

1000 Degrees

Humans can distinguish thousands of different sounds and shades of sounds. That's one of the joys of music. As improvisers, we have two great opportunities: 1) to expand the range of sounds that we use, and 2) to select the best sounds at the best times.

The Range of Sounds

The range begins with you. Although you should have your own normal, characteristic sound, what is your range of expression? Can you select from a wide variety of accents, articulations, dynamics, and special effects? Does your sound quality or technique need improving? Listening to other artists can give you clues about sounds you could take advantage of.

Every so often you should do a density/intensity check in your music. In your own solos, are you too often dense/intense, or too rarely? Does your group need to lower the intensity dial or crank it up? Texture is another consideration: does your group switch textures fairly often, or is everyone always playing at all times? Do you sometimes play interesting long notes to lighten the texture?

You should listen intently to the textures, density, and intensity of your group and your solos. Do those qualities rise and fall in an interesting way? If not, you may be locked into a range of habit, missing many rich opportunities. A good group exercise is to try different grooves, backgrounds, and textures in different sections of a tune. My BRIJJ group did that in preparation for our Crossover CD, and we came up with some interesting twists – “Toasted Oafs” ended up with half-time rock, bayonne, and double-time rock grooves, plus a space-out ending.)

Choose Wisely

As you develop your ideas in a solo, you have the familiar four choices: copy exactly, modify slightly, modify more, and try a new idea. But there are also other shades of these choices that you can try. For example, displacing a motif one beat but keeping the pitches and rhythm the same sounds almost like copy-exactly. Or you may focus on just two or three notes in a motif to copy exactly, while changing the others – then you get into the modify-slightly area. You can vary several elements of a motif and still be modifying slightly. If you look at the whole range of possibilities in expression, rhythm, and melody, you have a huge range to select from. Choose wisely!