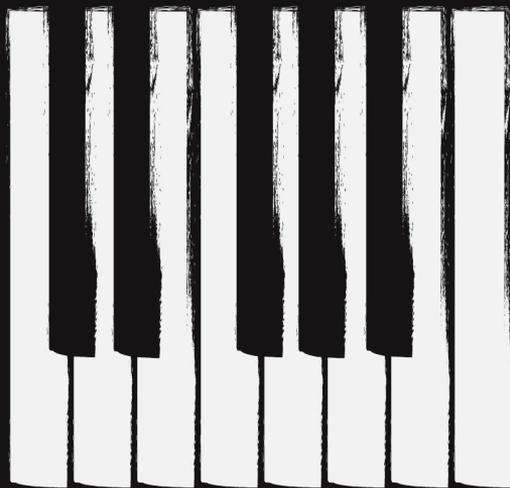


Teaching and Learning Jazz



From tradition to technology:
A frank appraisal of jazz education

by Richie Beirach and Michael Lake

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I dedicate this book to my two great master teachers,
James Palmieri, my piano teacher,
and
Ludmila Ulehla, my composition teacher and mentor at
Manhattan School of Music

This book is dedicated to the memory of
Christian Scheuber
George Mraz

Gone but never forgotten

Special thanks to
LeeAnn Ledgerwood
Dave Liebman
Regina Litvinova

Richie Beirach

Dedicated to Warren “Jeff” Jeffries, my jazz instructor
at Arcadia High School, who went above and beyond
to teach an eager young trombone player about jazz.

Michael Lake

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Richie in his New York Apartment in 1976



Introduction

by Richie Beirach

Mike and I have been working on books now for a couple of years, publishing some great pieces, in my opinion. They have all been a joy to work on, but I think that I am most happy with this one.

My satisfaction comes from the fact that the topic is so near and dear to me. I've been involved in jazz education since the 1970s, teaching privately and at universities, workshops, and master classes all over the world. I love to teach. This book is my way of giving back to jazz masters like Chet Baker and Stan Getz and Jack DeJohnette and Freddie Hubbard, Manfred Eicher and George Coleman—the greats who really helped me. They didn't have to, but they did.

I waited till my later years to begin writing books, starting only three years ago due to the pandemic-mandated lockdown. Gigs and recording dates had all been canceled, and I was going nuts.

Mike rescued me after our first interview for his Jazz Summit, when he asked if I'd like to publish some of my thoughts about music in general and jazz in particular. I agreed, and almost a dozen published pieces later, I'm very happy with our body of work.

This particular book on jazz education has been, in certain ways, the most difficult, and in certain ways, the most gratifying. Mike and I have different beliefs about certain things. We agree on most fundamental aspects of jazz and education, but throughout the writing of this book, we have also butted heads.

I think the friction we occasionally experienced has been very beneficial for us, as we hope it will be for you. Readers will gain more

from hearing both sides of certain topics rather than hearing only a single point of view. In fact, the second-to-the-last chapter is a no-holds-barred, frank conversation that we think you'll find enlightening.

The topics in this book are wide ranging, and they're not laid out as you'll find within the typical academic jazz education book. They reflect my life experiences and strong opinions, and Mike's as well. We've written most of this book together, in a true partnership. Much of the material came from recorded conversations with Mike and produced through a collaborative process that we have perfected over the years. Other parts of the book were written by Mike alone.

Perhaps the greatest cause of friction along the way was Mike's chapter on digital learning. In my opinion, most of the jazz instruction you'll find on the Internet is crap. It is provided largely by incompetent musicians or by people with a self-promotional agenda or a big ego, who think they know more than they actually do. After all, as Mike wrote, anyone with an Internet connection can call themselves a teacher!

To be fair, you can find some good things on the Internet about learning to playing jazz . There are some fantastic interviews with Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, and probably others I'm not even aware of. My complaint is with the remaining 95% of people expressing their opinions on playing jazz. I think the most wonderful thing about the Internet is the availability of links to all the great past and present jazz recordings of the past 100 years or so.

Working on this book has been inspiring because it has forced me to look at my own methods of teaching and at how I was taught. It has also been a means to think really hard about jazz education in new ways.

I hope it will inspire you to think similarly, whether you are a teacher or a student.

Introduction

by Michael Lake

A few years ago, Dave Liebman introduced me to Richie Beirach.

I told Lieb that I wanted to interview Richie for a Jazz Master Summit in which Lieb participated. The very short introductory email from Lieb to Richie about me went straight to the point: “Good cat. Knows some shit. Wants to talk to you.”

That email led to a phone conversation between Richie and me, and since then, over hundreds of conversations, thousands of emails, and tens of thousands of words, we’ve become good friends.

Along the way, Richie has given me greater insight into jazz history, harmony, improvisation, teaching, and the important players and recordings of jazz, especially the intricacies of what made them great.

Timing is everything, in music and in life. Richie and I did our first interview just as the pandemic was on the horizon. In short order, all Richie’s gigs were canceled, and he found himself completely isolated from performing music. He was not happy.

But he now had plenty of time to sit around and talk about jazz. With me. I had someone really smart and over-the-top passionate about music with whom I could argue about jazz. Recording and transcribing these conversations was an obvious next step.

He and I developed a rhythm for how to best get his knowledge and experience into print: We record, transcribe, and edit our

conversations, then read them aloud together, editing and rewriting as we go. It's a truly creative, collaborative process, and this book is our most ambitious result to date.

Richie and I both care deeply about teaching and learning jazz. We have the great fortune of sharing a core belief that jazz is not a recitation of learned phrases. It's not a patchwork of patterns and licks. It's a spontaneous composition—a story inspired by the mood, music, and people around you.

I've learned much from Richie over these few years, and I can see that I've influenced him some as well. He works hard at holding onto his strongly held opinions, but I think I've influenced him through my belief that not every player must want to become an extraordinary jazz musician to the exclusion of everything else. It's okay to play just to have fun and to feel good about playing.

Jazz education should help players at all levels become the best musician they can be, relative to how much time and effort they are willing to put into it. This book lays out the principles of effective teaching and learning, whether you intend on becoming the next jazz innovator or someone who wants only to confidently play over blues changes at a local jam session.

As the title states, this book is not only for students of jazz; it's also for teachers. Teachers will gain from the ideas about what makes someone a good music educator; what we believe can and cannot be taught about music; and Richie's real-world perspective on the old-school master-apprentice process of passing on the jazz tradition.

Students will learn how to choose the right teacher for themselves as well as the right school, and important learning that can be gained apart from school. We hope this inspires young players to contemplate whether higher education in music is for them. To help with that decision, we hope they will think about what they wish to gain from their musical abilities and question how best

that can be learned, if in school or not.

One trait Richie and I share that is clearly on display within these pages is our candor. You may not like or agree with everything we've written, but you are getting the unvarnished truth of our convictions, which shows in our open discussions on a variety of controversial topics. We even dedicate a few pages to Richie's unabashed opinion on the movie *Whiplash*, a film that centers around a cruel and sadistic fictionalized jazz professor at a prestigious music school.

In the end, we hope that this book will provide you with clarity about your jazz journey and get you questioning the things you've been told are truths about learning to master jazz.

How this book is organized

The writing of this book is a collaborative effort between Richie and me. The stories, history, and educational material of the first four chapters are Richie's thoughts edited by both of us, as are the chapters on the movie *Whiplash* and the lesson on jazz interaction.

The chapters on educating oneself beyond school, the digital revolution of jazz, and jazz becoming a caricature blog post were written by me. The conversation about learning jazz is a dialog between the two of us.

We begin the book with six fascinating lifelong lessons Richie learned from those he considered his master teachers. With that background, we will next talk about the master-apprentice method in which the knowledge of jazz was passed down from generation to generation. Richie, Lieb, Randy Brecker, along with their friends and peers were among the last generation to learn primarily by apprenticing with these masters.

We then explore the topic of formal jazz education in universities, which is a relatively recent phenomenon. We'll explore the cost/

benefit of that experience and offer guidance in choosing the best school for yourself.

Following our analysis of formal education is a section on learning the soft and hard skills outside of a formal university curriculum. These important skills enable young musicians to find and develop beneficial relationships, find their ideal musical opportunities, and to best take advantage of all the connectivity and technology available to them.

Continuing the technology theme, we next examine the influence of technology on jazz education and how best to take advantage of it.

This was a contentious topic for Richie and me, since, as you read in Richie's introduction, he believes very little good exists within online jazz education and the technologies that produce jazz rhythm tracks. He sees the value in my books and courses through my blog, MusicSavvy.com, and a small handful of other resources, but it took some conversation for Richie to get comfortable including a chapter that objectively describes online jazz educational resources.

The next section explores a psychological topic known as the four layers of competence and shows how self-knowledge of one's stage of skill development will make learning that skill more effective. From this section, you'll know where you are going as you learn jazz—or any other skill.

As we put this book together, I proposed a section to Richie that would highlight our contrasting opinions on certain important topics. He agreed that there would be value in exposing our different ways of thinking. That section is formatted as our live conversation.

Our similarities and differences are on full display in my blog where which Richie has been a passionate and prolific commenter. In the final section of this book, we include a post entitled "Is Jazz Becoming a Caricature of Itself?" along with selected com-

ments, including one by Richie.

Our hope is that you will find value in hearing from a diverse sampling of subscribers, all of whom had something worthwhile to add to the conversation.

Last, we included as part of the teaching portion of this book, a detailed description of a recording of Nardis by Richie's early 1980's trio from his *Elegy for Bill Evans* album. Richie provides a blow by blow description of exactly how he, George Mraz, and Al Foster crafted the solo sections throughout that recording.

Group interaction is an important aspect of contemporary jazz as Miles and Bill Evans taught the world. We hope that the insight you will gain from this final section will teach you how to best think and react to your fellow players as you exercise the creative freedom jazz provides you throughout your performances and recordings.

Jazz education is an important and complicated subject. Knowing more about it just might change your future. We hope it does exactly that through our writing.

Lessons from the Masters

by Richie Beirach with Michael Lake

Stan Getz on the role of improvisation over complicated tunes

In June of 1972, after graduating from the Manhattan School of Music, I played my first gig with Stan Getz. Jack DeJohnette was on drums and Dave Holland was on bass. Chick Corea had called me to ask if I could take that gig because he was leaving to form his new band, *Return to Forever*.

Our first week was in Toronto, at the Toronto Show Bar. It was a great venue. We played six nights, starting on a Tuesday. I rehearsed with the rhythm section and met Stan, who said he liked my playing. I was young, and this was my first major gig. I had played a lot with my friends Dave Liebman, Randy Brecker, John Abercrombie, and others, but this was my first big-name gig.

I was nervous but excited. I knew I was talented and I could play, but I also knew I was inexperienced. Dave Holland and Jack DeJohnette had just finished playing with Miles Davis and Chick Corea for three years. That was the top of the top for jazz musicians.

I felt like I was walking into history. Stan was an amazing player, and at that time he was one of the most popular jazz musicians in the world due to the astounding success of his recording of the bossa nova hit “The Girl From Ipanema.” Stan basically brought Brazilian bossa nova into jazz and into America.

After our first set, Stan took me aside and said, “Your intros are beautiful. Short and concise. Keep it up.”

That was a good first lesson, because I hadn’t known if they were good or what he wanted. At the time, I had nothing compare it to.

I also learned about programming a jazz set—the type of tunes to play and in what order. This is stuff you only get by observing how the masters do it.

We played the same two sets every night, which I thought was strange. I had expected us to have a much bigger repertoire, but Stan’s idea was to play the same 10 or 12 tunes the whole time you’re on tour. The point is to create something new with those tunes on a night-to-night basis. This is exactly what Miles did with his quintets.

After all, jazz compositions are not the focus; they are the vehicle for improvisation. I first learned and experienced this when I played with Stan. One of the tunes we played each night was “Lush Life” by Billy Strayhorn. “Lush Life” has a beautiful verse that I played rubato with Stan. Then we moved into the tune and played one chorus of the melody. We then played an ending with a cadenza from Stan, and that was the tune. It was short. So I asked him why he didn’t play a solo over the changes.

Stan looked at me, smiled, and said, “Kid, that melody is the best chorus! Why would you want to fuck around trying to improve on Billy Strayhorn’s great melody?” The lightbulb went on in my head.

For a tune whose entire form you want to improvise over, don’t use something like “Lush Life” with its long, involved head. For that type of tune, improvise something short, powerful, and evocative. Play something pregnant with ideas, like the melody of “Lush Life.” This lesson from long ago is a prime example of the master-apprentice process of learning jazz on the bandstand.

Chet Baker on extreme dynamic sensitivity

It was 1976, and I was on the road with Chet Baker. Throughout that time, Chet gave me his heart and his kind support and was very generous with his information about music. He could be pretty hard on his players at times, but remember, this was the old-school jazz master-apprentice method of on-the-job teaching and learning.

We performed one night in June 1978 at the Jazz Gallery in Washington, DC. Chet had just returned to the US, and he had a new contract with Horizon Records. His band consisted of me, Eddie Gomez on bass, and Eliot Zigmund on drums.

This gig was a big deal mainly because it was the return of Chet Baker from his time in Europe. The place was packed, and the front row consisted of the music press, everyone with their notebook and pen eager to review what they were about to hear that night.

We began with a beautiful ballad by Richard Rogers, “My Foolish Heart.” Leave it to Chet to open with a ballad. I played the intro, and Chet came in with the first couple of phrases, but then he suddenly stopped playing, reached for the microphone, and, without hesitation, said, “Richie, you’re playing too fucking loud.”

I was stunned, and the audience was silent. After all, I was not playing loud. I was playing what I thought was soft.

So we continued with the next two phrases while I had my foot pressed on the soft pedal, playing as lightly as I could. Chet grabbed the microphone again and yelled, “Richie, you’re still too fucking loud, kid.”

I was now obviously sweating through the red silk shirt that I had bought specially for this gig. I saw the reporters in the front row writing like mad. I thought to myself, “This is not good. My

career has ended before it even started.”

We finished out the set and all went well. A few minutes later, I went to Chet’s dressing room. I asked him, “Why did you humiliate me like that in front of all those people? Why couldn’t you just wait until after the set to tell me?”

He looked me straight in the eye and smiled and said, “Because now you will never forget it. You will never forget to think about your dynamics when playing a soft ballad with a horn player or a singer.”

He was right! There was something about my touch that he didn’t like, that wasn’t sensitive enough to accompany him on a ballad. He had a different and higher level of sensitivity.

To this day, when I’m playing a ballad with anyone, there’s this little spark of attention that reminds me to check my dynamics, all because of that moment onstage with Chet.

Jack DeJohnette on being free from the restraint of outlining the 8-bar phrase (the “one”)

That same week that I was playing with Stan, Jack, and Dave Holland in the Toronto Show Bar, I learned something else I would remember forever.

They were both more rhythmically advanced and experienced than I was at the time. I was trying to follow Jack. Keep in mind that Jack’s playing could be brilliantly complicated, with an elusive quality. He rarely played the one of the next eight-bar phrase in the traditional place. Sometimes it felt like two different bands, because when Jack was accompanying Stan, Jack played in a more conservative manner. He was still swinging and strong, but cool.

But with my piano solos, because I played in a more modern style, similar to what he was used to with Chick, he would open up and become the full Jack DeJohnette. And in those moments, I had trouble following Jack's phrasing because of his innovative rhythmic playing across the bar.

I was trying to shadow Jack. I was trying to ghost him, aiming to hit beat one along with him. It was the wrong approach, because it made me sound tentative. The rest of the band heard it, but they were really kind to me and didn't admonish me.

