

SEIZING THE MOMENT

Improvisation and jazz are all but inseparable.

John Kember reflects

It is just possible that pieces in a jazz style can be taught and performed without actually listening to the music; but when it comes to improvising that's 'mission impossible'!

Listening, absorbing and enthusing over favourite players and performances is vital to the would-be improviser. And access to the great performers has never been easier. It's all there, just a *click* away, on the computer screen. Not only can today's aspiring jazz pianists *listen* to great performances, in most cases they can *see* them too.

Just enter a song title or a favourite performer and you'll find a wealth of videos to choose from. The computer provides a resource unimaginable only a few years back. I recall a BBC programme many years ago in which Oscar Peterson and Count Basie exchanged musical ideas, side by side. That's there and I can see it over and over again! Where else can you witness Ellington playing Ellington, watch the unique playing style of Keith Jarrett, hear and see the likes of Bill Evans and Art Tatum?

There are many schools of thought and many methods and books that deal with improvisation. Although there are rare, gifted players who find their own way, the vast majority have to approach it little by little. To improvise you need to have a *magpie* mentality! Listen; *copy* to start with, until you have a wealth of phrases, ideas and riffs to draw on. It's never too early to introduce this. Even beginners can be encouraged to pick out tunes, make their own five-note phrases, sing back a few notes, then find them on the piano.

I have been privileged to co-write a book with an internationally renowned jazz educationalist and performer, the trombonist Jiggs Whigham. Together, we considered the subject of improvisation very thoroughly. Knowledge of all scales, arpeggios and modes were deemed essential; likewise familiarity with all 12 keys. But the starting point is much nearer home. Jazz is basically an aural

tradition and improvisation needs to be approached from a listening rather than an academic angle. Personally, I dislike that 'row of notes' often given to guide the improvised solo. This can be too restrictive and can discourage experiment rather than encouraging imagination. That said, however, it does work for some.

*'If you can't sing it –
you can't play it.'*

Jazz is a form of communication – a language. That being the case, it's worth considering how a language is learnt: by constant repetition and copying, hence the *magpie* approach.

Students should be encouraged to play back what they hear, whether in *question and answer* form or finding the notes of a well known melody. This form of musical *doodling* has many advantages. An artist will sketch on any scrap of paper that comes to hand. Why should the musician not do the same? Surely this is how many compositions begin. And by the way, it's well worth vocalising phrases – as with spoken language – before transferring them to the instrument.

We all have a vast 'library' of tunes we can call upon – built up from early childhood, rather like a photograph album of sounds and melodies. Students can 'find' these and ideally play them in more than one key.

Only when this facility is in place can they begin to make changes, small ones, changing a note or rhythm here and there and trying it out. Too many students want to do the 'flashy' stuff before they understand the melody, mood, style or its chord structure.

Playing the jazz standards, whether as songs or compositions, provides the ideal start. Listen to as many versions as possible, vocal as well as instrumental. Find what you like best. When you know the piece really well, begin to personalise it. Too many changes too soon may sound impressive but will end up as a hit and miss affair with no basis in either melody or harmony and provide nothing on which to build or improve.

Improvisation has been at the root of all music over the centuries, as has the influence of other composers, performers and arrangers. We're all influenced by what we hear and enjoy, and return to them time and time again. And it's these very influences and enthusiasms that shape our own efforts.

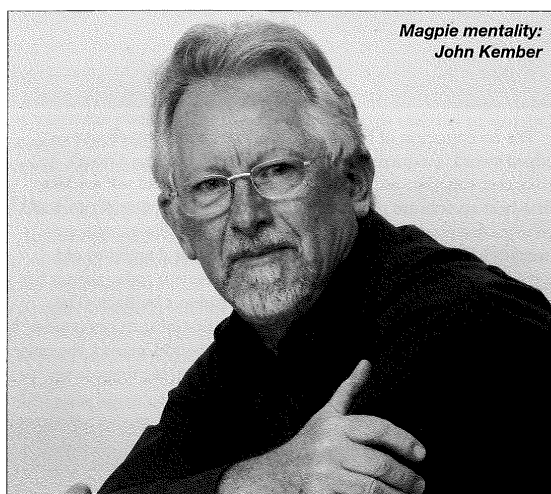
Where do I start?

Start by copying. A teacher can play a short phrase to sing back (as in initial aural tests), then you try to play it back. Alternatively, think of a tune, sing the notes, then try to find them on the piano. Try to give your playing the same articulation as your sung phrase or the original one. Do the same with tunes you hear around you. But always remember: *first sing; then play*.

Take a favourite tune and repeat it until the melody, intervals and chord progression are deeply ingrained. Only then can you begin to make it personal. Make small changes first – to the rhythm and/or melody, but still fitting them to the underlying chords.

Later, move on the cadences. V – I, and IV – I. Work out a few 'fills' that fit. Change IV to a minor chord – a more 'bluesy' sound. Progress to II – V – I and find phrases and ideas that work for you. Progress to a sequence of 7ths and develop ideas in as many keys as possible.

For inspiration, listen to the great singers (Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Tony Bennett etc), the great saxophone and brass players, the great vibraphonists (Milt Jackson, Lionel Hampton). Take what they all have to offer and help yourself to a few choice phrases. Be a magpie!



Magpie mentality:
John Kember