



Jazz Articles by Bob Taylor
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**Article 3:
The End is in Sight**

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The End is in Sight – An Approach to Solo Phrases

by Bob Taylor – ©2005 Visual Jazz Publications

Has this ever happened to you? You invite friends to come to a jazz concert, only to have them say something like this afterwards: “I like it when I can hear the melody, but I get totally lost during those solos – they seem really complicated ...”

Yes, it often takes more effort to appreciate improvised solos, for a number of reasons. But one of those reasons is something that we actually can and should do something about: *we usually need to say more with fewer notes.*

I hear a lot of younger soloists (and even older ones) who have great ideas, great technique, and great sound, yet somehow it doesn't all quite come together. One of the biggest reasons for this is that they simply don't know “when to say when,” or when to end a phrase. The more we ramble on in our improvisation, the

Here are the basic problems:

- Phrases are often too long and complicated.
- Solo phrases have too much variety and not enough development to keep listeners' interest.

So – why do these problems exist in the first place, and what can we do as soloists to overcome them? Here are three areas to consider that will help you rein in your solo phrases and make them really speak to your listeners:

► Why are some solos difficult to understand?

1. Balancing freedom, sound, and silence
2. Thinking vocal-phrases
3. Learning to use target end-notes

Step 1: Know the Freedom Factor

► How can I use creative freedom more wisely?

Ahhh ... there's nothing like a blank musical canvas to paint on! Yet the freedom to create carries responsibility with it. You can say whatever you want, and you can play whatever you want – but should you? There are two extremes to consider here: “ultra-freedom” (that rambling self-expression that's more fun for the player than the listener), and “micro-freedom” (fear of saying anything unless it's been tested out beforehand).

Ultra-freedom typically leads to long phrases with little development. The driving force here is the constant search for something new – constant “newness” is mistaken for creativity. New ideas are fine, as long as something constructive is also being done with the “old” ideas. And there are two underlying fears with ultra-freedom: 1) the fear of silence – “if I'm not playing, then something must be going wrong ...” and 2) the need to play more and more notes, because you're dissatisfied with what you just played. This can also lead to some overly long and tiresome solos.

Micro-freedom leads to rote-playing and insecurity, where you play what you copy from others, and you're reluctant to use your creative skills. Many players get themselves trapped in this zone, and it can be a challenge to break free. I once taught improvisation to an outstanding classical trumpet player, but we reached an impasse when his goal became “secure” licks instead of musical vision.

The Balance

For me, the answer lies in visual improvisation, based on SHAPE, melodic color, and rhythmic color. Once you can see your musical phrases unfolding clearly before you, that activity envelops your energies. You take pride and enjoyment in crafting and developing each new phrase. This leads to more satisfaction with what you play and less desire to add on “musical calories” to get that “full feeling.” And that creates a healthy balance between musical freedom and musical responsibility.

Can phrases still be long or complicated with visual improvisation? Yes, but they will also be *interesting*, because they are based on *cause and effect*, something that nearly all listeners can relate to.

► Am I “breathing” enough?

Step 2: Breathe

Why does “long-phrase-itis” strike a lot more pianists and guitarists than vocalists? Because vocalists need to breathe. Horn players need to breathe as well, but they typically do it only when they have to ... And some piano/guitar soloists seem to never breathe musically, even when they really need to.

We can, and should, take a page from the vocalist’s book by creating more singable phrases. As you work on short, effective phrases of 1 to 2 measures, your gain ability to create, develop, and control your musical shapes. Then expand those phrases to 3 bars, 4 bars, and more.

The neglected – but golden – space here is the medium-length phrase. It’s long enough to require some creative thought and handling, but short enough to reduce the risk of musical wandering. The key is to make each phrase interesting enough so the listener wants more.

