



**Jazz Articles** by Bob Taylor  
from *The Art of Improvisation, Sightreading Jazz, and More!*  
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**Article 30:  
Precisely!**

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## Precisely!

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Believe it or not, sometimes you can learn a lot from a parking garage structure ...

The photo at the left is of a parking garage in the Miami, Florida area. What strikes me about the structure is what I call “funky precision” – it’s offbeat and intriguing, especially for a parking structure, but it’s also precise and thoughtful in its use of shapes and colors.

Hmm, maybe there’s more to that “funky precision” term than meets the eye ...

### Classical is Precise, and Jazz is ... Loose?

Here’s the generalization we often hear as musicians: “Classical music is precise, and jazz is loose.” So is that true or false? I think most of us would agree that classical music is pretty precise. My 16-year-old nephew [John Sargeant](#) recently performed Liszt’s “Fantasia on Hungarian Folk Themes” as a soloist with the Utah Symphony, and seeing what he went through to learn and perform that piece was truly amazing (and so was the performance, by the way).

For another perspective on classical precision, coming from a background in jazz, see the feature article on trumpet soloist Nathan Botts in the November [jazzView Newsletter](#).

Speaking for myself, I’m reasonably proficient in classical music but nowhere near the level of holding down a major symphony chair. I’m just more comfortable performing in a jazz combo than in a chamber orchestra.

So, what about all that “loose jazz” ...?

## The Freedom of Jazz

Here's an area that most of us are familiar with – jazz offers a wide degree of personal expression in improvisation. For example, in an improvised solo you can choose to do the following things that would usually be unacceptable in classical music:

- Play nothing for a while – enter when you feel like it.
- Play a ton of notes per bar.
- Play behind the beat or on the beat.
- Alter or substitute the existing chords of the composition.
- Bend, growl, hammer, or otherwise distort some pitches in the melody.
- Open up a musical conversation with other musicians in real time.

When you think about it, that's a stunning amount of freedom. And although written jazz is not nearly as flexible as improvised jazz, it too offers freedom of interpretation, especially with the swing style.

So here's the dilemma that takes us back to the starting point – with all that freedom, what is the role of precision in jazz improvisation?

## The Precision of Jazz

► What's the role of precision in jazz improvisation?

When you watch or listen to some jazz performers, it's evident they place little value on precision – attacks are frequently missed, pitches are inconsistent, rhythms don't fit the style, and the tempo rushes or drags within a piece. As educators, too often we put up with precision problems like these in a jazz band or combo, where we'd have little patience with them in an orchestra or wind ensemble.

Yes, jazz is “looser” than classical music – in the sense that there are more freedoms of expression. But with those freedoms come *responsibility*. Our challenge is to find that “funky precision” in our solos, where the music feels spontaneous and creative, but where our ideas are executed *precisely where we want them*. This means we need to have control over each element of the music, even though the music itself doesn't sound highly controlled.

We'll discuss the details of that concept in just a minute – first, let's look at a few role models of precision and creativity:

- Chick Corea (piano)
- Wynton Marsalis (trumpet)
- John McLaughlin (guitar)

Each of these players is both highly creative and technically precise in improvisation. For example, you can see the evidence of strong classical technique in the playing of Corea (YouTube videos from jazzView 12/2006) and Marsalis (YouTube videos, jazzView 09/2006), and the Indian music discipline in the styles and rhythms of McLaughlin.

Other examples of players who exemplify precision of thought, although perhaps less emphasis on technique, are Bill Evans (piano), Paul Desmond (alto sax), and J. J. Johnson (trombone).

One artist who we wouldn't think of as a role model of precision is Miles Davis – there are certainly a lot of cracked notes on his recordings, for example. Yet most of his music demonstrated a great clarity and precision of *thought*, if not always execution.

### Guidelines for Creative Precision

Here are some aspects of creative precision to keep in mind as you develop your improvisation skills:

► What are some ways to increase precision in jazz improvisation?

- Keep your musical vision sharp – use SHAPE to guide your ideas and help you see and hear what you want to play.
- Expand your rhythmic vocabulary so you can find and use all the interesting spots in the measure (and there are many of them).
- For wind players, keep relaxed yet focused. Your pitches need to stay on target, and your tone needs to be secure.
- Trim down – don't carry around excess musical notes that get in the way of execution.
- Don't get ahead of yourself. Give your ideas time to breathe; build them steadily. Coach John Wooden's advice to his UCLA basketball teams is good here: "Be quick, but don't hurry."
- Use special effects "precisely." In other words, don't use bends, growls, slides, clusters, etc. as substitutes for ideas – instead, carefully craft them into your ideas.
- Do regular ear training to build your ability to hear intervals and ideas. Flexible scales and patterns can be ideal for this.
- Start and end phrases cleanly. For ideas on ending phrases, see Article #3: The End is in Sight.

### Back to the Garage ...

Remember the parking garage in Miami? It has a quirky personality – it’s blend of multi-colored shapes isn’t what you’d expect of a place where cars sit around. But it also has two things going for it:



1. It fits together nicely.
2. It’s solid.

And those are two good principles, not only for parking garage structures but also for musical improvisation structures. Make your melodies fun, make them quirky, bring them to life – but ...

1. Be sure they fit.
2. Build them solid.

You’ll be glad you did – and that’s “precisely” the point.