

Jazz Improvisation At Its Best Is A Creative Conversation



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVID OSTWALD LOUIS ARMSTRONG ETERNITY BAND

By Michael B. Friedman

Recently a neighbor who doesn't know jazz came to a jam session in which I played a few tunes on keyboard, and when I came back to our table, he asked, "Did you know what you would be playing?" "No" I responded. "I didn't even know who I would be playing with. The person running the jam session puts us together and we then ask each other 'what do you want to play?'" He looked astonished. "Do you then have music you can read?" "To some extent," I said. I showed him an app on my smartphone giving a chart of chords. "But mostly we improvise." He looked even more astonished. "How do you do that?" he asked.

That is one of the magical aspects of jazz. Musicians who may or may not have ever played together before join to play a tune together, maybe one they've never played before—and not only play the melody, but also take improvised solos on the tune.

"When jazz musicians improvise, they create a new melody over the chord structure of a song. The notes in that new melody are chosen from the notes within the chords—or from the scale implied by a series of chords. The improviser may hew closely to the contours of the original melody—or may completely depart from it, while adhering to the harmonic sequence." (from *A Passion for Jazz*)

Players implicitly or explicitly agree before they begin about style or rhythm (e.g. swing, ballad, funk, or Latin), and tempo. In jam sessions, much of this goes unsaid because there is a repertoire that most jazz musicians are familiar with. If they don't know the tune by heart, some use "lead sheets" giving the melody and chords; others use the phone app with chords only. For singers, keys are often changed.

Simple enough? Not at all. To play together is a remarkable feat. "One, two, three, four," someone may say out loud or

with a few taps, and everyone starts in the same harmonic and melodic place in the same tempo. How is this possible? It is a fundamental form of human communication. But to get a sense of how difficult it is, just watch people dancing. Good dancers are together. Many dancers miss the beat or don't connect with the rhythm of their partners.

Following a sequence of chords at a shared rhythm is fundamental to jazz improvisation; but this can be done mechanically, or it can transcend the mechanics and be truly creative. How is that possible?

Jazz as a language is a good analogy, for sure. When we speak, we are constantly improvising. New thoughts emerge as we talk. So it is with jazz improvisation.

Warren Wolf, one of the greatest jazz musicians playing today, answers "Jazz at its heart is a conversation." Sometimes soloists taking their turns improvising get lost in themselves, but sometimes there is an interchange between the soloists and the rhythm section backing them up or with other instrumentalists who join in. "Statement and response," Wolf said.

And sometimes there's chemistry like that between lovers or good friends, and sometimes there isn't. Jazz pianist Peggy Stern once said to me at a jam session, "I've had enough of playing for musicians masturbating in front of me." She wanted a conversation; she wanted to be heard as well as to listen. Metaphorically, she wanted lovemaking—not mutual masturbation.

This requires musicians to do more than follow the chord patterns. They need to listen to each other, they need to adapt

to each other, they need to find each other. David Ostwald, who leads the Louis Armstrong Eternity Band, which has played at Birdland in New York every Wednesday for the last 23 years, said to me recently, "You have to be open-eared, ready and willing to join with someone playing something unexpected."

In another recent conversation, Ian Rashkin, a marvelous bass player and former president of the Baltimore Jazz Alliance, said that it is important to capture the mood of the music and to express his own mood at the same time. "Soloing," he said, "is answering the melody, an interchange between it and me." He added, that, like Peggy Stern, as a member of the rhythm section, he does not want to just be background; he wants a conversation between himself and the soloist he supports.

How are these conversations possible? This is a very tough metaphysical question. Jungians answer that there is a collective unconscious that creative people tap into. That is the source. Tarus Mateen, a very creative bass player, recently said to me, "The music comes from the source and passes through the performer to the listeners." He believes that these conversations are best when musicians "let their hands do the talking," bypassing a verbal idea of what to play, going directly from source to expression.

How can players learn to do this? Wolf answers, "Listen to recordings of great performances. Master them and make them your own." A shared history is essential for a true conversation, for a true interchange.

Joshua Espinosa, one of the most original pianists working currently, says, "Masters of improvisation spend many, many hours exploring the multitude of musical possibilities . . . and eventually develop their own style." He compares learning to improvise to learning a language.

Todd Barkan, the owner of Keystone Korner, a world class jazz club in Baltimore, makes it a point to say about his club, "Jazz is spoken here."

Jazz as a language is a good analogy, for sure. When we speak, we are constantly improvising. New thoughts emerge as we talk. So it is with jazz improvisation. New ideas emerge as we play. But as with talk, jazz players often fall back on what they have said before, sometimes over and over again. Sometimes they rely on riffs they know, especially riffs that arouse an audience.

Repetition of the familiar can be emotionally powerful. But improvisation at its best is not just repetition of chord patterns, though that is critical. Nor is it repetition of riffs that work. At its best, it is, as Wolf points out, a conversation among creative people discovering and saying something that has not been said before, something created in the moment. How does that happen? That is still a mystery.

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