But that first night of the gig, Jack and Dave came to my room after the performance. I heard a knock on the door, and when I opened it, there they were asking if they could come in.

So I'm thinking the worst. They got another piano player because I'm not good enough to play with them.

We started talking, and Jack said, "Rich, don't listen to me for the time. Even I can't listen to me! You have good time, so trust yourself."

Now Dave, being British, gave his own translation on what Jack said. He looked at me and said, "What Jack means is that you're trying to follow where Jack puts the one. Don't do it. Let him orchestrate it with his creative phrasing and accents. He's not always going to hit beat one, but it doesn't matter. You have a good sense of time and form. Trust yourself. Don't try to follow his shit. You will never catch him, and it will sound stupid when you try."

Then they both smiled, assuring me that the music had a great vibe. I felt relieved—and lucky to be playing with these two, who felt like my older brothers.

The next night the club was packed. We started with "Invitation," and Stan's solo sounded wonderful. Next was my piano solo, and

I was roaring. I was feeling good; Jack was burning. Then I heard him doing something insane against the beat I was playing. I said to myself, just relax and do what they told me last night. I have a good sense of form. Here's the beat. Just put it where you hear it.

I did exactly that, closed my eyes, and came out right where I should be. Jack and Dave both looked at me, smiling and nodding. That was another important lesson that came from the master-apprentice relationship with two great colleagues.

How I learned to survive hostile sit-ins with the great alto sax master Sonny Stitt

Another lesson I learned from an old-school jazz master saxophonist occurred one night when I was playing again with Stan Getz, Jack DeJohnette, and Dave Holland at a New York jazz club called Fat Tuesdays.

It was a great gig, playing for packed houses each night. Several people showed up to sit in with us that week, including my good friends Dave Liebman and Randy Brecker.

On one of those nights, I saw Sonny Stitt walk into the club with his alto saxophone. Sonny was a mentor to Stan, so obviously he would be welcome to sit in with us.

Sonny was a complicated man who at one moment could be a loving, grandfather type and then the next could be a real nasty MOFO. Stan shared this kind of split personality, which I think he learned from Sonny. Seeing Sonny walk in, I wondered which personality would be joining us onstage that night!

Stan turned to us and said that he was going to ask Sonny to sit in with the band. I said, "Great!" Stan looked at me and said, "No. Stitt sometimes likes to fuck with the piano player. He thinks

he's teaching. He's going to come up here and call a hard tune in a difficult key, and count it off at a fast tempo. Expecting all that to trip you up, he'll then yell at you. He'll be testing you and thinking that he's training you to be a better player."

As Sonny walked up onstage, Stan announced that his great friend and mentor Sonny Stitt would now play a tune with the band. The audience gave him a standing ovation.

Sonny then turned around to Jack, Dave, and me and yelled, " 'All the Things You Are.' Key of F sharp minor. One, two- one, two, three, four..."

What Sonny didn't know was that by then I'd had enough experience playing in New York, where it was expected of you to play any standard in any key at any tempo.

But this wasn't just about music. It was more like the sport of gladiators. Stan was looking at me, smiling, well aware of the game that was being played. Jack and Dave had been through this before and were not fazed in the slightest.

As Sonny played the head, he was staring directly at me. I looked right back at him, keeping up with every beat and chord. Remember, I'm from Brooklyn, where we never back down from a challenge.

At the end of the head, Sonny yelled, "Piano solo!" I started tearing it up. I was burning right from the start. I forgot about any kind of traditional motivic development and the building and development of themes. I was just burning eighth notes throughout the solo.

All the while I was staring right back at Sonny, who, after he realized I was more than up for the challenge, cracked a smile. Everybody took a solo, including Sonny, who sounded great. After we finished the tune, Sonny came over to me, took my hand, and

said, “Nice job, kid.” So at that moment, I was cool in Sonny’s eyes. Stan took me aside afterward and said, “He did the same thing to me a long time ago, but with ‘Cherokee’ in the key of B!”

Sonny was one of those old bebop guys who wanted to pass on the tradition and do it in his own way, out of his love for the music.

Now let me add that I would never do that to anyone. If anyone sits in with a group I’m playing with, I want everyone to feel comfortable and all of us to sound our best. But Sonny was another example of a master who had his own way of passing on his knowledge.

George Coleman’s advice on “wrong” notes

Another amazing lesson for me as an apprentice came from George Coleman. I recorded a duo album with him because I loved his playing. We had known each other around New York City. George was a somewhat conservative saxophone player who played with Miles before Wayne Shorter. George played on a number of Miles’s classic albums. He has a remarkable time feel, with hard, swinging eighth notes and a great lyrical melodic sense.

I wanted to learn something from George, even though I didn’t exactly know what that would be. I didn’t want to take formal lessons with him, so I hired him to do a duo recording with me that we ended up calling *Convergence*.

That experience taught me a lot. We recorded mostly standards, plus a couple of my originals. We did a take of the standard “The Lamp is Low.” I did a reharmonization of it that George loved. He played soprano on it and sounded fantastic.

The first take was good, but it didn’t have enough energy. So we

did a second take, and in that take, I messed up something in my solo. My finger slipped off a key, resulting in an unintended note. It was no big deal, and the rest of the take was excellent and had the fire I wanted, and George sounded great.

After the take, we were sitting in the studio and I said, “I really liked what we played—except I fucked up. That missed note was really a drag.” George looked at me and said, “Really, Rich? That was my favorite note that you played on that solo.” I thought he must be kidding. To me it was an obvious wrong note, but George said, “Stop trying to make that note go with what you think it should be. Instead, let it be what it is.” Another lightbulb turned on for me.

I realized that George was right. I heard that note as a mistake because I intended something else.. My finger slipped into the root of the A minor/major instead of the G sharp that I intended. It turned out to be cool. It wasn't a mistake; it was just a different note, and it was fresh.

George talked to me about so-called mistakes. He said Miles used to play notes on chords that at first sounded wrong. But Miles had the courage of his convictions and let his playing be what it was. There is a big difference between a note outside a chord played by a beginner and that same note played by a master within the full musical context and knowledge.

Listen to Miles's solo on “Blue in Green” on the *Kind of Blue* album. Miles hits a natural nine instead of a flat nine over an A7 flat 9/ sharp 9, and it sounded terrible to me at first. Miles probably didn't intend to play that exact note. But unintended doesn't mean wrong. Unintended can mean surprise. Just because you didn't play exactly what you heard at the time doesn't make it wrong.

Context plays an important role in the playing decision and will affect the outcome. It was Bill Evans who was playing for Miles on that recording. Bill's voicings were so broad that Miles's note

worked at that moment. Another example is McCoy Tyner and John Coltrane. Trane couldn't play a wrong note because McCoy was there to immediately create the chromatic context for Trane's playing. McCoy's voicings were so richly ambivalent that they could absorb any note played by Trane.

I learned something important from George Coleman about the performance of jazz. You must think about the larger context. What you play is determined by everything else going on at that moment. That was very important for me to learn.

Manfred Eicher on playing no more notes than necessary

Another very important mentor in my jazz education was Manfred Eicher, the main producer for all my ECM records. He was not a player, but his sensitivity and skill as a master creative producer gave me an enormous amount of musical knowledge, support, and guidance.

I recorded three albums as a leader and six as a sideman for ECM, but the ECM album that stands out is my solo piano recording *Hubris*.

This was 1977, and I was 30. At that time, ECM had produced some iconic solo piano recordings, including Paul Bley's *Open To Love* Chick Corea's two solo piano improvisation albums, and Keith Jarrett's *Facing You* and *The Köln Concert*.

So I was in serious company. I had talent and I was confident, but I was still relatively inexperienced in terms of recording knowledge, at least compared with the other piano players I just mentioned.

I was practicing and practicing for the upcoming *Hubris* recording. To prepare, I held little concerts in my home, playing for friends, and I felt I was prepared.

The day arrived. At 9 am, I entered the studio in Ludwigsburg, a suburb of Stuttgart, Germany. It was a beautiful studio, with a tremendous piano. Manfred walked in and said, "Let's begin." I started with the title song, "Hubris." It's a beautiful Chopinesque kind of nocturne that I wrote. It was perfect for the recording, given all my classical training.

After playing the theme, I began my solo with a good melodic idea, but as I developed it, I interrupted my own flow by playing a scale and an arpeggio simply because it felt good, especially coming from the sound of that perfectly tuned studio piano and the legendary ECM reverb. But as Manfred was about to teach me, it had nothing to do with any preceding ideas or development of motif.

I finished the first take of "Hubris" and walked into the control room to listen, thinking it was a good take. Manfred looked at me like I'd just insulted his mother. He said, "Richie, what's the matter with you? What were all those arpeggios? What is this decoration? This wallpaper?! Just play the idea and let the piano ring. Don't decorate!"

This is how the master teaches. He didn't say, "You know, in my opinion..." He just said it. Not nasty, just the truth. He even seemed a bit surprised that I was not more aware of how I was overly ornamenting everything.

I started doubting myself, thinking maybe I shouldn't be doing this recording now. Maybe I'm not good enough or mature enough. And then I imagined Keith, Chick, and Bley in that studio.

Then Manfred said in a quiet voice, "Listen, you can do this. I know you're a good piano player. Just play the music. Play a phrase, leave space, repeat the phrase, and develop that phrase. Then go somewhere else. Use the piano to play the music. Don't let the piano play you."

And in a flash, I understood what Manfred was saying. It's like playing Chopin, Mozart, or Bach, who wrote no unnecessary ornamentation for their music.

You play the phrase, you play the motive, you take a breath, you play another phrase, then a development. Of course you have technical passages and runs, but that decoration, as Manfred put it, is not the essence of the music.

That decoration is unnecessary. At times you need technique to execute a complex musical idea, but Manfred was helping me understand the difference between what the music needs and what it doesn't need.

So here I was in the studio, with everything seemingly right on the line—make or break time for me—while Manfred is laying this new and critical information on me.

You cannot really receive information until you are ready, and that day I was ready. I recognized that the first take was terrible, the second take was better, but the third take was really good, which is what you hear on the album.

Manfred was very happy, and so was I. That third take felt like I had given birth. As a result, the music was so much simpler and cleaner than what I usually played, and that was because I was playing the music without unnecessary decoration.

That tune and Manfred's counseling on it was a big wake-up call for me. We ended up talking about those same elements on other tunes from the session. They would start out as a disaster. Then Manfred would talk to me, saying, "You know what to do."

And then we recorded the ballads, and after those, Manfred finally said, "Okay, now do something with much more energy. Let's see what you've got, but not too long."

Manfred's advice was perfect for me at the time, because he knew just the right thing to say and when to shut up. Because of that day, Manfred's lessons shaped my playing for the rest of my musical life.

I was thrilled with the entire two-day's worth of recording. The album came out great, and Manfred loved it.

Now, if you had listened to me playing those same tunes at the concert I recorded on my little cassette machine a week before the "Hubris" session, you'd hear a radically different player from who I was on that ECM session.

And that was the genius of Manfred Eicher. He was able to carve out the great music that was inside me, absent the unnecessary decoration. In fact, that was a defining characteristic of the ECM brand, both in the music itself and in the engineering perfection he applied to every recording.

Manfred was like a sculptor starting with a block of high-quality marble. He cut away all the unnecessary material and left the piece of art he envisioned. Not only did Manfred do that for the recording of "Hubris," but he taught me how to do it for myself.

The Master-Apprentice Method of Learning

by Richie Beirach with Michael Lake

The education I received from those experiences with Chet, Stan, Jack, Dave Holland, George Coleman, and Manfred Eicher could only come from performance experiences with masters.

The master-apprentice method used to be the only way jazz musicians learned their craft. It was before jazz schools formed and jazz books were written, and before the Internet was created and disseminated information about how to play.

As the great jazz masters leave us, I'm saddened that the experiential master-apprentice way of learning jazz has become rare these days.

Okinawan karate

Learning a craft from a master handing down knowledge dates back thousands of years. One example from the 1600s is the teaching of Okinawan karate, named after the island of Okinawa just off Japan.

At that time, there was no university education. Learning was conducted one to one or one to many, led by a master of Okinawan karate. One master, who was usually between 70 and 75 years old. He would be a real genius, with tremendous experience, who was taught by his master. He had a big house and would invite the ten top 12- to 16 -year-old karate students

from all over the island to live with him.

The master would have chosen the best of the best students, weeding out everyone but those he wished to teach. Those ten students would inhabit the house, each living in his own austere little room. No electricity, no toilets, and no heat.

The boys would wake up before sunrise to get water for washing and for cooking for the master and all the other students.

They would be responsible for chores like cleaning, cooking, and keeping everything in order.

Each student had one or two individual lessons with the master each day, lasting between 10 minutes to an hour, depending on what they needed to study that day. They went to sleep at sunset and started their day before sunrise. This was repeated every day, seven days a week.

And of course, in this unusually well-focused learning environment, these students learned the craft quickly, because they had the benefit of individual attention from the master as well as being in a group and learning from the mistakes and development of the other boys.

This experience produced an amazing line of highly skilled karate masters from Okinawa that continues to this day in many different forms.

Indian classical music

Another example of the master-apprentice method, of tradition passed on from master to apprentice, is Indian classical music. In this approach, the master sitar or tabla player sat on the carpeted floor with his instrument, across from the student with his instrument.

The master played a phrase, and then the student was expected to play the phrase back by ear. No paper. No reading music. There is still no music of this style on paper! It's never been written down.

This is the essence of the master-apprentice approach to learning. The student plays the lesson for the scrutiny of the teacher. They might spend 45 minutes on one phrase, listening for nuances, accents, tone colors, levels of fluency, and rhythmic accuracy. Eventually the phrases get longer and longer, as the student's ear and musical memory improve.

That is how the students learned to develop their ear. This was the way of teaching this 5,000-year-old classical Indian music.

Richie's master

My own master was James Palmieri, from Palermo, Sicily. James was 60 and I was nine in 1956, when I started studying classical piano with him in a Brooklyn private music school. I continued studying with him until I was 18. We had an amazing journey together. He was like my second father.

He taught me so much about the piano. He taught me how to read music, and he taught me phrasing, dynamics, touch, pedaling, and tone.

This was old school in the sense that if I did well, he would give me a hug, and if I screwed up or if I was lazy or didn't do something well enough, he would gently smack me on the back of the head.

James was a great pianist. He had been a concert pianist in Italy. He lost his wife and son in the infamous sinking of the Andrea Doria, after which he moved to New York City and led a very lonely life. He lived on 48th Street in Manhattan, right above an Italian restaurant called Vesuvio's.

At first we would have lessons in his studio in Brooklyn. He had his own small Steinway, surrounded by beautiful books and carpets and paintings. That was my first exposure to real culture in Brooklyn in 1956.

James was kind yet tough. He loved me and he would show it. I was, at times, exasperating to him, because on occasion, I didn't practice enough or I misunderstood the assignment because I was so young.

We would study a piece like the Beethoven "Pathétique Sonata" slow movement. He would play it first for me, and he really performed it. He would play with his eyes closed, as if he were playing in Carnegie Hall.

After James played the piece, my job was to learn the notes during the week so that I could play the phrases musically. I was nine years old, after all, and not a prodigy, so I didn't know much about music in those early years.

Those early lessons were difficult, because I would just play the notes and phrases without any idea of how the lines fit into the overall structure of the piece or what they meant. Pedaling was a challenge because my feet couldn't reach the pedals. I was very small. Throughout it all, however, James stayed with me. And by the time I was 12, I was playing pretty well.

