

VOCAL JAZZ IMPROVISATION: An Instrumental Approach

Gene Aitken and Jamey Aebersold

The vocal jazz choir movement today is much in the same period of development as was the high school and college jazz ensemble movement, more commonly known then as "the stage band" era, that began in the late 1950's and early-to mid-1960's. At that period of time, the stage bands, under the leadership of competent post-war music educators, were excellent in the ensemble aspect. . . good musicianship, intonation, interpretation, phrasing, and all the right notes. The institutional big band jazz soloists, however, didn't rise to the level of the ensemble. They had no concept of what a jazz solo was, or how to begin to practice and develop solo facility, and they didn't do a lot of serious listening and study of contemporary jazz soloists.

In 1983, the vocal jazz choir movement is a mirror of what was going on in the instrumental jazz era. The vocal jazz ensembles are conducted by competent directors, who produce groups that demonstrate good musicianship, in-

instrumentalists go through. They need to practice scales, to practice chords, to practice the same exercises as the jazz instrumentalists. Vocalists need to sharpen their ears almost to a degree sharper than the jazz instrumentalist. An instrumentalist can push a button, key, or string, and pretty much know a certain note is going to come out. But a singer, when they start to sing, doesn't really know what note is going to come out unless they have perfect pitch or have practiced ear-training. Where an instrumentalist is actually anxious to play new tunes with difficult chord changes to see if they can make it through, a singer is usually horrified at looking at a difficult chord progression. They don't know what to do with it, and have to hear the rhythm section play it over and over until they kind of get the hang of it. Hopefully, in the years to come, the vocal jazz soloist will become a more schooled musician and practitioner of their art.

Vocalists can progress and begin to learn complex chords and hear the altered sounds such as #4, #5, b9, and #9 much quicker than the instrumentalist.

tonation, interpretation, phrasing and all the right notes. BUT NO SOLOISTS! Specifically, the three areas that seem to need attention in vocal jazz improvisation in most cases are:

1. the inability of students to follow the changes and to deal with the scales and chords.
2. the improper use of scat-syllables such that the essence of the jazz concept, style, and interpretation is lost, and
3. the lack of study and knowledge of established instrumental and vocal jazz soloists and their music.

Since this article is specifically focusing on vocal jazz improvisation and not on the vocal jazz ensemble per se, we need to address the situation as it really exists. . . students today haven't been really taught to improvise and to thoroughly learn the harmonic structure of the chart or tune that they're improvising upon.

The high school and college jazz singers need to go through the very same preparation and practice that the

It is important that every vocal jazz director start out each vocal jazz rehearsal with 5-10 minutes of drills and exercises that relate to the solo sections of tunes being rehearsed, or to a simple chord progression that is within the grasp of the group. Instead of just one or two students working on a vocal improvisation solo in a haphazard approach as is the usual case, the entire group works on the solo. You'll be surprised. . . over a period of time some students who could not improvise at all begin to improvise good solos. When this happens, the educational process has begun. . . directors are educating students to begin to teach themselves.

Start with simple exercises. The director should insist that the students know where they are in the chord progression and what note they are singing. First, singers need to know where the root is. The choir should sing through the cycle of 4th's in all 12 keys, 2 measures each chord, and the director should be able to stop after six keys and say, "Where are we?," and everyone should know exactly where they are. As an example:

EXAMPLE 1



The students should be mentally thinking of the keyboard, or maybe some instrument that they play, but they do need to think in terms of what pitch they are on. In addition to identifying the root, they next need to identify the quality of each chord that they sing. Is this chord major? Or minor? Then change the cycle. Go around all 12 keys in 1/2 steps, down whole steps, etc. Next, sing through each cycle this time singing the third of the chord, then the fifth, the seventh, the ninth. In each case the student should be aware of where they are in the progression, what note they're singing, and the quality of the chord. Use major chords, minor chords, and dominant seventh chords. This type of program may take some time and some planning on the part of the director, but it is a good introduction to vocal jazz improvisation, and will definitely pay off in the long run. It is the first step toward educating the student to sing jazz.

After spending some time singing roots, thirds, fifths, etc., they are ready for the next step. Divide the choir into two sections. . . for the sake of this article, divide them into male and female sections. At the beginning of each rehearsal, don't dive right in and start improvising, but warm the students up on something that is beneficial to them when they actually begin to improvise. One group could sing the scales while the other group sings the chord (use Jamey Aebersold's Scale Syllabus to determine the correct scales and chords). The choir, depending on the level of development of the choir, could be 1-3-5 (meaning root, third and fifth of the appropriate scale), or 1-3-5-7, or maybe, 3-5-7-9. As an example:

EXAMPLE 2



Then reverse the assignment:

EXAMPLE 3

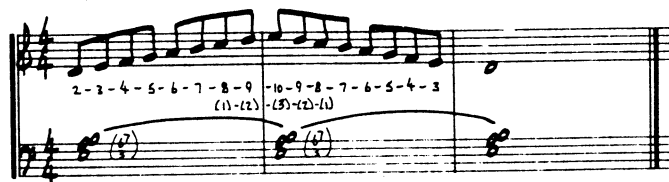


Adding the rhythm section, a good rehearsal accompanist who has good time and hopefully modern voicings, or a play-along record, will definitely be helpful. The rhythm section or the rehearsal pianist has the option of playing the changes or the scales. At this beginning level when using the scales and chords, stay 4 or 8 measures on a chord change until the students begin to internalize the sound.

