

Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #5 — Improvisation Part 1

“You know I think jazz is a great art form. The endeavor certainly. Of course it’s a difficult music. It relies heavily on improvisation, which is very difficult because everybody doesn’t do that well. The name of the game is to do that.”

[Musical Introduction]

Welcome to Jazz Backstory, my name is Monk Rowe and the first voice you heard was saxophonist Charles McPherson setting us up for Episode #5. Today we address the core element of jazz, the part that comes with the steepest learning curve, the mysterious and magical art of improvising.

Most of us have a basic sense of what improvisation is. A band jamming live on stage, a quarterback scrambling when the play breaks down, and a comedian riffing on stage at the Improv. On occasion I find it informative to turn to an actual dictionary to be reminded of the book definition. So, reading from the Random House edition:

Improvisation, a noun:

#1. To perform, deliver or compose without previous preparation. Really?

#2. To make or provide from whatever materials are available. Um hm

I believe we heard a relevant definition in our third Episode, provided by jazzman Clark Terry, and I’ll quote: “Years before people in this field knew anything about theory, harmony, composition or counterpoint, they gave into their feelings, in what they called “get off.” This is long before the term “improvisation” was in the dictionary, pertaining to music. They called it “get off,” which meant that first you played a melody, and thereafter you’d use that melody as a guidewire to superimpose extemporaneously, a new one.

Thank you Clark.

Like most artistic practices, improvising is only partially definable. Nonetheless, as Charles McPherson stated, it is the name of the game. It is what jazz musicians do and the particular way

it is done distinguishes one player from another. So do not abandon all hope, ye who enter here, we shall get to the bottom of this topic, or somewhere close.

Let's start with a lick from our Orchestra .

[Musical Interlude]

Hmm, pretty impressive. What do you think, improvised or not? It certainly sounds jazzy and I assumed it was made up on the spot. Not so stated our sax player, I was informed that it's just the Circle. The Circle? The Circle of Life? His response and a direct quote “No man, the Circle of Fifths, just playing the changes up then down. You gotta know the circle.”

Okay, this refutes Random House definition #1 which stated “no previous preparation required.” I asked our sax player for a definition of jazz improvising. After some reluctance, they jotted this down on the back of some sheet music.

“We start by playing a tune that has a melody, a form and a chord structure. Then, the rhythm section repeats the form and chords as accompaniment, the improviser creates a new melody. After everyone gets a taste, we come back to the original tune. If we do the same song again, the melodies we make up in the middle will be new and different from the first time around. Get it?”

I got it, and was reminded of another artistic technique from my one college art class — the triptych, a painting with three separate but connected frames. For my analogy, the left and right frames would look the same, the middle frame would be different, but somehow related. I can visualize it but I asked our house band to help us hear it. So here is the premier performance of, “a triptych type tune” with a working title “A-B-A.”

[Musical Interlude]

[Scats] It goes up, it goes down. Yeah, I like it and can hear that part in the middle, the “get off” Clark Terry spoke about. Nicely done, considering the available materials.

An obvious question and one that I regularly asked of our interviewees: what is going on in your head when improvising, can you describe what you're thinking about?

Here are three accomplished improvisers on the topic: pianist Bill Charlap, saxophonist Charles McPherson, and clarinetist Ken Peplowski.

MR: Can you describe your improvising? I ask this question a lot and I get a lot of different answers. But the thought process that happens when you're improvising?

BC: At its best, and at the level I feel I'm at now, no thought. One should not be sitting there doing analytical thought when you're improvising. You have — it's like language. You don't think about the next word you're going to say, you don't think about how to spell it or what that word is, you just say it. It's the same for me at the piano. Same for any musician worth their salt as a jazz musician. You think a phrase and you play that phrase. I don't think, gee that's the third, that's the seventh of the chord, that's a dotted eighth, sixteenth, there's a whole rest here, there's a half— all the technical things. So understand what I mean and I hearken it to language because in language you have to know how to conjugate, you have to know how to speak properly, how to get your ideas across in many different ways. You might say I walked up the mountain, and you might say I slowly walked up the mountain and then I ran and then I stopped and I took a rest, I had a ham sandwich, and then I got to the top of the mountain. There's a lot of different ways to get there. And I know many, many different ways, just as you would in a conversation, but you don't think about it, you just think of what you want to express. And that's the best analogy I can give for what happens when I'm improvising. Behind it is a great deal of knowledge and experience and the ability to listen. That's the most important thing is to listen to the players around you, or if you're playing solo, to listen to the air. Listen to the space, and listen to what the space needs. And if it doesn't need anything, don't play anything. And it's something like that.

