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**Article 20:
And You Can Quote
Me ...**

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And You Can Quote Me ...

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There are few improvisation techniques that can elicit more of that “aha” moment, than a well-placed quote in a solo. But quoting can also sound trite, predictable, overdone, or out of place. What makes the difference?

First of all, let’s take a closer look at quotes and how they might be used. Here are some guidelines and tips on using musical quotes in your solos, taken from *The Art of Improvisation*:

Using Quotes

A quote happens when you play all or part of the melody of a well-known song in your solo. The quote can be as silly as “Three Blind Mice” or as hip as a quotation from a great artist’s solo, or anything in between. It can also be transposed to fit any key.

Quotes can be fresh, entertaining material if you handle them well; otherwise, they sound predictable or forced. The idea is to pleasantly surprise the listener. The quote should spring naturally out of an idea in your solo (see *Quoting Naturally* below).

The following guidelines can help you with quotes:

- 1) Keep the quote short. The listener should say, “Hey, wasn’t that ...?” not “OK, that’s enough!”
- 2) Know the quote well (intervals, pitches, rhythms).
- 3) Don’t repeat the same quote in the same tune (but you can vary the quote).
- 4) Draw from many types of music (folk, pop, rock, children’s, classical, etc.).
- 5) Generally, you should play quotes sparingly.
- 6) The easiest tunes for using quotes are ones with simple progressions, such as blues, modal tunes, and tunes that don’t modulate. On simple tunes you can sometimes play some rather long quotes.

Quoting Naturally

Probably the worst quoting mistake is having a favorite quote you *must* play in a tune. When you do play it, chances are it will sound stiff or predictable because it doesn't relate well to what you played just before. Instead, use quotes that grow out of your own melodic ideas. That way, you play the quote because it *fits*, not because you're forcing it to belong.

To prepare for using quotes in your solos, you should:

- Memorize the melodies to many different tunes, from many different styles.
- Practice the tunes with slightly different rhythms.
- Be able to play the tunes in just about any key.

If you pay close attention to the intervals and rhythms you play (or someone else plays) during your solo, something may remind you of a well-known song you can quote. Then when you play the quote, it sounds like it fits with what you're playing.

A. Varied or Partial Quotes

Some of the best quotes are varied (altered rhythm or pitches), or partial (notes left out of the original). With imagination, you can come up with many variations of an original quote. Varied quotes leave the audience in more suspense, letting you use quotes more frequently. A varied quote of "Three Blind Mice" is shown below. It slightly varies the rhythm and pitches of the original.



Example A - Varied quote of "Three Blind Mice"

For some humor in your solo, you can change some notes in the quote to non-harmonic ("wrong") pitches. Another useful technique is to blur the rhythm of the quote, playing it in a rubato (free) style.

Remember the importance of *partial quotes* and *varied quotes*. Even a quote you've heard a hundred times before can take on new meaning when you "mess up" the rhythms or intervals just enough to make it interesting.

Building a Quote Vocabulary

Some players have a very limited range of quotes, and they use the same ones repeatedly. It's almost as though you can count on hearing that player's favorite quotes at least once a night – and sometimes once per tune. So how do you broaden your quote vocabulary to get the variety you need?

- Memorize the melodies to many tunes, and be able to play them in any key. Use a wide variety of sources for melodies.
- Keep listening to jazz! When you're on the gig, a tune you heard that same day will likely come back to "haunt" you, making it a likely candidate for a quote.
- Study the opening intervals to tunes and their characteristic rhythms. These two elements are the essence of what prompts a good quote. The more of these reminders you can store away, the better choices you'll have for quotes.

Setting Up Quotes

How can I introduce a quote before I actually play it?

If you have a quote you'd like to play, briefly setting the stage for it can be very helpful. You can do this by focusing on an interval or rhythm from the quote. Play that segment once or twice, by itself, in your solo – then launch into the quote. That way it sounds like the quote is built into the solo, instead of arbitrarily dropped into it somewhere.

Here's an example of setting up a quote, using the opening motif of "Maria" from West Side Story in a standard blues progressions. The first interval, an augmented fourth, makes a good setup for the quote. Here's one approach:

setup ----- quote -----

Notice the varied placement (displacement) of the opening interval, to keep things interesting before the quote.

Other Tips

Here are some additional tips to help make your quotes more interesting:

- 1) Look for interesting rhythms in quotable tunes. For example, Miles Davis' "Four" begins with a 3-note motif that's played 3 times in a row. In your solo you can set up the quote by hinting around at that 3-note motif.

2) Explore the “interior territory” of quotable tunes, instead of only the beginning, if the interior is interesting and recognizable. For example, in bars 9 and 10 of “Four” there’s an interesting bit that makes for good quote material. Interior quotes are often even hipper than main quotes.

3) Come back to the quote and push it a little further. You can build surprise and interest by returning and varying the quote a few bars later, or exploring the “interior” side of a quoted tune.

4) At first, practice quotes in tunes with more static progressions, such as blues or modal tunes. Then move on to tunes with moving chord progressions, which may require you to adapt your quote to fit the changes.

An Interesting Case Study

One of my favorite quote examples is on the “Friday Night in San Francisco” live CD featuring John McLaughlin, Al DiMeola, and Paco de Lucia. The tune is “Short Tales from the Black Forest” – a vehicle for a lengthy 3-way free improvisation. (If you haven’t heard this track, track it down; it’s a great example of group improvisation and interaction).

At about 4:29 in the track, one of the guitarists does a great setup by playing four chromatic notes. These happen to be the first notes of The Pink Panther, but it’s pretty hard to figure that out at this early juncture.

Another guitarist immediately repeats the lick; then the chromatic riff comes back inverted at 4:35, like part 2 of the Panther intro. By that time, you can hear some of the audience members (crazed guitar fans) start to get the picture of what’s coming. Then when the full melody comes in at 4:45, the surprise is complete, and the audience really gets into it.

But there’s more – instead of just leaving the quote at that, the group deftly converts the Panther theme into a Stevie-Ray-Vaughan-ish blues groove (5:01) that launches a whole new direction in the tune. The energy is unmistakable!

The keys here: great setup, partial and varied quotes, and developing the quote into a new style all make for an unforgettable performance.

Conclusion

Explore the world of quotes – it’s richer and deeper than you might imagine. The more you experiment, the closer you’ll get to finding what works for you and how quotes can energize your music.