



Jazz Articles by Bob Taylor
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Visual Jazz Web site: <http://www.visual-jazz.com>
E-mail: info@visual-jazz.com

**Article 10:
MR ED CPA**

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MR ED, CPA

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Who ever heard of a talking horse as a Certified Public Accountant? At least the acronym of MR ED CPA is easy to remember. And as luck (or fate) would have it, this acronym goes far beyond horses and calculators – it’s actually the key for studying jazz improvisation in a logical and sequential way.

Here’s the acronym spelled out:

Melody

Rhythm

Expression

Development

Chord Progressions

Performance

Analysis

Conveniently, the acronym lists the seven main elements of jazz improvisation! And did I mention that the elements are sequential?

Curiously, most jazz educators and method book authors use a completely opposite approach in terms of the sequence. I call it “backwards learning” – and I realize that’s a strong statement to make, but I think you’ll see what I mean as we explore the details.

First, let's take a look at the "backwards" (traditional) approach that most educators use, and then we'll explore the "forward" (MR ED CPA) approach that I prefer.

► Do most people really learn to improvise backwards?

The Traditional Approach – Learning Backwards with CAMPER-D

Consider the fact that there are hundreds of books of licks, patterns and chord progressions on the market – and yet most beginning improvisers still struggle with them, progressing too slowly. Why? It's CAMPER-D ... and here's some Q&A on why people keep using it, even though it's not an effective way to learn:

Q1: C is for Chord Progressions. Ya gotta learn them, especially if you want to play standard jazz tunes. So why not start here?

A1: Because starting off your improvisation study by learning chord progressions is like learning to drive by merging in and out of traffic on the interstate freeway. You'll have plenty of accidents unless you learn the "safe routes" through the progressions – which is exactly the solution offered by so many jazz methods. But this steers you away from creativity and into rote habits, which gets you off to a bad start. (The fact that there's a boatload of jazz theory to learn tempts many an educator to quickly dive into it, at the expense of building the foundation skills ... more on that later.)

Q2: A is for Analysis, so let's all jump in and transcribe solos!

A2: A few gifted musicians can transcribe solos right away, but for most of us transcribing is a very complex process – it requires strong pitch and rhythm recognition and notation skills to bring it all together. It's good, but it's *not* a good place to start.

Q3: M is for Melody – that means a handy book of licks and patterns at your fingertips.

A3: I tried this approach when I was young, and countless improvisers are still trying it – and it just doesn't work well. Starting to learn improvisation through licks and patterns leads to fragmented, predictable, non-creative solos.

Why Backwards?

Do we see a trend here? Chord progressions, transcribed solos, and jazz patterns are all *impressive stuff*, so most jazz educators load up on teaching it at the beginning – when it should really be moved to the end, with a focus on the fundamentals first.

Another reason why educators start with the complicated stuff first, is that there is usually some kind of “shroud of mystery” around the creative / fundamental skills. Here are some of the misconceptions:

- There’s no practical way to teach creativity.
- Scales are easy – once you learn them, what’s the point?
- Rhythms? That’s why we have a rhythm section ...

All these misconceptions undermine *teaching the fundamentals* on which the rest of jazz study depends.

So, what are those fundamentals?

► What’s different about MR ED, CPA?

Learning Sequentially with MR ED CPA

- M is for Melody – the kind you see in your mind, hear, and create.
- R is for Rhythm – the obvious but amazingly overlooked foundation in improvisation.
- E is for Expression – the personal touch that gives your solos identity and character.

These three elements form a core foundation for **visual improvisation**. You can think of Melody as vertical, Rhythm as horizontal, and Expression as the third dimension – and voila – you have three-dimensional, visual improvisation at your fingertips! (For details on using this 3-D improvisation model, see *The Art of Improvisation*.)

The next element inserts meaningful connections in your improvisation: D for Development. It’s like the thread that runs through your ideas, pulling them together and driving them to conclusions. Sadly, the “D” is all but missing from most traditional approaches.

Once you have these fundamentals in place, you can build on them by learning chord progressions, transcribing solos, and adding melodic patterns to your vocabulary. Here’s the key thing to remember:

* Note: The “MR ED” foundation makes the “CPA” possible – not the other way around!

The Visual Approach – SHAPE™

To break out of a rote approach, you need a tangible and effective replacement for it. That's the strength of SHAPE and the visual approach – it's simple, powerful, and most of all it helps you truly create. And that's the point of improvising.

SHAPE stands for See, Hear, And Play Expressively. (For more on SHAPE, see *The Art of Improvisation*.)

Here are some of the advantages of the visual approach:

- You stay in a single key or key center longer as you learn to create beautiful improvisation melodies. Then when you start changing the chord progressions, your melodies will stay strong – they won't be jerked around by the chords.
- You can begin to see how the great artists successfully use the basic elements of improvisation. Your motivation is to understand, imitate, and adapt their creative *ideas*, not just their exact pitches. And when you transcribe solos, you'll be looking for the why's, not just the what's.
- Above all, your improvisation is guided by musical vision. The musical shapes you see will pull you along, giving you sustained motivation and creativity.

Conclusion

Turn it around in your improvisation studies – get MR ED CPA going and say goodbye to CAMPER-D.

One more interesting thought to consider:

Getting the visual approach working first has a deep effect on CPA. With a visual foundation, you're no longer trapped by the rote approach – chords and licks are now at your service to help you create beautiful improvisation. The CPA that was first a bottleneck to progress now becomes a pathway to your improvisation potential.