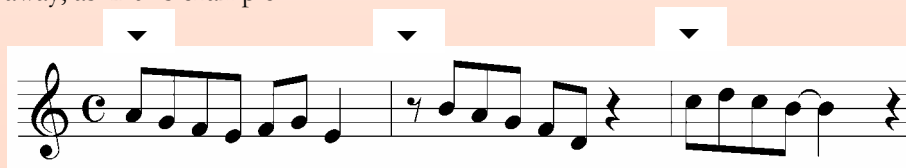
Ending Phrases

Here are some suggested solutions, taken from “How to End Phrases” in *The Art of Improvisation*:

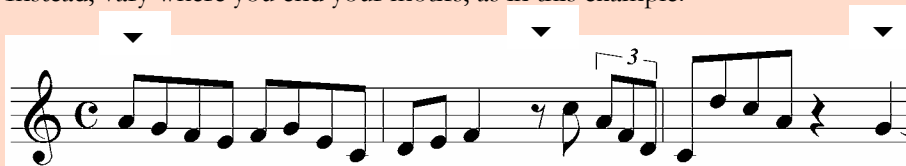
► What are some practical ways to end phrases?

- 1) Think ahead. Clearly visualize the *end* of your phrase so it comes off cleanly.
- 2) Try ending with a staccato note, or a longer note with expression (vibrato, etc.), or a well-defined rhythm. Your last note should be as secure in pitch and rhythm as your first note.
- 3) Try to vary *where* in the bar you end the phrase.
- 4) End before you’re forced to end. Don’t end a phrase just because you’re out of breath, energy, or ideas; end when the music says it should end.

The worst habit is ending each motif near a barline and starting the next motif right away, as in this example:



Instead, vary where you end your motifs, as in this example.



Eliminating Phrase Barriers

A related challenge is not how to end a phrase, but how to keep it going when you need to. Here are some ways to eliminate natural phrase barriers, taken from in *The Art of Improvisation*:

► How do I get past barriers in my phrases?

Problem 1: I keep stopping at new barlines.

Solution: Play *through* barlines. Stop just after beat one or in the middle of a bar, not always at the end of a bar.

Problem 2: A chord symbol changes while I'm in the middle of a phrase.

Solution: You'll learn about how to connect between chord symbols in Chapter 3B: *Melodic Connections*. The contours and rhythms of your phrase shouldn't be controlled by the chords; the chords should naturally fit into your phrases.

Problem 3: I can play complex ideas in easy keys, but I have to play simple ideas in the harder keys.

Solution: Spend extra time on scales and arpeggios in the more difficult keys. Try developing a simple idea (fewer/slower notes) from easy chords to harder chords. Ideas can get prematurely complicated in easy keys.

Problem 4: I run out of breath or make a mistake.

Solution: Shorten some motifs. Horn players can work on breath control to play longer phrases. If you make a mistake, don't just stop; maybe you can use the "wrong" note as part of your next idea.

Step 3: Use Target Ending Notes

One very effective way I've found to create medium length phrases is to use a "target" approach. Here's the basic process I use:

► What's the Target approach to phrases?

1. I resolve to myself that the very next phrase I play, whatever it is, will end cleanly.
2. After the first few notes, I enter a "ready to end it" mode, where I could choose to end the phrase at any time.
3. I tell myself "not here ... not there ... OK, here!" and I end the phrase with purpose.

(You can find more details on this process in the "Bank On It" topic in *The Art of Improvisation*.)

This works well in creating solid endings and avoiding those meandering, wandering phrases. But this targeting approach also has an *intriguing side effect* that may be even better than the clean endings it produces – it *pulls your ideas forward*.

Not only do your endings get cleaner, but – curiously – your rhythms will often take on new life. Also, you’ll be more inclined to “do something constructive” (develop) with the ideas you play while you’re decide just where to end your phrase.

As you practice this Target approach to phrases, I bet that you’ll fall in love with it over time. Your ideas will gel, they will pull ahead, and they’ll end cleanly – with little excess baggage. Your audience will love it to, because they’ll grab hold of your ideas and appreciate them more fully. Then you can progress to longer and more complicated phrases with confidence, because you’ll have better control over your ideas, and because your listeners will understand them better and trust your musical direction. That’s definitely worth it!

One more thing – the Target approach is highly recommended for jazz educators as well. I’ve seen dramatic results with my improvisation students who latch onto this concept – it’s as though you can see the creative process unfold in their eyes as they improvise.

Conclusion

There’s a beautiful world of creative phrases waiting for you in your improvisation. By controlling your freedoms, breathing musically, and driving towards effective target notes, you can say more with less – and enjoy your solos