

The Art of Vocal Improvisation

Version 3.1

... a visual and virtual approach to improvising jazz ...

by Bob Taylor

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There is a world of discovery and enjoyment in vocal improvisation. This book will help you get started building your skills and seeing new possibilities. Be sure to coordinate your learnings in vocal improvisation with the theory, examples and exercises in *The Art of Improvisation* book as you go along. Best wishes for success!

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Table of Contents

Basic Vocal Improvisation Skills1

An Approach to Vocal Improvisation1

Thinking More Instrumentally1

10 Bad Habits and 10 Better Habits1

Virtual Practice for Vocalists2

Reviewing SHAPE2

Virtual Rhythm Practice2

Virtual Pitch Practice3

Basic Vowels and Consonants3

Examples3

Priorities4

Tips for Better Vocal Improvisation4

More Vocal Improvisation Skills5

Additional Vocal Skills5

Good Sound Quality5

Extended Range5

Flexibility5

Vowels and Consonants5

Vowel Sounds5

Consonant Sounds6

Language Sounds6

Vocal Effects7

Words and Phrases7

Words and Natural Rhythms7

Instrumental Sounds8

Horn Sounds8

Guitar Sounds8

Bass Sounds8

Drum Sounds8

Other Sounds9

Basic Vocal Improvisation Skills

This chapter is an introduction to improvisation for vocalists. It covers these topics:

- An Approach to Vocal Improvisation
- Virtual Practice for Vocalists
- Basic Vowels and Consonants
- Tips for Better Vocal Improvisation

You don't need a highly trained voice to do vocal improvisation. In fact, a classical mindset sometimes gets in the way of the freedoms you need for jazz styles. Still, a good foundation in voice techniques can give you added range, flexibility, and strength of sound for vocal improvisation. If you're an instrumentalist who wants to try vocal improvisation, pay special attention as you use the vocal parts of the Virtual Practice Method.

Important: You should study and master Level 1 of *The Art of Improvisation* as you study this chapter.

An Approach to Vocal Improvisation

Many vocalists use a somewhat limited approach to improvisation. Compared to other instruments, the human voice can create a much wider range of expression. But because it has no buttons or keys, the voice relies completely on the brain's sense of pitch. This leads to these basic problems in vocal improvisation:

- *Problem #1:* Dependence on easy-to-hear intervals and scales
- *Problem #2:* Underdeveloped melodic lines and rhythms
- *Problem #3:* Exaggerated expression

Thinking More Instrumentally

To overcome these problems, most vocalists need to *think more like an instrumentalist* (and instrumentalists need to think more vocally, too). This doesn't mean just imitating an instrument's sound; it means developing a strong control over pitches, rhythms, and development to create more "instrumental" ideas. As you listen to great instrumental solos, think of how you can adapt them in your own vocal improvisations. Many great jazz solos have been transcribed and set to words by vocalists such as Jon Hendricks and Eddie Jefferson, and groups such as Manhattan Transfer and New York Voices.

You can also use a virtual framework based on a musical instrument, to keep your pitches and rhythms strong (see *Virtual Practice for Vocalists* below).

10 Bad Habits and 10 Better Habits:

Below are 10 things that vocalists commonly do that cause weaker solos, along with 10 ideas for improvement. The chapters in *The Art of Improvisation* that deal with the better habits are noted. Notice that most of these habits are also typical for instrumentalists who improvise. As you practice vocal improvisation, keep working to turn these bad habits into better habits.

Bad Habit #1: Emphasizing roots of chords, then the arpeggios.

Solution: Emphasize some color tones; use color skips (1C: *Melodic Color*).

Bad Habit #2: Emphasizing downbeats of measures.

Solution: Sing offbeats, consecutive offbeats, and interesting rhythms (1D: *Rhythmic Variety*).

Bad Habit #3: Relying too much on blues scales.

Solution: Use Lydian, pentatonic, melodic minor ascending, and others (1B: *Building Chords and Scales*; 2A: *More Scales*; 3A: *More Melodic Color*).

Bad Habit #4: Using too much vibrato and too many vocal effects.

Solution: Keep expression subtle, with occasional effects that fit the solo well (1E: *Using Expression*; 2E: *Embellishments*; 4C: *Special Effects*).

Bad Habit #5: Changing ideas without developing them.

