

Jim Novak

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DUNSCOMB & HILL, Chapter 9 - 10

Do you have any experience with performing or teaching improvisation? What are the big hurdles to teaching this in your situation? Do you have a method or success story to share? Use the resources provided in Assignments under Content, the DVD, personal experience and other sources to inform the discussion. This is one of the main aspects of jazz music and one where people feel the most uncomfortable. What strategies could you employ to make improvisation less scary for your students.

Hill discusses two concepts repeatedly in Chapter 9: developing aural skills and jazz vocabulary. These are absolutely the key to getting over the fear of improvisation, particularly with less experienced musicians. The most common reaction or comment I hear from my middle school students when it comes to improvisation is "I don't know what to play." I feel like the two concepts that Hill addresses in this chapter really help to assuage those fears.

I have to start by saying that I do not have any formal training in improvisation. My high school and college band directors were outstanding, but I don't remember them talking about it much in jazz band. We were given opportunities to solo, and it either went well, or it didn't. It is something I have always struggled with, and it took a long time for me to get a little comfortable helping my students with it.

My approach starts with keys, scales, chord symbols, and scale degrees. The students need to know the "word bank" from which they can draw notes on any given chord symbol. I would start with a piece that wasn't tremendously varied in its chordal vocabulary. A 12-bar blues is always a good starting point. Once they understand scale degrees, I might have them play through the blues with only scale degree 1. On the next chorus, I might ask them to play on scale degrees 1 and 3, and it would expand from there. Here is a progression I might have a student work through on the blues chords:

Playing up the scale degrees:

1

1 2 3

1 3

1 3 5

1 2 3 5

1 2 3 4 5

1 3 5 7

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Playing down the scale degrees:

1

1 7

1 7 6 5

1 7 5

1 7 5 3

5 3 1

5 4 3 2 1

5 3 1 7

Each time, we would expand their vocabulary, so that when they see a F7 chord symbol, they have a working knowledge of what would fit well into that measure.

Once they have an understanding of what fits, the next step is to try to create musical ideas. I always ask them to approach improvisation in small, safe chunks. In a 12-bar blues form, I might ask them to solo over a measure, then rest a measure, then solo over a measure, then rest. The next time, they might try three measures of improv, rest on the fourth, three more measures of improv, rest on the eighth. I try to teach the students early that a solo doesn't need to be filled with notes. The moments of rest at the end of an idea give you a chance to gather your thoughts, and it gives the audience an opportunity to prepare for your next phrase.

I love trading fours with students! I always tell them that I am listening to what they play, and I'll try to take their last idea or their last few notes, repeat it in the beginning of my improvising, and expand upon it. I'll try to start with really simple two- or three-note ideas and ask them to try to take the idea and go somewhere with it.