

The Versatile Improviser

Patrick Sheng, Jazz Studies
Long Beach City College

General Considerations

1. Develop an aggressive and confident playing technique
2. You should always play in a controlled manner – make every note intentional
 - a. This means playing within the limits of your instrumental technique
 - b. Don't play "whatever comes out of the instrument." Be in control.
3. Develop a wide range of musical tools to be at your disposal use while improvising
 - a. Scales/modes
 - b. Chords/arpeggios
 - c. Licks
 - d. Musical concepts
 - i. Call and response
 - ii. Thematic development
 - iii. Improvising around the melody
 - iv. Pacing/using space
 - v. Create anticipation and suspense through the use of repetition
 - vi. Communicate musical ideas and react to the rhythm section

The Basics

1. Figure out what key you're in. This can be done two ways:
 - a. Use your ears
 - b. Understand the chord progressions – oftentimes many chords belong to a single key
2. Play in that key

Use Your Ears

1. Improvise around the melody. It is a strong indicator of what key you're in, and it is also recognizable to your listeners
2. React to the overall sound of the group. If the rhythm section sounds bluesy, play blues; if it sounds soft play soft; if it's in outer space, get on the spaceship; etc.
3. Listen to your favorite artists, and emulate them

Chord Changes

1. Regardless of whether or not you play a chordal instrument, you must learn to read and play chords
 - a. If you play a chordal instruments, play the chords and arpeggios
 - b. If you play melodic instrument, play the chords as arpeggios, ascending and descending. These will make great licks later on.
2. After learning the melody, learn to play the chords *in time*
3. When you become familiar with the basic triads and 7th chords, play up to the extended notes (9, 11, 13) and altered extensions (b9, #9, #11, b13)
4. Become familiar with seeing common chord progressions in all keys. By identifying chord progressions, you can simplify many chords down to a single key
 - a. ii⁷ V⁷ I in major and minor keys
 - b. I vi⁷ ii⁷ V⁷ and iii⁷ VI⁷ ii⁷ V⁷ progressions

- c. 12 bar blues progressions
 - d. Rhythm changes
5. When learning tunes, learn the melody, chords, and artist specific intros, tags, and alternate changes. The intro to *Star Eyes*, the tag on *Nica's Dream*, Joe Henderson's substitutions on *Without a Song* and *Night and Day*, the half step turnaround on *Have You Met Miss Jones*, the classic Red Garland intro to *Bye Bye Blackbird* – these are often overlooked in fakebooks. It has to be learned by pulling it off the record (or CD, or mp3, media streaming website, cloud, etc...). After learning how your favorite artists have put unique approaches to standards, you'll have an idea of how to make your own intros, tags, arrangements, and possible substitutions.

Using the Vocabulary

1. Your solos will sound like jazz if you play jazz licks. Solos will sound bluesy if you play blues.
2. Learn multiple licks with a variety of melodic ideas (blues, bebop, modal, etc.)
 - a. Licks that work over a single chord
 - b. Licks that work over common chord progressions
3. Memorize your licks in all keys
4. Become so familiar with your licks that you can perform them anytime, in any key, in any speed, in any style. These licks will become your lifesavers when you experience musical “writer’s block”

Practice Tips

1. Metronome practice
 - a. Practice at different tempos
 - b. Click on 2 and 4 – try to make the metronome swing
2. Thoroughly and systematically practice scales and chords
3. Learn and memorize the melodies and chords to jazz standards
4. Learn basic jazz piano voicings, regardless of what instruments you play
5. Build a good selection of resources to inspire and challenge yourself

Valuable Improvisation Resources

1. Jazz recordings – learn from and play with the masters. CDs, records, DVDs, Youtubes, etc...
2. Your fellow musicians and teachers – play with and learn from real musicians
3. Transcriptions (by YOU) – take your favorite solos off the record, analyze what notes/licks are being played over the chords, and apply it to your own improvisations
4. Play along Recordings
 - a. Jamey Aebersold play along books/CDs
 - b. iRealPro for smart phones and tablets
5. Method Books
 - a. *David Baker's Jazz Improvisation: A Comprehensive Method for All Musicians*
 - b. *The Jazz Piano Book* by Mark Levine
 - c. *Inside Improvisation Series* by Jerry Bergonzi
 - d. *The New Real Book* (3 volumes) by published by Sher Music
6. Transcription Books for your instrument
 - a. *Charlie Parker Omnibook* (available in C, Bb, Eb, Bass Clef)