The way he taught me music really touched me and stayed with me. I was so moved by the music and especially his playing of it. He taught me only the great piano masterpieces.

James's teaching style worked for me because it was not just about the content and the music. It was about love. You want to please your master, and that was a big motivation for me. I would run home after the lessons to practice so I could gain his respect, to please him, and because I loved the music.

I loved practicing and never had problems with motivation. I had the opposite problem: getting away from the piano. My father had to literally pick me up by my shirt collar and drag me into the kitchen to eat dinner or to take me upstairs to put me to bed.

James taught me how to memorize music. In a real master-apprentice manner, he would say, “Okay, memorize the first page of the Beethoven’s ‘Pathétique Sonata in C Minor;’ ” Now that’s a tough piece, with all the sixty-fourth notes, especially if you’re only nine years old.

I would go home and work on memorizing it. I only had one week between lessons, so I couldn’t do it. It was beyond my skills at the time.

At the following lesson, James very nicely gave me a lesson on memorization. He said, “You have to learn it three ways. First, with visual memory. You must memorize how it looks on the page, so you can play it back in your mind’s eye during your performance. Use your visual memory for how it looks.

“The second kind of memory is aural. This is where you remember how it sounds. When you know how it sounds, that will help you if you have a memory loss.

“And the third and very important type of memory is tactile. Your fingers learn the music from repetition. It’s similar to how you know how to comb your hair or shave or brush your teeth. This is how you turn a habit into a reflex under pressure.”

James would also challenge me to make a point, which is very characteristic of the master-apprentice dynamic, especially in the jazz world, as I’ve mentioned.

I worked and worked on memorizing the “Pathétique.” My father even helped me. Finally I could play it from memory. I remember coming into my next lesson with a big chip on my shoulder. I was

arrogant and stupid.

James asked, "So, my son. Did you memorize the first page of the Beethoven?" I said, "Yes, master." He said, "Then go over to my desk and write it out."

"Write it out?" I said. He replied, "Yes. You said you know it, so you should be able to do that." I thought to myself, Oh, God, this is torture.

I couldn't write it out even though I could hear it in my mind. So James looked at me, smiled, and said, "So, my son, you really don't yet know it, do you?" I said, "I guess not." That was his way of teaching.

He then showed me how to memorize music by the way it looks on the page. You take a picture of it with your eyes, as if they are a moving lens, so that you can visualize it on the way home, on the bus, while you're eating, and before you sleep.

James told me to work on it throughout the week with that newfound knowledge, and to come back and write it out. So I came to the following lesson smiling, knowing that I could now write it out.

James said, "So, my son. Did you memorize it? Can you write it out?" "Yes," I said. "Okay," he replied, "Go over to the piano and play it." He was really messing with me as he smiled. I said, "Don't you want me to write it out?" He said, "No. If you say you can do it, I don't need you to show me. The most important thing is to play it on the piano."

I played it for him and performed it well, with all the correct notes. He was very happy and gave me a big hug. He said, "Now let's talk about the music, because you won't know what this piece really means for another 10 years."

I said, “What do you mean, ‘what it means’? He laughed and said, “Music has meaning other than the notes. It has an emotional intent and an intellectual structure.” He explained these amazing components of music, things that at ten I had never thought of.

James was teaching me for the future, because a ten-year-old is not going to fully comprehend music this sophisticated. It was beyond my knowledge of the world at that time. But, years later, I understood what he meant. Understanding one’s student this well is the hallmark of a real master.

I’ve always loved classical music, and James’s piano sound is still in my ear. People say that I have a very big, round sound that projects. Yes, it does. But James’s sound was at least five times bigger, rounder, and fuller.

One of the hallmarks of the master teacher is that they somehow know how to etch the lesson into the student’s being in a way that lasts forever. Sometimes, as James did, it’s done in a dramatic, theatrical way in order to make an impression—exactly like Chet Baker did onstage that night at The Jazz Gallery when he thought I was playing too loud.

By the time I was 18, I was playing the great classical music of Debussy, Ravel, Beethoven, Liszt, Chopin, Schumann, and of course, Bach.

Classroom teaching

Can the type of teaching I’m describing be done in a classroom, with a roomful of students? Part of the answer depends on the level of the students. One problem with the university system is that most of the schools admit students at various skill levels.

Most schools cannot take only the very best musicians, because they wouldn’t have enough students to meet their financial goals.

For most schools, business demands that they accept players in the middle. So, university education, even in great schools, tends to be geared toward students at the average skill level.

But what if you could really choose the students, and what if someone was there to screen out all but the best? You would have an entire class of excellence, even if there were only ten students who were all at a similarly high level. Then you could have more of a master-apprentice system that accommodates more than one on one.

That's exactly what I did for the piano department in Leipzig at the Mendelssohn School from 2001 to 2015. I was given the opportunity to completely remake the curriculum and to become the final judge at the piano auditions.

The head of the school at that time was a former student of mine from years before. He told me that he wanted to raise the level of the school. He was tired of hearing people disparage the jazz being taught at Leipzig.

The classical music school in Leipzig is known as the Felix Mendelssohn School. It is 160 years old and is probably one of the greatest classical schools in the world, certainly in Europe. The kids who graduate from the Mendelssohn School go right into the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig and fill the first chairs in orchestras around the world.

But the jazz school is only 45 years old, and Leipzig was originally in Communist East Germany. Their standards were low, and they admitted anyone into the school.

I was ready to raise their standards, and I was well equipped to do so. My success came down to the auditions, where we determined who we accepted into the school.

So I said, "Let me run the auditions, but you've got to back me

up.” The head of the jazz department agreed.

Of the fifty piano players who auditioned, we took at most only ten of them. We only took the best.

I taught ten private students in my home and two ensembles each week at the school. Everyone’s level of competence was similar in skill, attitude, and creativity.

It was very satisfying to have elevated the standing of the school. It demonstrated that the master-apprentice teaching method can work in universities if the focus is on quality versus quantity. My students all had to be at a similar high levels, so they could learn from one another and contribute to the learning environment within the class.

During the private lessons, I would play strongly with the students, as if I were playing at Carnegie Hall, because I respected them. That was something I got from my teacher James Palmieri. In the beginning, I scared the hell out of them. I was a fifty-five-year-old well-known pianist, and they were twenty-year old students.

We had ensemble rehearsals for two hours twice each week. After these rehearsals, I would leave so that they could talk about what we did in the class, and they would play for one another. I saw these kids grow significantly right before my eyes. It confirmed to me that their success--and the success of the school--was due to my upgraded selection process.

Many of my students went on to win prizes and scholarships and to record. And many of them are now actively playing around the world.

I learned a lot of things about teaching through my time in Leipzig.

Now I enjoy teaching privately one on one. I still teach in a group setting, but the skill level of the students must be high.

From what I see today, we have a lower level of student musicianship in our schools. As I mentioned, this is because university education is geared toward the average instead of the top, and that bothers me. That's part of the reason we don't have as many great players today as we did with the giants of the past. I'm sorry; we just don't. We have a lot of excellent players with a lot of technical prowess. They can play fast and in different keys and meters, but often they lack originality and individuality.

So many players today sound similar because they all went through a similar university cookie-cutter training. I don't blame the teachers unless they have a say in who can enter their school. If the incoming students are not at a high-enough level, the teachers are prevented from teaching high-level skills and complex topics.

The master-apprentice relationship in modern education, as I've described it, is very rare today. One exception in classical music was Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli. He was a wealthy and extremely talented classical pianist who lived in Italy and later in Switzerland.

He lived in a giant villa with several nine-foot Steinway pianos. He didn't teach for the money but rather for the love of working one on one with the greatest young piano players of that time, including Martha Argerich, Maurizio Pollini, and Vladimir Ashkenazy.

His handpicked students lived with him for one summer. Each student would have two lessons every day. Two piano tuners were on call at the house, keeping the pianos constantly in tune.

This was very much like the karate master from Okinawa I mentioned earlier. These piano students were super-talented, and

after two months living and studying with Michelangeli, they grew tremendously as artists.

I try to do as much teaching and mentoring as I can, as do Billy Hart and Dave Liebman. We try to find the truly talented students who are motivated to learn and grow.

The master-apprentice system is the ideal way to learn jazz. I experienced the power of that type of learning playing with Stan Getz and Chet Baker, and Dave Liebman experienced it playing with Elvin Jones and Miles Davis, as did all the others who toured and recorded with guys like Freddie Hubbard, Joe Henderson, Art Farmer, Art Blakey, Sonny Rollins, and Wayne Shorter.

All those masters were bandleaders. They all had working bands in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and they all needed sidemen. I was there as one of them in New York City. That gave me an amazing series of learning opportunities.

Some of us went from band to band. You might get a call that Joe Henderson needed a piano player. Or, in my case, Chick called and said, “Listen, Stan needs a piano player. I’m going to do my own stuff. Can you do it?”

The same happened with Liebman, Steve Grossman, and Bob Berg playing with Miles and Elvin and Art Blakey.

We worked at least six months each year, with festivals in the summer and club gigs and concerts the rest of the time. It was one big master-apprentice education on the road, in the bus, on the train, in the plane, in the restaurant, in the room, and after the gig at the bar. That’s how we all learned.

Things have changed. One reason is that the level of bandleaders of the caliber of Joe Henderson, Buddy Rich, Ray Charles, Chet Baker, and Stan Getz is much harder to find now.

But the other cause is that the economics of jazz groups playing on the road all year long has fallen apart. It's become too expensive, with airline tickets, hotels, and the clubs and musicians wanting too much money.

Both Dave Liebman and I have started playing with young musicians, but we're not working nearly as much as the bands I've been describing did in the 1970s.

Also, there is not as much demand for jazz today. It seems like a chicken-and-egg scenario. Is there not as much demand because the large number of great players no longer exists? Or do those players not exist because the authentic learning environment of the master-apprentice system no longer exists?

All styles of music ebb and flow. Maybe jazz is in a lull at the moment. In my opinion, over the last twenty years, the interest in and quality of the music have both slowed down.

The Four Levels of Competence

by Richie Beirach with Michael Lake

At first, this topic sounds very intellectual, but it really describes some very basic and fundamental ideas about attaining competence.

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Think of these four levels as steps in your journey to mastering any skill, including jazz. To begin, you'll start at the first level and move up to the top.



The first level of competence is called *Unconscious Incompetence*.

At this level, you don't know how little you know when you're very young and learning to play an instrument.

You think you are cool and skilled because everyone around you, including your family, friends, and teachers, is encouraging you and making you feel good about your skills. You haven't yet met anyone who will tell you that you are not nearly as skilled as you think you are. At this stage, you exist in a false yet comfortable bubble of praise and lack of critical information and feedback.

This occurs most often when you are a child, because nobody wants to say to a child, "You lack technique." It's not necessary; neither is it beneficial to the child at a very early in stage of development.

The second level is called *Conscious Incompetence*.

This is a difficult time in one's development, when you begin to realize how much you don't know. In the case of a jazz musician, you realize you don't play well. You can't swing, and your improvisational lines and voicings are weak. You have bad time, and the sound from your instrument lacks the strength and fullness of other, more accomplished musicians. You hear that you don't have anything meaningful musically to say.

Arriving at this realization is a shock. It's where most people quit. They give up and start doing something else. I got this treatment—kind of like cold water being thrown in my face—in my first lesson with Lennie Tristano, when I was 16.

Lennie was basically the nasty but brilliant Boris Karloff kind of bebop jazz piano teacher. He seemed very bitter, and he didn't come off as wanting to teach. He was crushing, but he did not stop me. Instead, his brutal honesty motivated me. I played some awful things for him, and I remember his annoyance at having to

listen to such mediocrity.

After all, I was a 16-year-old classical pianist trying to play jazz for the first time. And he was right. Even though I had good fundamental classical pianistic skills, I had no feel for jazz, and I was playing root-position triad voicings from the lead sheet.

But Lennie was unnecessarily cruel to me. He said, “You can’t play at all. Here’s a Billie Holiday solo and a Lester Young solo. Transcribe them, sing them, and come back next week. Goodbye. That was that week’s lesson.

This was a shock. I foolishly asked him, “What about Herbie Hancock”? He said, “Don’t talk to me about that shit! Don’t talk to me about Bill Evans either.” He hated them.

So I went home feeling depressed and helpless. Many people at that point give up the idea of a career in music, but somehow it motivated me, although only later did I come to realize that.

So, as difficult as Lennie’s message was to hear, I became conscious of my current lack of skills at jazz.

The third level of competence, which is usually a long way from the second quadrant, is called *Conscious Competence*.

This is a long road away from the horrible realizations of Conscious Incompetence, but when you get there, it’s a great transition. After years and years of work, we finally become competent jazz players.

From the thousands of concentrated hours of transcription, thought, practice, and playing with your friends, you realize—not from your father or your mother or your friends—you realize that you can play. You’re not brilliant or massively creative, but you’re playing the right notes, moving well on your instrument, with a good sound and good intonation, and with some kind of

feel for rhythm. There is now value to your musical statements. At this third stage, you've become a professional, with your own repertoire.

The last level is called *Unconscious Competence*, and this is your ultimate goal. Once you make it to this level, your skills are intuitive and part of yourself; you've become an artist who has command of what you play, at the highest level.

This level is achieved after years and years of practice, study, and performance. The artistic skills have become embedded in your subconscious. Without any conscious thought, you can easily play your instrument without strain. You can improvise with an effortless flow. You're swinging, you have good time, and you are playing from your heart, to your ear, and instantly to your hand. You are beyond confident.

You are able to create great music with others or by yourself as you arrive at this state of grace. Your ability to express what your heart and ear are hearing doesn't require thought; it's just there.

You can communicate your feelings and thoughts effortlessly through your music to friends, fellow players, audiences, and world listeners. You've gone from complete ignorance of your lack of knowledge and skills to being in control of your ability to fully express yourself.

In short, you have become someone who has something valuable to say to the world. You have become an artist.

This is exactly the process my friends and I went through: Dave Liebman, Randy Brecker, Michael Brecker, John Scofield, Ron McClure, John Abercrombie, George Mraz, Eddie Gomez, Billy Hart, Jack DeJohnette, and Adam Nussbaum.

This is not, however, the progression of a genius. A genius goes pretty much directly from the stage of Unconscious

Incompetence, still needing a lot of work, directly to Unconscious Competence. A genius moves through the middle two levels in a fairly short time. Geniuses still must put in the hard work, though. Tony Williams practiced for thousands of hours. It's just that he got much further in a shorter time.

Contrast that with me and the friends I mentioned. We are all hard workers who possess talent and extreme desire. To achieve Unconscious Competence, you must dedicate your life to it.

I have a very strong center: I know I can move people and create an atmosphere of beauty and excitement, and give people something to enjoy that goes beyond good professional playing.

Now, I didn't think about these four levels of competence when I was younger. I felt that being a jazz musician was my role in the world. But after years of teaching and interacting with students, I could see how we all progress through these four levels.

The student will probably enter a school or begin private studies when he or she is at the level of Conscious Incompetence. From there, intensive study can elevate the student to the level of Conscious Competence. This ties into what can and cannot be taught at a university. School can't teach you to achieve Unconscious Competence as an artist. It will come, however, if you dedicate yourself to the years and decades it requires.

Of Teachers and Schools

by Richie Beirach with Michael Lake

There's a Zen saying that the right teacher will appear to you when you are ready. Let's talk about how to find the right teacher or master if that teacher does not appear.

