



**Article 23:  
Seeing Better in  
Combos**

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## Seeing Better in Combos

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Here's a strategic approach to developing your combo. Encourage and use these three "I's" with your musicians –

- Interpret
- Improvise
- Interact

But before we talk about how to develop our "I's", let's talk about a common vision problem in combos – the dreaded "Karaoke disease."

### The Karaoke Disease

Hmm – this sounds like a rare tropical ailment, but your combo may indeed be carrying the bug. Here are the major symptoms for Karaoke Disease:

The rhythm section cranks along, playing all the changes correctly but without much variety. Each horn soloist treats the rhythm section like an automated karaoke machine. Interaction, if it exists at all, is too simple or obvious.

The fascinating (?) thing is that this appears to be a symbiotic problem – during improvisation, the horns start ignoring the rhythm section. That causes the rhythm section to fall asleep (auto-pilot playing), and then the horns ignore them even more, etc. Or, the problem could start with a boring rhythm section that puts the horns to sleep – either way the group suffers. Before long, there's a lobotomy split between horns and RS that lasts until the melody returns, or until some loud event shakes people awake.

The ironic thing is that while everyone is going to sleep creatively, there is plenty of sound going on! The melody for the arrangement may be challenging, the tempo may be brisk, and chances are that soloists (and rhythm section) are filling up the musical canvas with sound. But is it really interesting?

That begs the question: what makes an interesting combo? And so we come back to the three “I’s” ... Interpretation, Improvisation, and Interaction ... with the goal being the fourth and fifth I’s ... “Interesting” and “Inspiring” ...

Let’s take a look at each of these I’s in turn, from the perspectives of the soloist and the rhythm section.

### **Interpretation**

Interpretation is the first key that opens the door to interesting possibilities. The three main elements of interpretation are:

- Melody
- Arrangement (and form)
- Backgrounds

How you **interpret** the melody can set the stage for the rest of tune. I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard horn soloists kill a nice jazz melody – not because they can’t play the notes they see, but because they don’t *see* the notes to play. The melody gets cranked out with little or no expression, and multiple horns may gang up on a melody to squash it. (Note – as the tempo increases, the room for expression decreases, so multiple horns in unison on the melody are not such an issue.)

So what’s to be done?

- First – clear some space! Don’t crowd out the melody with too many musicians and too many notes. You should double (or more) on melody only on faster tunes or with complex melodies.
- Second – use the space! Move your melodies a little to the left and right (rhythmic freedom) and a little up and down (embellish the pitches).
- Third – make the melody your own; bring it to life each time you play it.

The next part of interpretation is the **arrangement** – the combination of melody, rhythmic style, solos, interludes, modulations, and endings. The possibilities here are enormous, but just remember that all it takes is a little spice to make a meal – and a memorable arrangement uses just the right devices, without overloading the tune. Ingredients to consider here are:

- Style shifts – changing between swing, latin, rock, double-time, reggae, etc.
- Simple intros and endings – vamps, cadenzas, pre-written licks, etc.

- Special twists – texture changes (piano & drums only, horn and bass only, etc.);
- multiple soloists, free improvisation

Finally, the **backgrounds** can add a huge lift. Horn players can plan and play short, repeated unison licks behind a soloist to boost the energy level (as long as it doesn't detract from the solo). Rhythm section players can likewise settle into a rhythmic groove at times – there are countless possibilities for variety here.

For more ideas on interpretation, see *The Art of Improvisation*.

### **Improvisation**

Plenty has been said about improvisation (and I've certainly said plenty about it myself in *The Art of Improvisation*), so I'll narrow the problem down a bit here:

“Soloists need to share more compelling ideas, with less wasted effort.”

The flip (and common) side in most solos is *overplaying*. Three reasons for overplaying: 1) players are embarrassed to leave silence in solos; 2) players can't find the “color” (interest) they need, when they need it; and 3) ideas are usually tossed aside before they have a chance to develop (or, they quickly get overdeveloped).

So let's boil it down even further, to these three key elements:

- 1) **SHAPE** – the ability to see, hear and play the ideas you want, in the moment
- 2) **Color** – the ability to grab interesting pitches, rhythms and harmonies to liven the musical landscape
- 3) **Development** – the ability to remember, reuse, and revise musical ideas to provide forward direction in solos

Mastering these concepts, even in small degrees, makes a world of difference in your combo solos. Instead of worrying about who can play highest, fastest, loudest, or trickiest, you'll start pulling together as a team of musicians – and that's when the fun really begins.

## Interaction

There's an important concept we need to understand here: the interaction "I" is a direct result of the other two I's (interpretation and improvisation). The better you interpret and improvise, the better your interaction is likely to be.

Is it time for lunch yet? Let's use a food example here to illustrate: the two things that make you want to interact with food (assuming you're hungry) is 1) if it tastes good, and 2) if it looks good. A side note here – I was flipping through cable channels several months ago and came across a show on the Food Channel, about making and selling custom chocolates. As I looked at the amazing (and delicious) creations these people were making, one comment "stuck" with me – "How they look is even more important to the first-time buyer than how they taste ..."

So, a good interaction with a chocolate treat depends on the look and the taste (which also includes aroma, texture, etc.). Good interaction in a combo depends on the interpretation of the tune, and the improvisation in the tune.

Beyond that, it's really a matter of developing the art of musical conversation:

- Talking (coming up with interesting ideas)
- Listening (absorbing ideas and deciding what to do about them)
- Feedback (copying or altering ideas in different degrees)
- Changing the subject (starting over with new ideas)

## Conclusion

When you feel the dreaded Karaoke Disease creeping in to your combo, do something unexpected –

- Interpret
- Improvise
- Interact

... and you'll see (and feel) a lot better about your music!