MR: Wow. That's a good answer. I like that.

BC: Yeah. I could of course go into a very scholarly answer — we do this when we're playing on this form, and if I was teaching a lesson to a piano student I would go into things like that. But I don't think that that's what it is finally about. It's finally about immediate expression of the idea.

- CM: Of course it's a difficult music. It relies heavily on improvisation, which is very difficult because everybody doesn't do that well. The name of the game is to do that. But because you are dealing with the spontaneity, that's what can make it difficult and not sound so good sometimes. So to pull it off you have to be expert or, you have to be something, to pull it off.
- MR: If you play a tune, if you're playing on "All the Things You Are," have you internalized that tune enough over the years that you don't have to think about this Two-Five-One and that.
- CM: Oh yeah. In pretty much all music. You have to do that when you're maybe learning a tune. But once the tune is committed to memory, the form, the structure and the elements that make the tune what it is, I don't think any real pro that's been playing for a number of years really thinks about that. It's pretty much like when you're getting ready to talk you don't really say I'm saying an infinitive, I'm saying this is a verb, this is an adjective phrase, you don't really say that. You just need to say whatever it is you want to say and then you try to do it. And you do do it.
- KP: Whatever you read or whatever you live, it all comes into your music. So you can't sit there while you're playing and think about every single chord and what can I play over this, what can I play over this? Because the best moments when you're improvising, you're actually — I hate to say this — but it's almost an out-of-body experience. You can actually listen to yourself playing. You forget about everything. You're just sailing through the changes and saying oh, hey, why, how did I play that?
- MR: And how do I get out of something that I didn't mean to play? Did that ever happen to you?
- KP: Yeah. Oh, of course. In fact sometimes you can do that. You play little tricks on yourself. You paint yourself into a corner and then you try to get out of it. But as Dizzy Gillespie said one time, you're only a half step away from salvation at any given moment. Because when you look at a chord and you look at extensions of the chord, you keep adding thirds onto the chord, you have every note in the chromatic scale anyway. So it's all how it comes out at the end, how you resolve a phrase. So to me the object is not to think about every chord as an individual thing, but the whole thing is a big picture. And your object is

to get from point A to point B and tell a story and have a flow to it — a beginning, a middle and an end.

I hear three takeaways from these improvisers:

1. They operate in the world of spontaneity,
2. Preparation is required to be successful in that environment
3. Improvising is much like speaking, creating a language with sounds instead of words.

It can be argued that all styles of music have a distinctive language. In classical genres, the musical information is provided predominantly by the composer, who indicates not only the notes to play but also stipulates the way to play them. The musician's main task is to give sound and life to the printed page with a modicum of personal expression. The jazz player composes or is provided with a melody, then expected to "get off" it, the B section in our musical triptych, and the most challenging task is choosing from the multitude of available choices. While listening to the other band members and keeping in mind how long they should play, an improviser makes spontaneous choices with pitch, phrasing, dynamics, rests, long and short notes, personal expression, the list goes on. I can attest, that an infinite number of musical options does not necessarily make things easier.

Veteran trumpeter Joe Wilder and vocalist Dianne Reeves spoke about wisely limiting their choices to achieve the best possible outcome.

MR: Is it possible to verbalize what you think about on any particular tune while you're playing?

