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**Article 24:  
Turning the Tide**

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## Turning the Tide

by Bob Taylor – ©2006 Visual Jazz Publications

Where do ideas come from?

Now there's a loaded question for you – so naturally I'll dodge the issue. (I'm not a brain researcher, and this article is only 4 pages long anyway.) But I do have a practical idea on the subject, and I'll share that in just a moment. The goal? You'll create a literal tide of musical ideas – and then learn to turn that tide to your advantage as you improvise.

### Approaches and Challenges

First, let's look at the typical approaches to idea-generation, and their challenges:

- 1) Copy licks – there are a million and one books on the market that instantly feed you “ideas,” or you can grab them from your favorite recordings. The challenge is making them a natural part of your playing, not forced or out of context.
- 2) Immerse yourself in listening – this is easier for those who are skilled at hearing and adapting nuances and connections, but it can take a long, long time to produce results for most of us.
- 3) Learn your scales – millions of hours have been spent in the practice rooms of life mastering jazz scales and arpeggios, but the problem is transferring them into solos so they sound more like music and less like ... scales and arpeggios.

Each of these approaches are good and can be successful to a point (and I've tried them all myself), but my “practical idea” can be even more powerful in terms of generating ideas quickly and effectively. Here it is:

► Where do jazz players typically get their ideas for improvisation?

### \* Flexible scales and SHAPE

Could it be that the answer is really that simple? Yes – and it’s often overlooked, because

- a) Many players and educators get suspicious because the solution sounds so simple;
- b) It threatens the “norm” of learning by rote (and selling/buying a mountain of books on licks and patterns);
- c) Flexible scales and SHAPE (See, Hear And Play Expressively) work well because they tap into the creative process in a visual way.

### Part 1 - Starting the Flow

► What’s a good way to generate musical ideas for improvising?

Using flexible scales is a great way to start generating ideas for your improvisations. At first, we won’t worry about how refined or “finished” the ideas are – remember, we’re starting the flow, so there’s going to be a little spurting along the way.

So where do we begin? Here’s how to get started with flexible scales (the complete explanation is found in *The Art of Improvisation*).

1. Choose a scale in a selected key, such as C Major.
2. Using just half-steps and whole-steps, play the scale accurately up and down at ever increasing speeds.
3. Challenge yourself by moving up or down when you least expect yourself to do so. Watch carefully for mistakes – blind spots in your vision or scale technique.
4. **Raise the bar** by gradually adding wider intervals to the flow. Start with a few thirds, then try 4ths, 5ths, and 6ths. Monitor your accuracy carefully – slow down, isolate tricky intervals, and push your abilities.
5. Master all keys in the basic set of jazz scales: major, Lydian (major w/#4), Mixolydian (b7), Dorian (b3, b7), pentatonic (12356), and blues.

This may seem like a strange exercise – we’re running a bunch of scales in crazy ways, but where are the cool-sounding patterns and licks we’re used to? Answer: Think of this as learning how to cook: at first the ingredients in the bowl look nothing like that fancy omelet you’re imagining. But in time, you’ll have something deliciously interesting – *because you control the ingredients and the combinations.*

► How do you get from scales to improvisation?

## Part 2 – Dividing the Flow

Once you're comfortable with this basic approach of creating a musical flow, the next step is to divide the flow into more manageable pieces. There are two basic ways to do this:

1. Insert more rests into the flow.
2. Vary the rhythms you use.

Method 2 is a gold mine – instead of all eighth-notes, try interesting rhythms like quarter-note triplets, dotted quarters and eighths, consecutive offbeat quarters, eighth-note triplets, etc. Now you're thinking in two dimensions: vertically (for up-and-down scale movement) and horizontally (rhythmic placement of the notes). Your SHAPE ability starts to unfold, as you are now improvising in a single key. And what's more ...

### **You have bridged the gap between traditional scales and improvisation!**

Think about that for a moment. We typically spend hours of boring practice learning rote scales up and down, and then we transfer them into our solos just like we practiced them – boring! Or, we leave the scales and arpeggios behind in the practice room in our search for the “golden licks” we need.

But we have discovered a much more creative and satisfying approach in a few easy steps: we play flexible scales (sharpening our musical vision) and then divide them into rhythmically interesting ideas.

This transition from scale to improvisation is extremely valuable. There is one more important aspect to making the transition complete: adding melodic and rhythmic *color*. (Think of it as adding the right spices in your cooking lesson.) For more information on using colors effectively in improvisation, see [Visual Jazz Article 14: Expanding Your Color Palette](#).

## Part 3 – Controlling the Flow

So far we have discovered a powerful way to generate and shape our musical ideas. Remember that there is a lifetime of creative work to spend here, and it pays off in creative improvisation.

Now – what do we do with these ideas once we've generated them? The answer is at once simple and deep ...

**We develop them!**

The creative circle is now complete – we originate ideas, shape them, and develop them into a musical framework, much like telling a story or having a great conversation.

The cool thing is that there are many development tools you can use to transform your ideas. Most of these tools have been around a long time – they are actually borrowed (ripped off?) from classical composition. You can learn about them in detail in *The Art of Improvisation* – and it sounds like a future article topic as well ... stay tuned!

### Starting at the End vs. Riding the Wave

► Why not skip flexible scales and go right to the ideas?

Before we finish, let's take one more look at the whole idea process. Most players want to start at the end – they want to take finished meals (licks and patterns) out of the microwave and serve them up ready to go. I've been that route, and that's why I decided I need to learn how to cook for myself.

But what about skipping the whole flexible scale thing and just creating interesting ideas – melodies and rhythms – from scratch? I've also been that route, and while I've enjoyed a certain degree of success with it, I've always run into this basic problem:

Trying to create “the cool idea” from scratch is tough to do – it often leads to hesitation or perfectionism, both of which stifle the creative process. While cool-creation may work for more gifted players, most of us will struggle with this as we try to figure out *where* to pull ideas from. So, the outcome is usually returning to the “safe” ideas – our licks and patterns from the musical microwave.

On the other hand, having a flow of ideas and shapes behind us is a powerful idea-generator. Flexible scales not only increase our musical vision, but they also help us interact with ideas played by other musicians.

Start the flow – turn the tide – and ride the wave!