear for jazz develops, you'll find that what the bass player or pianist is playing, for example, will suggest phrases to you which you would not have thought of by yourself. This for me defines the

joy of playing jazz with others, so play along with records, recorded backing tracks, sit-in at jam sessions, or play with a friend, and you'll soon see what I mean.

Lastly, lets talk about rhythm. Jazz improvisation is not just about playing appropriate and interesting notes. It's phrasing these in a 'swinging' way, which makes it a jazz improvisation. Some players seem to be born with this sense of swing, but not all. I don't think you would be reading this article if you had no sense of swing at all, but you may need to develop that aptitude. The best thing for this, again, is listening to those who do it well, not just passively, but actively analysing what they are doing, copying phrases you like, and so on.

To sum up, first develop your improvising tool-set, listen to the great jazz players to develop your feel for the music, then let-go, whilst taking note of what you are playing and who you are playing it with, and apply your mind and musical 'soul' to being as inventive and original as you can. In other words play with 'wanton heed, and giddy cunning', as the man said !

- **John Clarke**