JW: Well I don't know. These things come to you automatically. I mean sometimes, usually if I'm going to play something while someone else is playing, I'll try to think of something that I would like to start, introduce my solo with, and it's something that's relative to the quality, nature of the piece itself, and something that fits kind of harmonically with what's going on. And I usually try to think about that. And I also think it's just — improvisation it's like giving a speech or something like that. You have a subject, and your interpretation of it may differ from mine, but it's still basically the same subject so that's a theme that you're improvising around. And you try to play something that enhances it, and also adds a little different flavor to it. So you don't come in and play

exactly what the person before you. You may even extract some of what he played as a lead in to what you're going to do, so you get that dove-tailing, and it's like passing the baton in a relay race. You do it smoothly. You don't do this — you're running and you pick up the same speed as that person whom you're going to accept the baton from or pass it to, and you get that smooth transition you know. That's — if you listen to a lot of improvisation in different groups, when they have that smooth transference from one to the other, that's the way it does. That's the way it comes off.

DR: It has a lot to do with what the song is about for me you know. I know in working with different musicians, I did an album called "The Grand Encounter." And I remember any time we did a song the musicians would always say, "Now what were the lyrics to this song?" They always wanted to know the lyrics to the song so that they could really, really tell the story in, I guess in a way without words. And that's basically kind of how I think when I'm, you know — "Lullaby of Birdland" is I think for me, more than anything it's nostalgia. Because when I first heard the song I remember where I was, who I was, how young I was and what an impact it made on me. And I think you know that when I'm singing I'm thinking about wow, I wish, if I were in that session how I would be, what I would do and I guess that's what that was.

MR: Do you find that you would change your choice of syllables and sounds depending on what kind of music you're scatting over?

DR: It really has a lot to do with placement of pitches and sound. I always look at improvisation, at least for me, as the words that you can't say, the things that come out of your soul. And any song that I sing I will change the sound or the timbre in my voice to fit what it is that I'm trying to say. So that probably is true with improvisation as well.

Words of wisdom that could only come after years of gigs and interaction with other musicians. As we wrap up Episode 5 I have the feeling that an opening disclaimer would have been in order. We made progress, but an exact and all encompassing definition of jazz improvisation is really impossible. For me, that's rather a good thing. I like a bit of unknown the happy accidents and the magic that defies explanation. As the renown jazz critic Whitney Balliett wrote "Jazz is the sound of surprise." And for a surprise, there needs a bit of mystery.

[Musical Interlude]

Our jazz vocabulary word of the day has obviously been “improvisation.” But I’ll add another, actually a group of words. *Jazz Tales from Jazz Legends*, the title of recent book I co-authored with Romy Britell for the Fillius Jazz Archive. It offers nine chapters of memorable excerpts from our oral history interviews, first hand accounts of the jazz life from artists like Marian McPartland, Joe Williams, Dave Brubeck, Jon Hendricks and many more. *Jazz Tales from Jazz Legends* is available from amazon.com. I think it will hit the perfect note with you.

While a perfect definition of jazz improvising may not be forthcoming, this succinct offering from baritone saxophonist Gary Smulyan comes pretty darn close.

GS: Jazz is a lot more than just playing by ear or by feeling. There’s this misconception, oh man, I’m a jazz man, I play what I feel man. And that’s not what it is. I mean jazz is really, four things have to hook up, right? What you can think, what you can hear, what you can feel and what you can execute on your horn.

I love it, and think it’s worth repeating: What you can think, what you can hear, what you can feel and what you can execute on your horn. We will revisit Gary Smulyan’s description in Episode 7 and follow up on Joe Wilder’s pass-the- baton analogy.

We have passed our first season’s halfway point, and a whole note of gratitude goes out to my support team at Hamilton's IT Services, to student Jason Lever for his technical assistance and to Romy Britell for interview transcriptions and content guidance. And kudos to our house band, the Orchestra in a Nutshell, who played an expanded role in this episode.

It occurs to me that I have yet to assign any homework, and I am doing the air quotes here. So here’s a listening assignment if you are so inclined, one that will take precisely seven minutes and three seconds. Google the jazz recording “Mr. P.C.” by John Coltrane and have a listen. In our next visit we will examine how a song with an eleven second melody can be transformed into a performance lasting over seven minutes. We’ll see you on the flip side.

[Musical Interlude]