Selecting the right teacher for yourself involves many factors. First, you have to know what musical skill level you have attained at this point, and from that, you will start to determine the type of teacher that is best for you. What do you want and need to learn?

Your choice of teacher is also influenced by where you live. New York, Paris, Boston, Berlin, and Leipzig are all big cities that will give musicians a greater variety of teachers than they could find in a small rural town.

Big cities provide players with the highest concentration of active, professional jazz musicians. They also provide a more diverse culture and, therefore, bigger and more sophisticated audiences, venues, live performances, and, again, more teachers and schools.

Any teacher you consider should be able to play well for you and demonstrate what he or she is teaching. I don't believe in teachers who don't play for their students. I think that occurs more in classical music, at a very high level, where the master no longer plays but just provides astute criticism.

But I'm not talking about old classical masters. For jazz, you need a great teacher/player to cut a path for you and show you how to practice, what to practice, and when to practice. You need

someone who can assess your strengths and weaknesses, to help you create a personal practice schedule that covers the skills on which you specifically need to work.

There are some very good jazz teachers at major universities who are academically trained and can play pretty well but have no real professional experience recording, touring, or performing. They're not likely to inspire you as much as a better known and more experienced player will.

Conversely, if you study with a more experienced jazz player, he or she won't be teaching every day, week in and week out, because they are out in the world performing. They might come in for a workshop or a master class that will inspire you. You might end up gaining more from that irregular appearance than from six months of weekly lessons with a full-time professor.

Find an experienced player who loves to teach. Again, there are guys and gals who can play very well and know the material, but they don't want to teach full-time. You can sense this in the difference between a focus on you and your development and their greater focus on themselves and their own career.

A teacher's love of music is infectious, and a good teacher passes on his or her passion to the student. I always say that you can tell a great teacher if the student runs from the lesson to go practice. I believe teaching is 50 percent inspiration—if not more—and 50 percent information. Find someone with a balance. A teacher who only inspires will not give you enough of the knowledge you need, and a teacher who just provides information won't inspire you enough to do the required work.

Find a teacher who will focus on your personal needs. After all, you are probably paying the teacher or the school to provide instruction. This is one problem with university jazz education: You might be assigned a teacher who has been at the university for ten years or more and is no longer creative or caring enough

about each student's individual needs. He or she uses lesson plans from prior years and goes through the motions, adhering to an ingrained course curriculum that has become all too familiar over with repeated use. A sign of this can be the frequent passing out of old lesson plans instead of considering the individual needs of the student(s).

Jazz is a music of individual expression. It attracts people who want to express their feelings through improvisation. Classical music is different, partly because it is more focused on the composer than on the performer. The classical player expresses herself or himself through the music of the composer, not as a spontaneous personal expression.

So musicians who are serious about jazz must learn from someone who is going to honor their individuality even at the very beginning stages. These musician/teachers will not only honor your current stage of development—they will nurture and guide you through each stage it and on to the next stage and then the next.

After learning the skills to develop a great improvised solo, including technique, knowledge of harmony, and the ability to swing, what is truly most important? The individuality of the particular player. After all, that is the premise of jazz. As great as he was, the world doesn't need another Michael Brecker. The world needs you and what you have to say musically.

The student will eventually reach a point where he or she has learned the repertoire, developed a strong harmonic sense, and started to create a unique approach. Now it's time to go out and perform.

Performing requires musical consistency, business skills, and a heightened knowledge of the world. It's also the test of whether one is skilled enough to make a living playing music.

A great teacher provides a balance between giving the student what the teacher knows he should be studying and the student's desires.

Let's say a student comes to me and says, "I really love these Bill Evans ballads and I want to learn to play them." I hear that his chops are not strong, and his voicings are rudimentary. But he is motivated. I'm going to use his desire to improve his playing. I'm going to give him some of the musical knowledge he wants, but I'm also going to give him what I believe he needs.

You will greatly benefit from the kind of teacher with whom you can feel comfortable asking basic questions, especially if you are playing below the level of other students. You might benefit greatly from a teacher with whom you can have a beer and talk about other, more personal aspects of your life. This type of teaching falls more under the master-apprentice relationship described in the previous chapter.

Regardless, your teacher should be nurturing and kind. This is very important. There's no reason to allow yourself to be bullied, humiliated, made fun of, or scared by a teacher of jazz or anything else. That's not acceptable; it will stifle your learning and motivation. (For more on that, read the chapter on the movie *Whiplash*.)

The sweet spot is to study with someone who is kind, fair, and a little bit tough on you. By "tough" I mean if you come to your first lesson unprepared, the teacher is upset. If you come to your second lesson unprepared, he refuses to continue the lesson until you put in the required time to learn the material. That's very good for you, since you'll experience the consequences of not committing to the necessary work.

A good teacher has boundaries and red lines—and maintains them. Crossing those lines should lead to consequences. This insistence on clearly defined standards will speed up your

learning and build the school's or the private teacher's reputation as a student-friendly and academically excellent learning experience.

Teachers and mentors

You can learn your instrument and how to play jazz from many people. You can learn in a classroom full of other students as well as one on one with a private teacher. You can study with a master professional jazz musician or with a full-time academic instructor.

For purposes of this discussion, a teacher is someone you see on a regular basis—perhaps weekly—who provides you with instruction similar to what they have delivered to other students over the course of their career.

A mentor is a teacher who develops a more personal relationship with the student and considers much more broadly and deeply what the student needs in order to achieve personal musical goals. The guidance the mentor provides to a particular student could vary significantly from that which he or she provides to other students. A mentor-student relationship is close to the master-apprentice relationship we discussed earlier.

A mentor typically has a more personal interest in your life than a teacher will have. You spend time learning more than just music from your mentor. Someone providing this depth of guidance will also offer advice on other aspects of your life, because they often understand the relationship between your musical development and your personal development, and they have probably been in your shoes years before.

A teacher, as we are defining that person, is almost exclusively focused on the mechanics of musical production. Once the hour is up, he wishes you well and says he'll see you the same time next week.

A private teacher will have more of a relationship with you than will a classroom teacher. The classroom teacher gains the efficiency of teaching a group but loses much of the personal connection with each of the students. There are always exceptions, but the sheer number of students in a classroom precludes close relationships with individual students.

Mentors provide the most personal, individual attention to the student, but they may not get together with a student as frequently as a private or classroom teacher. Your mentor might be someone who plays professionally and sees you every few weeks or months when coming off the road. He or she gives you a lesson and hears how you are playing, and has a heart-to-heart conversation with you. The mentor is checking in with you, being interested in how you are doing both musically and personally.

You are obviously friendly with your mentor, but there's still a certain distance. A mentor is not your pal or colleague any more than your teacher is. You will have a more personal relationship with your mentor, but still the mentor will maintain a professional distance. You will probably feel closer to your mentor than he or she will feel to you. That professional distance allows the mentor to call you out on uncomfortable issues or offer you objective guidance on a variety of related topics, some of which may be personal.

You need not choose between having a mentor or a teacher; you can have both. In fact, that's probably the best scenario, since you'll gain specific knowledge from your teachers, and life wisdom and guidance from your mentor.

The most valuable insight someone can gain from this section is that jazz instruction can range from that provided by someone with the strictly academic intent of providing technical knowledge all the way to an older and wise master who takes a personal interest in the student and all the related elements of his or her life that culminate in the student's jazz-playing proficiency.

Knowing this spectrum of instruction will help you determine who and what setting will best fulfill your jazz education needs.

A university jazz education

An important question a younger player might ask is, When is it right and when is it not right for me to study music at a university?

If you're older, let's say you're 25 to 30 years old, and you've already had private lessons with a good teacher. Do you need to attend a university? Is it important to have the degree on your resume, and would you benefit from close interaction with the other students?

A university music education degree can be useful if you're still exploring your career options. If you love playing jazz and are truly skilled, and your goal is to be a professional jazz musician, you might not need a diploma.

A diploma, however, does have value. You may not want to be on the road for the rest of your life. The diploma gives you greater flexibility, because it will allow you to more easily get a teaching job. It will provide more certainty and security. You might want to have a family and, therefore, want a steady, local, dependable income.

Keep in mind that there are other classes in the university that might interest you and that may serve you well later in life. You can learn about Western civilization, poetry, history, and lots of other important subjects.

If you're a beginner or an intermediate player, then you will probably benefit more from a university education than an experienced player would. One reason is that you will be in classes with other people and learning a lot from them. You will

learn from hearing their mistakes and their successes, and from constantly being around groups of people who are in love with a certain subject and with whom you will become friends. That's all very beneficial to your education and growth.

If you are older and play well and have some experience, it might still be a good idea to attend a university in order to surround yourself with other players at and above your own skill level.

If you are a much older professional and in a different place in your life, then attending a university surrounded by students of a younger generation may not benefit you—unless you simply want the diploma.

Truthfully, unless you have had the great fortune to become established while you are in school, you are going to have a hard time making a good full-time living right out of school. That's the tough truth.

Something else for you to consider is that you might be a good player but you might not have the right personality for the life of a full-time, professional, touring jazz player. What's the right personality? First, an extrovert with confidence who loves surprises. To thrive on the road requires you to have the courage to constantly be working in a different environment each day and to enjoy living with uncertainty and unpredictability.

On the other hand, if you are a music teacher at a university, your life is set. It's very comfortable and stable. I know. I lived it and loved it for 15 years in Leipzig.

I also continued to play all over the world while I was teaching in Leipzig, so I didn't become complacent in the teaching job. If you plan your life well and are blessed with a bit of luck, you can have the best of both worlds: performing and teaching.

There are wonderful music schools in almost every country. Great jazz schools at universities will provide you with master's and doctorate degrees and excellent teachers. The Internet, through YouTube, Spotify, iTunes, and thousands of other sources, supplements formal education with a huge diversity of jazz learning resources and access to the vast library of great recorded music from the past 100 years. These universally accessible resources and music have exposed jazz to players all over the world that a generation ago was either too costly to buy or unavailable.

Don't, however, confuse quantity with quality. The truth is that the majority of online jazz resources are of poor quality and can even be destructive to a student's jazz skill development. Any musician striking out on his or her own to learn and be exposed to this music must discern the difference between the good, the bad, and the ugly. This can be another value of a teacher: to guide the student toward recorded music worth listening to and to online educational resources that will enhance the learning process rather than confuse it.

What can be taught

Like all forms of art, jazz requires certain skills that can be taught and others that cannot. A student should be aware of this distinction, as it applies to studying at a university as well as to private lessons.

As an artist, you are expressing your individuality. As your audience, we want to hear your improvised musical story over the changes to "Stella." We want to hear your sonata for piano. We want to hear you express yourself. To me, that's the artist's primary objective.

Now, of course, the way to learn to be yourself is to apprentice through the masters who came before you in this music. That is

a natural learning process in the arts. We study the masterpieces of a particular art form, and we copy them, and then hopefully, along the way, after absorbing their essence, we develop who we are as an artist. Your expression evolves so that it stands out from mere imitation.

All this is true unless you're a genius. If you're a genius like Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams, or Mozart, this does not apply to you, because somehow you know and hear everything from a very young age.

Consider Herbie Hancock, only 23 years old in 1964, on two performances recorded live at Lincoln Center: *Four and More* and *My Funny Valentine*. His solos had depth and maturity way beyond his age.

Herbie had great taste, amazing swing, great chops, and great compositional instincts. As an artist, he was already incredibly mature beyond his years.

Tony Williams was 17 when he revolutionized jazz drumming. He created a whole new way of playing small-group jazz. He was an astounding player.

But obviously non-geniuses can learn to become great players. The question is, what can be taught? I can teach a student jazz theory. I can show him a C minor major seventh chord. I can describe the chord and play it for him on the piano. I can illustrate it on paper. Jazz theory can be taught because it is mathematics. It's tangible.

In the same vein, I can teach a student my theory of reharmonization. I can teach what Bill Evans played and how he played it. I can demonstrate the influence of contemporary music on jazz harmony.

I can teach my reharmonizations for "Round Midnight," "Stella

By Starlight,” and “You Don’t Know What Love Is.” I can put harmonic concepts on paper and play them for the student. We can dissect and discuss all this. The reharmonizations are teachable because they can be objectively defined.

One can be taught to play piano with good technique, which will expand the possibilities for improvisation. I can identify the stress in your wrist or in your arm. I can teach good, relaxed hand positions and how to hold your fingers and your wrist in the proper way.

A musician can be taught the fundamentals of composition. I can teach the essence of jazz composition and can demonstrate using tunes by Billy Strayhorn, Joe Henderson, Wayne Shorter, Duke Ellington, and Bill Evans.

How do you learn composition? You can write a one-page ballad, which I observe and evaluate. We identify why the melody is strong and why the bridge may need work. We identify why the piece is not finished or how it is overwritten.

Sight-reading can be taught. The eyes can be trained to look far enough ahead to prepare the brain and the hands on the instrument. You can learn which notes need not be played when you’re sight-reading.

Good jazz phrasing can also be taught. A student may have some good ideas, and an effective teacher can help improve the flow and consistency of those ideas.

Practical commercial skills can be taught, like how to put together a great set list for a gig or a recording. Choose ten of your original tunes and five standards that you have worked on. You can be shown how to make a great set list of that material to which your audience will respond.

You can also be taught how to deal with stage fright and extreme

nervousness when performing, recording, or auditioning. My own concept about fear is to use it to your advantage by transforming it into energy onstage or in a studio.

What cannot be taught

Now let's talk about the intangible artistic skills that, in my opinion, cannot be taught.

You cannot be taught artistic originality. No one can teach you how to be you or how to develop your own personal sound on your instrument. It's absolutely impossible for me to help a student develop his or her own individual, authentic piano sound.

Your personal sound comes from inside you. It originates from how you hear your instrument. No one can do that for you. You can be introduced to a variety of great players and discuss the unique aspects of their sound, but ultimately, you must originate your own personal sound and approach to your instrument.

You cannot be taught to play with a great swinging feel. I can demonstrate for you what great jazz time sounds like by performing for you and by playing you recordings of various musicians who have great time. But a sense of time is as personal as one's sound or one's approach to phrasing a melody. It is innate. We develop our sense of time by hearing it in others and then developing the ear and skill to articulate that for ourselves. You can be taught to have adequate functional time, but what cannot be taught is that magical musical element called swing. You can develop it—but only with a great deal of listening and hard work.

Swing is such a delicate mystery. It's an enigma. We can't even perfectly define what swing is. We can talk about the components of swing, that it has a triplet feel and an infectious

groove and flow. We can contrast it with classical music time. We can even use words and phrases to describe it, such as syncopation, swallowed notes, accents, and articulation. But how you incorporate those attributes to create a beautiful, swinging groove—that cannot be taught.

You cannot be taught how to be personally expressive on your instrument. Obviously personal expression comes from your own life experiences and view of the world. You can imitate someone else's expression, but that is not your authentic translation into music of the world as you see it.

A musician can be offered ideas to consider while searching for musical identity. How to find yourself and how to find your own expression is a subject for an entire book. In fact, that is the main subject in Dave Liebman and Mike Lake's great book *The Art of Skill*. But no one can teach you how to be musically expressive.

Similarly, you can't be taught how to create your own jazz vocabulary, because if it is your vocabulary, then choosing and developing it will have nothing to do with your teacher or anyone else.

Could Van Gogh help Gauguin find Gauguin? No. These things are done in solitary by artists in every art form. It's a solitary journey.

You also can't be taught how to create your own music—how to compose like yourself. I can show you the mechanics of good composition, but I can't show you how to stamp it with your individuality.

