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Towards Teaching Jazz Improvisation

by Brian Lillos

There is no perfect way to teach jazz improvisation. There is not one magical methodology that fits this subject. The art form, like most art forms, is multi-dimensional and will not exist "inside the box". Teaching jazz improvisation is as much about teaching creativity as it is about teaching jazz vocabulary and jazz grammar. Teaching creativity is an "outside the box" concept. It is a lifelong artistic journey.

Several challenges face the student and the teacher of jazz improvisation. Mastery of scales, chords, harmony, voice leading, and repertoire are pre-requisite and few teachers, if any, would disagree that they are essential. A concept often overlooked, however, is creativity. Teaching creativity and learning to be creative with a language is more about process than exact scientific measurement. The process requires the uniqueness of the individual to be explored. It requires a nurturing and honest learning environment to be in place. It needs to encourage risk taking and exploration, and at a higher level, the development of the creative spirit and the artistic voice.

In other words, language acquisition and development are completely about process. The teacher and the student need to understand learner styles and the "back and forth", multi-tasking nature of learning language. (This can very frustrating for the "anal retentive" mind. It sees a great deal of ambiguity when learner "scope and sequence" do not fit an exact schedule.) Unfortunately, for the anal retentive jazz educator, one can't communicate in a language unless one learns to speak the language. But, one never learns to speak the language if one waits until one is completely ready. Language development is a "back and forth" type of thing, and from a scope and sequence point of view, it is a process where ambiguities can co-exist. It is the equivalent to learning English as a second language, only it is jazz. One has to babble, one has to fumble, one has to mispronounce the language. It is part of learning. One has to get on the wrong bus, say you'll "knock someone up" (will call on them), try to purchase eggs at the dry cleaners, or take your car to the anthropologist for repairs. One has to sometimes get it wrong to eventually get it right. This process needs to be embraced by the teacher and the student and they both need to be "shameless" about it.