



Jazz Articles by Bob Taylor
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**Article 4:
Melodic Memory**

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Melodic Memory, Part 1

by Bob Taylor – ©2005 Visual Jazz Publications

The story of my life: I get a great idea, but there's no time to write it down – so away it goes into space. (In my *Deft-initions* book I call that “airchitecture” ...) Fortunately I've remembered and written enough of them to get by. Which reminds me – in improvisation we face the same kind of memory barrier, only on a much more condensed scale as we create music in real time.

Here's the problem in a nutshell:

- We come up with a good – or even great – improvisation idea, and *then proceed to do nothing with it.*

Is this a common problem? Absolutely - many soloists have great ideas at their fingertips, but they seem to play them and then discard them. (This is like the football equivalent of going 3 and out on every series.) What results is the feeling that the solo never really gets off the ground.

Musical Memory Lapse

So what brings on this musical form of Early Alzheimer's? Here are a few reasons why this might happen to us:

1. We aren't having many original thoughts. This could be due to relying too much on patterns and licks.
2. Our solos are so overgrown with notes and density that it's hard to pick out the individual ideas.
3. We can't remember what we had for breakfast, let alone what we played a few measures ago.
4. We don't know what to do with a good idea, even when it jumps up and bites us.

▶ What causes musical memory lapse?

Let's take a look at the issues one by one.

1. Need More Original Thoughts

I remember struggling with this problem in my early days of learning to improvise. In my solos I remember thinking, "What do I play next? What was that cool pattern I learned yesterday – oops, too late, I'll try it in the next chorus ..."

There are two basic approaches to this problem:

▶ How do I come up with more original ideas?

- a) Learn and store up enough ideas that eventually you'll have plenty to work with. This is the method most players use, but it can sure be a slow, long and painful process.
- b) Learn to create your own ideas on the fly. This is what I wanted, but didn't think it was possible and didn't know how to do it. Fortunately, the Visual Foundation (SHAPE, Flexible Scales, and Virtual Practice) make this all possible. (For more details, see *The Art of Improvisation*.)

I suggest building on approach B, and then adding A as you go. That way you'll have a solid foundation with room to add cool ideas in context. And remember – "original" doesn't mean that nobody has ever played that idea before; it means that the idea flows out of what you are doing, not what you pre-planned.

2. Overgrown Jungles

We often tend to play too much in solos, because we fear silence or because we're constantly searching for that "next great" idea. Unfortunately, high density without purpose dilutes what we are saying musically.

For some practical suggestions on keeping your solos trim and fit, see my Article 3: "The End is in Sight – An Approach to Solo Phrases."

3. What *Did* I Have for Breakfast ...?

I often think there is a broom-dog (like the one in *Alice in Wonderland*) who goes around in our mind, sweeping up memories of anything we played more than a measure ago. Knowing that mental dog is there as I solo, I make a conscious effort to keep the last few measures "in cache" so I can re-use any parts of them as needed. Yes, the old stuff is still often discarded, *but it's always available* – and that's a powerful asset to draw on.

Chances are that you are not taking full advantage of your short-term musical memory skills – not to worry, there are some suggestions in the next section on SHAPE and musical memory.

4. What About that Idea that Just Bit Me?

So you'd like to do something constructive with those good ideas ... Stay tuned for the next article, "Melodic Memory: Part 2" for some practical tips on taking good ideas to better places.

How can SHAPE help me with musical memory?

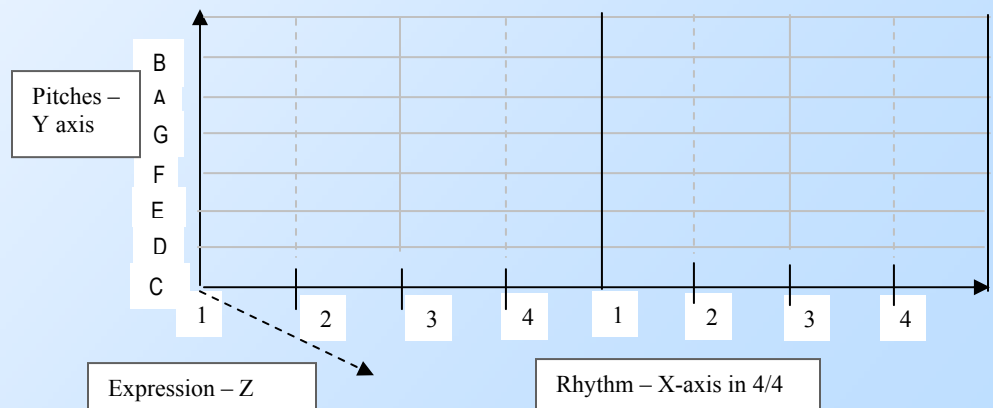
How SHAPE Helps Musical Memory

SHAPE (See, Hear, And Play Expressively) is a powerful system for visualizing and remembering the notes you play. As explained in *The Art of Improvisation*, it creates a three-dimensional grid where you can "pin" your notes and watch them as they flow.

Here's a brief overview of the three-dimensional aspect of SHAPE:

- x-axis = time (rhythm)
- y-axis = pitch (melody)
- z-axis = expression (dynamics, articulations, effects, etc.)

To the right is a graphic framework of 3-D music. When you improvise, you place notes on the Y-axis (pitch) and the X-axis (rhythm). You can use the 3rd dimension (expression) to complete the 3-D model.



Having visual reference points in your mind for the notes you are playing can help immensely with *remembering what you've played*. Then you can make much more intelligent and timely choices about what to keep using, what to discard, and where your ideas are taking you.

As you learn to use SHAPE effectively, you'll realize that not only are there three dimensions in musical space (rhythms, pitch, expression), but there are also three "dimensions" in your solo journey:

- The past (what you've already played)
- The present (what you are currently playing)
- The future (what you'll play next).

And that leads us to our next topic, 3-Way Musical Vision.

3-Way Musical Vision

We've talked about how SHAPE can help you remember what you've already played (in the past). SHAPE, of course, can also guide what you are currently playing, as well as giving you a visual path of where to go with your ideas.

That leads us to the concept of 3-way musical vision – the ability to see past, present, and future and link them together in meaningful ways. But wait – before we start thinking must suddenly become “mystic prophets” and see everywhere in time and space, remember that we're talking *small* distances here. That's right, one or two measures into the past, and a bar or two into the future (not *that* kind of bar ...).

How does 3-way musical vision work?

Here's a simple diagram of 3-way vision. Notice how the melodic memory gets more hazy the farther you get from the current measure or idea.



Remember that you don't really see in 3 directions at once – you simply change focus quickly, from one place to another. And if you're thinking that this is still pretty much impossible, let me remind you that you've already practiced this skill if you have ever – c'mon, admit it – played video games. To survive in any action video game, your mind races from where you were, to where you are, to where you're going – and very efficiently, I might add.

So 3-way musical vision is not only possible, it's *highly recommended*. I'm convinced that the great soloists all have mastered the ability to see back, here, and ahead, with great skill and artistry. Why?

So they can create ideas that really speak to us, leading us on a musical path of wonder. And that's a huge part of the magic of improvisation.

What's next with Melodic Memory ...?

Next Article – Melodic Memory: Part 2

Featured topics in the next Visual Jazz article, Melodic Memory: Part 2, include:

- Development Tips
- Anchor Points
- The Magic of Markers
- Scavenger Hunts

and more ...