

The Jazzworx! Improvisation Method

by Greg Quigley and Vince Genova

As we approach the new millenium, and just over a century since the first 'out-and-out' jazz band was organized in 1897 (*The Story Of Jazz*, M. Stearns), one still asks the question whether or not jazz improvisation can be taught successfully. We, at Jazzworx!, believe that jazz improvisation can be taught easily, in a systematic and logical manner. However, our experience in observing other jazz instruction methods and curriculum suggests either an indirect way of presenting jazz education materials and/or the assumption of prior theoretical or jazz knowledge.

For example, the most common introduction to the beginning jazz improviser is usually a 'twelve-bar blues' and/or the 'blues scale'. Firstly, the beginning jazz improviser comes from a variety of theoretical backgrounds (i.e. from no knowledge of musical theory to extensive classical theory and ear training). To explain the blues scale theoretically will confuse the novice, because it is not a diatonic scale. In actuality, only the 'bending of certain notes', such as the 3rd, 5th, and 7th were practiced in original Afro-American Blues, rather than actual pitches (*Writings In Jazz*, Nathan Davis). Secondly, attempting to teach one scale to play over three or more chords will actually stifle the beginning improviser. The new jazz improviser must develop correct approaches from the start by

thinking of and negotiating each chord and its underlying scale or 'sound' individually — 'The blues scale does not teach anyone to play through chord changes' (*Jazzworx! Beginning Improvisation*, Vol. 1).

It was partially through the above observations that Greg Quigley and I felt a need for an easier, more direct approach to Jazz Improvisation. It has been, indeed, a complimentary partnership. Greg has extensive experience in primary schools and high schools in Australia, and I have been involved with Universities in the U.S. since 1970. In addition, Greg has sponsored Jazz Workshops and Seminars throughout Australia since 1979, of which I have been part of the teaching faculty from 1994. We have since begun a Jazzworx! School in Brisbane, Australia, where we were able to (with the assistance of the students) trial different teaching approaches and methods. The students were quick to let us know what didn't work!

What did work was that every student, without exception, could improvise over a C major scale with the CD play-a-long the first time. The only stipulation was that the student knew the respective scale beforehand. Major scales were learnt through the 9th (in tempo), ascending and descending, from whole notes to eighth notes. This enabled the student to experience chord tones on

the strong beats both ascending and descending. At that point, rhythmical nuances were explained (i.e. the differences between syncopation and articulation). Once a particular scale was learned, it was up to the student to rhythmically alter the notes and create melodies from that scale e.g.:



This was paramount in developing confidence in the student's ability to improvise. The next step in basic improvisation was to introduce the C major 9th arpeggio and to incorporate it with the C major scale in the improvisation:



The above musical examples are from our Beginning Improvisation workbook, in order to guide the student through various stages of development in creativity. However, the student had to apply these exercises to all major keys through the Circle of 4ths. We found that, although everyone could improvise over the C major scale, very few musicians, including 'professionals', could improvise comfortably around the major scales in all keys! The Beginning Improvisation CD play-a-long (Volume 1, CD1) starts from C major (concert pitch) and each key progresses, one key per track, through the Circle of 4ths. As a climax to CD 1, all keys are incorporated on each of three tracks in the following formats: in 4 measure phrases, in 2 measure phrases, and in 1 measure phrases, all via the Circle of 4ths.

Why the Circle of 4ths and not the Circle of 5ths? Jazz music is similar to Western (European) music,

in that it usually progresses in upward movements of 4ths (C, F, Bb etc.). We say upward movements of 4ths, instead of downward movement of 5ths, because chord sequences such as the ii7-V7-I progression do not move counterclockwise, or from right to left, around the Circle. The Circle of 5ths (C-G-D-A etc.) is an unlikely harmonic cycle or sequence, yet it is still referred to and it is still in practice. Why? Therefore, we have structured our play-a-longs using the concept of the Circle of 4ths.

The new jazz improviser must develop correct approaches from the start by thinking of and negotiating each chord and its underlying scale individually, even over a 3 chord basic blues. As a preface to the basic blues, we have devoted 12 tracks on CD 2 (Volume 1) to the dominant 7th, or Mixolydian scale, one for each key. We feel this scale adequately represents the required sound of the dominant 7th chord, and before students progress to dealing with the actual blues form, they must have a firm grip on dominant 7th scales and arpeggios.

We describe the dominant 7th scale in two ways: 1) as a major scale with a lowered 7th; and 2) as a mode built on the 5th degree of a major scale. It is important to point out to the student that, although certain scales may share the same key signature (e.g. G Mixolydian vs. C Ionian), each scale is individual in its own right. Once the entire set of dominant 7th scales are learned, they are put to use in the 12 Bar Basic Blues in all keys.

Again, this basic blues progression is learnt through the Circle of 4ths. We found, in this manner, as the student moves from one key to another, only one new scale is required (e.g. after learning the F basic blues, the Eb dominant 7th scale is the only scale to be learnt before proceeding to the Bb basic blues. Likewise, the Ab dominant 7th scale is to be acquired before playing the Eb basic blues). In order to facilitate the learning of basic blues in all

