

15 Tips for Successful Jazz Improvisation

by Bob Hinz

1. **Less is always more.** This is an important, though difficult lesson to learn, and it is possible that it may take many years to learn—if you are lucky enough to ever learn it. There are many reasons why this works, but one that is the most important is that the less notes you play the more you swing and the more accurate your rhythm. Faster rhythms, such as sixteenth notes (or even eighth note triplets at a fast tempo) are very difficult to play in time (unless, of course, you are Oscar Peterson). Conversely, the more notes, the less you swing, and rhythm and swinging are the most important things in jazz. Actively practice playing *less*. You have to over compensate this way because the tendency is to play more notes, especially when you play with other musicians in front of an audience.
2. **Use space.** Accordingly, it also follows that the more space you leave between phrases, the better your rhythm and the more you swing. This is because you have time to listen to the flow of the groove and to plan your next phrase. This often leads to an approach where your melodic ideas are based on motives, which use specific rhythms to develop pitch relationships. This makes the music more coherent, and more interesting to listen to. Improvise using rhythmic and motivic relationships, such as repetition, variation, and contrast. Experiment rhythmically with repeated groups of notes. Try developing a rhythmic idea, and shift it in relation to the bar line. Working with short motives and melodic fragments is always fun for the player and accessible to the listener.
3. **Breathe.** Think about how the breath supports the phrases that you sing. This allows for a natural approach to phrasing, and a vocal, melodic quality. Remain aware of the contrast between sound with silence: the notes of the improvised melody with its rests. Notice the phrasing of the original (composed) melody of the tune.
4. **Let it happen.** Don't play the music—let the music play itself. Don't *make* it happen, *let* it happen. Get out of the way of the music. This is a simply way to say that you don't want to think too much about what you play while you are playing. Most of what you will play occurs as a result of the habits that you acquire during practice, drilling, and training. In performance, things occur in real time, and happen too quickly for you to control except in an overall manner. If you try to interfere with the body's wisdom (acquired through practice), you'll mess things up.
5. **Keep your place.** Regardless of what you play or don't play, *always* keep your place in the tune. This is, perhaps, the most important aspect of all in ensemble performance. If you lose your place, apply methods and techniques that will help you keep the form. For example, keep the composed melody of the tune in mind as you play through your solo.
6. **Rhythm is #1.** Do all of the above with rhythmic spirit and vitality. How you sing or play something rhythmically is almost always more important than what notes you play. Blues and swing go together like milk and cookies (pardon the lame analogy). If you want to add more rhythmic vitality to your phrases, use blues oriented figures. Also, remember that playing rhythmically does not mean playing constantly. It is easier to create and maintain a strong rhythm with shorter phrases rather than longer ones.
7. **Listen.** When you solo, train yourself to *listen* before you start each phrase—give yourself time to play: pause, then execute; pause, then execute, etc. This approach will attract the attention of the listener. For example, if they expect your entrance as a soloist, and you don't immediately start to play, listeners get drawn in and really want to hear what you have to play!
8. **Play melodies.** Remember that as an improviser you are generating *melody*; not just rhythm. Play a simple, *pretty* melody; there is nothing wrong with that. Sometimes a simple melody is the best melody, and like many great jazz musicians often do, try to tell a little story with your solo. Don't forget, you are trying to play something that people want to listen to. If you overwhelm them with too much information (too many notes), *they turn off*.
9. **Use long notes.** Don't worry about long notes (for example, quarter notes and half notes at medium and fast tempos). Long notes balance faster note values and allow your eighth notes and eighth note triplets to lie better in the groove. However, since long notes fade out rather quickly on the piano, use repeated notes, and octave and chordal tremolos to help sustain long notes. Use articulation, accent, and short notes at the ends of your phrases, to add rhythmic spirit and vitality, and to give the phrase clarity and definition.
10. **Practice with a metronome.** (You've probably heard this before) Accordingly, practice phrases, with the metronome on 2 & 4, using half notes, half note triplets, quarter notes, and quarter note

triplets. This will help your time and feel, and keep you out of the habit (hopefully) of playing too many notes.