Solution: Use principles of melodic and rhythmic development in solos (1F: *Developing with Motifs and Phrases*; 2F: *Melodic Development*; 3E: *Rhythmic Development*).

Bad Habit #6: Relying on phrases with predictable, similar lengths (based on a comfortable breath) and similar contours.

Solution: Vary phrase lengths and melodic contours (Chapters 1F, 2B).

Bad Habit #7: Using a limited range and no wider intervals.

Solution: Try wider skips and a variety of filled intervals (Chapter 2B).

Bad Habit #8: Not interpreting swing rhythms and articulations accurately.

Solution: Use the guidelines in Chapter 2C.

Bad Habit #9: Singing ideas that are harmonically limited.

Solution: Outline ii-V-I's and chord variations (Chapters 1G and 3F).

Bad Habit #10: Avoiding non-harmonic tones.

Solution: Sing and resolve non-harmonic tones (Chapter 3A).

The exercises in this book are also designed to help you approach vocal improvisation more instrumentally.

Virtual Practice for Vocalists

The voice *can* sing pitches as accurately as an instrument can, but too often it doesn't. If you could sing pitches as accurately as an instrument plays them, but also have the immense flexibility and range of vocal sounds, you'd be in great shape for some fine vocal solos. (Some classically trained vocalists can sing incredibly difficult intervals, especially in 20th-century music.) As a jazz vocalist, you can use the Virtual Practice Method in interesting ways to build your confidence in rhythms and pitches.

Reviewing SHAPE

As you create vocal improv ideas, the SHAPE approach is just as important for you as it is for instrumentalists. For more about visualizing the notes you sing, see Chapter 2B: *Melodic Shapes* in this volume, and Chapter 4A: *Soundscapes*.

Virtual Rhythm Practice

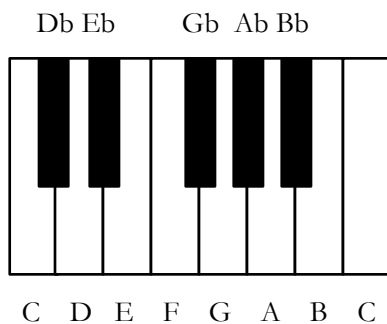
It's important to see the basic shape of your rhythm as you create it. Although it's too complicated in most cases to see all the rhythmic values of the notes you sing, you can still see the following things as you solo:

- Barlines (each measure) and double-bar lines (each section of the tune)
- Rhythmic entrances (where in the bar you start)
- Basic types of rhythms (8ths, quarters, triplets, dotted notes, etc.)

For more about visualizing rhythms, see *Virtual Practice Method for Rhythms* in Chapter 1D: *Rhythmic Variety*.

Virtual Pitch Practice

To visualize pitches and intervals with the Virtual Practice Method, you can use the Virtual Keyboard as you sing. It contains one octave from the keyboard, but you can extend (repeat) it in your mind as far as necessary to the left or right.



The basic goal for using the Virtual Keyboard is this:

*** See and hear your vocal notes on the Virtual Keyboard as if you were playing them with your fingers.**

To use the Virtual Keyboard in your vocal practice, follow the steps below. Each step is an ear-training exercise you can repeat and build upon. If you make mistakes, try to figure out exactly where the problem is.

- 1 *Matching pitches.* Go to a real keyboard and play any note, then accurately hum that note (you can hum octaves up or down from the pitch you play).
- 2 *Matching intervals.* Same as step 1, but play and sing any interval (up or down) of an octave or less.
- 3 *Touch and sing.* Same as step 2, but touch the keys so lightly they don't make a sound. Sing the interval you touched, then test it out by playing it.
- 4 *See and sing familiar motif.* See the intervals for the first part of a children's or other easy song. Sing each note as you see it on the keyboard, then test by playing.
- 5 *Try new melodies.* Same as step 4, with ever-increasing levels of difficulty. You can finger along (air fingers) as you sing. In time, you'll see as fast as you sing

Basic Vowels and Consonants

Here are some basic vowel and consonant combinations to use in your vocal improvisation syllables:

- *Vowels:* "ah," "oo," and "ee." These represent the sustained part of a note. "Ah" is lower in pitch, "oo" is medium in pitch, and "ee" is higher in pitch.
- *Consonants:* "b," "d," "v," and "z" for softer attacks, and "t" for harder attacks. To end a staccato note, use "p" or "t."

