

150 Frequently Asked Questions about Improvisation

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Here are some of the questions you may have wondering about when it comes to improvisation. Each question number below is linked to a spot in *The Art of Improvisation* that offers help or information on the topic - just click on the number to go to that topic.

The Nature of Improvisation

1. What is jazz improvisation?
2. What are the basic elements of improvisation?
3. Why should I learn to improvise?
4. Can you really learn to improvise, or do you have to be born with it?
5. Where is a good place to start with improvisation?
6. Is copying other jazz musicians a good way to learn to improvise?
7. How do I transfer what I listen to into what I improvise?
8. Can improvisation be pre-planned?
9. What basic values are related to learning to improvise?
10. What do classical music and jazz have in common?

Practice and Skills

11. What exercises would help me improvise better?
12. How can I make practicing more fun?
13. What music skills should I have before I start learning to improvise?
14. Do I really need strong sound and technique to improvise?
15. Do I need perfect pitch to improvise?
16. How can I practice improvisation without my instrument?
17. What are bad improvisation habits I should avoid?
18. What are wrong notes?
19. How can I practice and use scales more effectively?
20. How can I increase my practice time without getting tired?
21. Is there a way to bridge the gap between chord/scale practice and actual improvisation?
22. How do I strengthen my interval skills?
23. How can I learn to play tunes by ear?

24. Is it important to know how to transpose tunes?
25. How can I get myself better prepared to start improvising?

Creativity and Expression

26. Is there a way to actually see what I should play?
27. How can I play more expressively?
28. How does the creative process work in improvisation?
29. What are some of the barriers to creativity?
30. Shouldn't I just be free to play whatever pops into my head?
31. How do I add those extra frills to my solo without them being distracting?
32. How is jazz improvisation related to painting?
33. How is jazz improvisation related to composing?
34. How is jazz improvisation related to language and conversation?
35. How is jazz improvisation related to standup comedy?

Chords and Scales

36. How do I use chord symbols in improvisation?
37. Should I start right off with blues scales?
38. What are good scales to use with major chords?
39. What are good scales to use with minor chords?
40. What are good scales to use with dominant chords?
41. Why does an F sound bad to hold out against a C Major chord?
42. What are some additional scales beyond the basic ones?
43. Can I use the chromatic scale in my solos?
44. How much should I rely on playing chord arpeggios in my solos?
45. How much attention should I pay to the alterations in chord symbols?

Creating Melodies

46. How do I play more colorful melodies?
47. How do I play more interesting blues ideas?
48. Why do my melodies sound like they are going up and down in a rut?
49. How do I balance steps and skips in my playing?
50. How can I make my high and low ranges more interesting in solos?
51. What unusual intervals could I include in my solos?

52. What are the best ways to quote melodies in my solos?
53. What about the notes outside the basic scales – can I use them?
54. How do I learn to play outside the key?
55. How do I switch back and forth smoothly between playing inside and playing outside?

Rhythm and Styles

56. How can I practice rhythms and use them in my solos?
57. How do I liven up my rhythms?
58. How do I learn swing rhythms?
59. If there are no articulations or accents in a written swing piece, how do I add them?
60. What are the subtleties and variations in the swing style?
61. What is “laying back?”
62. How can I use triplets better in my solos?
63. What are the basic characteristics of jazz fusion?
64. What are the basic characteristics of the latin style?
65. What are the essential latin rhythms to use?
66. What unusual rhythms could I include in my solos?
67. How can I be freer with the tempo?
68. How do I play those rhythms that seem to shift?
69. How do odd numbers work in rhythms, like 5, 7, etc?

Developing Ideas

70. How do I make my solos sound they are going somewhere?
71. How much should I repeat musical ideas, and how often should I change them?
72. How can I play more effective phrases?
73. How much silence is appropriate in a solo?
74. What can I do about getting tangled up in an idea and messing it up?
75. Are there basic tools I can use to create and develop solos?
76. How can I get better at remembering what I played?
77. Why do so many improvisers play lots of notes, and high, fast and loud?
78. Why do some soloists sound more like they are composing on the spot?
79. How long should a solo be?
80. How do I tie ideas together so it sounds like they fit well?

Tools and Techniques

81. How do I get smooth connections in my melody from chord to chord?
82. How useful are jazz patterns?
83. What makes good-sounding patterns?
84. How do I create my own patterns?
85. How can I spice up chords?
86. How can I build the intensity in my solos?
87. How can I play mellow but interesting solos?
88. What techniques can I use to play better double-time?
89. What special effects could I use in my solos?
90. What techniques would help fill in the gaps in my solos?
91. How do I play good solo fills?
92. What are some tips for playing solo cadenzas?
93. What are some tips for playing solo introductions?
94. Should I ever just play as fast as I can?
95. How do I use those super-fast licks in my improvisation?
96. How do I get “fast fingers?”
97. Some soloists play new chords too early or late, but it still sounds good – how do I do that?
98. How do soloists change keys so quickly, so often, and so smoothly in solos?
99. What are some tips for playing solos at fast tempos?

Chords Progressions and Tunes

100. How does the melody of the tune relate to the solo?
101. What are the most common kinds of tunes I should learn?
102. How do I keep from getting lost in the form of a tune during my solo?
103. How do I keep from getting lost in the tune during drum solos?
104. How can I simplify a chord progression?
105. How do chords in a key relate to each other?
106. How do I recognize a key in a chord progression?
107. What are the most common and useful kinds of chord progressions?
108. What are some ways I can personalize the tune melodies I play?
109. What are some good ways to end tunes?

110. What other types of blues progressions are there?
111. Can I change a chord progression to make it more interesting?
112. Should I ever avoid a chord?
113. How should I end a solo?
114. What are some tips for playing good ballad solos?
115. What standard tunes should I learn?
116. Can I practice chord progressions without an instrument?
117. How do I learn the melodies to standard tunes?
118. How do I learn the chord progressions to standard tunes?

Group Communication and Performing

119. How do you communicate with others through improvisation?
120. What are the basic roles of the rhythm section?
121. How do I get an effective order of solos in the tunes my group plays?
122. How do I get my group to make smooth style transitions?
123. What are the specific ways to promote interaction in my group?
124. Should my group members copy each other's ideas?
125. Can two or more players solo at the same time?
126. Can we switch roles once in a while in the group?
127. What are some tips on playing in duets and trios?
128. What are some tips for playing on gigs?
129. Should everyone in the group solo on every tune?
130. How can my group move easily between tempos and meters?
131. How do I overcome stage fright?
132. How can rhythm section players do a better job of supporting the soloist?
133. What are some tips for live performances?
134. How do I build an effective set of tunes for my group?
135. How should I relate to the audience?
136. What are some good ways to trade solos?
137. What is free improvisation?
138. What should I do if I'm soloing with musicians I've never played with before?
139. What are the core skills that my jazz group should have?

Analyzing and Listening

140. How do I analyze written solos?
141. How do I transcribe solos?
142. Who are some good improvisers to listen to?
143. Does it help to record my solos and listen to them?
144. What are the most common mistakes that beginning improvisers make ?
145. Should I listen to solos of other instruments or pretty much stick to recordings of my own instrument?
146. How do I analyze my own solos?

Other

147. What are some tips for good vocal improvisation?
148. What problems do vocal improvisers typically run into?
149. What elements of improvisation are often neglected?
150. When should I be more conservative with my improvisation?