

Mr. Ed, Part 2

By now you have probably learned about my famous and crazy acronym – MR ED, CPA (Melody, Rhythm, Expression, Development, Chords, Performance, Analysis). I'm always amazed at how well that acronym works – not only because it spells out the seven basic elements of improvisation, but because it also spells them in order of learning priority. Wow. So let's talk about that order, why it makes sense, and why so many people go about it backwards or inside out.

Out of Order

Many improvers and teachers follow the CAMPER-D order of priority, more or less:

Chords, Analysis, Melody, Performance, Expression, Rhythm, Development

So, if a lot of people do it that way, how could it be wrong? Well, because I said so ... OK, we need better reasons than that ...

1) Starting off by learning chord progressions is like learning to drive by merging in and out of freeway traffic. Most of us learn to drive in a school or church parking lot, or on a back road somewhere, where there's nothing to collide with. Learning to create basic melodies while the chords are constantly changing causes a lot of musical traffic accidents.

2) Analyzing before learning the basic improvisation tools turns into a copying exercise. When you copy before you know *why* or *how* something works, you won't know why or how to use what you copy. And transcribing solos right off the bat is a mistake, even though many teachers recommend it. You need some definite pitch and rhythm recognition skills before you transcribe.

3) Look where rhythm and development end up – at the end of the line. That's because it's easy to overdose on eighth-notes – no rhythms to worry about, no concept of development. And no growth.

Order, Please

1) Melody – because it's the beginning of everything. If you can play an expressive melody on a single chord, you can learn to do the same thing over a chord progression. And then you really have something.

2) Rhythm – because it gives new life and possibilities to melody. Good melody and rhythm are the starting point for meaningful developments.

3) Expression – because I needed a vowel in the acronym ... but also because it puts the finishing touches on melody and personalizes it.

4) Development – because great melodies need great treatment, and development is how you turn melody into a meaningful composition.

5) Chord progressions – because you don't want to stay in one key forever! And obviously you need to apply your melodies and developments to real-life jazz tunes and their chords.

6) Performance – because you've got to get out there and try it all out. And interacting with other musicians can have a profound effect on you think and react.

7) Analysis – because, after all this, you're in a great position to really learn from the solos of others.