By mixing these basic vowels and consonants you can get syllables such as bah, dah, tah, doo, boo, too, dee, bee, and tee. You can use these syllables in many different combinations with eighths, quarters, triplets, offbeats, etc. For more on vowels and consonants, see *More Vocal Improvisation Skills* in Level 4.

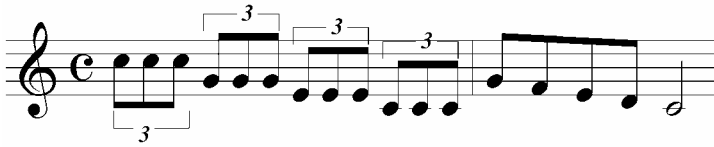
Examples

The examples below show a traditional way to add consonants and vowels to "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," and then a more unconventional approach.

Example 1



1 Doo voo zoo-bah doop, Doo-vah zoo bah doo
2 Ah pah gooz-a dey Ya-la say-vooh nah



1 D B D dooboodoo zooboodoo
zabadah Zee voo dee boh doh
2 Eel-e-ka zil-i-ka pu-li-ka da-li-ka na-da soo too lay

Priorities

Remember that while consonants and vowels enhance the pitches and rhythms, the pitches and rhythms (SHAPE) are still the most important elements. So,

- 1) Concentrate on the melody line first.
- 2) Let vowels and consonants hang on the melody.

The most creative vowels and consonants in the world won't rescue a boring, thoughtless melody line. With an interesting melody line, subtle and inventive vowels and consonants add even more interest. Keep the priorities straight; the music will blossom.

Tips for Better Vocal Improvisation

Below are some of the goals for vocal improvisation described in Level 1.

A) Overcome three basic problems:

- Dependence on easy intervals and scales
- Underdeveloped melodic lines and rhythms
- Exaggerated expression

B) Think more like an instrumentalist in using secure pitches and rhythms.

C) Use the following 10 Better Habits of Vocal Improv:

- 1) Emphasize some color tones, use color skips (Chapter 1C: *Melodic Color*).
- 2) Sing offbeats, consecutive offbeats, and more interesting rhythms (Chapter 1D: *Rhythmic Variety*).
- 3) Use Lydian, pentatonic, melodic minor ascending, and other scales (1B: *Building Chords and Scales*; Chapter 2A *More Scales*; and Chapter 3A: *More Melodic Color*).
- 4) Keep expression subtle, with occasional effects that fit the solo well (Chapter 1E: *Using Expression*; Chapter 2E: *Embellishments*; and Chapter 4C: *Special Effects*).
- 5) Use principles of melodic and rhythmic development in solos (Chapter 1F: *Developing with Motifs and Phrases*; Chapter 2F: *Melodic Development*; Chapter 3E: *Rhythmic Development*).
- 6) Vary phrase lengths and types of melodic contours (Chapter 1F, 2B).
- 7) Try wider skips and a variety of filled intervals (Chapter 2B).
- 8) Use the swing rhythm guidelines (Chapter 2C).
- 9) Outline ii-V-I's and chord variations (Chapters 1G and 3F).
- 10) Sing and resolve non-harmonic tones (Chapter 3A).

More Vocal Improvisation Skills

This chapter has the following sections:

- Additional Vocal Skills
- Vowels and Consonants
- Vocal Effects
- Instrumental Sounds

Additional Vocal Skills

Improving on the skills mentioned below can help your vocal improvisation.

Good Sound Quality

Getting a good sound quality doesn't mean you need to be a virtuoso singer, but you should develop a vocal sound that sounds free and clear, without extra tension or harshness.

Concentrate on moving the air from the lungs and letting the sound resonate in the head. Vibrato should not be an automatic part of each sound. Instead, reserve it for longer notes and vary its use.

Extended Range

Work to increase your high and low ranges so you can add usable, clear notes to your vocal solos. The high and low notes don't need to be overpowering; they just need to be reliable to hit and well in tune. For the higher notes, work on a dependable falsetto sound ("head voice"); keep it soft at first.

As you increase your overall range, work out the rough spots or breaks between high, medium, and low notes. Practice long flexible scales from low to high so you can cover all the notes smoothly, with reliable control.

