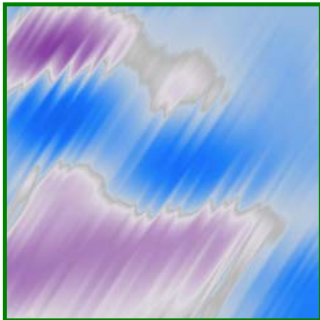




Jazz Articles by Bob Taylor
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**Article 32:
Inside Flexible
Scales**

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Inside Flexible Scales ...

by Bob Taylor – ©2007 Visual Jazz Publications

What are flexible scales, and why are they such a powerful jazz improvisation tool?

I'm glad you asked ... let's find out!

The Background

First, a little history ... I was a late bloomer in jazz, and I realized that I had a lot of scales to catch up on. My college trumpet instructor, Newell Dayley (now Academic VP of Brigham Young University) had a great suggestion – learn the scales on my fingers, away from my horn. So that's what I did – since I was “trapped” on a bus for 6 weeks with a performing group touring the U.S., I used the time to learn a boatload (or busload?) of scales on my fingers, in all keys. That was actually an exercise in virtual practice (more on that later), and I felt proud of what I had accomplished.

► What are the problems with traditional scale learning?

But ... the transition from scales to improvisation was still a tough one. What should I play in a solo – scales up and down? That's boring. How about an arpeggio up and down? That's boring, too. Licks and patterns? They sound better at first, but they can get old over time. For example, in his earlier play-along books, Jamey Aebersold would print out the scales to use over each chord. That's good information to know, but the tendency I saw in many players was to run the scales from bottom to top, exactly one octave, just like they look in the book, and then play them almost that way in solos. The drawbacks: you usually start the scale on the root (most boring tone), you mostly play ascending lines, and you tend to stay within the octave, as printed.

I was stumped.

Now, back to classical trumpet for a moment ... In my trumpet studies, I was working on the Clarke Technical Studies (similar to the Hanon exercises for piano, etc.). Here's an excerpt from one of them that I'm sure most trumpet players would recognize:



These etudes were interesting to a point, and they often covered all 12 keys, which was good. But I often found myself “jazzing them up” and throwing in ad-lib notes here and there, just for fun. And then it hit me – these were like scales that were turning flexible before my eyes. To a degree, I could control how far up to go and when to come down. So then I thought, “Why not apply that to any and all scales – change the contours of a Dorian, a Lydian, a Pentatonic, in the key of Ab, or C#, or E ...?” For example:



E Lydian flexible scale

Getting Started with Flexible Scales

Now I was getting somewhere: scales were becoming more of an *exploration* instead of an exercise. The basic ground rules for flexible scales were:

- Keep the key signature.
- Go up and down as far as you want, changing direction whenever you want.
- Start anywhere in the scale, not just on the root.

It's easiest to start practicing flexible scales against a straight style, such as bossa nova, and then proceed on to the swing style. And remember, you can practice them *with or without* your instrument, any time, anywhere.

► How do I go from flexible scales to improvisation?

Bridging the Gap: Scales to Improvisation

So far so good: flexible scales were more fun to practice, and they fired up the creative juices more than just running the same old rote scales up and down. However, they still didn't really sound like true improvisation yet. So there was more work to do on the model ... and it came in the form of two basic pieces to add:

1. *Skips*
2. *Rhythms*

Adding Skips

Introducing wider skips into a scale at first seemed like cheating, because scales are supposed to be step-wise. But here's where we start to overcome gravity – we mix scale steps, arpeggio skips, and wide interval leaps. First we add a few thirds; then we try 4ths, 5ths, 6ths, etc., and go as wide as we want.



C Major flexible scale with widening skips

Adding Rhythms

After you get fairly proficient at creating a stream of eighth-notes with a variety of intervals, it's time to add the final element – rhythms. Start easy and move to complex; here are some suggestions.

- Add a few quarter-notes and quarter-rests.
- Add dotted quarters and offbeat quarter values.
- Add quarter-note triplets (and rests).
- Add eighth-note triplets (and rests).
- Tie various triplet values together.

When you do this, you end up with a flexible scale that sounds a lot more like improvisation – because it is!



Flexible scale with skips and new rhythms

The Next Steps ...

There are additional concepts that help turn flexible scales into improvisation. Here are some of the most important ones:

- Melodic color – identifying and emphasizing pitches that increase interest
- Rhythmic color – identifying and emphasizing rhythms that increase interest
- Adapting to chord changes – changing and connecting keys, chords, and scales smoothly
- Development – using melodic and rhythmic tools to “tell a story” with your improvisation

These concepts, and many others, are discussed in depth in *The Art of Improvisation* (see www.visual-jazz.com).

Conclusion: The Benefits

Flexible scales have huge benefits for jazz improvisers. Here are the main ones:

- *Creativity*. With flexible scales you have an unending idea source. It’s like having the ore that you can refine into finished music.
- *Practice*. Combining flexible scales with virtual practice gives you a powerful practice method that you can enjoy anywhere, with or without your instrument.
- *Ear training*. As you work with flexible scales, your ability to hear intervals (and rhythms) increases.
- *Visualization*. Flexible scales are also great for *eye training* – the ability to see musical shapes and contours so you can create the sounds you want to.

Discover the world of flexible scales and the difference it can make for you!