

Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #6 — Improvisation Part 2

[Musical Introduction]

Welcome to Jazz Backstory Episode 6, a second take on jazz improvisation.

Perhaps you have had the experience of feeling perplexed during a jazz performance. How do the musicians actually know where they are. Surprisingly, jazz improvisation mostly occurs in organized settings. As Gary Smulyan stated in Episode 5, it's not just playing whatever you want, man.

Our jazz vocabulary word of the day is relevant to this topic. The word is a familiar one: “chorus.” It conjures up an image and a sound.. A chorus, a group of singers. Or if you’re a student of popular music, the chorus, part of a song that is repeated and usually includes the title as in, “My Girl” or I’m “Back in the USSR.” Jazz players use the term to indicate one time around the form, whether it’s a 12-bar blues or a 32-bar A-A-B-A structure. Improvising one time over the song form is designated as one chorus. Jazz artists rarely play just one, and the decision of how many improvised choruses a player takes is often made on the bandstand, in the moment, as part of the creative process.

Some of you may have taken me up on the listening assignment suggested at the end of Episode 5. The tune was “Mr. P.C.,” an uptempo 12-bar minor blues, written by John Coltrane and named for his bassist Paul Chambers. It fits the jazz descriptor “straight ahead,” indicating a swing feel with an uncomplicated arrangement. The recording follows the standard format of melody at the beginning and end with the “get off” part in the middle, our musical triptych from the previous episode. The initial version of “Mr. PC,” from the 1960 “Giant Steps” LP lasts 7:05 seconds, the actual melody of Mr. P.C.? a grand total of 11 seconds! Let's see if I can pull it off [Mr. PC acapella]

It took me 12. Now how did the John Coltrane Quartet take an 11 second tune and expand it to seven minutes and five seconds? Well, it’s a lot of choruses and as a personal challenge, I

tracked them as they flew by . The results of my in depth research: Coltrane plays the melody twice then launches into 15 choruses of intense improvisation, pianist Tommy Flanagan follows with 11 choruses, leading into 8 choruses of 4 bar exchanges between Coltrane's tenor sax and Art Taylor's drums. Two restatements of the melody, a four bar tag and some [scats] over the last chord, and the song clocks in at 7:05. That's 36 choruses of the 12 bar blues. This is a prototypical jazz performance, melody-the get off-melody. Go ahead and check it out, "Mr. P.C." and see if I counted correctly. Interesting to note that the one quartet member who did not get a taste, a solo spot, was Mr. PC himself, bassist Paul Chambers. We may have more to say about bass solos in a future episode.

[Musical Interlude]

In Episode 5 we heard a number of observations about improvising that deserve a follow up. Clarinetist Ken Peplowski referred to the multitude of jazz tutorials currently available to young musicians and stated "it's great to learn all this stuff, any knowledge is good knowledge, but the trick is later to forget it." Personally, I don't feel at ease with all the music theory I have forgotten, so what does Ken Peplowski actually mean? Pianist Michael Weiss expanded on this topic quite eloquently during our December 2021 interview.

MW: This experience of this collaborative art form teaches you how to be in the moment and in the present. And to me the whole game that ties everything together is the cooperation or the successful cooperation of your conscious and subconscious. When you're in the musical moment, when you're in the act of a creative improvised endeavor, you have to have all your faculties working at a top level. When you're improvising, when you're soloing for example, you have to get out of the way of your creativity. We say let it happen, get out of the way, having a flow, a creative flow. All that is letting your, you know all your storehouse of ideas that you improvise, that come out, the story you tell spontaneously originates from your subconscious. Your subconscious is all the things you know. And you can't be able to say everything that you know all at once, because not everything comes to you all at once, so where is it? It's in your storehouse, your history of experience I think is sitting in your subconscious. Sometimes when you're playing you feel like you don't have any ideas at all and you're just sitting there going through the motions. The fingers are leading you and you're hoping that the fingers will lead you to someplace that spark an idea that you can actually, actively, that you can activate. A little