Flexibility

Work to improve these aspects of your vocal flexibility:

- *Wider intervals.* Work on 5ths, 6ths, 7ths, 9ths, etc., to cover more territory.
- *Quick passages.* Work on double-time passages and faster rhythmic values, such as eighth-note triplets.
- *Sudden switches* from high to low range or vice-versa.

Bobby McFerrin is an example of a singer who is a master of sound, extended range, and flexibility.

Vowels and Consonants

Level 1 of *The Art of Improvisation* describes the basic vowel and consonant sounds for vocal improv syllables. Below is a more extensive listing of vowel and consonant descriptions. Try them in different combinations in your vocal improv practice and solos.

Vowel Sounds

Vowels are usually the sustained part of the note and consonants are the attacks, but you can also start a sound with a vowel. Note which vowels you neglect or avoid, and experiment with them. You can also try switching low and high vowel sounds.

- *Low vowels:* oh, aw, a (short), a (long), ooh
- *High vowels:* e (short), i (short), y
- *Diphthongs (vowel combinations):* i (long), ow, eu, oi

Consonant Sounds

Especially note which consonants you neglect or avoid, and experiment with them. Consonants are divided into two types: hard and soft. The hard consonants sound more percussive, while soft consonants sound smoother.

Hard consonants:

- k (or hard “c” or “q;” this is the hardest sound)
- t (the next-hardest sound)
- p (somewhat between hard and soft)

Soft consonants:

- b - basic articulation attack
- d - basic articulation attack
- f - less used, attack or ending
- g - less used attack
- h - very soft attack
- j - less used attack
- l - usually in “la” but shouldn’t be overused
- m - humming attack or soft ending
- n - like “m” but less used
- r - usually trilled, as in drum roll
- s - softer attack
- v - softer attack
- w - usually an ending
- z - attack or ending, like “s”

Consonant combinations:

- br, tr - usually for percussion
- fr, gr - humorous
- ch, sh, th - percussive attacks, cymbals
- bl, cl, fl, gl, pl - less often used

Language Sounds

Some types of tunes lend themselves to non-English syllables and sounds. For these tunes you can sometimes sing syllables that sound like a certain language but aren’t real words. A few tune types and corresponding languages are listed below. A little language imitation is fine, but if you want to do extended passages, you should speak the language or listen to it frequently.

- *Bossa nova and samba - Portuguese.* Stress these consonants: zh, j, d, p, m, and v. Stress these vowel sounds: o, ah, ooh, ee.
- *Salsa and samba - Spanish.* Stress these consonants: k, s, r, t. Stress the same vowel sounds as in Portuguese.

You can also experiment with African dialect sounds and sounds from various languages when the type of tune calls for it.

Vocal Effects

Vocal effects can be some of the most exciting parts of vocal improv, but too often they end up as a sideshow or as filler for lack of solid ideas. To get the best from vocal effects remember these points:

- *Use effects sparingly*, with variety. Don't get locked into one or two effects; be able to choose occasionally and from a wide variety.
- *Time the vocal effect* so it becomes a logical part of the idea, not a distraction.
- *Develop* with an effect occasionally, so it can fit in with your upcoming ideas. Use sequences, rhythmic development, or any other tool with the effect, but don't carry it on too long.

Below are some useful vocal effects you can work on and include in your solos. Most of them can be done with definite or indefinite pitches. Try mixing them in with a long flexible scale for practice.

- 1) Trilled "r" or flutter (a purring sound, short or long)
- 2) Air sounds (blowing with an indefinite pitch, hissing, or inhaling loudly)
- 3) Growl (guttural sounds)
- 4) Squeaks ("eep," "aak," "oop," etc.)
- 5) Multi-pitch (like clearing your throat while singing)
- 6) Trills (narrow or wide)
- 7) Double-tonguing (du-gu-du-gu) and "doodle" sounds (these are good for articulating very fast passages)
- 8) Nature sounds (birds, insects)
- 9) Morphing vowels (turning one vowel into another on the same pitch)
- 10) Screams and other noises ("ow," "hey," "ooh," etc.)
- 11) Bends (slow or fast, within a major second), long falls or glissandos
- 12) Whistling or humming (or both at the same time)

An excellent CD with many types of vocal effects is "Vocal Summit" with Bobby McFerrin, Jae Clayton and others.