I've never met a good jazz educator who thinks he or she can teach someone how to swing or develop a great time feel or develop a personal sound or vocabulary.

You should know that before choosing a teacher or school. You

must be clear on what another person can teach you and what they cannot. You will have a lot of work to do on your own, so it's important for you to know what you can be taught and what can only come from inside yourself. Otherwise you will waste a lot of time and money.

All this assumes that you want to be an artist, not just someone who simply learns the mechanics of playing an instrument.

An artist is different from a jazz accompanist or a cocktail piano player. To become an artist demands that you listen to the music of jazz masters with the intense focus of hearing the essence of their music and how they are playing it. To study music, you don't play recordings in the background as audio wallpaper.

To study this music in order to become a true artist means to go to a concert and give your undivided attention to the players and the music they are performing. Listen deeply to their personal expression, their melodic phrasing, their unique sound on the instrument, their sense of time, and what they are expressing musically about the world in which they live.

The problem now with education, as Dave Liebman frequently reminds me, is that it teaches uniformity.

Saxophone players everywhere sound pretty much the same. So do piano players and players of every other instrument. This is because music education is focused on the middle instead of accommodating the individual's actual level of talent and customizing the learning to their particular skills.

I think this is a problem, because if the student's current abilities and talent are below that middle, or average, they risk being left behind or not learning what they need. It's even worse if their talent is above that middle, because the student is being held back and not being given the more advanced instruction he needs.

Choosing a school

Let's talk about music schools and their cost. Today, jazz programs at universities are exorbitantly expensive, and I think that is a problem. Who can pay three hundred thousand dollars to go to NYU for four years? That's a terrible position to be in, especially if you borrow that money.

I taught at the New School for ten years, one ensemble each week. I couldn't teach more because I was touring and recording full-time, but I enjoyed the teaching experience.

Like the other teachers, I didn't get rich and couldn't have made a living from that teaching alone. Unfortunately, the students were paying enormous tuitions. I asked myself, Where did all that money go? Certainly not to the teachers.

I later taught at the Mendelssohn School in Leipzig, Germany, and I got paid very well as a professor. Remember, like most universities in Europe, it is state-supported and -funded. We were probably paid twice as much as our American counterparts.

Consider the costs illustrated on the next page of some of the major American universities offering a degree in jazz.

As a high school student wishing to study jazz at a university, how do you choose the right jazz school for yourself?

Fortunately, students these days have many options. There are around ten great schools in New York City alone. Given the cost of an education, you must consider the likelihood of graduating and then becoming a professional, full-time, performing jazz artist. Do you have the talent and ambition to accomplish that?

Be brutally honest in assessing your own talent. Someone has to tell you the objective truth in terms of your talent compared with the rest of the world.

School	Location	Four Year Tuition
Columbia University	New York, NY	\$254,120
University of Southern Cal.	Los Angeles, CA	\$246,012
Northwestern	Evanston, IL	\$243,072
Oberlin	Oberlin, OH	\$240,960
University of Miami	Coral Gables, FL	\$219,040
NE Conservatory	Boston, MA	\$214,920
The New School	New York, NY	\$209,976
The Juilliard School	New York, NY	\$204,920
Manhattan School of Music	New York, NY	\$197,080
Berklee School of Music	Boston, MA	\$178,640

If you choose to move forward with a university education, consider the following criteria for choosing the right school. These considerations are in no particular order. And they are simply a few of the more important ones for you to consider as you search for the right school for yourself. Remember, the perfect match for you may not be at all the right fit for someone else looking to study jazz.

1. Evaluate the teachers. Schools comprise a collection of teachers; therefore, your school choice is largely based on the musicians who teach there. Who are the professors for your particular instrument? Who else teaches there that you admire and can learn from?

Don't assume, however, that every great player is also a great teacher. Look for videos of a particular musician teaching online. Do you get the sense that he or she is a good communicator and possesses a style from which you will learn and benefit?

Do you know anyone attending that school? Ask them about the

instructors with whom you would study. Do your homework, since selecting the school to which you will dedicate the next few years of your life is critical to your future.

Contact current and previous students of teachers and learn from their experiences with a particular teacher. Ask how their experience differed from their initial expectations. Ask what learning they valued most from that teacher. Ask what they would do differently now, if they were to start over with that teacher.

Perhaps see if you can take a private lesson from a particular teacher to see for yourself how they teach and how you relate to their style, abilities, and their personality. Compare how they teach in a classroom with how they teach one on one, if you have the opportunity to do this.

2. Consider the city in which the school is located. Your university education extends beyond what happens in the classrooms. Your learning also takes place within the community of students and professional musicians outside the school.

Unlike studying medicine or law, music is a social activity. By studying in a big city like New York, Chicago, or Boston, you will have regular access to many clubs and great musicians with whom you can play and learn.

Consider this: There may be very good teachers on your instrument in small college towns, but will you have the cultural exposure there, being within that community, that's necessary for your growth both as an artist and a human being?

3. Know the school's specialty and the programs they offer.

Each school has a certain emphasis and specialty. Some schools are more focused on performance, and others spend more time and effort on the technical side of music. Some stress the business of music, and others stress music education. Make sure the school you choose provides an emphasis on the specific area you wish to

learn and specialize in.

Many top tier schools offer a variety of specializations, so you'll have to go back and research the faculty and alumni to see just how much emphasis they place on and how much expertise they bring to your desired area of specialization.

4. Cost. The cost of education keeps rising, and for many, the “perfect” school is financially out of reach. Investigate the scholarship opportunities. Can you earn a part-time living in ways that are sponsored by that school and within that community?

While student loans can ease the burden of having to earn your way through school, be aware of their long-term claim on you. As a musician, do you really want decades of repaying \$100,000 or more for those four years of prestigious schooling?

You may be good enough to earn a merit-based scholarship at one school but not at another. Scholarship access can be an important part of your selection process, enabling you to spend more time developing as a musician and less time struggling to support yourself.

As with all these criteria, you must find the balance. You might earn a full scholarship at one school. and as such, you'll be among the best on your instrument. But being at the top is sometimes not as good as being in the middle, learning from those around you, who will be pulling you up to their more advanced level.

5. Do the school and community feel right for you? You will be living within the confines of the school and the surrounding community, so it is important that the chemistry feels right to you.

You might find an opportunity in another country. Will that culture be too different for you? Will language be a barrier? If this is your first time far from the place you've spent your entire life, do you think you can make the adjustment?

Consider the culture at the school and surrounding community.

Talk to other students and ask them about that and about the politics of the area. Those things can creep into your life in unexpected ways.

Be open to how the school, students, and community feel to you. The best school in the world will not provide you with a good education if you are unhappy with your surroundings throughout your school years.

6. Is school even your best option? As a high school senior, the question you are most often asked isn't, "Are you going to college?" but "What college are you going to?"

These days it is assumed that everyone should attend college right after high school. Throughout these past few pages, we've given you plenty of reasons to attend a university, but please remember that for a musician, university education isn't the requirement that it is for medicine, law, or science.

Know why studying music at a university is the right choice for you, rather than going along with what may be an assumed next step. Ask yourself these (and other) questions:

- How sure am I that I want to become a professional musician?
- What necessary skills can I learn at school?
- What school and teachers will best teach me those skills?
- What location makes the most sense for me?
- Will school give me opportunities that are important for learning other life skills?
- Can I afford the school I want?
- How else can I get the money for school?
- What do I want to do with my life?

Educating Yourself Beyond Music

by Michael Lake

Attending a university is an immersive experience in which you can build a variety of life skills that go beyond playing your instrument or learning music theory.

To be a successful musician today requires a number of soft and hard skills that allow you to build and capitalize on your community of musical and business contacts as well as taking advantage of the wealth of tools and information available to you. You can connect to people anywhere in the world, but creating and maintaining relationships with other musicians, business contacts, and your audience demands a certain set of interpersonal skills, such as:

- Empathy
- Problem solving
- Teamwork
- Adaptability
- Open mindedness
- Integrity

Take note of a successful person in any field. You'll see someone who possesses a high emotional IQ, which is a person who is skilled at perceiving, using, understanding, and managing their emotions. They are a person with whom others can more easily connect. You'll also find someone with diverse skills that make it possible for them to accomplish a wide variety of tasks critical to success. While you attend a university, take the opportunity to build your soft (people) and hard (technology) skills by:

1. Being interested rather than trying to be interesting.

Think about the people you most enjoy being around. Do they spend their time talking about themselves, or do they seem genuinely interested in you? When you meet someone, think about what you might learn from them. Ask about their interests,

accomplishments, and goals. What are they doing with their music? What is happening with their career or relationships? After a certain amount of time, they will probably want to turn the conversation to you and ask about you and your life. But start with them as your focus.

2. Network like a pro. Your success as a musician depends a great deal on the community you build of other musicians, businesspeople, fans, and partners. Apply your interpersonal skills to your networking as you go to jam sessions, concerts, trade shows, and other social events.

Your social media presence plays a large role in your networking. Apply this advice to your online activity: Post what your followers value rather than what you think is cool.

Don't make "likes" and other vanity metrics the objective of your online activity. Share primarily on topics your audience values, and your community and influence will grow from that.

And while it may seem obvious, don't be a jerk. People don't associate or do business with people they don't like, no matter how great the value proposition might be.

3. Think like a trader. A good relationship is one in which both parties benefit. Consider what you can do for someone in exchange for something you receive from them. Trading money for goods or services is the obvious application of the trader mentality, but beyond that, think about what you can provide someone that has nothing to do with money.

Is there something they seem to need that you could provide without an unfair sacrifice of your time or money? Sometimes just making the offer will be appreciated. You could offer an introduction to someone you know or a thought that could solve a problem, or you might lend them something they need.

Too often, we approach relationships with a “take” mentality rather than a “give” mentality. You can think of this kind of giving not as a sacrifice but as a trade for the value they might provide to you.

4. Lead with “yes.” While you are young and developing your skills, musically and otherwise, you will be asked to do things for which you may not feel 100 percent qualified. Successful people say yes and then figure out how to do it.

You must know your personal risk tolerance, but it’s very likely that you are more resourceful and capable than you realize. Don’t agree to cover the piano part in a trio if you have no piano chops, but as a sax player, maybe you can say yes to subbing in a big band where everyone’s skill level is above yours.

Find a way to get the parts beforehand, or listen to some of the band’s recordings to get a feel for their music. Consider the saying, All growth comes from outside our comfort zone.

5. Add value. Inside or outside school, be skilled at adding value to every project. Go above and beyond to find ways to improve, or add something that can only come from you. Your opportunities will expand beyond what would otherwise be possible.

As one example, this book and the other projects I’ve created with Richie came about because I originally suggested putting into physical form his wisdom and insight into jazz mastery and the reflections gleaned from his vast experience. My initial value was being able to transform Richie’s talking into print, publish it, and sell it, which is what he wanted. Did I know for certain what my value would end up creating? No, but see the above point about saying yes, then figuring it out.

A second example is the album called *Fratres*, featuring Doug Yeo, formerly of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and Gerry

Pagano, formerly of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

Gerry asked if I could record this classical bass trombone duo album in my studio; I agreed. As Doug and Gerry described the music they wished to record, I suggested that I create a string quartet accompaniment for the “Bach Concerto in D Minor.” They also wanted to record Tommy Pederson’s “Rumble on 6th Street,” to which I added an urban atmosphere of street sounds, and they loved it.

I was on a roll, so I composed a piece for two bass trombones with me on alto, which I played for them and they agreed should go on the album. I took the chance that they wouldn’t like what I created, but it worked out. My name went from a recording and mixing credit on the back to a contributing musician credit on the front.

Find ways to elevate your value on a project—maybe one you’re not even part of originally. Propose ideas to people and sell your participation by making obvious the value they will gain from your contribution. Make sure your proposal is mutually beneficial, then come through by doing a remarkable job with which they are thrilled!

6. Be eager to learn. Related to the point about engaging outside your comfort zone, be hungry to learn new things. Yes, the reason you are in school is to learn, but this point relates to knowledge and skills that extend beyond your core university studies.

You have the totality of all the world’s knowledge at your fingertips, so make sure that your hunger for learning is not limited to what is taught in the classroom.

Steve Jobs took college classes in subjects that interested him. One of them was calligraphy, and that led to the initial defining difference between the Apple computer and the PC.

By allowing yourself to explore diverse experiences, you open your mind to thinking in diverse ways. As a musician, your success depends on your ability to think beyond what is taught throughout a prescribed course of study.

Consider learning skills on your own such as:

- Audio technology
- Basic video editing
- Business fundamentals
- Email automation
- Skilled at searching the internet (digital literacy)
- Graphic design
- Instrument maintenance/piano tuning
- Money management
- Persuasive writing
- Public speaking
- Sales
- Time management
- Website creation

What the Movie *Whiplash* Got Horribly Wrong About Jazz Education

by Richie Beirach with Michael Lake

I recently saw the movie *Whiplash*, which was released in 2014. My reaction was a combination of shock, outrage, anger, and even a bit of depression, because it is such a distorted, Hollywood portrait of the relationship between a conservatory big-band jazz teacher and his students.

The movie's characterization of the teacher Fletcher, played by J.K. Simmons, is so divorced from the realities of jazz education that I feel the need to write about my reaction. I want to set the record straight by contrasting the portrayal of the teacher in the film with what I consider the characteristics of a good jazz educator.

The film is so unnecessarily exaggerated in terms of the behavior of the teacher toward the students.

My disappointment isn't just because it defiles teaching, but also because this movie got so much acclaim. This was not just an unknown independent film that only a few people saw. After all, J.K. Simmons received an Academy Award for best supporting actor that year.

And I usually like J.K. Simmons. He's a good actor and seems like a good guy. I've seen and enjoyed him in many other roles. I can't blame him for his portrayal of a monster. After all, he didn't write the script. I blame the writers and the producers who insisted on this malevolent, violent, humiliating behavior, and for framing all those horrible characteristics around a big-band jazz competition.

I've been a jazz educator my whole life, so this film hits me where I live. I'm trying to be objective about it, but I resent the way the film illustrates teaching.

But like the other dozen or so jazz movies made through the years, like *Lady Sings the Blues*, *Bird*, *'Round Midnight*, that horrible movie called *Miles Ahead* by Don Cheadle, and the two films on Chet Baker, they are all intentionally exaggerated for their Hollywood impact.

They are a reflection of Hollywood's take on jazz musicians and the cinematic obsession with conflict, sex, drugs, violence, and the clay feet of great artists. They end up humiliating their subjects in a very cruel way.

Were jazz musicians like Charlie Parker, Miles, and Billie Holiday perfect angels? No, of course not. But the lurid exploitation of the most negative elements of their personalities and lives is exaggerated in order to get people into theaters and buying popcorn. Unfortunately, it works.

I would like to have seen the original script of *Whiplash* before these Hollywood producers got to it. Perhaps the message of the movie might not have been smothered by their *Pulp Fiction* treatment of it.

It's not just an issue of me not liking the film. This is not about Richie Beirach being offended. I am voicing my opinion because I believe that *Whiplash* perpetuates the Hollywood myth of debauchery and untruths about jazz in general.

I can hear people saying, "Lighten up, Richie. It's just a movie. It's fiction and a stylized portrayal of an off-the-deep-end teacher."

But the audience doesn't know that! They come away thinking that's jazz—and that's the way jazz is taught. In the other jazz movies I mentioned, the audiences very likely walk away thinking that jazz

musicians are all losers and violent, hapless junkies. Watching *Whiplash*, they might believe that without the humiliation of Jo Jones throwing a cymbal at Charlie Parker, he wouldn't have been the genius player he was. But that's a complete lie.

