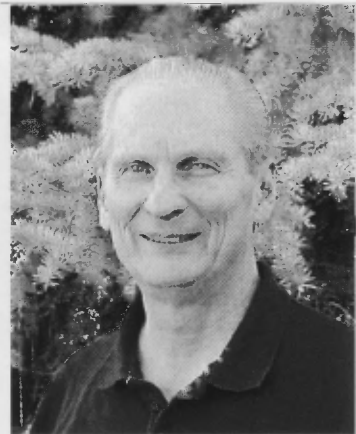


Breaking The Improvisational Barrier Without Your Axe!

A SUREFIRE WAY TO LEARN IMPROVISATION CONCEPTS

BY JOHN KUZMICH, JR.



recently presented a “how to” jazz improvisation workshop at a private non-English speaking music school in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. ■ I had no advance knowledge of who would be attending or what instrumentation I would have to work with. ■ As it turned out, the ages of the participants ranged from 18 to over 65 and nobody brought their instruments. ■ Though it was a challenge preparing for this workshop, the results were gratifying. ■ Everyone ended up participating through their voices – no one could “fake” it by just wiggling, which too often takes place when students are improvising. Bossa nova was our style of choice because there is often less stress with that than in other jazz styles. ■ I thought I could have run for public office in Brazil when I suggested the bossa nova style over standard jazz tunes for entry-level improv instruction, but the bossa nova style is my choice for this type of introductory lesson, regardless of where the workshop takes place.

Within the bossa nova style, I reference a number of jazz tunes to improvise on: model tunes with very few chord changes, blues changes with a few more chord changes, and more complicated, standard tunes with frequent chord changes that are usually 32 measures long. Each style has certain advantages for teaching improvisation, but at the entry level, the blues in a bossa nova style serves the purpose of getting students started with basic improvisational concepts of melody, harmony, rhythm, and form without excessive notes.

My aim here is to present an entry level improv workshop as a model for teaching students who either don't understand the fundamen-

tals of improvising or who need to be brought up to speed with a minimum of rehearsal time.

Head Tunes Based on Repeating Riffs

Sometimes the best lessons are the simplest. Too much theory and too many technical terms can kill the best of intentions and enthusiasm for improvisation. So I begin with simple riffs. Students are quickly engaged in playing chord changes by rote using the basic 12-bar blues progression: I, I, I, I, IV, IV, I, I, V, IV, I, I. With simple repeating rhythms and melodic intervals, students flow through the basics of blues improvisation.

Example 1 with Simple Blues Riffs

“TOO MUCH THEORY AND TOO MANY TECHNICAL TERMS CAN KILL THE BEST OF INTENTIONS AND ENTHUSIASM FOR IMPROVISATION.”

Example 1 with Simple Blues Riffs

Roots	1, flat 7, 1	1, flat 7 1, b3
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Example 2: Blues Riff Transposed

By getting the students to sing the riffs, they can overcome their instrumental shyness and start to hear the changes. They become better oriented and don't get lost while they're mentally and aurally manipulating the root, flat 3rd and flat 7th of three chords with a series of simple rhythms. Voila! They're improvising. Once that can be done smoothly, we expand the riffs to include:

Example 3 with More Complex Blues Riffs

1, flat 7, 5, flat 7, 1	1, 3, 5, 3	1, 3, 5 8, flat 7
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First Time Comping

Example with Blues Riff Transposed

Considerations

Teaching improvisation concepts and using a rhythm section are really two distinctively different tasks that need to be done simultaneously. Rhythm section players need some V.I.P. attention in order to instill stability for successful improvisation teaching. The rhythm section is the foundation for good improv experiences. Here are some shortcuts for dealing with the rhythm section. Use some play-along recordings in which the rhythm parts are fully notated, providing a structured way to teach and learn basic comping techniques and styles. As an example, consider using Jamey Aebersold's *Volume 54*, tracks 3 and 10, which are excellent entry level blues tracks. There are also three *Volume 54* publications written for bass, drum, and piano with fully transcribed parts

for each track students can listen to and practice with for a more authentic experience. And each CD is enhanced with its bass, drum, or piano part mixed louder than the surrounding rhythm section.

Don't have Jamey Aebersold's *Volume 54*? Pick any medium bossa nova or jazz shuffle and have the pianist, bassist, and drummer incorporate some of the following ideas: bossa nova bass parts are usually in fifths. The piano avoids the roots in the right hand and emphasizes upper chord extensions. The drummer avoids using the bass pedal on every beat, concentrating more on the hi-hat on beats two and four on the ride cymbal on every beat, and avoid back beats on beats two and four on the snare drum.

