



10

Essential Tips Every Jazz Improvisor Needs to Know

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Tip



Practice with a plan

One of the biggest obstacles for musicians working to improve at jazz improvisation lies in the development of a solid daily practice routine.

You do your best to get into the practice room and diligently spend hours toiling away, but how you spend that time is crucial to seeing musical development.

You see there are barriers that you'll encounter in your daily effort to improve: struggling to figure out the best method of practice, frustration as to why the content of a practice routine is not leading to improvement, or even finding motivation to set foot into the practice room.

One mistake that will waste more time than anything else is aimless practicing. It's very easy to get into the habit of just playing exercises or lines that you are good at in the practice room, but it takes real discipline to focus on areas of your playing that need improvement.

Here's how to change that...

Know your destination

Think hard about it. Where is this time that you're spending with your instrument headed? You play your instrument every day or maybe a few times a week. Now what does it mean to you? Where do you want to go with it?

Before you worry about scales and chords, before you make a list of tunes to learn, and before you spend hours in the practice room, this is the question you need to answer.

This is step one. By looking at the player you want to be tomorrow you'll discover exactly what you need to practice today. So what is your musical destination?

Get Specific

What sets apart the musicians that move forward from the rest of the pack that is frustrated and struggling? The answer is simple: the players that are improving have a plan. They've made a goal and have identified the practice elements that will get them there, step by step, day by day. You need to do the same thing.

To find direction in your playing you need to have a plan each time you pick up your instrument to practice. Get organized and specific, down to last detail. Instead of saying "I'm going to practice today," know exactly what it is that you're going to practice and what you are going to accomplish by the end of your session.

Take a minute and ask yourself the following questions:

- What do you want to accomplish in the practice room today?
- What are you going to focus on technically this week?
- What tunes do you want to have down by the end of this month?
- What part of your musicianship do you want to have improved six months from now (time, range, odd meters, ear training, etc.)?

- What do you want to have mastered on your instrument a year from now?
- What is your vision for yourself as an improviser five years from now?

Eliminate Time Wasters

Put a stop to activities like mindless practice and procrastination that are wasting your valuable time. This is a daily effort that requires continual evaluation. Catch yourself when you are wasting time messing around with play-a-long tracks or are putting off difficult exercises for another day.

As shown by this article on [how play-a-longs are wasting your time](#), it's surprisingly easy to waste an hour with a play-a-long, not only stalling your progress, but sometimes even reinforcing bad habits.

Time spent ineffectively or unproductively is essentially delaying or even preventing your progress. If an exercise or practice habit has little musical relevance, doesn't focus on problem areas, and isn't contributing towards your ultimate goal, cut it out of your routine and replace it with something that does.

Further reading:

[Time to Overhaul Your Practice Routine](#)

[How To Practice Less and Improve More](#)

[How Play-alongs are wasting your time](#)

[4 Simple Exercises you need to do now](#)

Tip

#2



Develop your ear

When it comes to studying the fine details of improvisation, the majority of people go straight to music theory. That seems like a logical place to begin, right?

However an understanding of theory will only take you so far...

Trying to study improvisation strictly with theory is like trying to study a distant culture without actually traveling there and setting foot on the soil or breathing the air. It's like struggling to understand a people without eating their food or spending some time living with them.

Sure, from a distance you can gather some sterile facts, but in reality you just don't get it.

To truly understand something you need to take a completely different approach. Rather than studying descriptions and definitions, you'll learn so much more by jumping in and physically experiencing the subject of your interest. The same is equally true for a foreign culture as it is for music.

If you want to get to the next level as an improviser you need to start focusing on sound, and this means using your ears. You can read about music theory all day, but until you start dealing with the physical sound of music, you're that person that's on the outside looking in.

The only way to improve your ear is by specifically setting time aside and focusing on some ear training exercises. Here is a quick, but very beneficial ear training exercise to implement in your daily practice with a friend.

