

## Improvising

I've come to appreciate a certain kind of reflex, and wanted to share my observations about it with you. These aren't new ideas by any means... just things I don't hear discussed much. It's just about maturity and using your ears in an *intuitive* way. You have to be completely comfortable playing your instrument for this to happen.

At the time I'm writing this, I've been working with the same pianist and bass player in a jazz trio for about 2 years. I've played with those same players in other bands over the years, for about 10 years. It's developed into something really fun and interesting. We're not "elevator music", but much more spontaneous and much more dynamic. Plus, we host a jam session, and have had quite a bit of repetition with the same, very good horn players, singers, etc.. It NEVER falls apart. The absolute worst-case scenario is that a particular improvised tune might sound "adequate", rather than "spectacular". Happily, the results are almost always excellent. Why is that?

Obviously, we all know each other, and in this case, we all happen to like each other. That helps a lot. We respect each other enough to pay close attention, be supportive, sense dynamics and rhythmic patterns, and so on. When one of us makes a momentary error, the others will cover it, rather than make it more glaring. These are the kinds of things we've all (hopefully!) felt, and although "nice", they're not particularly unusual.

Nope... It's not the "friendship" thing, it's not "chops", "speed", "time", "feel", or whatever. (but they help) What really makes all this work is that we all play *positively*. There's an old adage in music that "if you mistake, do it twice, so the audience thinks you did it on purpose". That's cute, but I think that's focusing on the error. After all, our role on stage is generally to produce great music, not to "look cool", right? What is past is past. What works best is to continue with your thought, and leave the mistake in the past. (but try not to do it again)

The other aspect of being positive is to play with genuine emotion. If you don't like the music you're playing, quit. But if you love it, then play it that way, and try and feel (and/or influence) the emotions of those around you. If they're not putting out real emotion, they're probably holding you up. The audience knows when you're a fake, and it's a lot easier to be yourself anyway. Luckily, in jazz, you typically don't have to be an actor.

If you do anything less sincere, the audience will sense, hear, and see this as the "clunky" feel that none of us want to be a part of. If you know the tune, *play it!* If you don't know the tune, use common sense, and support the band, listening hard. But moment by moment, decide what you want to do, and just do it. It gives everyone around you a feeling of confidence, and inspires them to do the same. As long as you're playing musically and listening to each other, things should fall into place. It has to be a team. The non-supportive or non-contributive member of the band is probably holding you up, or interfering in some irritating way.

From the audience point of view...

If you're cocky, and then make a mistake, the audience will "hate you" for it. But, if you're sincere, and make the same mistake, the audience will "allow" it, and listen more for the big picture... your intentions. The search for perfection never ends, but just be careful about believing that you've "got it." There's always somebody better. ...Believe it.

- Mike James