By listening to Jamey Aebersold's "Maiden Voyage," #54, will give your rhythm section some basic comping techniques that work well on medium jazz tracks like #3 ("Bb Blues") and #10 ("F Blues") or bossa nova track #4 ("Solar Flair") and #7 ("Song For My Father"). This takes pressure off of the teacher so he/she can concentrate more on the horn players without neglecting the rhythm section. Again, there are separate publications by Jamey Aebersold Jazz for *Volume 54* with fully notated parts for piano (*Jazz Piano Voicings* by Jamey Aebersold, *Volume 54*), bass (*Tyrone Wheeler Bass Lines* transcribed by Evan Barker from *Volume 54*) and drums (*Jazz Drums Play-Along* by Steve Davis from *Volume 54*) along with CDs with great stereo separation and mixing for enhanced listening for each instrument.

Jamming With Riffs and Background Riffs

Now you are ready to get your students improvising. Have the group (ensemble) begin singing a rhythmic riff such as, "doo-bah doo-wah" on the previously mentioned I, IV, V roots for one or two choruses. Then have each

Example 3 with More Complex Blues Riffs

student sing that riff or their favorite riff alone for one chorus as a solo making sure that they transpose the riff through the three chord changes. On the second chorus, have the student repeat the riffs with the group singing a catchy four-beat background riff only on the root of each chord. Involving all students all the time backing up every soloist, helps everyone master the chord changes and strengthens their confidence.

Opening Up Improvisation Jam Session

At this point, the jam session can be opened up quickly in several ways. Try introducing more sophisticated riffs with catchy rhythms and/or dif-

ferent notes. Students will respond to catchy head tunes that can lead to more sophisticated riffs. I like to let students learn how to imitate each other using the simple riffs already taught by trading fours with a partner. The ear training concepts employed here are invaluable as the

“THE RHYTHM SECTION IS THE FOUNDATION FOR GOOD IMPROV EXPERIENCES.”

participants imitate each other's riffs, alternating four-measure sequences in a call-and-response manner. The trick is to help students not get lost in the changes when they are not soloing. Each pair of students will need to trade two or three choruses. Remember to start and end the trading fours section with the head tune to make it a complete composition.

Stop-Time: Spice Up the Jam Session!

“Stop-Time” is a great stimulus for featuring students who are learning to incorporate slick melodic and rhythm patterns into their soloing. When one student lights that fire, it motivates others to come up with

guest clinician

slicker riffs. The process is simple. Play the head tune and then have each student solo for one chorus. On the second chorus, have the rhythm section play only on the first beat of each measure or the first measure of each new chord. Soloing against stop time, without any comping except for the beginning of each chord change helps the student make the changes correctly. Horn players can also play the roots with the same isolated stop time rhythm for each chord. On the third chorus, the rhythm section comes back and the soloist keeps soloing. Stop-time is a good way to provide extended solos for entry level students as they work on melodic/rhythmic riffs in a positive, supportive experience.

A Good Beginning

This workshop can be use in several installments or as presented in 60 minutes. Even with a translator, everybody understood how to improvise on the changes, melody, riffs, and trading fours. Once students experience the building blocks of improvisation by singing rather than searching for notes on their instruments, they grasp the basics of what is needed and ear training clearly supported through imitation. What I like about this experience is that nothing comes between the students and the music. No music is passed out. Their ears and their own voices let them feel the very essence of the jazz improvisation experience. Students learn to participate in a unique step-by-step process beginning with the roots, to simple riffs, to more sophisticated riffs through stop-time and trading fours with call-and-response imitation concepts. But you, the educator, are the secret ingredient for success, so I strongly advise you to participate, as well. You break the ice, infuse energetic confidence, and seamlessly weave theory

and technique with just your voice. The ultimate goal is transferring this learning to the instrument. Success is imminent with this positive, step-by-step experience. Fingers will find what the mind has imagined.

Coda

Once this approach has been initiated, your jazz ensemble is ready to apply the improv instruction with a daily five-to-10-minute warm-up based on a riff or head tune. Bingo! You will have everybody in your band instantly improvising, albeit rudimentarily, at first. Eventually change keys in future rehearsals, first using the more common keys of concert Ab, Eb, F. Riffs will become very apparent as they pop up in students' solos and you hear them expand their improv ideas at music festivals and in live concerts. I regularly use the head tune approach as sound check right in front of the audience. It's a great crowd pleaser and a good warm-up.

Dr. Kuzmich is a nationally-known music educator with more than 30 years of teaching experience. He has certification from TI:ME (Technology Institute for Music Educators) to serve as a training instructor throughout the country. His academic background also includes a Ph.D. in comprehensive musicianship.

As a freelance author, he has more than 250 articles and five textbooks published. As a clinician, Dr. Kuzmich frequently participates in workshops throughout the U.S. and several foreign countries. For more information, visit his Web site: www.kuzmich.com.

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