All you need is a wisely chosen ear training partner, a piano or keyboard, 20 minutes of uninterrupted time, and a clear mind:

Interval Exercise

Partner

Plays a random interval on the piano, two notes, one immediately followed by the other.

You

Hear the interval in your mind. Sing the first note and then the second note. Then state the interval and direction. If you need it repeated before attempting to sing and identify it, request that your partner plays again.

Partner

Verifies pitch accuracy of your singing and whether you identified the interval correctly. If you are incorrect, have your partner play it again, listen even more closely and try again. Do not proceed to the next interval until you sing it accurately and identify it correctly.

Repeat this process until your partner has randomly played all intervals ascending and descending. That's all the following intervals, randomly played at least once, up and down: minor 2nd, major 2nd, minor 3rd, major 3rd, perfect 4th, diminished 5th (tritone), perfect 5th, minor 6th, major 6th, minor 7th, major 7th, octave.

You can add a major 9th (an octave plus a whole step) and minor 9th (an octave plus a half step) if you like as well.

Developing your ears will open up an entirely new side of improvisation that will enable you to improve quickly. Suddenly you won't have to rely on thinking through scales, chord tones, or progressions - you'll be able to hear them. You'll start to hear intervals, melodies, bass lines, and chord progressions and as a result, learning tunes and transcribing solos will become much more natural and easy.

Here are some more ear training resources and exercises to check out:

[Fundamental Jazz Ear Training](#)

[Fundamental Jazz Ear Training With Seventh Chords](#)

[3 Reasons to Sing Everyday](#)

[Hearing Chord Changes](#)

[Connecting Your Ears to Your Instrument](#)

[Getting a Vivid Aural Imagination](#)

[Master Your Intervals in 28 Days](#)

[Hearing Chord Tones](#)

Tip

#3



Sing everyday

Every time that you improvise you must overcome a huge gap. Any guesses what it is? It's the gap between your ears and the sound coming out of your instrument. You see, right now there are the melodies that you hear in your mind and there is the music theory that you've memorized, and these two sides compete every time that you attempt to create a solo.

What happens to most improvisers is that the theory of scales and chords wins out, leaving those personal melodies trapped inside like prisoners. This makes the otherwise enjoyable aspect of creating music downright mechanical, not to mention frustrating!

But don't worry, singing is the way you're going to reconnect with your inner musicality.

Create a sonic connection

When you sing a musical idea it naturally creates a strong physical connection between your voice and the sounds that you're hearing; your inner musicality and the physical sound that you produce.

In school, you probably learned music directly from a page of sheet music. This is great for learning, but it left out your ears and your voice. Because of this, you need to find a way to re-establish a direct connection from your ears and the sound that's coming out of your instrument.

Here's the process in which you should learn melodies, chords, tunes, and solos:

HEAR IT ● → SING IT ● → PLAY IT

Sing through your instrument

Your instrument is basically a crutch that you rely on in order to improvise. You hear a chord or a melodic fragment and once you've found the key you use the scales, chords, and licks you've worked out as the basis for improvisation.

However, when you're forced to sing a solo instead of playing it you can't hide - you truly have to play what you hear. Pushing down a key or valve will not automatically guarantee a correct note. Singing is a sure way to tell if your ears are up to the level of the rest of your instrumental technique. By incorporating the simple act of singing into your ear training practice as well as your transcription process, you'll see a noticeable difference in the way you are hearing things and how you play them on your instrument.

Here are four ways to incorporate singing in your practice:

- Practice singing intervals (Major 3rd, Perfect 5th, minor 7th)
- Sing the chord tones of various chords (Over a C7 sing the 3rd, the 6th, or the 9th)
- When you are learning a tune start by singing the melody
- When you transcribe, sing the fragments of a solo that you're trying to learn

Remember your voice is always with you, so use it to your advantage in everything that you do!

Further Reading:

[3 Reasons Why You Should Sing Everyday](#)
[Connecting Your Ears To Your Instrument](#)

Tip

#4

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Learn musical language

Jazz is a language. You've probably heard this phrase uttered in interviews or conversations with great improvisers, but what does that even mean?

