

The Art Of Transcribing

Transcribing is perhaps the most useful tool in learning jazz. Along with a lot of listening and practicing, transcribing will give a complete understanding of certain styles in jazz. In classical music we analyze and practice the music of the great masters. In the field of jazz, it is also important to practice and analyze the music of its masters. What differs is that Mozart's music is already notated and available to us. In jazz we have to transcribe it ourselves since it was improvised when it was first played.

Since jazz is improvised music, we don't want to sound exactly like our favorite performer. There are however, harmonic and melodic elements that are part of general jazz theory and the great masters of jazz utilize this understanding in their improvisations. Remember, there is nothing wrong with borrowing phrases from other players and incorporating them creatively into your own solos. Bill Evans played so much beautiful music and I enjoy using parts of his musical vocabulary in my own playing.

There are many things that can be learned from transcribing.

1. Harmonic structure including substitutions.
2. Scales and note choices over certain chord changes.
3. Phrasing: How does the phrase start and end.
4. Length of phrases.
5. Articulation.

All these points are important in order to understand a certain player's style. When you find phrases that you really like, analyze over which chord changes they are written and practice them in different keys. Making up your own variations of favorite phrases will contribute to the development of your own unique style of playing. This is how jazz has progressed throughout its history. Charlie Parker listened to Lester Young, Oscar Peterson listened to Art Tatum, Keith Jarrett listened to Bill Evans and everybody listened to Charlie Parker.

Transcribing techniques:

When you first begin to transcribe, it seems like an overwhelming task. By learning the different techniques you will quickly improve and speed up the process. The more you transcribe, the easier it gets, and you'll soon notice the improvement of your ear's ability to hear relative pitches. Transcribing is probably one of the best ear-training exercises there is.

1. Work on an entire phrase at a time. Listen and learn the phrase so you can sing it, and then play it on your instrument. If the phrase is too complicated, you might have to break it up into smaller segments. Transcribe what you can first and then try to fill in the blanks.
2. Figure out the rhythm. It's helpful to identify the down beats and then link them up to their corresponding notes.
3. Play the solo from your own notation and listen to how it sounds. By now you probably have a good idea about the solo and can identify if there are any wrong notes and/or rhythms.
4. If you get stuck on a segmented it's better to move along. Usually when you come back to something for the second or third time you realize that it's easier to figure out.

The following solo is in the style of Bill Evans. It reflects Evans' superb taste and harmonic knowledge. I have indicated a few places I find interesting. I call these phrases *themes* and I use them as a basis for my own variations. Both the themes and variations become important tools in my own improvisation.

Sample Transcription

$\bullet = 140$

G7 \flat 13 Cmin7 G \flat 13 Fmin7 B \flat 7 EbMaj7 A \flat 13

5 Db7 C7(\flat 9) Fmin7 A \flat min7 Bmin7 E7 Eb \flat 6 A7 \flat 13

9 D7(\sharp 9) G \flat 13 Cmin7 G \flat 13 F7(\sharp 9) B \flat 13 Eb \flat 6 D7 \sharp 5

13 Db7 C7(\flat 9) Fmin7 A \flat min7 Bmin7 E7 Eb \flat 6 B \flat min7

17 Am7(\flat 5) D7(\flat 9) Gmin7 Am7(\flat 5) D7(\flat 9) Gmin7

21 Cmin7 F7(\sharp 9) B \flat Maj7 Fmin7 A \flat 13

25 G7Alt Cmin7 G \flat 7 Fmin7 B \flat 7 EbMaj7 D7

29 Db7 C7(\flat 9) Fmin7 A \flat min7 Bmin7 E7(\sharp 5) Eb \flat 6 A7Alt

33 D7(\sharp 9) G7(\flat 9) Cmin7

Themes

Fmin7 Bb7 Eb⁶
 D7(#9) G^{b13} Gb9 Cmin7
 Bmin7₃ E7 Eb⁶
 Gmin7
 Bmin7 E7(#5)

Variations

Fmin7 Bb7 Eb⁶
 D7(#9) G^{b13} Gb9 Cmin7
 Bmin7 E7 Eb⁶
 Gmin7
 Bmin7 E7(#5)

All jazz musicians should be familiar with, and proficient in transcribing. I require all my students at university level to transcribe several solos each semester. As a great teaching tool, I use the books from Mel Bay's new series, *Essential Jazz Lines*, an informative and well organized aid in the study of improvisation. Each book consists of transcribed licks that are organized in different categories. They give the student excellent insight into various jazz artists and their individual approaches to improvisation. The books include a play along CD, an important tool used to practice the material in all twelve keys. The categories are.

- Minor chord material.
- Short ii-V-I material.
- Major chord material.
- Turnarounds.

- Dominant chord material.
- Long ii-V-I material
- Minor ii-V-i material.

If your goal is to become a proficient and creative improviser, substantial amounts of listening, transcribing and analyzing, combined with useful learning tools such as Mel Bay's *Essential Jazz Lines* series, will have you well on your way to creating your own unique voice. *Essential Jazz Lines In The Style Of Bill Evans* will be out this month (June 2002).

Per Danielsson