

The “-ilities” of Improv
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by Bob Taylor

There’s a standard tune played by Sonny Rollins and many others entitled “Three Little Words,” which focuses on the message “I love you.” Those words have motivated most songwriters (and most human beings) throughout the ages. Here are three slightly longer words that can provide rich motivation for your development as a jazz soloist: *stability*, *agility*, and *humility*. Let’s look at these three words and how they act as a foundation for wise improvisation.

Note: Many of the concepts in this article are drawn from the author’s work “The Art of Improvisation” (see www.visual-jazz.com).

1: Stability

Stability is having the proper control over your sound, technique, and ideas to play solid solos. Since jazz is such a fluid and creative art form, listeners will want to hear a sense of direction in your solos that comes from musical stability. Here are some musical elements that should feel stable to you when you improvise:

- *Sound, pitch, and technique* – You get a consistently pleasing or interesting jazz sound. Your notes are pitch-centered (except for when you purposely play them otherwise). You articulate notes cleanly (or with special effects, if you intend).
- *Melody* – You know the pitches that work with each type of chord. You know at least the basics of how to create interesting melodies.
- *Rhythm and time* – While playing alone or with chords, you keep the tempo and time steady. You can play interesting rhythms in your melodies.
- *Chord progressions* – You can play melodic ideas that run through chords, rather than stop at each new chord.
- *Form* – You can find your place in the tune form during your own and others’ solos, knowing where to start and stop each chorus.

... but not Rigidity

For too many players, finding stability leads to rigidity: there is too much emphasis on rote memorization, licks, and uninspired patterns. This is a long, slow, and painful road that traps many a player (myself included, for a while). It puts too much focus on technique and not enough on vision.

So how do you get stability to feed into *agility* instead of rigidity? The Art of Improvisation uses an approach that combines *flexible scales* with *virtual practice* right from the beginning. Instead of only laboring over pre-written licks, arpeggios, and

patterns, you can spend more time learning to see scale and arpeggio shapes in your mind as you practice. That trains you to start seeing what to play, which is precisely the overarching skill you need for improvisation anyway. The better you can see musical possibilities, the more agility you'll have (and the more you'll want).

2. Agility

We typically think of agility as achieving nimble technique on an instrument. But agility also means seeing, choosing, and playing good ideas in the moment of opportunity.

There are several elements at “play” here:

- *Vision* – In *The Art of Improvisation* I talk about three-way vision: past, present, and future. Seeing and hearing what you played a bar or two ago helps you choose what to retain and develop in your solo. Seeing where you are right now helps you shape your melodies, rhythms, and expressions. Seeing ahead helps you choose the right direction for your ideas. What, see in three directions? You can do it – with practice your brain can switch between these vision modes very quickly.
- *Choosing tools* – Tools are for building, not for hanging in a museum. When you see what you're creating, it's great to be able to draw on tools that help you build what you need in the moment. But the tools are the means to the end, not the end.
- *Development* – Learning how to develop melodies and rhythms is a lost art for most soloists. There's no escaping the fact that composers for hundreds of years have developed musical ideas with skill and ingenuity. Our task as improvisers is to likewise in real time, as the music unfolds.
- *Interaction with others* – This is where so much of the joy of jazz is found. We can support, copy, or mutate, the musical ideas of the other players in the group. This is like seeing in a fourth direction – outwards.
- *Texture and density* – There are so many possibilities for variety in the *amount* of sound (density) or types of sound (texture), whether in your solo or in what the whole group plays. Too many musicians are stuck in “heavy” mode or “light” mode, with little exploration in between.

3. Humility

Humility is a tricky one – as soon as say you have it, you don't. But false humility is no help either. It's not about saying “I'm not very good” or “that player is so much better than me, so what's the point of trying?” – rather, it's “the more I know, the more there is for me to know.” Staying humble means you're teachable, no matter how good you might sound or how much you've already learned.

Here are some humility hallmarks for improvisers:

- Increased vision of possibilities
- Greater responsibility to get things right

- Awe of the creative process and the Creator
- Gratitude for your talents and gifts, and admiration for the gifts of others
- A focus on sharing, not starring
- Being willing to be influenced by the music around you instead of shutting it out while you solo
- Dedication to solid principles and paths

Humility Feeds Agility

There is a real connection between humility and agility: the more open and prepared you are for possibilities (humility), the more likely you will capture ideas that go beyond your first inclination (agility). In turn, discovering new ideas and approaches leads you back to a renewed awe and respect for the creative process; so agility feeds humility.

Living in the agility/humility zone is wonderful, whether in life or in music. Great improvisers create inspiring works for all of us from this magical region. But getting there is only possible after you establish that base of stability.

Conclusion

Stability, agility, humility – those three little words have far-reaching consequences for soloists. And for everyone else, for that matter. Try them, feel them, use them, and see what a difference they can make for you.