The entire movie is one big, relentless lie that humiliation and cruelty can inspire students. For example, accusing that trombone player of playing out of tune while knowing he wasn't, just to make some point about intonation, was completely unnecessary.

Humiliation is not the way to get people to play in tune—or to do anything else! Attacking and publicly disparaging someone can destroy them. Any teacher using these methods runs the very real risk of chasing talented musicians away from a successful life in the arts.

Teaching someone to play an instrument is not like Special Forces boot camp. First of all, reaching musical proficiency is not a life-or-death endeavor. The point of the harsh training for US Navy SEALs or the SAS (Special Air Service) is to bring the recruits down to their lowest level of humanity and then break them down even further, to see who's got what it takes for combat. The guys who survive are the ones you want fighting for your country or freeing the hostages or killing Osama Bin Laden. You don't level that abuse on children learning to play jazz!

Let me talk about the music within the film. I thought it was littered with clumsy, awkward, and stiff big-band arrangements. I love the big-band music of Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Gil Evans, and Thad Jones, and I've recorded big-band albums. It's a fantastic genre. There's nothing wrong with that style, just with how it was used in this movie.

To me, those corny arrangements of "Caravan" and "Whiplash" are little more than empty and nervous-sounding academic exercises.

And the entire film is forced into the context of competition. Can the drummer play faster? Can he play louder? Can he play more like a metronome than the next drummer?

Bela Bartok, the great Hungarian composer, once said on the topic of competition in the arts that “Competitions are for horses, not artists.” Music is not a race. It’s not a sport, but it is portrayed as sport in this film.

At one point, I thought, this kid (Miles Teller) was going to kill Fletcher. He’s going to get a gun, I said to myself, and shoot Fletcher dead. Sure enough, Miles wrestles Fletcher to the ground, saying he’s going to kill him. This is coming from a music-school big-band drummer?

That’s enough of my opinion of the film and its completely over-the-top portrayal of a monstrous jazz teacher. Now let me turn to the positive aspects of what makes for a good jazz educator.

My profile of a great jazz educator is someone who provides:

1. correct information delivered in a very clear and methodical way.
2. the application of this information directly after it has been presented.
3. inspiration to the students that motivates them to pursue their craft in the face of difficulty and obstacles
4. an example of a professional performing artist. The profile of a great jazz educator is someone who provides an example of an active professional performing artist

After the information is provided to the student, the teacher must be able to demonstrate the examples she or he is explaining. Ideally, a teacher should be an example of integrity at a level of excellence as a player and/or composer, within his or her own professional life.

Yes, there are great teachers who no longer play at their prior high level because they've devoted most of their time to teaching; this happens a lot.

Next, the teacher must be able to direct the students to listen to specific instances of how the masters played. She or he encourages the students to listen specifically to how Herbie Hancock accompanied Wayne Shorter or how McCoy comped for John Coltrane. She or he encourages them to hear how Bill Evans comped for Miles on the *Kind of Blue* album.

The third element a great teacher provides is inspiration. The teacher must be able to inspire the students to do the required, difficult work.

I would hope that one effect of that inspiration would be to motivate my students to more diligently seek out a jam session that week, to try out what they've just learned. That's my job. To be an inspiration in every way possible, to take my students through the difficult process of playing jazz and becoming an artist.

The ideal I'm referring to is the highest level to which a teacher can aspire. Hopefully he or she is someone who's been on the international stage, with known recordings.

I love my students. I love teaching. It's a great profession, especially jazz. But teaching jazz is very difficult. It's difficult enough to teach composition or classical performance, but at least with written music, you have the score and the composer to discuss. It's tangible.

Jazz, on the other hand, is intangible. Much of teaching jazz is about finding your musical self. How do you teach someone to find themselves? It can be done, and I do it often, but it's very tough, and it takes time.

As a teacher, you provide attention in an atmosphere of care and

respect. A teacher does not give students unconditional praise, like, “Yeah, everything you played is wonderful.” The teacher is making important judgments throughout the lessons and is constantly asking, “Is that good enough? No? Why not?” Then the teacher explains why. Constructively.

Providing attention and caring doesn’t mean pussyfooting around. You always tell the truth to the student, from an honest place, when describing what you heard him or her play. But you always lead with the positive. You encourage them with whatever good you hear in their playing. This is the way I was taught, and the way I think all teachers should communicate with their students.

Say a student is playing a version of “Round Midnight” on the piano. After hearing it, I can tell there is much to improve. But the time was great, and I heard real passion, even though the pedaling and content were poor.

So how do I respond? I tell the student, “Your time is great. You’re swinging, and you really have something to say. I believed what you played.” Then I say, “But your voicings need work, and there’s no motivic development in your phrases. It’s just one phrase following another without telling a story.”

I will sit with a student like this for hours with a student who has the right attitude. I give everything possible to my students. Because if they graduate and earn an opportunity to make a record and play concerts, they could change the scene. They might even change the direction of our music.

It’s not if you tell the truth but how you tell the truth to a student about their playing. If you start by saying, “That was some of the worst shit I’ve ever heard, and you have no story, you’ll lose the student. You’ll destroy their confidence.

All the things I’m saying about great teaching are absent from the movie *Whiplash*.

The Digital Revolution in Learning Jazz

by Michael Lake

Jazz is an analog art form. The musicians agree on a tune or, at the very least, a key center and proceed to compose spontaneously, from the depths of their soul. All the players express themselves as the group responds to their musical telling of some sort of story.

When they perform in front of an audience, musicians feel the energy of the crowd, which in certain ways shapes the music.

It's easy to see why the master-apprentice method of teaching and learning is so effective in jazz, this art form of sensitivity, demanding technique, and nuanced empathy.

As our lives become more and more connected to and provided for by the Internet and the microchip, however, jazz can't help but follow the world down this digital rabbit hole.

The digital age has granted us easy access to all forms of music and its instruction. Including jazz. Through the smartphone in your pocket, you have access to virtually unlimited musical resources.

A guitar player in the Australian outback can learn theory from Berklee, composition from Juilliard, and jazz history from the New England Conservatory. Thousands of topics are available, many of them free, and the number is growing daily.

Learning jazz through the Internet, however, is not limited to the websites of large, prestigious schools. Independent sites that specialize by instrument, style, and delivery medium are everywhere.

You can take online lessons from top players on your instrument via text, produced video, and, of course, live remote sessions.

You can create your own rhythm tracks in any tempo and any key through Band-in-a-Box and iReal Pro. Even though the tracks created by these tools often sound like they're played by robots, they can be helpful, especially if you don't have live musicians available with whom to practice. And if you take the necessary time, you can put together a track that's good enough for practicing the mechanics of improvisation.

You can listen to any track or album you've ever heard of through streaming or YouTube or audio files sitting on various sites. While the digital distribution of music has hurt artists financially, this limitless access has become a boon for listeners all over the planet.

Jazz and the Internet, however, make for a challenging relationship. On the Internet, anyone can pose as an expert and teach anything, including improvisation. An online instructor brimming with confidence in the material and playing their instrument well may appear to the average viewer as a purveyor of expertise and truth. To the musician seeking answers, their guidance seems unimpeachable, and so it is followed.

Musicians wishing to learn to play jazz using online instruction and other resources, therefore, must be able to discern between good and bad. In fact, if the wrong advice is followed, your progress will slow or even stop. Worse yet, you could doom yourself to frustration if you approach your instrument and improvisation in a thoroughly wrong way.

The question is, how best can you determine good from bad instruction and advice from the Internet, and use this technology to help you play better?

First, just realizing the need to discern the quality of this resource is crucial. Hopefully this book will provide some necessary

guidance. But please, also seek out the opinions of knowledgeable and experienced friends, colleagues, and teachers.

One popular tool for jazz players is play-along recordings. Like any tool, these recordings can be used both beneficially and destructively.

Improvising over a play-along track is kind of like making love to a robot. The risk is that after enough of that, you may forget what a human feels like. In jazz terms, you might not develop the sensitivity to play in harmonic and rhythmic sync with real live players. Remember that musicians do not play in perfect clock-accurate time; neither are they simply playing over fixed sounds.

So balance the time you spend working on the mechanics of improvisation through clicks or play-along tracks with getting out there and playing live in front of people. When you play with others, you hear and anticipate the nuances of their playing, which is central to jazz.

Even getting together with just one other musician will help develop your musical empathy and is much more beneficial for you than playing exclusively with recordings and other digital reproductions of music.

Use recorded tracks to learn the notes of new tunes. Use them to drill parts of tunes you don't yet play well. Use them to play through the scales and chords as a technical and ear-building exercise.

But, especially as you're starting out, make sure to keep the proper balance between your use of digital tools and live playing.

Jazz is different from other musical styles, because the art of jazz doesn't lie primarily in technical mastery of the notes and knowledge of theory. It lies within the interaction and empathy felt among the players as they create musical stories through their combined efforts.

The art of jazz is in the ability of the musician to hear and then react to his or her fellow players while spontaneously composing music that reflects his or her thoughts and feelings. How does one teach that skill remotely on line through Zoom, email, video, or podcasts?

The majority of online jazz learning resources default to teaching music theory, providing written lines, licks, and transcriptions while demonstrating improvisation. It makes sense, since distribution of detailed information is what the Internet most easily accommodates.

Perhaps someday in the distant future, artificial intelligence will allow us to play along with a realistic profile of great past jazz musicians and will provide the kind of tough-love feedback that was the hallmark of the master-apprentice method of decades ago.

We'll let our great-grandchildren enjoy that, but for now, what is the best that jazz educators can provide through the realities of our current digital age, beyond performance demonstrations and the distribution of written scales, transcriptions, and exercises?

First and foremost, the Internet's vast library of recorded music allows anyone to hear both the major and minor players throughout the history of jazz and the music that influenced it.

In fact, entire online courses can be taken on a single important musician or on the entirety of music history. You can join online communities that are focused strictly on discussions about a particular musician and musical genre.

Blogs and podcasts continue to be created around jazz, providing explorations into the various subgenres of jazz and the music of iconic players from the past 100 years and beyond. There's no shortage of social media activity around jazz and its important players. The Facebook group *Jazz Music* currently has 181,000 members. The Facebook group dedicated to discussing all things Miles Davis (called simply "Miles Davis") has 20,000 members.

There's even a Facebook group dedicated to "Kind of Blue" lovers. Consider TikTok, whose largest demographic is between the ages of 10 and 19. The hashtag #jazz attracts a following of 1.8 billion views.

Clearly, the distribution of music and discussions of everything imaginable relating to jazz are a boon to the music and to its exposure to people all over the world.

But what about teaching jazz—the subject of this book? Is the Internet built for that? Well, yes and no.

Watching jazz educational videos or listening to related podcasts can provide players with helpful information, but it can't take the place of live interaction with a master. Think back to my story of playing with Chet Baker or being in the studio with Manfred Eicher.

The live human element of jazz is its heartbeat. As close as we might get through streaming or live video conferencing, the digital translation of those interactions filters out a significant portion of the synergy required for teaching and learning jazz.

But rather than deny that learning about jazz can occur through the Internet, consider how the medium can most effectively be used by educators and students.

One major challenge of online jazz instruction, especially when it's prerecorded, is that one message must fit all. That means it is up to the viewer to understand and implement the material on their own. Purveyors of online instruction must make learning as interactive as possible. This is where the art of online teaching lives. Interactivity can take the form of the student recording your playing, for assessment by the course creator, or can take place in live online sessions between the student and teacher.

I think it's a requirement of online teaching to accommodate short attention spans and the need for entertainment. Not for entertainment's sake but in order to hold the student's attention

and make an impression so they retain the material. I received the ultimate compliment recently with a student of one of my online courses telling me that he can't wait to practice after watching and listening to a lesson.

Too often, the instructor talks into a camera, and the final video is a series of quick, hard edits in order to cram as much talking as possible into the 'lesson'.

Teaching—online and in person—is so much more than simply dispensing information like pouring water into a glass. It involves empathy, feedback, short-term wins, surprises, entertainment, demonstrations, and clear direction.

Unfortunately, most online jazz instruction takes the form of explanations that lack clarity and demonstrations that leave the student impressed but completely unaware of how to apply what he or she just heard. How many times have you heard, "Just play this..." only to realize that you can't play that and hearing them play it didn't help?

Practice makes permanent all those little things a student might pick up from a well-meaning but ignorant instructor. One's ability to play well is no guarantee that someone can effectively teach others.

Consider all the brilliant musicians who have built online teaching platforms that serve only to confuse or, worse, lead the student down a completely wrong path

The ancient adage, With great power comes great responsibility, comes to mind. Let the student choose online jazz education and resources with care. Ask a teacher or colleague for advice and recommendations, so that you can use this powerful medium to achieve your best result.

A Conversation About Learning Jazz

by Richie Beirach with Michael Lake

Throughout our years of knowing each other, Richie and I have found ourselves agreeing on the fundamental aspects of playing, teaching, and learning jazz. If that were not the case, we could never have written the volume of material that we have produced, including the book you now hold in your hands.

But we have found ourselves in disagreement from time to time on a few narrower topics. In fact, I wrote a blog post on one of these topics that was a celebration of the idea that two people with strong opinions can disagree and yet remain friends and continue to work together. I find that refreshing in today's culture of intolerance toward opposing viewpoints. We present it here.

Michael Lake: Richie, let's start with the topic of the metronome. Not long ago, I wrote a post about the use of the metronome, and you had some pretty strong things to say about that.

Richie Beirach: The metronome is okay for young kids who are practicing alone, which is difficult. And I remember when I was at that stage. Using the metronome can be fun for them, because it's almost as if they have a little friend to practice with.

But any possible consideration of the metronome as a musical beat—I consider that to be a problem. The metronome click is not a musical beat. It's a robot. It's like having a conversation with a robot or asking a robot for a hug or to go out on a date or for a kiss. That's exactly what it is. And continuing with that analogy, if you get used to interacting with robots and depending on their perfect click, click, click as though it were real, like a human drummer,

you'll start to think of that as a musical beat, and it's not.

The human mind will acclimatize itself, and that clock-perfect click takes root, especially in a young player, who will then have difficulty getting free of it.

I hate to sound like an old geezer missing the good old days, but it used to be much easier to play with other musicians. It seems like there were always more people to play with and places to play at. Rehearsal space was cheaper, and you could get a little gig in a club. But today's economics makes it much more difficult for the physicality and logistics of getting together to play. And because of that, we see the rise of programs like Band In a Box, iReal Pro, and play-alongs, which, in my opinion, are all an extension of a metronome.

Here's the problem. These tools have created a lot of players with very bad—stiff—time. I've seen this first-hand over the years. I really think kids used to have better time. And even if their time wasn't great, it was fixable.

But now for these 18-to-24-year-old players, their whole thing is the metronome or a computer program or some other mechanical accompaniment. I hear these kids being stiff as a board from practicing with robotic clock time.

I've seen this so often that I've become inflexible on this point. A metronome can be helpful for children or adult beginners who have no plans to become even semi-pro. Even though I say that, even for those kids or adult beginners, I still think there's always the risk of the student's time being manipulated by the metronome or other time-perfect play-along. It can prevent you from having a sense of human, imperfect time. And that kind of time is what we all play with when we play with others, especially in jazz.

ML: The main reason I push back on this is because of my own experience. To this day I play with a metronome. I set it at 100 or

110 and exercise my tongue on sixteenth notes. I set it to a slower tempo and work on interval exercises. I look at the metronome almost like a stop watch for a runner...

