

Supporting the Vocalist

This article is for those who have occasion to improvise on tunes where there's a vocalist. As a trumpet player, I've found this to be an intriguing experience. A few tips are in order here.

The Balance

I discovered that there is a fine balance to supporting a singer through improvisation. The vocalist is usually the “star of the show,” so you don't want to upstage him or her. You need to find that zone where it sounds like you're part of the same fabric in the tune. Sometimes you play at the same time, sometimes you fill in the blanks, and sometimes you trade solo ideas.

Providing a Background

- Keep the density of your ideas low. Long notes that are well-harmonized are usually effective.
- Learn to “sneak in and out” so the singer feels you are there but isn't distracted by your entrances. Try small, definite motifs at first, well-separated by rests.
- Keep the pitch range and intensity fairly low as well – don't overshadow the singer.
- Learn to “un-match” the singer's held notes; harmonize above or below, but don't hang onto the same note. If that happens, gracefully move to a harmony note if possible.

Filling in the Blanks

Providing fills can be challenging from the timing standpoint, but with practice you can help generate a great sense of teamwork.

- Develop good phrase timing in the tune melody. You should be able to sense when the singer *needs* instrumental fills.
- Keep the solo fills somewhat conservative.
- Concentrate on great SHAPE, well-defined rhythms, and melodic color to make your fills interesting.

Trading Solo Ideas

- Make your fills more *supportive* by developing small ideas you hear from the vocalist. This can grow into a great musical conversation.
- When the music feels like it should get more intense, help the singer. You can shift into background mode with higher-pitched long notes or riffs.

When you come back to the tune melody, go back to the “background” ideas above. When you end, let the vocalist take the lead on the last note(s). Be ready to play a brief fill at the end to finish things off, but generally you should avoid launching into a cadenza.