

The Fine Art of Copying

By this point I've hopefully made it clear that vision is critical to your development as an improviser; vision should not be replaced by copying. So what is the role of copying? Here are some suggestions to make copying work for you instead of against you.

1. *Get a good spectrum of artists to copy from.* In your listening, include artists of many different styles and instruments. I'm a trumpet player, but some of my favorite ideas come from keyboardists Chick Corea and Clare Fischer. Also, I'm glad I have a good historical vocabulary: when I'm called on to play Dixieland jazz, it sounds more like Louis Armstrong and less like Miles Davis.
2. *Focus on the context, not just the idea.* Ask yourself: *why* does this particular idea sound good? What tools or elements of good improvisation does it use? Is it part of an effective melodic or rhythmic development? With practice, you'll be able to quickly associate a good improvisation technique (non-harmonic tones, offbeats returning to downbeats, 3 against 4, etc.) with a good idea.
3. *Copy, then adapt.* Once you've grabbed the musical idea and can play it, look for ways to develop the idea. Take it apart in fragments; add to it; sequence it; use any of the development tools in *The Art of Improvisation* to turn the idea into your own.
4. *Work on your transcription skills as necessary.* As you copy increasingly difficult ideas and passages, keep working on your melodic and rhythmic transcription skills (as discussed in *The Art of Improvisation*). Or, play along with the recording and see if you can imitate the idea exactly when the artist plays it.

Using these suggestions helps you turn copying into *absorbing*. That's like digesting and assimilating nutrients into the musical bloodstream, not just choking down chunks of solos and memorizing them. The more you absorb, the more you'll focus on the myriad of wonderful and subtle relationships and connections in the solos of great artists. And those are *definitely* worth absorbing. The goal: find your own voice as a jazz artist by absorbing the great ideas of those who came before.