catalyst. But at the moment there's no catalyst. You are uninspired. What do you do to inspire yourself? To jumpstart your creative flow? So to me this is like the battle that goes on every time, every single time I'm on the bandstand. What's going to come out? How inspired will I be? How freely will my ideas flow? There are certain tricks I'll do sometimes to try to push myself into having to force a different type of creative situation. Like sometimes I'll, rather than continuing where I've gone a million times before I'll look at another range of the piano and I'll say I'm going to make myself start my phrase up here, not because I hear it but just to make myself do it, and then, what does that make me do? Sometimes you have to trick yourself to, you know accidents are how things get going. You have to create an accident. You have to almost, maybe you have to deliberately hit a note that you don't, you wouldn't hear necessarily, you wouldn't normally go there but that opens up a whole process of, you know, creative possibilities. How do I make, if you think this is a quote unquote wrong note or unintended note, how do you make it right? How do you justify it musically?

Michael Weiss used the term "in the moment," creating instantaneously, and moving immediately to the next moment, at the same time being aware of what you played in previous moments, and thinking ahead to when you should stop.

There has been medical research under the layman's heading of, "your brain on improvisation" where an improviser's head is actually wired up, resulting in an EKG print out that very much resembles multiple seismic events. Between the conscious and the subconscious "there's a whole lotta shakin' goin' on."

[Musical Interlude]

Here is what trumpeter Joe Wilder had to say in Episode 5, regarding the common bandstand protocol of soloing after another soloist:

"You may extract some of what they played as a lead in to what you're going to do, so you get that dove-tailing, it's like passing the baton in a relay race. You do it smoothly. pick up the same speed as the person whom you're going to accept the baton from.

Some years ago I was fortunate to record original music with an all star cast, including trumpeter Wendell Brunious and trombonist Bill Watrous. One tune, titled "Beyond Category" included solo spots for Wendell and Bill in that order. The transition that occurred between them was a

baton passing worthy of the Olympics, a flugelhorn magically morphing into a trombone, here is the excerpt:

[Musical Interlude: “Beyond Category”]

Did you hear it? It was perfect, if you care to do a replay and time it, the improvised baton passing occurs right at 50 seconds. All the more impressive considering they had not seen the music until that day. Here is what Bill Watrous had to say about being in that moment and how aspiring musicians can prepare themselves for a similar setting:

BW: Both of us just closed our eyes and just went with it. See if you blunder ahead all the time, you’ll never get anything. But if you play a little bit and then stop for a second and listen to where it’s going, and go there, there’s no problem. That’s the secret in that stuff. But it’s people that are trying to have this constant ongoing flow, you can’t have an ongoing flow if you don’t know where the heck you’re going.

MR: To go there, as you say, you need to have spent some years developing your ear.

BW: Oh yeah.

MR: What do you suggest to players to do that?

BW: I would suggest this: I would suggest that they take those Aebersold CDs, okay, and play along and put them on, even if they don’t know the tune, and just try and feel their way through there, not getting into a panic but just going where they suggest that you go. And if you listen, if you really honestly listen, and have the ability to listen, of course that has to be developed too, ear training is one major part of this thing, if you can teach them to hear a tone and produce it on their instrument, and then hear a series of tones and produce that. And if you equate what you hear with what’s coming out of your instrument, it makes it a lot easier. It makes it a much simpler job you know than if you’re just shooting in the dark. You have to close your eyes. I tell a lot of young players, don’t have your nose dripping on the paper man, listen to what this thing is doing, close your eyes and get into the capsule and go there. And just let your ear and your feelings sort of take you someplace if you can. It’s worth trying.

Bill Watrous, Ken Peplowski and Michael Weiss addressed the challenges of a soloist within a group, playing a designated jazz composition. A number of intrepid jazz pianists, including Keith Jarrett, Cecil Taylor, Marilyn Crispell and Dr. Denny Zeitlin have often presented solo concerts with no pre-conceived tunes, keys or tempos, total improvisation. Dr. Zeitlin, who is also a

licensed psychotherapist, speaks about his preparation before walking on stage for such an endeavor. We'll then pass the baton to the marvelous soprano saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom and peer one more time into the brain and soul of a jazz soloist.

