June 2006 - #11 BRADLEY LAIRD'S www.mandouniversity.com
MandoUniversity News

Using the Rational Magnifying Glass

It has been said that learning to improvise is like learning to speak another language--the language of music. Memorizing songs, complete solos, or musical phrases is about like being able to recite a poem or a pithy quote which someone else wrote. It is entirely possible for a person to recite a poem in Japanese without even knowing the meaning of a single word if one is a good memorizer and imitator. This is the opposite of what it means to improvise.

Imagine that you are taking a trip to Japan and you buy a "Learn to Speak Japanese in 7 Days" tape. You listen to it in the car for a few days and memorize a dozen or so phrases in Japanese like:

"Good morning."

"Which way is the bathroom?"

and "I'll have beer please."

That sort of memorization of phrases, while barely useful, is not going to give you a very good understanding of the language. If you learn the entire phrases without knowing which sound represents which word or thought how are you going to improvise a sentence like "Which way is the beer?"

You might come out with something like "Good is which please morning!" or worse. One important key to improvising , whether spoken or played musically, is to break the "language" down into smaller units so that the parts can be reassembled to say different things.

Beginning improvisers always seem to be looking for "licks" and patterns that they can string together to create some kind of solo that fits with the chords of whatever they are playing. These patterns and licks can be learned from a variety of sources such as:

a) little snatches or sections of music borrowed from a previously learned complete song.

b) Patterns or licks learned from instruction books.

c) Patterns or licks which you invent, not on the fly, but while doodling around in your practice time until you come up with something that sounds good and you memorize it.

These various licks, musical phrases, and patterns are usually stored away and associated with a chord. You have something you borrowed from a G chord measure of Salt Creek and you realize you can play it whenever a G chord is happening. This is a basic understanding that can send you in the right direction for improvising. At a very basic level you have determined that a set of notes "works" when played over a G chord. That is beginning to speak the language!

Music comes in many sizes. Let's look at a list of examples in decreasing size order:

1. A complete fiddle tune, played 3 times through with variations each time. Completely memorized note for note. This is a lot like a piece from someone's "contest repertoire."

2. One time through a memorized fiddle tune.

3. The "B part" of the tune.

4. The second half of the "B part" of the tune.

5. The final 2 measures of the 2nd half of the "B part" that is played over the chords A E A.

6. 8 individual notes played over the transition from the E to A chord.

7. 4 notes of the A pentatonic scale played over the A chord.

8. An E note which is the next to last note played over the A chord. It is the 5th note of the A scale.

You don't even have to know what I am talking about here as long as you can see that the "size" of the musical idea is getting progressively smaller. I have a theory (which I will not discuss right now) that proposes that when the size of a musical idea approaches "infinitely small" the musician and the music become one and then true "free improvisation" can occur.

Yes, that is pretty deep and weird, but think about this: We struggle to learn all we can about music. We try to understand what notes work over which chords and when to use them. We think, think, think and try to understand. And all of this effort is in an attempt to gain the ability to NOT THINK and just PLAY. My theory implies that as the scale of each musical idea becomes smaller and smaller they become incomprehensible by the conscious mind and can only be felt at that point.

It reminds me of a scientist who begins studying a leaf with his naked eye. He learns something. Then he gets a magnifying glass and learns more. Then he gets a microscope and observes even more complexities. Then an electron microscope. Still he knows there are smaller and smaller structures which he can not see, but can only imagine.

OK, back to the subject we started with. If you think in large blocks (like complete songs) it is hard to make use of the material when trying to improvise. If you learn a break to "Salt Creek" and one day find your self forced to improvise over some other song which mysteriously has the exact same chord progression as "Salt Creek" you could, in fact, play your complete version of "Salt Creek" over that other song! But, it will still sound like "Salt Creek." We need to think in smaller units.

