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**Article 18:  
The Fast Lane**

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## The Fast Lane

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“Racers, start your engines ...”

There’s something about the thrill of going fast, whether it’s driving, riding horses, or – especially – improvising jazz.

Too often, however, the jazz “racetrack” is littered with skid marks and remnants of crashes. Tone, accuracy, rhythms, even chord progressions are routinely sacrificed by players because of the need for speed.

So how do we play jazz in the fast lane, without getting run over? Let’s take a look at the challenge in three phases: *why* to play fast, *where* to play fast, and *how* to play fast.

### Why?

OK, this one’s easy – we play fast because it’s fun, challenging, and exciting. But let’s think of our audience (and our fellow musicians) for a moment – is it as fun for them as it is for us? Not always – and, unfortunately, it may be challenging for them as well. Why? The answers are fairly simple ...

- Fast playing involves a lot of notes, and high density is more demanding on the listener.
- The faster we go, the less creative we tend to be in our playing.
- “Fast” can take over our solos, like weeds in a garden if we’re not careful.

► Why play fast?

With these cautions in mind, we can take a more holistic approach to fast playing. Once in a while, we just flat-out play fast – lots of notes over a long stretch (the Indy 500 approach). But most of the time we really need to *balance* fast, medium and slow playing (or note values) in a tune. Getting a balance, even in a fast tune, helps the really fast passages stand out. It also helps you keep grounded in tempo and technique, and it’s usually more engaging for the listener. (Listeners love the adrenaline rush of fast playing at first, but they tend to burn out when it goes on too long.)

Here are three keys to fast playing:

- 1) Make it *interesting*. Have something to say when you play fast, not just tired repetitions. Your audience will thank you.
- 2) Make it *clean*. Don’t get ahead of yourself or your technique; it’s amazing how much more energy is created with a cleanly executed fast passage than with a ragged one.
- 3) *Mix* it up. Play fast in different spots in the tune, to add variety and to keep your own ideas fresh. For example, don’t always play fast on the easy chords and slow on the harder chords.

### Where?

► What are my opportunities for playing fast?

It’s important to know where the improvisation “fast lanes” are and how to merge into them. Here are some basic opportunities for playing fast ...

#### Fast Tunes

Obviously, you play fast on fast tunes. But there’s more to the picture there. The eighth-note is the basic currency for fast tempos; but you can also play a wide variety of other rhythms. If the tempo’s uncomfortably fast, intersperse some quarters and dotted quarters in the eighth-note stream. If the tempo’s easy enough to handle, try some eighth-note triplets to add extra energy and speed. And avoid the temptation to play *continually* fast – use a variety of rhythms and textures to add interest.

#### Double-Time

You can kick into double-time feel in many different places in a tune, to create faster passages. With double-time, the transitions are important to take care of. Many players simply launch into the new 16ths (double-time 8ths) right away, without setting the stage by using different rhythms in the new feel. Also, the shape and development of your ideas can lead you into and out of double-time, instead of just “flipping a switch” to do that.

See also Chapter 4B: Double Time, in *The Art of Improvisation*.

## Riffs

Riffs are short, fast, repeated figures designed to generate intensity. Mixed in with eighth-note passages, they can be quite effective. Here are a few of the many riff examples in *The Art of Improvisation* – each one is repeated quickly, at least several times. The pitches can also be varied as needed.



Other factors in using riffs include starting and ending transitions, and linking riffs together in longer chains.

See also Chapter 4D: More Development, in *The Art of Improvisation*.

## Burning

“Burning” is basically just playing a passage as fast as possible, regardless of the current tempo. Make sure the idea you burn with is a strong one, and that the notes are well-executed so the passage comes off cleanly. Remember – “fast as possible” still means clean. Burning passages can add an extra level of excitement to an already hot solo.

See also Chapter 5B: Rhythmic Variety, Part 1, in *The Art of Improvisation*.

## **How?**

► How do I build speed skills for improvisation?

The basic goal: Build your speed abilities in improvisation, while playing in control.

A wonderful tool for building speed in your playing is using Flexible Scales. Not only does it build your touch/position dexterity, but it also builds your *visual* dexterity as you quickly see the changes in shapes and contours in your improvisation lines.

Now for a little driving fun ... Using the racing analogy, we want to get some serious speed going in our playing, without crashing too much. But we need to negotiate the hair-pin turns, not just drive fast on the straight-aways. That's where the power of visualizing is crucial – as you see each melodic shape, you can steer it and react to the musical landscape as you go.

### Think Fast!

The faster we go, the slower our creativity. That's only natural – there's less time and energy for creativity as high speeds. Our mental energies are focused more with technique, staying with the tempo, and trying to remember what the chords are. So here's the ongoing challenge to take:

### **\* Gain the skills to build more creative ideas at faster speeds.**

Finally, here's an excerpt from *The Art of Improvisation* with some tips on increasing your speed for fast passages:

#### **Increasing Speed**

As you work on double-time ideas and material, playing fast and clean becomes increasingly important. One effective way to build speed and technique is by honing your skills with flexible scales. These principles can also be used in single-time playing at faster tempos.

#### **D. Building Speed with Flexible Scales**

Here are some ways you can increase your speed with flexible scale ideas:

1. Choose a starting note in a flexible scale; go up and come back down (stepwise) to that same note. Repeat that small piece of the flexible scale over and over, gradually increasing the tempo until you can play it very fast. This is similar to “riffing” (see Chapter 4D: *More Development*).
2. Try idea #1 with different starting points, different scales, and changes in direction.
3. Try idea #1 with a higher difficulty level (see Chapter 1E: *Practice Levels for Flexible Scales*).
4. Identify difficult spots in the flexible scale piece. Work on the awkward intervals or fingerings until they become more comfortable.
5. Gradually expand the piece so you can play longer at a fast tempo.
6. Sharpen your musical vision (SHAPE) by training yourself to change directions or use wider intervals *where they are not comfortable*. Each time you successfully navigate unfamiliar territory, you build your ability to create double-time ideas quickly and accurately.