



Jazz Articles by Bob Taylor
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**Article 17:
Food for Thought**

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Improvisation ... Food for Thought

by Bob Taylor – ©2006 Visual Jazz Publications

Hungry? Let's spend a little time in the "kitchens of our minds" ... First, we'll imagine three kinds of diets to choose from:

- 1) All fast food – the easier the better
- 2) Prepared meals – Lean Cuisine, frozen burritos, etc. – with a little original cooking thrown in
- 3) Original recipes – healthy and creative recipes – with a few prepared meals here and there

You've probably tried all three of these sometime in your life. An extreme example of Diet #1 is the "Super-size Me" movie – where a guy ate nothing but McDonald's food for three meals every day (in the days before the "healthy" items were added to the menu). He gained a ton of weight and "enjoyed" a series of health problems. And it was expensive!

Diet #2 definitely seems more healthy, especially with the improvements these days in frozen entrees and prepared foods. It's low effort and less expensive than Diet #1, but you still get a lot of preservatives, sodium, etc. And you miss that "home-cooked" look and feel ...

Diet #3, as most nutritionists would probably tell you, is the best for you – and probably least expensive – as long as your recipes are balanced and healthy. It does take more effort, which is probably why so many people avoid it in favor of Diet #1 and Diet #2.

OK, this isn't supposed to be an article for *Modern Cooking Magazine*, so let's make the transition to jazz now ... (a different type of "cooking" ...)

► What are the
"improvisation" diets?

What is “Fast-Food” Jazz?

Fast food is a) ready to eat, b) initially tasty, and c) not necessarily nutritious. So if we extend the fast-food metaphor to jazz improvisation, we get easy-to-learn licks that sound OK by themselves but don’t add up to healthy solos.

Fast-food jazz is easy – you just memorize a blues lick or pentatonic pattern in a few basic keys, and you’ve got instant music. But this “instant” approach can be a dangerous one:

► What are the problems with pattern-driven learning?

Instant begets instant, so it’s easy to become “addicted” to the quick fixes, both as a player and as a teacher. There are plenty of methods on the market today that basically spoon-feed the player a series of licks or patterns until they somehow know how to improvise. This is especially attractive for many improvisation teachers – just by turning the “patterns” crank, there are plenty of ready-made assignments for students. Sadly, the student solos reflect the lack of “nutrition” in this approach – there’s little development, interaction with the rhythm section, or personal expression being used.

Patterns and Habits

As explained in *The Art of Improvisation*, “Patterns are not bad – they’re just misunderstood.” Here are three common ways we misuse patterns:

- Too often – we overplay patterns, at the expense of creating our own ideas and interacting with others.
- In the wrong places – we stick a pattern in our solo wherever we think of it, instead of where it would best fit in the context of what we’re building.
- Rote – we usually play patterns from the root to the octave, ascending, several times, without varying the rhythms or pitches much.

When we learn to use patterns effectively – especially as we develop pre-learned patterns, or create and develop patterns on the fly – we open up a new path towards vision instead of rote playing.

A Balanced Diet

► What’s in a balanced improvisation diet?

Eat your vegetables ... watch your carbs ... you know the routine when it comes to diet. But what are the essential musical ingredients of a balanced improvisation diet?

Here are a few ideas on a healthy improvisation diet, with a few thoughts attached for good measure ...

1. See what you listen to. When you listen to good jazz improvisers, don't just listen for licks to steal (although that can still be useful at times). Instead, try to see things like texture and density, development, rhythmic interest, harmonic creativity, and melodic color. Try to understand *why* it sounds good.
2. Use flexible scales to generate melodic ideas. Flexible scales are powerful ways to generate musical ideas and even patterns, right on the spot, while stimulating and increasing your vision as you go. For more about flexible scales (and virtual practice), see *The Art of Improvisation*.
3. Remember, to develop. There's a reason for the comma in that phrase – you need to capture and remember the shapes of what you've been playing in your solo, so you can use those shapes in your developments. Then your solos will take on an added sense of coherence and meaning.
4. Interact! This implies conversation, communication, and capturing and supporting ideas. If you're stuck with fast-food jazz, interactive “cooking” is nearly an impossible task.

And remember to include – and balance – the seven basic elements of improvisation in your playing:

- Melody
- Rhythm
- Expression
- Development
- Chord Progressions
- Performance
- Analysis

Making the Transition

► Why do we get stuck in rote playing?

I'm always intrigued by how easy it is for some players to make the transition from rote playing to visual/development playing, yet how difficult the transition is for other musicians. I taught an improvisation student recently – an extremely bright and talented musician – who had a hard time “letting go” of the need to be driven by pre-determined patterns. He felt somewhat lost in trying to come up with ideas on his own, so he reverted to learning by rote.

To be sure, the patterns and ideas he learned were very impressive, and his great sound and technique carried him well. But the connective threads among his ideas were not strong – it was more like “each idea for itself.”

And here we come to the fork in the road ...

The truth is that many players will remain content to traverse the highways of licks and patterns in improvisation. (I've certainly met a lot of these players, and I've heard many more of them in recordings.) And that's fine. There are some tremendously talented players in that group.

But ...

If you're intrigued by the art of linking ideas together, the goal of building musical shapes as you go, and seeing the end from the beginning – that's the path to try. It's a path less traveled, perhaps because of misconceptions that it's too mystical, reserved for a few geniuses among us. Not so – any of us can open the visual doors to improvisation, and in doing so we come in contact with the story behind the music, not just the words; the dialogue, not just the monologue. I made the transition from rote to pathways for myself, years ago, and I'll always be glad I did.

So, one question remains ...

In the grand buffet of improvisation – what's on your plate?