

The Element of Surprise

There are good surprises and bad ones. In the business of improvisation, surprises are woven into the fabric – they’ll happen whether you want them to or not. The goal, of course, is to increase the good surprises and decrease the bad ones.

Bad Surprises

Being surprised in a bad way definitely can put a damper on your improvisation. Here are some of the most common “bad surprises” we deal with in improvisation:

- Losing your place in the form of the tune.
- Hearing or playing a “wrong” note.
- Getting the chord progression wrong.
- Miss-communicating on solo order or length, or colliding in group interactions.

I feel that the better prepared you are, the less chance there is for bad surprises. They will still happen once in a while, no matter how well prepared you are, but you can usually deal with them quickly and effectively. Sometimes that means turning a bad surprise into an opportunity (or even a good surprise).

Good Surprises

To promote good surprises in your improvisation, you need to be keenly aware of 1) how your solo (musical SHAPE) is developing; and 2) what’s happening around you musically. I’m “surprised” at how often improvisers fail to recognize the good surprises happening in and around their solos (or least the opportunity for surprises). I could no more imagine playing a gig without musical surprises than I could eat the same thing for dinner for a week straight.

When you have a really strong sense of SHAPE, you increase your ability to see and create good surprises in time. It could be an abrupt silence, a clever development, an unexpected effect or expression, a well-placed quote, extreme range, or any number of other surprises.

Good surprises can also come from powerful group interaction or from simply being aware of how musical elements are unfolding. In either case, that awareness can lead to additional opportunities that can be even more exciting. You can take your solo to another level, and your group can support you as you go.

One of my favorite recordings is the Jim Hall / Red Mitchell duo in a live concert at a club (you know, where dishes rattle and the phone rings during one of the tunes ...) After they play “Fly Me to the Moon” with some great rhythmic twists and turns, one of them utters the memorable line, “Mid-air, man!” May your mid-air adventures hold some good surprises.