Well just like the language that you speak, there is a musical language that you use when you improvise with a musical instrument.

Language is made up of melodic lines. The difference between this language and musical licks that you learn lies in where you learned these lines from, how you learned them, and what you can do with them.

Where you learn language

As opposed to learning it from a book or from the web, you learn language with your ear. You hear it and imitate it until you know it. You don't sit there ripping one note off, writing it down, ripping the next note off, writing it down... that's how you learn licks, not language.

You want to take language from your heroes. Not people you're supposed to like; emulate the people you actually like. If you don't like John Coltrane or Stan Getz, don't learn language from them. If that's the case, I feel sorry for you, but that doesn't matter. Learn from your personal heroes.

How you learn language

When a toddler starts talking, they have their favorite words. They say them over and over and over...That's how you learn language. Just like a child, you copy your heroes (in the child's case, these are their parents), find something they say that you love and play it over and over and over.

You're of course familiar with the saying, "Don't discover yourself. Create yourself." This is what you're doing.

You're creating yourself from the ground up. You get to choose each and every little influence. Choose wisely. Then put in your time to own each piece of language you select.

Further Reading:

[The Difference Between Licks and Language](#)

[The Importance of Language](#)

[How to Acquire Useful Language](#)

[Playing Longer Lines In Your Solos](#)

Tip

#5



Transcribe

One area of your daily practice that can directly change your approach to improvisation is transcription. Transcribing a solo or simply learning a melody by ear today will have an impact on your playing tomorrow.

Right now you may have a good grasp of music theory and solid instrumental technique, and you may even be getting by with these two skills alone, but for some reason when it comes to creating melodies over chord progressions a musical gap suddenly opens up. No matter how much you practice there is still an elusive missing link preventing you from improvising the way you envision.

If this sounds like you, you're definitely not alone - this is the exact predicament many hopeful improvisers find themselves in. You seemingly have all the tools, but to your bewilderment the task of creating a melodic solo over a chord progression just doesn't seem to be happening. The missing link that everyone is searching for is transcribing - learning solos, melodies and chord progressions by ear.

What is transcribing?

Transcribing is the process by which you learn and ingrain musical information from a recording. The one aspect of transcription that vastly improves your musicianship is the process of figuring out the solo by ear. Truly hearing the intervals, chords, and articulation of a solo and internalizing them.

If you haven't been transcribing, you're missing an essential component to developing as an improviser. Remember, this music is a language and the way that you learn this language is through your ears. To get started with transcription, check out these articles:

[How Transcribing One Solo Can Change Your Concept](#)

[Transcribing is not Transcribing](#)

[Transcribe With a Purpose](#)

[Practice Less and Improve More](#)

[Overcoming Obstacles in Transcription](#)

[Playing Transcribed Solos Backward](#)

[Getting More From Transcribed Solos](#)

The process of transcription develops your time, your articulation, your sense of melody, and your understanding of the art of improvisation. When you get into a room with your instrument and a record and start transcribing, you begin to learn all the things about this music that can't be taught in a classroom or a book.

If you have unanswered questions about the creative or stylistic aspects of improvisation or you're wondering why your practice is not giving you results, start transcribing today. Learning the language of this music by ear will enable you to bridge the gap between picking notes out of a scale and creating a solo that actually means something.

If you're serious about improving your ability to improvise and you're serious about building a musical language, transcribing should be your #1 improvement project.

Tip

#6



Use Visualization to quickly improve

If you're having trouble with memorizing tunes or learning chord progressions in all 12 keys the problem might not be with your technique - it could be with the way you see music in your mind.

To solve this minor stumbling block you need to learn a technique that's used by many of the top athletes and professionals in the world. It's called visualization.

Visualization is simply the process of forming mental images. These images could consist of information that you are trying to memorize or a task that you are attempting to perform, it doesn't matter.