RB: ... That's exactly the problem. Music is not sport. It's an art form.

ML: May I continue, Doctor Dogmatic?

RB: Sure. Go ahead.

ML: It allows me to gauge my articulation speed and flexibility speed on the trombone. The inflexibility of the metronome provides me with an objective.... Again, I'll use the word "gauge" for my technique.

Now, certainly you have a world of personal experience with students that I don't have. But I will tell you that my own sense of time as I play with people is probably my strongest skill as a musician.

I am an advocate of setting a metronome on 2 and 4, and then playing tunes or an improvisation while keeping a swinging feel throughout those two weaker beats.

I do notice that a strong sense of musical time is something that's missing from many of the musicians I play with. I can't attribute it to their having practiced with a metronome, but grooving jazz time is both a critical element of playing well and one that I find most absent. So maybe you're right. I just haven't experienced that for myself.

As a related topic, what is your opinion of play-alongs like *Band-in-a-Box* and *iReal Pro*? And not just about the time element of them, because in a way, they are also like a metronome.

RB: You're right in that they are related to the topic of playing with a metronome, but I am sympathetic to someone living in a

small town without access to a bunch of other musicians. What do they do if they need a rhythm section to practice “Have You Met Miss Jones”?

I have a really hard time recommending it, but in terms of it becoming an either/or situation where you don't practice the tune or you play over the changes with the Band-in-a-Box program or an Aebersold track from his play-along series, I would say it's the lesser of two evils, but play-alongs bring with them an additional problem in that you're not just being hurt by the metronomic time, but you're improvising without the experience of human interaction. There's no one listening to you and responding either rhythmically or harmonically. And that interaction is the essence of jazz.

The nature of play-alongs is that simply a play-back tool, and therefore, provide no possibility of interaction. The fun of jazz, and the interesting thing about it, is the constantly changing surprises arising from the interaction between the soloist and the rhythm section. These elements are completely rooted in jazz, from Louis Armstrong right up until today. Think about the early examples of call-and-response pre-bebop.

If you play with Band-in-a-Box for three hours a day for years and you think and feel like you're sounding good, you're not. It's an illusion, because after all those hours, you've gotten used to the nonreactive state of the recorded rhythm section. The Aebersold or live Band-in-a-Box tracks could be played by top players—but they're not playing with you. They're not hearing what you play. There is no interaction, in the same way that there is no interaction or flexibility as you play with a metronome.

Now, as you said earlier that you don't need interaction with the metronome when you play your tonguing or intervallic studies on trombone, I get it. But when you are playing jazz, if you don't care about interaction, I'll tell you to find another profession—or at least another style of music to play. Jazz is about interaction! The best players are the most sophisticated. They're capable

of creating many wonderful moments from the interactions between themselves and other musicians. Listen to Elvin Jones with Trane or Bill Evans and Scott LaFaro and Tony Williams with Miles Davis.

ML: So, Richie, what were you thinking when you and Dave Liebman recorded the Jamey Aebersold play-alongs?

RB: We recorded those in 1978, and we insisted on making one for the most advanced players. And also, honestly, it was a payday for us. Back then we thought that it would be a good thing for those advanced players, because there weren't any play-alongs out there with those types of tunes at that level of performance.

At the time, I wasn't aware of the harm play-alongs could cause. I admit that. It was 50 years ago, and I thought, "Oh, a chance to make some money!" Also, we got to record our own music along with standards and play those pieces at an advanced level. We did not dumb it down. So we felt okay about it, and I heard that very few people even used it because it was too advanced.

ML: So if somebody came to you now and offered to pay you five grand to record a play-along, would you do it?

RB: No. Absolutely not. Because unlike back then, I'm not tempted because I don't need the money.

ML: Well, I guess similar to what I said about the metronome, I have used play-alongs my whole life. And thank God for Jamey Aebersold, because even though I lived in Phoenix, Arizona, in the 70s and had a lot of playing opportunities, play-alongs gave me the chance to learn new tunes and work on changes.

I remember that Liebman/Aebersold album. Yeah, that was hard, but it stretched my ears and ability.

And again, like my continuing use of the metronome, I had

opportunities to play with other musicians.

RB: Well, you were lucky. You could play with other people, not exclusively with play-alongs.

ML: I'm also a big fan of Band-in-a-Box, since it provides me with an instant rhythm track for my recorded video lessons and audio tracks that go with my books. I always use the real tracks, as they call them, rather than MIDI, and I have to render five or six choruses to find the one that sounds best.

Also, I like Band-in-a-Box because I can play over changes in keys other than the standard ones. I love playing standards in five flats or in B or E, because it exercises my ear and knowledge of the changes.

Maybe the answer is to use play-alongs or iReal or Band-in-a-Box in moderation, all the while making sure you are playing interactively with real, live players.

RB: No. Sorry. I say don't use any of that crap.

ML: Let's talk about another jazz education resource: books of transcribed solos. What do you think of them?

RB: I have to go back to when I was a kid. In the early 60s, when I got interested in jazz, I was looking for material.

I'd go to the 48th Street music stores like Manny's, or Carl Fischer, where they had thousands of books on how to finger scales, exercises, and how to play the classics like Beethoven or Mozart.

But there were, like, ten books on jazz improvisation. One was a book on Billy Bauer's guitar solo transcriptions. They also had some early Bird transcription books, which were too hard for me at that time.

There were no books yet on great contemporary solos from Trane or Miles or Herbie or Bill Evans. That all came later. I think I would have benefited from seeing what those guys were doing.

But 50 years later, here's what I tell players: You must learn to transcribe the great jazz solos yourself. Don't transcribe a ton of them, but there are certain iconic solos that contain important lessons. The lesson could be on lyrical melodic lines, swinging, solo form, eighth-note lines from Herbie Hancock, or unusual double-time phrasing from Trane.

One important benefit of doing your own transcribing, rather than just reading it out of a book is that you'll develop your ear. Writing out the transcription of a solo will also strengthen your sense of rhythm, plus you will really learn the solo. You'll hear it deeply.

Now, of course, there are 10 million transcription books, and every great solo has been transcribed. And not only are they in books, but they're also online. You could find the one you want in five seconds, right? Or use one of the many digital tools now available to transcribe it for you.

When I give an assignment to a talented young boy or a girl, I tell them they must transcribe a particular solo, and they'll say, "But Professor, I can buy or download the transcription, which will save me time. I'll get better quicker." I tell them not to do that, because the act of transcribing it is what will improve your ear.

I know that transcribing a complicated solo can be painful. I don't have perfect pitch, and I was not born a genius. I was a prodigy; I got there early. My ear was okay but not great.

It was painful when I started transcribing solos, because my ear was not yet developed enough for the task. In 1967 and 1968, Lieb and I used to do it together in Dave's loft on 19th street in Manhattan. It was terrible. He would lift and drop the needle on

the phonograph while I wrote. I remember trying to transcribe Trane's solo on "Impressions." And McCoy's.

Lieb would play, like, eight bars, then lift the needle and ask, "Did you get that"? And I'd say, "No!"

We eventually got it, of course, and my ear got much better from the process. I attended Manhattan School of Music from 1968 until 1972, where I had a regular ear training class with Mrs. Elizabeth Lehmer at 9 every Monday morning. We practiced dictation using Bartok—slow movements from his string quartets. So my ear improved rapidly from this work.

And now I can hear pretty much anything. And that's important, because if I'm playing with Lieb and he plays a C sharp over a C minor chord, I have to hear that note instantaneously—in a nanosecond—so I can put the right chord under it in order to make it a musical moment.

ML: So is there any benefit to the books of transcribed solos — the Charlie Parker Omnibook and all the others like it?

RB: As long as you work on transcribing the important solos first, without looking in the book or seeing them online. I'm all for analyzing the solos from books or from some online source, but it's important to have the patience and discipline not to just look at the published solos. You need to carry out the act of transcription to improve your ear. Once you have written it out and played it, then go ahead and look at the transcription someone else did. See how close you are.

There are many ways of notating complex rhythms, and the published solo may be better than what you wrote. So learn from that.

ML: I agree with all that. One other type of transcription I used to do a lot of was harmony. I remember creating lead sheets from Bill Evans albums like those two with Tony Bennett. *The Tony Bennett*

Bill Evans Album and *Together Again*. They played some beautiful tunes that were not in fake books, and I wanted to play them. So I figured out the chords and form and played them on gigs.

Also, I learned a lot from transcribing Bill Evans voicings: how he would approach or lead into certain chords and what he used as chord substitutions or reharmonizations.

You and I have also talked about the benefit of actually writing out the solo rather than memorizing it as you listen. I think one big advantage of seeing it on paper is that you can analyze what the soloist did over certain chords.

Related to transcription books are jazz pattern and scale books. I imagine you're not a big fan of those? Books like the Slonimsky book, *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*.

RB: I'm glad you brought that up.

Those books are poison for a young jazz musician, because it's easy to fall into the trap of memorizing the patterns written out there. And when you learn these patterns and they get into your playing, they're like a virus, because it's an obvious pattern that's not your improvisation. It's not from you. It's not spontaneous. And because of that, it sticks out in a very ugly way, like a piece of mud on a wedding dress. It's not cool.

You mentioned Slonimsky. It's true that Trane used to practice from it, but only after he could already play. He was curious about those scale sequences.

I don't recommend that book in terms of memorizing the content for solos. You'll end up sounding like scales. You'll sound like... Slonimsky.

But it is good to read through and to play for fun. I found a lot of nice things within it, but the whole point is that there is an

in-between step that is usually not mentioned. It's something that makes it really cool.

Take the Slonimsky book, or any scale or pattern. Find a pattern that you like that's an intervallic cell. Instead of just saying, okay, I'm going to play that exact pattern over the blues, you expand on it. You personalize it. You develop it and you alter it. You make it your own. Making it your own is what jazz is all about.

ML: I totally agree about not memorizing written patterns within your improvisation. I use the Slonimsky book for technical exercises. After all, most of the stuff in there is really challenging for trombone. Probably for any instrument.

But my advice for using written patterns is to modulate them by ear into other keys. I like to do this with the Bach Cello Suites. For example, learn the first eight bars of Suite #1, and then play it by ear in other keys.

And with published jazz patterns, learn one, and then, by ear, transpose it into other keys. Not, as you said, in order to cram them into your solos but, instead, to use that exercise as a way to more closely connect your ear to your instrument.

This is the challenge I find with online teaching of improvisation. So many players just want the notes to play. But I want to teach the art of reflecting the thoughts and emotions through one's instrument—spontaneous composition.

The pattern books are so appealing to people because it gives them ready-made notes for their solos. But that is not what I consider improvisation.

One last topic worth exploring is the influence of other players. We've discussed the trap of comparing yourself to other players.

RB: There's a certain kind of comparison you make when you're

younger that is deadly, because it can kill your motivation and your will to grow. I experienced this early on.

I lived in Manhattan starting in 1968. That was an innovative time for guys like Trane, Miles, Cecil Taylor, Charles Mingus—they were all in their prime. They were young, strong men, playing music no one had ever heard before. And I got to hear their best stuff every night,, up close and personal.

At the age of 17, I was very limited in what I could play. I had only been playing jazz for five years.

I didn't know what these guys were doing; it was too complicated for me. But I was drawn to it because it felt heavy and wonderful and free and brilliant, and it expressed emotions like I'd never heard before.

It was very mysterious for a kid like me, in love with jazz, to go to the Village Vanguard on a Tuesday night and hear Miles, Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams, Ron Carter, and Wayne Shorter create music. These guys never talked about what they would play. There were no rehearsals, at least not like most people would think. Then, at the right moment, five guys in black suits would walk onstage. No. Four guys, because Miles wore whatever he wanted, and it was always just right. I noticed that he looked pissed off a lot of the time.

In front of a packed Tuesday-night crowd at the Village Vanguard, Miles didn't say anything into the mic. He just tapped his foot a little, and amazing music began. It was phenomenal. Each one of them was great player in his own right.

We're talking about comparing yourself to others. Well, it was hard not to, with Tony Williams only a year older than me, Herbie just four years older.

I used to come home thinking that I was just little Richie from Brooklyn. I can never play to that level, so what am I doing in this music?

I was a good classical player who started to play jazz when I was 12. Those times when I was confronted by the jazz masters could be depressing, but at the same time, they were some of the most inspiring moments!

The music my friends and I heard was so inspiring—and I loved it so much—that’s what pushed me through the tough times of self-doubt.

All my close friends thought the exact same thing. Dave Liebman, Randy Brecker, Steve Grossman, and others felt overwhelmed. And then there was Trane, who was at an even higher level, because it was spiritual. Trane played at another level of excellence and depth of emotional sincerity.

You are being unfair to yourself if you question your whole reason for playing after listening to masters. Instead, focus on improving your skills and strive to discover your own musical identity. Save yourself. Compare yourself to the masters, but do it for a reference to how your instrument could be played rather than an example of what you can or can’t do yourself—yet! Continue to be focused on developing your skill and your own individual artistic identity.

We all wanted to be great. We loved the music we were hearing every night. We wanted to be as good as we could possibly be. And to get there meant that we had to help one another, since at that time, there was only one school: Berklee.

Lieb and Randy taught me some great things about melody, and I got to show them some of my harmonic discoveries.

ML: I agree that it’s poison to compare yourself to others, and not just because it causes self-doubt.

It makes sense to use others as a kind of gauge of your abilities, if you’re perceptive enough to hear it. I think it helps to be specific

about what it is you love about someone's playing. Maybe you respond to their chops or their melodic beauty or to their tone or sense of harmony or sense of rhythm.

Now you can work on your own version of whatever that was. Let's say you're a tenor player. You hear Michael Brecker, and now you want to sound like him. If it was his technique that you love, work on your technique, but not to copy what Michael already accomplished. Find your own version of fluency all over the tenor, inside and out.

I think there is a certain mystique about great players. Students may think the only way to play is to be a better version of their hero. And if you can't do that—and no one can, by the way—what the hell are you even bothering for?!

Everybody has different levels of skill based on their talent, commitment, and willingness to work. No judgment; just fact. If you have a certain level of musical skill and instincts, you can create your own musical voice.

If that voice is authentically you, it won't sound like anybody else. And developing and enjoying satisfaction in that is a great achievement.

Is Jazz in Danger of Becoming a Caricature of Itself?

by Michael Lake

Judging by the number of comments, this remains my most popular article. I think this is due to the truth that it spoke to its readers, and to the topic hitting a nerve with so many of them.

The theme of the post is technical prowess versus authentic human musical communication through jazz. Not that they can't coexist. This book is filled with references to technical masters who express themselves beautifully through their playing, one of them, of course, being Richie.

But the question I ask in the post is: Are imitation of the jazz masters and raw technical skill supplanting the authentic emotional human expression that is at the core of this music? Is simply "sounding like" the masters the goal of the modern-day accomplished jazz musician?

Throughout this book, you've read about the evolution of jazz education, ranging from the master-apprentice method of teaching to the acquisition of a college degree. You've been reminded of Hollywood's view of jazz education as being obsessed with mechanical perfection. You've been cautioned about the potential dangers in today's digital clock-accurate tools.

But in the life-long lessons Richie absorbed from his mentors, as described in the beginning of this book, you'll see that none of them stressed playing faster or more like someone else or using tricks to impress the listener.

Instead, these lessons taught Richie to respect the melody, to be more sensitive to dynamics, that time should not be mechanically calculated, to be prepared for all types of playing situations, that there are no wrong notes once a certain level of musical maturity is reached, and to play only as many notes as are needed and no more.

