

The Real Answer on Improv

Jeff Graham

I have sat through many sessions at conferences and listened to many adjudicators talk about improvisation. While it is said we must listen to jazz to play it well the discussions ends up being centered around, playing and understanding chord changes. I have come to the conclusion that this frustrates my students, teachers and me! While I have a good knowledge base of chords changes my students don't. I teach what they are capable of learning which for the most part is very limited. I have a feeling many teachers don't understand it either. Many of us don't have the training. Many of us meet with our jazz bands once a week for 90 minutes or less. So what do we do? Step one is listening and transcribing. It is the Real Answer. There are no short cuts! **All the answers are in the recordings.**

Jazz is an aural tradition. Like any language, you must learn to speak it before you can study it and learn to truly express yourself. Learning from a book or the "this scale goes here" as the first step is ridiculous. How did we learn to speak our native language? By imitating our family and friends. Therefore too learn jazz we must imitate the great musicians who spoke the jazz language with grace, style, soul and stank baby! So transcribing or learning music with your ear and applying to your instrument is the "Real Answer".

A common misconception about learning jazz music is that studying chords and chord scale relationships will teach you to play the right notes at the right time. But if you can't truly speak the language then how can you study it? It would be like trying convince my 4 year old son to conjugate a verb before he had learnt to say; "Good night Daddy, I love you." I love hearing him say that, it truly warms my soul. I also like hearing my students play something they learnt from Miles Davis because it's real and meaningful. Now don't get me wrong you must at some point study chord changes. In fact a huge bulk of every jazz musician's practice time is devoted to studying chord changes. But all great jazz musicians started by listening and transcribing! Once you get a feel for the language you can start to study it and learn how to manipulate it.

The last obstacle is patience. Anything that is worthwhile learning takes time. You must be patient if you intend to learn how to play and understand jazz music. We live in a society full of quick fixes; plastic surgery, fast food, high speed Internet or learning how to play jazz by learning using chord scale relationships. And young people love quick fixes. Transcribing and really learning how to play jazz is very time consuming. It may take a student hours upon hours to learn a solo or lick. But it gets easier and easier as the process continues. And so we must teach our young students patience as well. They will not sound like Charlie Parker today. But they can find a Miles Davis solo that is learnable. Or a few blues licks they can use on the blues tune they are performing They can even find a Parker lick that is learnable. It all requires patience.

Jazz is an aural tradition. If you want to learn it you must listen and transcribe. While studying chords changes is important young musicians should concentrate on finding their voice in the music first. And lastly patience is a must. If you teach than do your students a huge favor and make them listen listen listen! I begin all rehearsals with the recordings. And lastly get them to transcribe transcribe transcribe! If you're a student of jazz, do yourself the favor.