What does matter is that you mentally rehearse every aspect of that physical motion – seeing it, hearing it, and feeling it. And this process is more than beneficial when applied to the aspects of improvisation like chords, chord progressions, tunes, and language.

Visualization and music

Visualization is the key to playing anything. It's an unconscious step that we all must go through to be able to play what we have in our mind. This mental image precedes everything you play from chords to the musical language that you've transcribed.

The people that seem to have everything at their fingertips are simply excellent visualizers: they can perfectly imagine what it's like to play something before they play it, almost without even thinking. Here are some pointers to keep in mind when you visualize musical language:

- Hear the line exactly as it sounds in your mind
- In your mind, feel how your fingers would feel as they press the keys of your instrument
- Break up the line into manageable parts and take them chromatically or through the cycle to go through all keys

- Stay aware of each chord you are on and each chord tone
- Be precise and go very slow

Further Reading:

[Use the Power of Visualization to Improve Faster Than Ever: We'll Show You How in Our New eBook](#)

[10 Visualization Exercises for Chord Progression Recall](#)

[Visualization one key at a time](#)

Tip



Develop musical phrasing

Listen to Miles Davis play on Kind of Blue. Now what do you notice? What makes these solos sound great? More than the notes or the harmonic devices in his solos, the one thing that sticks out about Miles is his sense of phrasing.

He's telling you a story. There's a beginning, a middle and an end to each of his solos and you understand what he's saying - emotionally and intellectually. This is what sets him apart and why so many listeners connect with his sound. Miles could play anything he wanted, but he always played with a clear musical statement.

It takes an advanced and honest musician to improvise a melody that they are hearing in their heads amid the wash of constantly moving chords and time. And it takes an even more mature musician to not play all the scales, and patterns and language that they've practiced for hours.

This idea of phrasing and creating meaningful musical statements is one aspect of improvising that is missing from a lot of players' solos. Improvising is not just using scales or inserting a pattern into a chord progression, in the end it's all about creating music and performing personal melodies.

What is a musical phrase?

A successful musical phrase has 3 main components:

- It's a complete musical statement
- Works with the harmonic background
- Contains rhythmic definition

Just like a conversation with a friend, a good spoken statement must convey a complete idea, it must be relevant to the conversation and social setting, and it can't be mumbled or run on and on.

So why is this important?

No phrasing, no listeners

I've seen hundreds of live performances and sitting in those audiences, I've also observed thousands of listeners. Seeing the audience reaction to a performer can reveal some interesting clues about performing.

When a performer is not getting the listener's full attention, it's usually because one of those three elements of musical phrasing is missing:

- The soloist is not making musical statements or playing musical ideas.
- The soloist is not able to navigate the harmony, is not making the changes, or is getting lost in the form.
- The soloist is not playing with any rhythmic character, stringing together 8th notes or playing with no regard to the time or rhythmic content of the solo.

Beyond the theory of a solo the thing that will impact the listener the most is musical phrasing. Be sure to check out these articles for some in-depth musical examples.

[Thinking About Musical Phrasing](#)

[How to Phrase Like a Pro](#)

[Exploring Musical Space](#)

Tip

#8



Learn to play with great time

Everyday in the practice room we spend most of our time focusing on the melodic and harmonic aspects of jazz improvisation. As a result we forget about one essential element of a great solo: time.

And this can set you up for disaster. Time and rhythmic clarity are one of the most important aspects of your playing. Just listen to your favorite players and you'll immediately notice impeccable time - this is not a coincidence.

3 steps to developing a stronger sense of time

As an improviser the first hurdle in developing a stronger sense of time lies in hearing, feeling and playing on beats 2 and 4. Here are three exercises that you can do to develop this skill:

Step 1: Learn to hear metronome clicks as 2 & 4

Set your metronome to 60 bpm.

After a click goes by say out-loud, "1." So, it will go something like this: "click"... "1". This forces your ear to hear the next click of the metronome as beat 2.

