

ON IMPROVISING by Steve Treseler

FINDING THE ZONE

Some of the greatest improvisers describe a peak state of non-thinking, known as being “in the zone” or a flow state. Sonny Rollins says, “When I play, what I try to do is to reach my subconscious level. I don’t want to overtly think about anything, because you can’t think and play at the same time — believe me, I’ve tried it. It goes by too fast.”

Saxophone master Chris Potter describing the same state: Of course, simply “not thinking” doesn’t usually work. After reading Kenny Werner’s *Effortless Mastery* in college, I tried to not think while performing, but when thoughts popped up, I started thinking about not thinking. This didn’t generate great results. Flow is a state of deep concentration, not just an empty head. Before arriving at the pinnacle “not thinking, music flowing” stage, we can direct our attention to specific areas that allow us to improvise better music. What areas are these? This is where you get to experiment.

FOCUS ANCHORS

Flow only happens in the now, so focus anchors help us direct our attention to the present tense. The point is to keep your conscious mind engaged and occupied with an anchor, and to begin trusting your subconscious mind to take over.

These strategies are only effective for tunes you have totally internalized. If you are concentrating on the mechanics of playing your instrument or trying to remember what chord change is next, you won’t have the bandwidth to focus on the anchors. **Choose a piece you know really well, or start with a free improvisation.**

Shift all of your attention to a single point of focus and improvise a solo. Be sure to record yourself, because you may not remember what/how well you played. Announce each anchor out loud so when you listen back you know which are most effective. This list can get you started, but experiment with any point of focus that drives you into the present moment.

Before playing a note:

- Imagine with total clarity the music you seek to create.
- Recall the performances where you played and felt your best. Where were you? Who was there? What did it sound like? Most importantly, recall how the experience felt in your body at an emotional level.

Physical Anchors

- The physical sensation of the vibrations of your instrument
- Deep diaphragmatic breaths (especially for wind players)
- Relaxing key muscle groups (shoulders, arms, brow, etc)

Auditory Anchors

- Get absorbed in the tone of your instrument
- Focus on the sounds of a specific instrument (cymbals, bass etc)
- Listen to the entire ensemble
- Observe ambient sounds in the room

Visualization Anchors

- Imagine the visual shapes and colors of the sounds you are creating
- Imagine a scene or narrative
- Assume the persona of one of your favorite players (or non-musicians)
- Channel a specific emotional state

Limitation Anchors

Focus on a specific approach to improvisation:

- Lyrical
- In the pocket
- Motivic
- Variation on the melody
- Interactive call and response with rhythm section
- Get more ideas in my book *Creativity Triggers for Musicians* which you can [download for free](#).

Come up with your own—the possibilities are endless.

MEDITATION

A meditation practice is stellar concentration and focus training. In addition to lowering anxiety, it helps us direct our attention exactly where we want it to go. (Tara Brach's guided meditations helped me start a daily practice: [Web](#), [iTunes](#).)

Even if you don't get into the effortless, "the instrument plays itself" zone right away, this level of deliberate focus can make a huge difference in your playing. And it may be your gateway to the zone.

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The Philosophy of Improvisation

Improvisation is one of the highest and most demanding forms of music composition. Many people try to learn how to improvise by studying scales, modes, licks and other "cheats". In my opinion, these mechanical cheats are not only intellectually and musically dishonest, but will also end up frustrating those of you who are truly talented, because they will not teach you how to improvise. They will merely turn you into monkeys who regurgitate licks, play scales super-fast other such non-musical garbage.

In this video I present a different philosophy to learning to improvise. In my view, mastering improvisation is comprised of three steps:

(1.) First, learn how to compose. Be able to say something "offline" before saying it "online"! If you can't come up with musical ideas without any pressure, how on earth are you going to do it on the fly? By training your composition skills you are building up a true musical vocabulary of ideas.

(2.) Once you can compose on the fly in your head, you must be able to recognize the notes you hear in your mind. If you hear a musical phrase in your imagination, you must be able to say which notes precisely it corresponds to.

This involves training your ear.

(3.) Finally, train your hands and master the technique necessary to play those notes you hear in your head in real time.

In my book, this is the ONLY honest way to improvise. I highly encourage all competent and curious musicians out there to steer clear of "licks" and "scales" and to embark on a much more satisfying - albeit probably much harder - journey.

More About Improvisation and Jazz from Wikipedia:

Musical improvisation (also known as musical extemporization) is the creative activity of immediate ("in the moment") musical composition, which combines performance with communication of emotions and instrumental technique as well as spontaneous response to other musicians. Thus, musical ideas in improvisation are spontaneous, but may be based on chord changes in classical music, and indeed many other kinds of music.

One definition is a "performance given extempore without planning or preparation." Another definition is to "play or sing (music) extemporaneously, especially by inventing variations on a melody or creating new melodies in accordance with a set progression of chords."

Improvisation is one of the basic elements that sets jazz apart from other types of music. The unifying moments in improvisation that take place in live performance are understood to encompass the performer, the listener, and the physical space that the performance takes place in. Even if improvisation is also found outside of jazz, it may be that no other music relies so much on the art of "composing in the moment", demanding that every musician rise to a certain level of creativity that may put the performer in touch with his or her unconscious as well as conscious states. The educational use of improvised jazz recordings is widely acknowledged. They offer a clear value as documentation of performances despite their perceived limitations. With these available, generations of jazz musicians are able to implicate styles and influences in their performed new improvisations. Many varied scales and their modes can be used in improvisation. They are often not written down in the process, but they help musicians practice the jazz idiom.

THOUGHTS ON IMPROVISING IN THE EASTERN/BALKAN TRADITION

- An improvisation is NOT about you or your abilities (contrary to popular belief).
- Respect the genre and its specific stylistic expression.
- Know AND STICK to your scales.
- Allow the song you've just played to inform and guide your solo.
- Know who your audience is.
- Listen and engage with the underlying rhythm of the tune.
- Know the pivot notes (hinges) that are natural points of transposition or scale change.
- Practice avoiding your own habits in favor of a well rounded expression.
- Use volumetric dynamics to your benefit.
- Explore and stay at the level of the emotional content of the song.
- Explore any given phrase by alternating its notes.
- Surprise or unintentional notes-use them to your benefit (if you can).
- Work on the sound of your instrument.
- Explore rhythmical repeatable patterns as a reinforcing tool to accentuate a single concept.
- Avoid overly repetitive notes or phrases (redundancy, blabbering).
- Study the masters of the genre you're soloing in.
- Be humble. "Music" is much bigger than you.
- Be a decent person. No matter how good a musician you are, if you're a jerk, other musicians will not play with you, AND your music will suffer.