DZ: Usually what I try to do is to get out of the way. If I know I'm going to have to play, to get ready for a concert, usually what I try to do is to find a way to clear my mind of other concerns. Sometimes that will involve me getting off by myself for a few minutes before I go up on the stand. And if I'm worrying about where did I put my plane ticket, and did I call this guy, and what time is that gig tomorrow night, I try to gentle myself out of those concerns. And one of the ways that works best for me is an internal reminder, to remind myself how profoundly grateful I am to be able to play. That there is something about that that moves me so much, I mean even to say that brings tears to my eyes. It's like I do feel so profoundly grateful to have music in my life, that when I remind myself about this, the rest of these concerns just — they recede. And then I feel I'm ready to just greet music. And so if I then go out on the stage and there is just a piano there and myself I just sit down and just wait for something to happen. And something happens. You know? There'll be — some phrase will occur, it will just play itself. And then I'm just playing. And then I just stay out of the way, I try not to manipulate the music. I try to honor it, to just listen to it. Where does this music want to go now? What am I hearing? And if I play a note or a chord or a phrase that contains something other than I was thinking about, an error in terms of where I was going, I try not to beat up on myself and start castigating — oh schmuck what a dumb note to play — because you start doing that and then that messes up the next four notes or the next four phrases and then you beat yourself up for that, and that could start a real downward spiral in the music. So I think over the years I've gotten better and better at being just graceful with that. I heard it, sometimes you make wonderful lemonade out of a lemon. You can take that mistake, turn it on its ear, do something very interesting with it, so that, and you talk to a lot of jazz musicians and a lot of them will tell you they've come to love their mistakes on record. Because it really pulled them into something different. Because they had to react in a different way, so you'd better legitimize it or work with it or do something with that clam that appeared in the line.

JB But learning how to improvise, that's something — you really learn how to do it on your own. Nobody teaches you how to do it. They just sort of create the settings for you to experiment in. I think Joe approached it that way. And he gave me the tools for trying to hear and reach the things that I wanted to be able to play.

MR: This is a tough question I think, but I've often liked to see if I can tell what people think about when they improvise. Are you conscious to a great degree of the changes as they go by or is it a little more esoteric than that?

JB: Well here's the way — I'm not entirely sure. When I study a piece of music that has important harmonic material in it, I internalize it. I think this is how a lot of jazz musicians would describe the process to you, but I play it over and over and over again, both on the horn and on the piano, until the coloristic changes that are in the tune aren't symbols on a page anymore, they're inside. I can hear them in their fullness, in their harmonic fullness, you know where they exist in a structure. And if I've succeeded in really learning that tune, the page goes away and the tune is then inside me. And occasionally I may have the chart in front of me and you use those symbols, the chord symbols as little reminders of what's going on. But like I said I think if you really know the tune, the harmony is inside you and also I think the melody is, on some unconscious level, being sung in my head when I'm playing. It's there. It's inside. And I think that's some kind of guidepost that exists in your musical imagination at some deep level. I don't know it's hard to talk about this stuff. But I have a sense that that's what it's about.

I think you will agree that this episode has been a deep dive into improvisation. Even deeper can be the scholarly research focused on what is essentially a spontaneous art. Following is a title of a recent paper submitted to the Jazz Education Network Research Committee

Patterns in Music: How Linguistic Corpus Analysis Tools Can Be Used to Illuminate Central Aspects of Jazz Improvisation

Personally, I could use a perspective from the shallow end of the pool. I once asked a fellow musician how he achieved such a distinctive style with his trumpet solos, His reply, "It's all Bb" My own two cents, "It is all Bb, except when it's not."

We'll go out listening to the full version of Beyond Category, one more opportunity to hear Wendell Brunious and Bill Watrous do their magic. Our next two episodes will feature memorable moments, both comical and poignant, experienced by those who lived the jazz life. Until then, see you on the flipside.

[Musical Interlude: "Beyond Category"]