



**Article 27:  
Time Travel**

**Jazz Articles** by Bob Taylor  
from The Art of Improvisation, Sightreading Jazz, and More!  
Visual Jazz Web site: <http://www.visual-jazz.com>  
E-mail: [info@visual-jazz.com](mailto:info@visual-jazz.com)

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## **Time Travel**

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One of my favorite books (and movies) is “The Time Machine” by H.G. Wells. The concept of traveling through time is fascinating to me, and there are plenty of dilemmas to ponder. For example, there’s the riddle of going back in time and accidentally killing your grandfather, so you would have never been born to be able to go back in time to kill your grandfather – you get the idea. (Not that you’d actually want to harm Grandpa, of course ...)

Another strange one from The Time Machine (book version) is this – a toy version of the machine is sitting on a table, then it’s sent off through time and disappears into thin air. Which way did it go? Into the future, of course, because if it had gone into the past, we would have seen it every day sitting there on the table. (Whoa, as if the machine couldn’t do a U-turn in time and smash that theory to bits?)

But what if I told you that time travel in jazz improvisation is real ... and it’s even practical?

What? You’d probably think that I’ve been staying up too late and watching sci-fi movies. But even though you can’t book a time travel tour with your agent (at least that I know of), you can still go mental – umm – I mean, you can time-travel in your imagination.

This article will show you how, and how to enjoy the process as you see your solos taking shape more clearly. So let’s begin ...

► What's the role of 3-way vision in improvisation?

### 3-Way Vision

So how could imaginary time travel possibly be of any practical use in improvisation? The answer lies in the concept of 3-way vision, which means you're able to see the past, present, and future of your solo, in small pieces.

Let me emphasize here that we are talking about *small* pieces of memory and *small* journeys in time – nothing huge at all.

3-way vision is actually quite common in the human experience – we remember the past, see how it affects our choices today, and then try to map out a strategy for tomorrow. For example, if you've ever played a video game (yes, it's OK to admit it ...), you've experienced a type of 3-way vision. In the game, your mind quickly alternates between where you've been, what's happening now, and where you're trying to go next.

In improvisation, we do something very similar to this – we “travel” back a few measures to see what was interesting, we integrate it (or not) into our current idea, and we begin to see the future of our solo taking shape.

But trying to see in three directions is just too overwhelming, right? Well, remember that you only see in *one direction at a time* – the trick is switching directions quickly and effectively. And if you're thinking even that may be too difficult, just remember how good you used to be at Pac-Man ... your mind is capable of some very quick decision making, if you can keep the focus small and purposeful enough.

### Step by Step

Here's the process I recommend for using 3-way vision in your improvisation:

1. Look ahead to start.
2. Play in the present, and leave the “record” button on.
3. Look behind for ideas to develop.
4. Combine the best of the present and the past (summing up).
5. Use your idea sum to help guide you into the future.

Then repeat this process throughout the solo.

Here's a diagram of what this "3-Way Vision Model™" might look like:

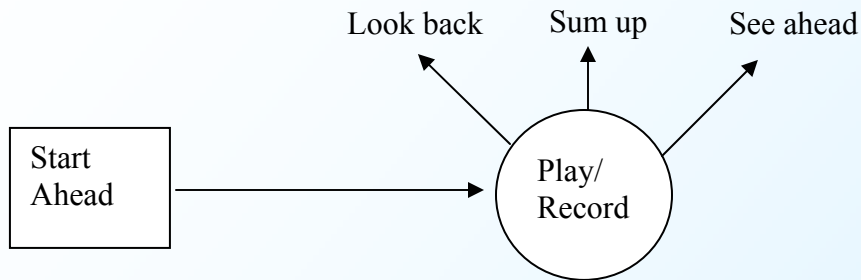


Figure: *3-Way Vision Model™ for improvisation*

Now I'll explain each of these steps in the cycle in a bit more detail ...

### Step 1: Starting Ahead

The goal of this step is to get the solo jump-started in a confident and secure way. The problem is that many improvisers tend to take one of these extreme positions:

- a) Don't think ahead to start the solo – that's cheating.
- b) Work out at least several bars, or start with your favorite lick or pattern.

The best solution, in my opinion, lies in the middle – pre-plan just enough to “get the motor started,” then kick into the cycle. And the “just enough” part involves finding the colors (melodic and rhythmic) that you want, along with perhaps a small shape to work with (although that may come easily, after you've established your foothold).

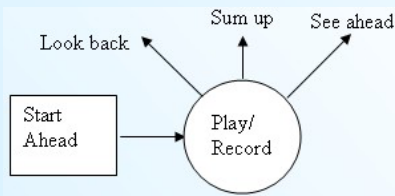
Remember that this pre-plan step happens once, before the cycle begins, and it's probably just a few notes long. A confident – and interesting – beginning to your solo makes all the difference!

### Step 2: Recording the Present

Most players are fairly oblivious to the cool possibilities that may abound in the moment of jazz. That's why it's so important to visually “record” what's going on in your solo, a bit at a time. As you learn and practice the SHAPE technique, you see your solo line unfolding in a way that you can remember and reuse it as needed.

This recording process also helps you become more *involved* in the present – instead of throwing out ideas until “something good comes along,” you’re busy crafting and shaping the current idea. That attention to detail, in real time, can boost your concentration and unlock your creativity.

Remember that you’re also recording ideas from the other musicians (rhythm section) as you play!



### Step 3: Looking Back

Once you have set the “record button” in your mind, your ideas (and your group’s ideas) are basically available to you for replay, development, or discard. You may want to start looking backwards fairly soon into the solo.

Again, this process happens *very quickly*. A visual trip into the past usually takes a few tenths of a second or so – just enough to help you recapture a small idea or rhythm, while you’re secure with the idea you’re currently playing.

Also note that you can bounce between step 2 and 3 several times before you go on to step 4. The important point is that you can quickly switch between steps in the cycle; don’t just follow a mechanical, arbitrary course around it. The *music* and your vision will dictate when to look here, behind, or ahead.

The biggest goal of traveling into the past is finding the “gems” that you want to develop for the future.

### Step 4: Summing It Up

Once you’ve recorded the present and traveled to the past a time or two, you begin to get a fairly good picture of the direction your solo is taking. One way to look at it is like this: Present + Past = Future!

Seeing a bit of the future may include what shapes or rhythms you want to use next, whether to build intensity, go outside the key, copy ideas from the rhythm section, go to a higher or lower range, use special effects, etc.

### **Conclusion**

Repeat and enjoy! The 3-Way Vision Model™ is a powerful resource for helping you find, control, and manage ideas visually in your improvisation. And ...

Enjoy your brief and profitable trips through time!