

A Few Ideas About Soloing  
by  
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If you are just getting started with improvisation it can be a bit overwhelming. Scales, chords, playing ideas over changes, learning tunes, etc, all need to be mastered, and it's easy to get confused by information overload. Don't worry. Just keep it simple. Most importantly, play with a singing/musical tone, and good swinging time. These are the two most important qualities listeners hear in a jazz soloist. To achieve this kind of swinging musical sound you must listen to musicians that have it! Yes, listening is more important than playing. Listening is how you learned your own native tongue. Here is a brief list of players: Sax – Dexter Gordon, Joshua Redmond, Paul Desmond and Kenny Garrett. Trumpet – Blue Mitchell, Freddie Hubbard, Chet Baker, Miles Davis. Trombone – J.J. Johnson, Bill Watrous, Carl Fontana, Wycliffe Gordon. Bass – Ray Brown, Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen, Jaco Pastorius, Christian McBride. Guitar – Joe Pass, Pat Metheny, John Scofield, Kurt Rosenwinkle. Piano – Kenny Barron, Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, Kenny Werner. Drums – Buddy Rich, Roy Haynes, Jeff Hamilton, Jack DeJohnette.

First. Keep in mind that everything you play is done in a time-frame. It begins and ends and there is only the one-way forward, therefore, nothing you play can be wasted or without purpose, just as when you are in a conversation, you rarely say things that are unintended and meant to be immediately forgotten. So, limit the amount of information you play initially to just a couple notes and bear in mind always, what you are playing, in relation to what you have just played, and use this to influence what you are about to play. Again, just like a conversation.

To use another analogy, think of yourself on a boat. The recent past is the rudder on the stern (back), and in the now moments you are trimming the sails and setting the wheel, setting your course into the future, influenced by your past. The currents and waves you are in are like the tune you are playing and the other members of the band. These also influence the decisions you make. Now how to proceed? First, don't play notes. Make statements. Don't throw away any sound you've played. Use it again like you meant to play that! Just as you don't speak in words, you speak in sentences that support your larger ideas.

Take the couple notes or a simple idea and try to shape it along these lines. Balance unity and variety. Too much of either unity or variety will cause the listener to drift. The best works of art have a nice balance of new material and development of old material, this is how most song forms are structured. The lyrics to a standard 12-bar blues are three four-bar phrases structured a-a-b. I Got Rhythm Changes are structured a-a-b-a, this is also known as song form. Most pop tunes today are structured in a format akin to verse-chorus-verse-chorus-release section (often guitar solo), chorus, or is a-b-a-b-c-b.

Of course there are exceptions, but there is a general rule of three. This first time you play something it is an accident. When you repeat it you are profound. If you repeat it again, you are a bore. Think about the punch line to a joke. How many times can you hear it, and to what effect? In a nutshell, play something, play it again, change it, then come back to it and you've created an a-a-b-a effect. If you want to hear a soloist working an idea and changing it slightly, listen to Sonny Rollins' solo on St. Thomas.

Of course you'll need to know the melody to the tunes you solo on. You'll want to understand the chords and scales used as well. It's good to know the lyrics to a tune, and as you develop as a player you'll want to use voice leading to help you make compelling moves from chord to chord. That means a good understanding of the V7 cycle and how it applies to major and minor keys is essential. You'll want to memorize everything, especially the great solos that you transcribe. Learn to play them exactly like the recordings. Try to identify repetition and variety, look for scales and arpeggios and how they relate to individual chords or the keys, then practice the ideas you find around the cycle, so you can develop your vocabulary in all keys.

Be patient and consistent. You didn't learn a language in one day, or even a year. Ten years is not unreasonable, and truly, not a long time. Enjoy the discovery. Music is awesome and fun. Improvising is a blast! Good luck.

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