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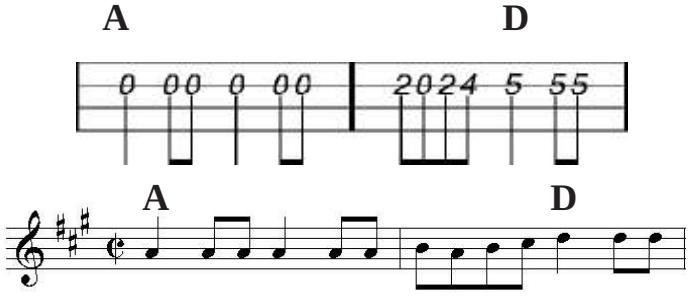
While we may not need to get down to the individual note level of understanding for a while, that is the direction we should be moving towards if we want to improve our improvisation ability.

To go back to the Japanese language analogy, it would help a lot to know the meaning of words instead of complete sentences.

At a very minimum, start by studying the songs you already know and play. Look at each chord in the progression and take some time to try to understand why you are playing the notes you are playing. Let's say you play a version of "Salt Creek" that begins like this:



Take a look at the notes in the first measure. Those notes are on an A chord. You are playing nothing but an A note over an A chord. This, while utterly simplistic, is a very basic rule of improvisation:

The A note can always be played over an A chord.

You could refine that and theorize that, since the A note is the first note of the A major scale, this rule might be true:

The first note of the major scale can always be played over the chord of the same name.

In other words, you can always play a C note during a C chord, a D note during a D chord, etc. This is very rudimentary but this represents the kind of expansion of ideas we seek in moving towards our goal of speaking and understanding the language of music.

Let's look at the notes in the 2nd measure and try to come up with some rational reason for playing these notes. If you know how to form a major scale you might recognize that all of these notes are notes from the A major scale.

The A note (the open 2nd string) is the first note of the A major scale. The B note (the 2nd string, 2nd fret) is the second note of the A major scale. The C# note (the 2nd string, 4th fret) is the third note of the A major scale and the D (2nd string, 5th fret) is the fourth note of the scale.

Notice that the chord changed to a D at the moment we play the D note. We just said the D note is the fourth note of the A major scale. But, since the chord has changed we need to look at the D note in a new context. It is now the FIRST NOTE of the D major scale. Well, how about that?!! We have just found more proof for that very first rule we devised. Here we are playing a D note during a D chord. (By the way, if you are smirking and thinking that is ridiculously simple, just go through some songs you know and see how many times this rule is employed. How often do you play a G note during a G chord. It happens a lot!! So it must be an important concept, eh?)

We can produce another "rule" by looking at the 4 notes before the chord changes to a D. We said they are the first three notes of the A major scale and since they sound good (our cardinal rule for testing the validity of rules for improvising) we could state this:

You can play the first three notes of any major scale over the major chord of the same name.

You might take a leap and propose a new theory such as this one:

If the previous rule is true, you can likely use the ENTIRE major scale over the major chord of the same name.

This, in the course of this discussion, is an unproven theory. How can we prove or disprove its validity. We can use the "does it sound good" test in a couple of ways:

1. Search through songs that "sound good" and see if you can find examples of ALL of the notes of the major scale being played over the major chord. If you can find good sounding examples of all the notes of the scale you have proven the theory.

2. Get some fool to play some chords on a guitar or piano or an autoharp or something while you play test the notes of the major scale, and patterns made from the note, over the chord and decide if it sounds good.

If you prove the theory to your satisfaction then we have a new rule for improvisation:

You can always play major scale notes over the same major chord.

Let's stop and look at the big picture. Knowledge is power. Knowing how to play "Salt Creek" is limited power. Knowing why you play each individual note is even more powerful. Knowing which phrases work over which chords is power. Knowing which notes work is more powerful.

Whether you know one tune or hundreds, you can always improve your ability to speak the language of music by taking the time to analyze and rationalize why you play the notes you play. As Briscoe Darlin says, "More power to ya!"