Next, try verbalizing all the beats. After a click, say "1" and then during the next click say "2." Then say "3," followed by saying "4" in unison with the click of the metronome. Looks like this: Hear a click...then say "1", Hear a click while simultaneously saying "2"...Say "3"...Hear a click while simultaneously saying "4."

Once you get confident verbalizing with the clicks, move the voice to your mind. So, instead of saying each beat number, hear the numbers and clicks in your mind. Practice hearing the beat numbers and clicks in your mind until it is second nature to hear the clicks on 2 and 4.

Gradually, increase the tempo a few beats per minute at a time. If you started on 60bpm, progress to 63 or 65, making sure to stay at a tempo that you can still confidently hear the clicks on 2 and 4. Keep increasing the tempo, a bit at a time, spending several minutes on each increase until you reach somewhere around 104bpm.

Step 2: Learn to play with the metronome clicks on 2 & 4

As Michael Brecker said: *"I have at times used a metronome on 2 and 4. I get depressed when I do it because I rush. Playing with a metronome on 2 and 4 does help."*

After you can comfortably hear the metronome clicks as beats 2 and 4, select a piece of jazz language you've transcribed. Perhaps a ii V line that you've acquired from one of your favorite players.

Now, set the tempo to 60bpm and play the line with the metronome on 2 and 4. Use the same techniques that you used previously to hear the clicks as 2 and 4. If you accidentally turn the beat around, making the clicks 1 and 3, don't worry about it. Just stop and recalibrate your ear to hear them again as 2 and 4.

Just as you did with the hearing exercise, gradually increase the tempo a few beats per minute at a time until you get up to 104bpm. You can always go faster in the future, but 104bpm is a good starting place to aim for.

Step 3 : Learn to start phrases anywhere in a measure with the metronome on 2 and 4

As Joe Henderson said: *"I developed the ability to start anywhere in the bar and it lent to a whole new attitude of constant variation. I would start with the first bar, not starting it on one but starting it on the 'and' of four or the 'and' of three..."*

The next step in developing a stronger sense of time is to acquire the ability to start phrases in different parts of the bar. Breaking down the bar into eighth notes is the simplest way to approach this.

For this exercise, again select a piece of jazz language you've transcribed. If it's not already, adjust the line so that it's comprised of 8 eighth notes as in the example of the original phrase below. Now set your metronome to a slow tempo, maybe 60bpm-72bpm. Before you play anything, hear the clicks as beats 2 and 4. Then play your original phrase. Play it for two minutes straight.

Then leave out the first eighth note, so now your phrase will start on the and of 1 and practice it for two minutes. Then leave out the first two eighth notes so your line starts on beat 2 for two minutes. Continue like this until you've begun the phrase on all beats of the measure.

Further Reading:

[Develop a Stronger Sense of Time](#)

[Hearing Time: Rhythmic Ear Training](#)

[Integrating New Rhythms Into Your Playing](#)

[Using Polyrythms in Jazz Improvisation](#)

Tip

#9



Don't rely on the Real Book

Meet the "Real Book player."

The Real Book player is the musician that learns tunes out of a fake book, practices in front of a fake book, and performs using a fake book. Like a ball and chain, the book is always there. No book = no music.

They look at lead sheets to memorize tunes, they practice improvisation by staring for hours at written out chord progressions, and they rely on the book like a life preserver at gig after gig. How do I know so much about the "Real Book Player?" I know because I used to be one.

The problem was not that I was trying to improve as an improviser and learn a large repertoire of tunes, it's that I was trying to use a fake book to achieve this goal.

I see many musicians unwittingly heading in this same direction – glued to the book and wondering why they're having trouble memorizing tunes or difficulty creating solos. Don't let this happen to you.

The Real Book is a musical crutch

The more you use the book, the more you'll become dependent on it. This seemingly harmless and convenient crutch that you bring along to your rehearsals and gigs will suddenly become an unbreakable habit. You can't perform without it, you can't practice without it, in fact your entire ability as an improviser becomes tied to this book.