Words and Phrases

Occasionally you can insert actual words into your stream of vocal improv syllables. One way is to insert an unusual word ("forklift," "cinnamon," "refrigerator," etc.) that catches the listener by surprise. Each word has its own rhythm (number of syllables, accent, etc.) that makes it fit eighth-notes, triplets, or other rhythmic values, and makes the pitches seem to go up or down.

Another approach is to insert a few words at a time that make a phrase ("we're on the boat," "I'm coming apart at the seams"). You can weave in and out between real words and fake vocal syllables to create an interesting mix. If a train of thought comes to mind, you can try a few sentences as long as the rhythms and accent flow naturally with your pitches.

Words and Natural Rhythms

A good exercise for integrating words, rhythms, and accents is to set a story to music as you improvise. For example, try reading aloud a Dr. Seuss book such as "Green Eggs and Ham" or "One Fish, Two Fish ..."
Here are the steps for creating music from stories:

- 1 Choose a page or paragraph to read.
- 2 Read it all once to discover its basic speaking rhythms and accented syllables.
- 3 Imagine and hear a rhythm section playing a background for you (swing, rock, latin, fusion, etc.).
- 4 Speak the words through, looking for interesting rhythms (consecutive offbeats, dotted notes, triplets, ties, etc.). With practice, you can skip this step.
- 5 Choose a home key note and a constant chord to sing in (CMa, C7, Cm7).
- 6 Read the rhythms through again, this time singing pitches for the words in an improvised melody.

For more advanced practice, try these steps:

- 7 Add a simple chord progression to your melody, such as a blues or a short ii-V-I progression.
- 8 Use chords from a jazz standard (*200 Standard Tunes*) or your own.

Instrumental Sounds

The basic kinds of instrument sounds you can imitate are horns, bass, and percussion. A few other instrumental sounds are also discussed below.

Horn Sounds

The basic sounds and syllables you use probably already sound somewhat like a horn, but there are some additional things you can do to imitate horn sounds:

- Falls (bouw)
- Flutter-tongue (trilled “r”)
- Double-tonguing (du-gu)
- Wide trills/shakes (ah-ee-ah-ee-ah-ee)

You can also imitate trombone slides by alternating slow falls (down) and glissandos (up).

Guitar Sounds

The most common guitar sounds to imitate are for electric guitars, acoustic guitars, and banjos.

- Electric guitar (rock solo): wah, wow, wee (with a nasal sound)
- Acoustic guitar: pling, ping, plang
- Banjo: brick-a-brick

Bass Sounds

You can imitate an acoustic or electric bass with your voice as you improvise.

Acoustic bass:

- For medium-range notes use a basic “doom” syllable.
- For pickup eighth-notes use “bah.” A sample walking bass line in 4/4 with an eighth-note before bar 1 would go like this:
bah-doom doom doom doom ...
| | 1 2 3 4
- For really low notes, use a ”bome” sound.
- For higher notes, use “deem.”
- For three 8th-note triplets and a quarter-note (usually descending), use “dip-it-dah-doom.”
- For ideas on building walking bass lines, see *Rhythm Section Techniques* in Level 1.

Electric bass:

- Add other sounds, like “bow” for slides, “dang” for twangs, “toong” for basic notes, “bap” for slaps, etc.
- Use a more nasal sound to approximate electronic effects.
- Make quarter-notes a little choppy than for acoustic bass sounds.

Drum Sounds

To get a good drum sound you need to understand the basic sounds from each part of the drum set. These are divided into drums (snare, toms, bass) cymbals (ride, crash, hi-hat), and other (sticks, rims, stands).

Drums:

- Snare drum: dat, bat, or pat; you can also end sounds with “ck” instead of with “t.” For drum rolls, use brr, drr, or prr. For flams (two notes played close together) use “pdat.”

- Toms: From high (small drums) to low (bigger drums), use these: dee, doo, dum, dohm, and dome.
- Bass: Use “bum” with a quick vowel sound.

Cymbals:

- Ride cymbal: use tsssh (more s's = longer note value)
- Crash cymbal: use pssssh.
- Hi-hat: use tsssh for open hi-hat, “chick” for closed.

Other:

- For metal rims and stands, use “tick” or “tick-it.”
- For sticks hitting together, use a clucking sound.

Other Sounds

A few more instrumental sounds are described below.

- Stringed instruments -- humming with some vibrato
- Chimes - use dong, ding, ting, bong, etc.