OCT./NOV., 1983

As the students develop their aural awareness, begin to focus on the particular color each note has in the chord. For instance, if the 1st altos are singing the third, they should develop an awareness and feeling of what it sounds and feels like to sing the third on major chords, minor chords, etc. Expand their aural awareness. . . have them sing the 7th or the 9th. Each of these notes has a different resonance and they need to learn to hear and feel that part of the music. Change the voicings around, and don't always start the scale on the tonic. . . use some imagination.

EXAMPLE 4



Begin to change the background whole notes to rhythmic comping figures.

EXAMPLE 5



Use different chord patterns. Vary the rhythm of the example.

EXAMPLE 6



Vocalists can progress and begin to learn complex chords and hear the altered sounds such as #4, #5, b9, and #9 much quicker than the instrumentalist. An instrumentalist has to think, "I'm in the key of A, what is the #9?" Whereas singers, once they learn the sound, can pick it up quickly.

ARTICULATION

Singers should listen to jazz instrumentalists' recordings and try to imitate both the sound and the articulation of the instrument. Articulation and sound are important concepts. As an example, when Chet Baker scat sings, he sounds like a trumpet player. When he plays his trumpet or flugelhorn, he sounds like someone singing. He perhaps has bridged the gap as well as anyone and when he sings, he sings exactly as though he had his trumpet in his hand. He has a command of the sound and articulation of his voice.

Choosing overused scat-syllables like "do-bee, do-bee," or "do-ba, do-ba," not only produce an un-flowing, angular, non-musical sound, they destroy the basic fundamental interpretation of the jazz line. At times, and in the

VOCAL JAZZ IMPROV

(Continued from page 10)

Don't forget that these isolated figures do not necessarily have meaning by themselves, but must be interpreted depending where they fall in the jazz line or jazz phrase. These scat-syllables are a guide only.

Caution: over emphasis of specific phonetics involving complex sounds can be restrictive. An artist's choice of sounds at any given moment is highly spontaneous and individual. Bob Dorough's tendency to sing improvisatory "soap-a-soap," for example, is a reflection of his own personality and humor. Scat phonetics are international. The singer is creating pure music when meaningless instrumental or vocal sounds are employed. There is no distraction of a story or message. Extra-musical sounds, such as electronically altered vocal sounds, are also fair game to the improvising singer.

Patty Coker

JAZZ VOCALISTS TO LISTEN TO

Ella Fitzgerald	Joe Williams	Jon Hendricks	Clark Terry
Dave Lambert	Eddie Jefferson	Mel Torme	Joe Carroll
Jan Stentz	Mark Murphy	Bobby McFerrin	Leo Watson
Chet Baker	Dizzy Gillespie	Al Jarreau	Roy Eldridge
Betty Carter	Louis Armstrong	Bob Dorough	

Selected Bibliography

- Anderson, Doug. **Jazz and Show Choir Handbook**. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Hinshaw Music, 1978.
- Berger, David. **Contemporary Jazz Rhythms**. Volumes 1 & 2. New York: Charles Colin, 1983.
- Coker, Patty and Baker, David. **Vocal Improvisation - An Instrumental Approach**. Lebanon, Ind.: Studio P/R-Columbia Pictures, 1981.
- Fredrickson, Scott. **Scat Singing Method**. Hollywood, CA: Scott Music Publ., 1982.
- Konowitz, Bert. **Vocal Improvisation Method**. Port Washington, N.Y.: Alfred Publications, 1975.
- Swain, Alan. **Improvise: A Step-By-Step Approach**. Evanston, Ill.: Jasmine Music Publ., 1980.
- Terry, Clark and Rizzo, Phil. **The Interpretation Of The Jazz Language**. Cleveland, Ohio: M.A.S. Publishing Co., 1977.



Jamey Aebersold is one of the improvisation authorities in the world. His development and refinement of the play-a-long concept to teach improvisation offers the student a chance to develop creative talents at home and school. He has produced over 28 record/text volumes for jazz education. He is director of the Summer Jazz Combo Clinics.

OCT./NOV., 1983

the ultimate small group experience

COMBO CHARTS

classic tunes for 6-7 players

- scored for 3 horns (alto sax or trumpet, alto or tenor sax, & tenor sax or trombone), piano, bass, drums, and optional guitar
- fully-written intro, first & last choruses
- open space for solos — suggested scales for improvisation are provided
- arrangers Phil Woods, Jeff Holmes, Dick Lieb, Bob Brookmeyer, Lennie Niehaus, Rusty Dedrick & Sy Johnson
- available from your local music supplier — \$10.00 - \$12.00 each
- free brochure available from Kendor Music

titles:

ALL OF ME
 ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE
 BILL BAILEY
 FLY ME TO THE MOON
 HERE'S THAT RAINY DAY
 I LEFT MY HEART IN SAN FRANCISCO
 K.C. BLUES
 THE MAGIC SHOP
 THE PREACHER
 SATIN DOLL
 SCRAPPLE FROM THE APPLE
 SITTING HERE
 SOME SKUNK FUNK
 TAKE THE "A" TRAIN
 WE'VE ONLY JUST BEGUN
 WHEN I'M SIXTY-FOUR
 WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHIN' IN
 YARDBIRD SUITE



Kendor Music, Inc.

music publishers

Main & Grove Sts.
 P.O. Box 278
 Delevan, New York 14042