When this musical crutch becomes an essential piece of your ability to practice or perform, you're going to run into problems as an improviser. You may be able to get by right now, but if you're not careful the fake book will stop you from developing into the musician that you one day wish to become.

There are three major pitfalls to using a fake book:

Ignoring your Ears

The main problem with fake books is that they allow you to play tunes and create solos without using your ears. When you read a melody and a chord progression off of a page, you're essentially playing music with your eyes. As soon as you start taking in information with your eyes, your ears are going to involuntarily turn off.

You never really 'Know' the tune

When you rely on a fake book, you never get to the point where you "know" the tunes that you're playing. This is fine if you just want to fumble through solos, but getting to the level of great improvising requires that you know a tune inside and out.

Not just memorizing a melody and sequence of chord symbols, but ingraining these sounds in your ear, knowing these progressions in your mind, and working them out on your instrument. You have to know the tune on a personal level. Without this connection to your ear, body, or musical feeling, your improvising is going to be flat and mechanical.

You limit the music

Thousands of musicians have the Real Book and most of

these musicians are using it to perform in front of audiences. As a result, every player that is using a book is limited to the same finite number of tunes contained in that book. Go to any jam session in any city and you'll hear the same three dozen tunes performed in roughly the same way.

"Jazz" becomes this thing that sounds the same everywhere you go. It becomes a predictable background music that never really reaches an emotional or creative high point.

Do's and Don'ts for Fake Books

On your journey as an improviser it's inevitable that at some point you'll have to read out of a fake book. This is OK. The Real Book itself isn't necessarily a bad thing, it's the way you use it that will either aid or limit your playing.

- **Do** use a book as a reference when you are starting to learn how to improvise, when you don't know any tunes, and when you haven't worked on ear training.
- **Do** use a fake book when you don't know a tune that you have to perform on the spot
- **Do** use the book as an occasional reference along with the recording in your practice

- **Do** use a fake book to double check the material you're learning by ear (*Note that fake books often contain mistakes, wrong melody notes, or incorrect chord progressions. Always check out multiple recordings when you are learning a standard.)
- **Don't** read or perform a tune from a fake book without listening to it first.
- **Don't** use a fake book as a substitute for learning tunes from the recording.
- **Don't** perform standards with a real book (as much as possible).
- **Don't** use a fake book to perform when you know your set list ahead of time and have time to prepare.
- **Don't** become complacent with or dependent on the fake book. You should always be striving to memorize and learn new tunes. The fake book should be a temporary aid, not a vital piece of your musicianship.

Further Reading:

[Why You Shouldn't Be a Real Book Player](#)

Tip

#10



Be Greedy for the music

If you don't know who Harold Mabern is, it's time you did. The legendary pianist has played with everyone and is on the records of Lee Morgan, Hank Mobley, and Freddie Hubbard, just to name a few. I had the great honor of studying privately with him for over a year. Not only is he an incredible musician, but he's also one of the warmest, most vibrant, and positive people I've ever had the pleasure of knowing.

Harold possesses great knowledge and he loves to share it. Sometimes he'd have a dozen students surrounding him listening intently to his incredible stories and words of wisdom. He has many gems of knowledge that he repeated to me over and over during the time I spent with him.

One thing he frequently said is that you have to be greedy for the music like John Coltrane. Pursue all types of music. Anything you love, just absorb it. Figure it out and have fun doing it. Harold listens to and plays all types of music because he is greedy for the music.

Music or not, you have to be passionate about what you're doing and always be striving to soak up more knowledge because you genuinely love it. Remember to always be greedy for the music.

Further Reading:

[3 Gems Harold Mabern Told Me](#)

[3 More Gems From Harold Mabern](#)

[Only Listen to The Best Jazz Recordings](#)

Thank You

We'll see you soon...

We hope you enjoyed this exclusive eBook. If you've found it helpful and wish to support Jazzadvice, we'd greatly appreciate it.

Thanks for reading!

Forrest & Eric

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