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Jazz Preparation Pack Transcription

The background of the cover is a close-up, slightly blurred photograph of a sheet of music. The music is written on five-line staves with various notes, rests, and symbols, including a treble clef and a bass clef. The paper has a warm, aged tone.

Transcription: Why it's important and how to do it

How did all the universally acknowledged master musicians in the history of jazz, from Lester Young and Miles Davis to Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday learn to play? In a world before music conservatoires and jazz teachers, they painstakingly transcribed solos by their favourite players from records and tried to work out what was going on.

Although jazz education has become more formalised since then, jazz is still a fundamentally oral tradition, and many concepts and ideas are too subtle to pass on in books and lectures – to learn them, we have to work in the same way the old masters did, by transcription and immersive listening.

Why transcribe?

Saxophonist Dave Liebman has written and lectured extensively on transcription. He talks about the artistic development process as “Imitation – (Playing in a) Style – Innovation” – transcription is how we achieve the imitation part.

His website is well worth checking out, where he discusses the subject in detail and also provides audio examples of his students very closely imitating some classic solos:

http://davidliebman.com/home/ed_articles/the-complete-transcription-process/

The process of transcribing and playing along to solos, copying all the details like eight-note/time feel, sound and inflections as well as the notes and rhythms themselves, is the only way to properly imitate the masters when trying to learn to play jazz, since much of this detail cannot be properly notated.

It's also a very efficient use of your time – transcription is the only practice technique that works on time, rhythm, technique, aural skills, language, feel, inflections, sound, melody, harmony, reading, memory all at once!

What to transcribe?

Try and find solos to transcribe that:

- You really like and would love to be able to play tomorrow if you could.
- Are based on common forms/tunes, preferably that you already know, e.g. blues, rhythm changes and standards.
- Are by classic, well-regarded players from the tradition (e.g. from the 50's and 60's), so that you're sure what you're transcribing is generally applicable and will stand the test of time.
- Are on your instrument, at least at first. Later on, it is also good to get a different perspective by transcribing a solo on a different instrument.

How to transcribe?

You must find what works best for you – I would recommend singing first, copying the detail exactly (time-feel, rhythmic detail, inflections etc). You can do this either singing phrase by phrase or the whole solo before transferring it to your instrument. Using technology to slow down the recording while maintaining pitch is fine!

When you go to your instrument, be confident in what the notes are before you play, and see if you can play it right first time. This mimics the aural process in improvisation ('playing what you hear').

Then, learn to play the whole solo on your

instrument with all the detail in straight away, playing along with the recording, before finally writing the solo down for analysis. This process may take months at first, and that's fine – there's no rush. It's up to you if you do it all from memory or you write it down as you go along. You'll be amazed what you are capable of remembering!

Be sure you learn to imitate all the inflection, time-feel and timbral qualities you can, rather than just the notes – these are the parts of the music that you can't learn by reading transcriptions from books.

What to do with it?

Once you've learned your transcription, you've already done a lot of great work and will have subconsciously learned a lot about feel, sound and phrasing.

However, you should also go through the solo and subject it to different kinds of analysis. For example, you should write in the chord changes that are being played behind the solo above your transcription and attempt to analyse it harmonically, working out why the notes work. Also try and look for motifs (little cells that keep reappearing) as well as how the energy of the solo develops, as well as how the soloist phrases and leaves space.

Also pick out rhythmic and melodic language you are drawn to, try and work out what's going on, and try and conceive practice exercises to help you assimilate that piece of language. For example, you would want to become very flexible with a melodic piece of language to get the most out of it, and this would mean transposing it into all 12 keys, moving it around different cycles (cycle of 5ths, 4ths, semitones, tones etc) and working out how it would fit on different chord-types or other places in the key.

Finally, try and apply these techniques and pieces of content from the solo on other repertoire, hopefully being creative enough with them to make them your own.

Suggested solos to start with, by instrument

Saxophone

Dexter Gordon – Three O'Clock in the Morning (Go!)

Piano

Wynton Kelly – Freddie Freeloader
(from Miles Davis' Kind of Blue)

Trumpet

Miles Davis – Blues by Five (Cookin')

Trombone

Curtis Fuller – Five Spot After Dark (Blues-ette)

Guitar

Grant Green – Solid (Solid)

Voice

Chet Baker – Do It The Hard Way
(Chet Baker Sings It Could Happen to You)

Bass

Wilbur Ware – Softly as in a Morning Sunrise
(from Sonny Rollins' Live at the Village Vanguard,
Disc 1 – evening set)

Drums

Roy Haynes – In Walked Bud
(from Thelonious Monk's Misterioso)

If you have any questions about your offer,
please don't hesitate to contact our Admissions
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