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

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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:



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:



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.

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 that the instrumentalist. An instrumentalist has to think, "I'im 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

appropriate place, "do-bees" and "do-bas" can be used effectively. As an example of an incorrect and a correct way to interpret an instrumental jazz figure:

EXAMPLE 7



Notice, when the figure is sung incorrectly, how dated the sound and style are vs. when the figure is sung correctly. This is what is meant by trying to imitate the sound of the instrumentalist. Not the instrumental sound per se, but the interpretive sound. The same applies when incorporating scales and chords into the rehearsals . . . an attempt must be made to sing the scales and chords with good articulation and sound . . . as a good jazz instrumentalist would. There are numerous scat-syllables available that are correct . . . the criteria are: they must flow, be in the jazz style, and facilitate the interpretation of the jazz line. No one group of syllables is better than another unless it makes the jazz interpretation concept better. Can you now imagine the awkward, non-musical, non-jazz sound of a scale being sung:

EXAMPLE 8



Another concept when singing scales or any group of eighth notes in any pattern that makes it more correct, is the imitation of the instrumental back-accent, or off-beat tonguing. Literally interpreted in jazz music, an instrumentalist would use a legato tongue sound, with no break in the air stream, and lightly articulate only the off-beatnotes.

A vocalist must approach the interpretation of the eighth note the same way. The articulated, off-beat note in vocal jazz is usually a softly accented consonant, while the slurred-to note on the beat is usually a modified vowel sound.

EXAMPLE 9



This is true no matter if the example is used in a vocal jazz improvisation solo, or appears in written form in a vocal jazz chart. Incorrect use of scat-syllables is perhaps one reason why so many published charts employing scat-syllable are hard to sing, and harder to make swing. The vocal scat-syllable sounds just don't imitate the jazz instrumental sound. The same concept should be evident when "vocal-eze" is employed (using words instead of scat-syllables). . . the words must mimic the interpretation of the instrumental jazz line.

As students and directors become aware of these concepts, they should begin to listen to jazz soloists for both the artist's interpretive sound and articulation.

LISTENING

The whole idea of imitation is extremely important and always has been. The instrumentalists nowadays must take the imitation and add to that all of their practice room practice of scales and chords, the melodies, the ear training, the intervals, and learning tunes. If a student today listens to Miles Davis plays a blues, when they sing, they'll probably sound much better than they would had they just been turned loose with no prior listening experience to a blues in that key, at that temp.

Students today need to listen to instrumentalists such as Miles, Charlie Parker, Cannonball Adderly, Blue Mitchell, and any other of the major jazz artists . . . delay listening to big bands . . . listen to small jazz combos. Listen to someone like Stanley Turrentine, who plays simplier, singable melodies. The vocalist can easily transcribe them. And listen to tonal jazz players . . . the people who are singing and playing the same tunes you want to sing and play.

When transcribing and memorizing solos, write them down if possible . . . without using the piano . . . develop an aural approach to music . . . make the ear work for you.

Finally, the director needs to tell the students that singing the exercises are not just to kill time. Singing vocal jazz exercises helps the students to improvise. They'll know where they're at, can keep their place, and will have a better chance of singing what it is they hear in their head, and to know what it is they're singing. When the chord moves from one change to another, the student can move effectively . . . and pre-hear the changes in their heads . . . that's what the good jazz player, jazz singer does . . . they pre-hear what's coming next.

RELATIVE PITCH AND INTERVAL PRACTICE

With instrumentalists, they see an A7 and they can play the root A without thinking too much about it. But if the vocalist were instead asked to sing the root of an A7 chord, chances are none of them could find it. The vocalists need to develop that same sense of pitch. They should carry a pitch pipe with them all the time and drill on intervals in their spare time. It is imperative that a singer learn that a perfect 4th is the first two notes to "Here Comes The Bride," or that a half-step up is the first two notes of "What's New?"

A FEW SCAT-SYLLABLES

The following scat-syllables are listed in groupings of quarter notes, eighth notes, triplets, and sixteenth notes. Please note that these are only a few suggestions.

Ī	j	Ü	3	, , , , ,
za	zahp	za-za	doo-dl-ee	doo-dl-doo-dl
by	bop	va-va	oo-ba-da	dee-dl-dad-dl
boo	wopp	by-oo	boo-dl-ee	do-va-da-ka
ee	weep	oo-ba	opp-pi-ti	do-ee-da-da

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Don't forget that these isolated figures do not necessarily have meaning by themselves, but must be interpreteddepending 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 Dave Lambert Jan Stentz Chet Baker Betty Carter Joe Williams
Eddie Jefferson
Mark Murphy
Dizzy Gillespie
Louis Armstrong

Jon Hendricks Mel Torme Bobby McFerrin Al Jarreau Bob Dorough Clark Terry Joe Carroll Leo Watson Roy Eldridge

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Jamey Aebersold is one of the improvisation authorities in the world. His development and refinement of the play-a-along 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.

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