



Jazz Articles by Bob Taylor
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**Article 5:
Melodic Memory,
Part 2**

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Melodic Memory, Part 2 – Development Tips

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In the previous article – Melodic Memory, Part 1 – we discussed ways to sharpen your musical vision and memory so you can see and remember musical ideas. This Part 2 article is about *doing something* constructive with the ideas you see and remember. .

Here's a perplexing thought – we hear musical development practically every day. Development is deeply ingrained in jazz, classical and pop melodies; even (shudder) country-western songs develop their tunes. In the supermarket, in the elevator, in the car, in music theory class – musical development surrounds us.

That being the case, why do so many jazz soloists neglect development in their solos? Is the freedom to improvise so attractive that we forget to use it responsibly? Just because I *can* play anything I want doesn't mean I *should*. Unless, or course, what I want to say is musically compelling.

Which leads us to our main point ...

➤ Development is *essential to musical thought*, but *largely neglected*.

▶ What would help me get started with development?

To better understand the power of development, we need to understand

- A) Why to develop
- B) What to develop
- C) How to develop

Why Develop?

This section will be brief, because the evidence in favor of developing is overwhelming. First, the development of ideas is central to any form of communication, whether it's conversation, literature, music or art. For example, think how boring conversations can get when ideas are never explored! Now think how fascinating they become when one idea is explored and evolves into another idea ... you get the "idea" ...

In jazz, communication leads to musical interaction, and development is a key part of getting ideas off the ground and headed in the right direction. A jazz group that develops each other's ideas is "Miles" ahead of the ordinary group.

Great Players, Great Development

Second, great jazz improvisers know how to develop well. Two cases in point are Wynton Marsalis and Chick Corea. Although they are both superbly gifted in technique, you can still hear simple ideas being developed in their solos – technique does not obliterate development, it enhances it. (Now I can think of a lot of players for whom the opposite is true ... development is more an accident than a necessity.)

When players develop ideas in a solo, it's a form of story-telling. Our attention is captured, and so is our imagination. The focus switches from "what's left in my bag of licks?" to "what comes next in the story?"

What to Develop

Probably the two biggest problems are that players develop too little (or not at all), or they develop too obviously. Once you're convinced that development is important in your solos (which I hope is the case), the next question becomes *what* to develop.

Notice that we didn't say *how* to develop – that comes later. You can have great development techniques, but if you're developing something that's not interesting, then you're missing the point. It would be like starting a conversation about dryer lint (hmm, maybe someone would actually find that interesting ...)

Start with Interesting Ideas

So ... *develop on simple, interesting ideas.*

And what makes an interesting idea? That's not just a subjective question – the interest level of an idea depends on the basics, such as melodic color, rhythmic color, and context. Learn to recognize and use color tones, color intervals, and rhythmic color spots effectively in simple ideas. (See *The Art of Improvisation* for more details on these elements.)

► What makes for an interesting idea?

This may sound easy to do, but if your solos are cluttered and over-complicated, it may take some real effort to re-focus on saying more with less.

For example, here's a short and somewhat interesting blues idea that gets developed (varied) twice.



Original motif first variation second variation

Make Something Interesting from Something Routine

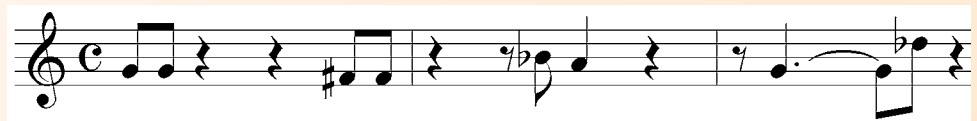
Then ... *develop something interesting from a routine idea.*

For example, “C Jam Blues” starts with a fairly brain-dead motif – two 8th-notes on beat 1, on the 5th degree – little melodic or rhythmic color.



Original motif first rep. second rep. third rep.

The first repetition of the motif comes after 3 beats of rest, setting the first motif clearly in our memory. The second repetition comes after only 1 beat of rest, and so does the third – except that the third repetition finally changes rhythm and pitch. So there is a subtle progression of similarity and contrast in developing this routine motif. Now, think of all the really interesting places you could take a idea like this with a little development ...



Original motif first variation second variation third variation

The Scavenger Hunt

I have often thought that development and interaction are much like a scavenger hunt – you are continually “scouring the neighborhood” for interesting ideas, whether they’re played by you or someone else in the group.

There are two important things you need to do in your hunt for ideas:

1. Listen closely for possibilities (“see” them).
2. Be selective about what you use.

Many good ideas are missed, either because we aren’t paying close enough attention, or we don’t recognize a good thing when we see it. It’s a bit like shopping – you’ve got to have the patience to look and the wisdom to know what to buy and when.

Here are four things you can do when you hear a good idea in your group:

- Let it go by (but appreciate it)
- Support it (play a complementary rhythm or motif)
- Imitate it (play some or all of what you heard)
- Vary it (play it back, altered).

Getting a good balance with these four elements will help your group thrive on musical interaction.

How to Develop

Jazz is a lot closer to classical music than many of us would admit. Case in point – the development tools we need for jazz improvisation are basically borrowed (stolen?) from classical composition. The Art of Improvisation explains these tools and how to use them in a jazz context. A future article here may deal with using these development tools.

Composers, of course, have the luxury of looking at what they’ve written and going back over it with an eraser (or mouse-click). Improvisers can’t erase what they’ve played, but *they can look at what they are playing* so they can develop it better. The skills discussed in Part 1 of this article series are designed to help you see and remember the ideas you play, so you can start developing them. Another skill that will help you capture and use ideas effectively is a method I call “magic markers” – see the end of this article for details.

For now, let’s focus on another four things – the *four degrees of variation* (taken from The Art of Improvisation).

Four Degrees of Variation

- *Exact repetition (no variation)* is best when the motif has strong interest, such as color tones or offbeat rhythms. One or two repetitions is fine; occasionally you can build energy with many repetitions.
- *Slight variation* is subtle, gradual development. Although slight variation may not seem like an interesting concept, it's actually very powerful when used well. Most improvisers neglect slight variation in favor of more variation.
- *More variation* creates more melodic variety and develops the motif somewhat faster. This technique dominates some players' development; it should be used carefully.
- *Complete variation* (starting a new motif). This gives you a fresh start for a new motif and development. This is like starting a new paragraph of musical thought.

In this example, bar 2 varies slightly; bar 3 varies more:



Original motif

Slight variation

More variation

Development tools help you use these four degrees of variation wisely.

Conclusion

There is much to learn about development and how it can help you communicate your ideas, among your group and with your listeners. Hopefully this article will help you move forward as you think about *why* to develop, *what* to develop, and *how* to develop in your solos.

Next ...

In the next article we'll cover:

- Magic Markers
- Development Tools
- Development examples from transcribed solos