11. **Remember that the left hand is improvised.** Although pianists spend many years only learning and applying chord voicings, the left hand, like the right hand, is also *improvised*. You can do anything with it: play single notes, note pairs (such as octaves as well as two different notes). Leave it out of entire choruses if you wish. This is not a bad idea given that the right hand playing *alone* almost always generates a more rhythmic melodic solo than when both hands are playing (either together or interactively).
12. **Use the left hand to play melodies.** The left hand is often used to play chords and chord voicings. It can also, however, be used melodically—either to extend the range of the melody into the lower register, or to respond to the right hand in an interactive and conversational manner. The left hand can also be used (interactively, in combination with the right hand) to create rhythmic patterns that would be impossible with either hand alone.
13. **As tempos get faster, use the left hand *less*.** Conceive of your improvised solo as a melody generated exclusively in the right hand, and introduce the left hand to emphasize, contrast, or punctuate the right hand melody. This works for a number of reasons: First, it gets more difficult to play rhythmically as the tempos get faster. Accordingly, by devoting your attention exclusively to the right hand, the melody can remain rhythmically strong at the faster tempo. Second, the continual use of the left hand at faster tempos clutters the texture. By using it less (or leaving it out completely), the melody will project more as the texture is thinner and more open.
14. **Balance the left hand with the right hand register.** For faster tempos, or when the register of the right hand gets lower, use *less* notes in your left hand voicings. For slower tempos, or when the register of the right hand gets higher, you can use more notes in the left hand. Generally, 3rds, 7ths, & 10ths (supplemented by 6ths and octaves) work well in the left hand at faster tempos.
15. **Use the left hand to complement the right hand.** A great exercise when practicing improvisation is to play only the left hand *or* the right hand in your solo; never together. Practice going back and forth. This will allow you to develop a sense in interdependence between the hands and help you to avoid the habit of cluttering the texture. In addition, your groove will improve. In faster tempos, conceive of both hands as *one* rhythm. Try to keep the left hand quieter than the right hand when you use it to accompany your solos.

About the Author

A jazz pianist and composer, **Bob Hinz** received his Bachelors degree in Music Theory from SUNY Stony Brook, his Masters in Music Education from the Eastman School of Music, and his Doctorate in Jazz Studies from New York University. He has recorded two albums as a leader: *Instead of Words* and *Flying Colors*. His composition, "Chemistry," from the recording *Flying Colors*, was selected for the 1998 National Association of Recording Merchandisers jazz sampler compact disc. This recording appeared and remained at number one on the *Billboard* jazz chart in the summer of 1998. In October of 2000, Bob was featured in full length Sunday *New York Times* Article titled "Jazzman Sets Tin Ears Ringing". In June of 2001, he was a featured Guest on Marian McPartland's *Piano Jazz*, a National Public Radio Broadcast.

Active as an author and educator, his books of jazz piano transcriptions, *The Artistry of Bill Evans, Vol. 2* and *The Artistry of George Shearing* are published by *Warner Bros*. Upcoming books that are currently completed-though unpublished-include *The Improviser's Guide to Melodic Embellishment* (a collection of studies that immerse the jazz musician in vocabulary for improvising melodies and introduce the player to the concept of embellishment), *The Jazz Compositions of Bud Powell* (a collection of 46 Bud Powell originals arranged in lead sheet format and transcribed directly from Powell's recordings), and *Studies in Technique for the Jazz Pianist* (a collection of exercises that orient the jazz pianist in techniques that necessary and appropriate for playing jazz piano). Currently, Bob is working on another CD, *Send It In*, eleven original compositions for jazz quintet.

Bob's articles have been published in *Clavier*, *Music Educators Journal*, *Jazz Educators Journal*, and *Teaching Music*. He has taught piano, music theory, and jazz improvisation at the State University of New York, and has been teaching piano since 1975. He also works as a pianist performing solo and with his trio in the New York area.