Hopefully this post will prompt you to ask yourself: Are we losing something in jazz as we find ourselves in the second decade of the twenty-first century?

To illustrate the prevailing reactions to the post, we've included here comments written by a wide range of musicians. These comments were not cherry-picked to confirm the article's point. The comments we publish here are representative of the general consensus and are points that we feel add to the conversation.



Is jazz in danger of becoming a caricature of itself?

February 23, 2021 | Improvisation, Most popular

I was forwarded a YouTube link yesterday of a young musician playing John Coltrane's solo from Giant Steps note for note. He was a technically proficient player who obviously had worked hard to get each of Trane's difficult phrases under his fingers. But after watching it and thinking of the many similar online imitations of great solos, it sparked a thought in me.

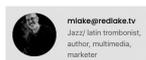
It prompted me to ask the question, what is jazz becoming?

By itself, musicians showing off their technical prowess is not bad. It's a sort of fascinating sport or entertainment. But I question the larger issue of how jazz improvisation is being taught and what musicians are playing in the name of improvisation. This question goes to the core of my primary of ear teaching methods which promote ears over eyes and right brain over left.

I am reminded of something I heard once from Brent Vaarstra from learnjazzstandards.com who said that his most popular video lesson after all these years continues to be the one teaching players which scales to play over specific chords.

The study of chord-scale relationships by and of itself is not a bad thing. In fact, running scales and patterns is very beneficial for technical development, building fluid articulation, and the ability to hear harmony within one's instrument. It becomes unmusical, however, when those scales and patterns become the rote foundation of a player's improvisation. I don't believe that the analytical left-brain construction of notes and flourishes of manufactured runs are the stuff of one's authentic musical soul. And isn't our soul the fountainhead of our jazz performance?

Perhaps Black History Month is the perfect time to consider the origins of jazz. Think of the spirituals, field chants, and hollers born out of the pain of slavery. That raw emotion evolved into the blues sung by Bessie Smith, Leadbelly, Robert Johnson, Charlie Patton, and others. Early instrumentalists and composers like Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Art Tatum, and others transformed and evolved that personal emotional expression into the more modern art of improvisation lead by the likes of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and many others.



Most popular

Just tell me the buttons to push
February 6, 2022 | 19 Comments

My recently turned 18-year old son is a graduate photographer. He's got himself a little business where people pay him for senior photos, family portraits, sport team pictures, and other personal moments.

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About the movie Whiplash and jazz education
November 10, 2019 | 28 Comments

A couple weeks ago I sent Richie Baruch a YouTube clip from the movie Whiplash as a bit of levity. It was the scene where the teacher in the film Fletcher declares that poor timepiece players for being out of time. Spoiler alert:

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About a metronome
August 1, 2017 | 26 Comments

I originally meant to write this as a reply to a comment Richie Baruch wrote on my blog. But as I started writing, I realized that this could be the springboard for something much more important.

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Is Jazz in Danger of Becoming a Caricature of Itself?



February 23, 2021 ≡ Improvisation

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By itself, musicians showing off their technical prowess is not bad. It's a sort of fascinating sport or entertainment. But I question the larger issue of how jazz improvisation is being taught and what musicians are playing in the name of improvisation. This goes to the core of my theory of teaching methods, which promotes ears over eyes and right brain over left.

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What is common to all those early innovators of blues and jazz is the pure, unadulterated, authentic emotion in their musical expression. In our eagerness to "sound like" the modern giants of jazz, are we replacing that authentic emotional expression with a manufactured imitation of their speed and harmonic complexity? Again, this is not to condemn those who, for fun, imitate the superhuman playing of others. Hearing Trane's "Giant Steps" solo played note for note is perfectly innocent. But it shined a light on my concern about how easy it is to risk sanitizing the fundamental emotional aspect of jazz performance, so that the music becomes a caricature of its former self. We risk that if, in the name of jazz improvisation, we take the safer route of manufacturing solos rather than emoting them.

Transcribing and modeling great improvisations is a wonderful tool for learning the jazz language. Use the tool wisely as the means to feel in your head and hands the master's flow through the changes. Don't use that transcription as the substance of your solo. Don't be lazy and allow it to become a replacement for fresh, spontaneous jazz composition.

Are we overcome by the thrill of technical fluency, which can take us beyond what we can project organically through our instrument? Are we losing the essence of individual expression?

And even if one is not chasing after fluency per se, there is that pervasive guilt of not playing up to “the standard.” Keeping up with the musical Joneses. If everyone else is doing it, why aren’t we?

There’s nothing wrong with striving for better/more fluent technical chops, but chops are the means to your musical expression, not the end.

Perhaps the antidote is to forget about how you should sound and, instead, listen to how you do sound. Even more important, think about how you want to sound. Where within yourself will you find that music? Start by listening to the voice in your musical imagination. I know you’ve heard it, but perhaps it is too often drowned out by the noise of obligatory imitation and blinded by the letters and dots on the printed page.

A month ago, I wrote a post containing a short video I produced called “Playing the improvisation of your imagination” (“Sing-Play” for short!) The exercise I provided was the instruction to sing and record a phrase or two over a rhythm track and then play on your instrument exactly what you sang. I challenged people to do the exercise and tell me about it afterward. The overwhelming response was that it was a refreshing experience because what they recorded on their instrument after first singing it was much more musical and personally authentic than what they would have played otherwise.

Take a step back and consider what we are trying to accomplish when we play jazz. In the normal course of our playing, we’re not entering a contest and we’re not auditioning for technical proficiency medals. We’re simply expressing ourselves. If that heartfelt expression takes the form of sheets of sound, great. If it takes the form of a few well-placed notes, great; but please find what it is for *you*.

Comments



Walter George says:

Thank you for these thoughts. This is ground breaking information and is sure to be helpful to all regardless of ones level. One could build whole courses to aide in execution of these concepts.

What is needed in jazz education are more concepts like these that can break thru the scale/chord learning process and make learning jazz fun.

Another concept you might consider weighing in upon is rhythm. Mike Longo who was a pianist who played with Dizzy Gillespie and teaches his rhythm concepts quotes Dizzy as saying – ” jazz is African rhythm plus Western harmony... if you’ve got rhythm, the notes will follow “. He is quick to say, rhythm education is very neglected and not taught in music school.



Jerry Bergonzi says:

At some point a musician turns his or her attention from other players to his inner player and develops their art. Everyone’s journey is different. Their are many paths up the mountain.



Angelo says:

Hi Michael all of this makes sense to me and I believe on one hand may sound even encouraging to the ears all those “recreational” jazz students – like me – who struggle to find this jazz “feel” in their improvisation, or comping. However I do feel that reaching that level of freedom to express one’s own musical self is – for those like me at least – an impossible challenge without the “cut-and-paste” reproduction of others’ licks, chops, etc.. (aka the jazz

language) or having to ask their jazz instructor which arpeggio/scale/pattern to apply in that particular section of a tune. What do you think?



Michael Lake responded:

Learning to improvise is a process, and part of what I wanted to communicate in this post is that too many players are stuck in the earlier stages of imitation and memorization.

Think of how each of us learned to talk. We listened to those around us and imitated what we heard as best we could. But we eventually evolved our skills so that we could express our individual thoughts using our own command of language rather than simply parroting what we hear others say (hopefully!)

So yes, imitate solo fragments and transcribe and learn complete solos. Learn your scales and arpeggiate chord tones.

But... be clear on your evolution and end goal. It is to allow all of that preparation and imitation to sit in the back of your subconscious while you consciously express yourself using the vocabulary of jazz.

Your expression isn't your version of someone else. It's you as only you could tell your musical story.



Francesco Amico says:

Wonderful article Michael...and stunning class!

That made me think of something Miles said in his autobiography with Quincy Troupe: "I don't go to jazz gigs anymore as I find them so boring"

Well, I'm not saying that I completely agree with his point but, what I find too common in jazz musicians and in many artists, in general, is that they have little understanding of their mission, and often get lost in the crafting of their art...

So my question is, with so much great music already recorded why would I need to play/write another tune? Why not just play a CD of my favorite musicians instead of going to a gig in town?

The "WHY" seems quite unclear...in my opinion



Michael Lake responded:

Francesco, the "WHY" is the essence of jazz. Good players provide you with something new and personal. We are attracted to certain players because we resonate with their personal approach to music and the stories they tell. That's why we listen to them play in clubs and concerts.

If you are limited to just the albums and the music of the past, you are loosing out on the fresh expression of live jazz musicians.

Now, you might live in an area without such talent. Then, I guess, you're limited to recordings.



Abbott Katz says:

You're right to suggest that on average today's players may be more technically accomplished than their forebears, and that advantage can cut both ways, but at the same time a bad player can play with emotion, too. I'd suggest the ideal is authentic inventiveness.



Glenn J Hoburg says:

Michael, this line: "how easy it is to risk sanitizing the fundamental emotional aspect of jazz performance and for the music to become a caricature of its former self", resonated deeply, especially as it relates to emotion. For me, jazz above all other genres, requires emotional inventory.

Sometimes I feel like it's a counselor's couch! Exposing deep seated fears and desires, as well as calling for wholeness, self-acceptance, and freedom. Steps toward it feel as an act of faith to me. Your reflection is very helpful. Thanks.



Colleen BanderHoek says:

Yes. I agree with everything you say. I think jazz may be following the path of classical. When Bach, Mozart etc were fluent improvisers then the music was written and performers started only using the written notes and practicing perfection instead of their own music.



Michael Lake responded:

So true. Richie Beirach and I spoke about that this afternoon and he brought up the point the cadenzas were originally meant to be improvised, like in the Beethoven Piano Concerto. But at a certain point, cadenzas became notated because of a lack of improvisatory skill and, I guess, laziness.



Jerome Meltzer says:

That is a very good article. I think that it's great to keep improving technically and to study the masters. To find your own voice is the process of becoming an artist. That journey has to involve other aspects of discovery aside from musical knowledge. It's about your engagement with life, what you experience, feel, think about.



Victoria says:

I think Chick Corea was a genius at fusing technique with emotion, and of course there are many others. Maybe the saying "it's not what you play, it's what you DON'T play" rings truer than ever these days.



Clay Moore responded:

So true. Richie Beirach and I spoke about that this afternoon and he brought up the point the cadenzas were originally meant to be improvised, like in the Beethoven Piano Concerto. But at a certain point, cadenzas became notated because of a lack of improvisatory skill and, I guess, laziness.



Richie Beirach responded:

There really are two Chicks, may he rest in peace. I knew him well in the 60 s when he was living in Dave Liebman's loft on 19th street in NYC. We used to hang out and talk about music all nite. He was an amazing genius and wonderful warm human being .

The Chick I'm talking about was from his first recording

called *Tones For Joan's Bones* in 1966. Amazing playing and composing. He made more great iconic CDs until 1972 when Scientology got him and destroyed his natural creative path. He went from creating these wonderful masterpieces like *Now He Sings Now He Sobs*, *Inner Space*, *Sundance*, *Is*, *The Song of Singing*, *A.R.C.*, two brilliant solo piano CDs for ECM, and of course his great work with Miles Davis in 1969. But after 1972 it was *Return to Forever Light as a Feather*. Watered down crap in my view. Now if the *Return to Forever* CD was his first and that was his direction and limit of his vision then no problem

But the church stole his devotion to his musical development. We were all so sad about it. He always sounded good up until the end cause he was a great musician and exceptional jazz pianist and composer. But in my opinion, he never again regained that incredible creative reservoir of PERSONAL UNADULTERATED UNINHIBITED SWEEPING CREATIVE VISION that he showed early on. I miss the original Chick very much and I owe much to his early amazing musical legacy.



Harry Howell says:

Great Mike.....Everybody is unique like DNA.....What a waste to waste energy ‘Cloning’?



Timothy Clarke says:

I totally get where you are coming from in this essay. It doesn't “work” if I try to look outside myself for the answers about how I should play—that's a very personal, unique “problem” to solve, which involves so much more than just copying the work of another artist (although that can be an important learning tool). Further, technique is just one aspect of performing a musical instrument – one's artistic conception seems to me to be so much more important, in the long run.

But we seem to be living in an age of information overload. And in the age of playlists and artificial intelligence, we seem to be doubling down on labels and systems of organization that might actually be diluting the art of jazz music.

I'm not sure I'm even comfortable with that term “jazz”: creative music seems to be much more dynamic and expansive than the silos we seem to put it in. The creative artists we hold up high – Wayne Shorter, Louis Armstrong, Paul Bley, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Keith Jarrett, Chick Corea—they all were concerned with self-expression and “music” as a more intangible, pluralistic, conceptual art form.



Colin Farish says:

So true. Living in India and learning to play the sitar, we learned to always sing what we play. This connects our playing to our breathing, and then we're able to more easily sing through our instrument. I too marvel at those that can play Keith Jarrett's improvised solos note for note. When someone asked him what

he thought of that, he simply asked, “why?” Spontaneous composition, or improvisation, is discovered and expressed in the moment, revealing the passions, intention, and inspiration of the artist. The spontaneous free – flow of meaning between the artist and the listener, to me, is the essence of jazz. Thank you for reminding us all of that!



Timothy Clarke says:

Very enjoyable read and informative as well. Thank you. I'm a 78 year old who drifted away from a career in music more than forty years ago, but never really gave up my love for it. Broadway, studio and club date work was slowly disintegrating here in New York during the 1980's and I along with so many of my musician friends either entered the education field or gave it up completely.

Your approach to improvisation makes so much sense. I used to tell my students “if you can imagine it, you can play it”...the key of course was being able to think melodically within the jazz style and that does not come unless you've learned the language. So I would tell them that listening and building your musical vocabulary is a pre-requisite before any improvised line can be built. The idea of singing is a great way, as you say, to make the connection between your musical mind and your instrument.

I was especially impressed by the comments about where jazz is going that you made in your initial email. I agree entirely that too much emphasis is being placed on copying the greats note for note, rather than concentrating on being innovative and unique in your own way. If we all did the former, you might as well not call it “progressive Jazz”.

Also, the points you make regarding the overuse of scales and chord scale relationships to form the basis of solos is on the money. Singing a line is equivalent to playing what you hear in your head, but the challenge I think lies in the ability of the player to execute that line with fluidity and feeling, which many early and intermediate students grapple with.

I think the overriding appeal of jazz improvisation, regardless of what instrument you play, is the challenge. It encompasses creativity, a strong musical vocabulary, an advanced command of your instrument and above all, an ability to convey emotion and feeling within the jazz idiom. Sorry for the tome, Mike. You got me psyched.



Murf Reevesl says:

Thank you Michael for writing this. I believe the internet and social media have changed the way we listen and play music.

As a music director I listen to dozens of albums daily, and I hear the same songs over and over. I may hear ten versions of Ruby, My Dear, but only one or two stand out. I feel they stand out because the artist has injected his personality and experiences into the song.

Songs are like jackets, find the one that fits and when you put it on the jacket and you change, and people can see and feel it. Everything is so quick with emails, downloads etc. that sometimes we forget to tell ourselves, the best for personal development is to go at our own pace, not another's pace. Not the label's pace, the chart's pace or anybody else's pace but your own.

This will take longer, but all great art takes time and patience to develop. Much like a tree. It starts out as a tiny seed, but once the experience of living is added, you have a mighty forest of individuality.



Mark Turner says:

My brother and I have discussed this with respect to blues/ rock guitar playing, which is his thing. Rick Beato has some great YouTube videos discussing rock music's death at the end of the 90's, moving away from blues influence, into what he calls The Era of Perfect Music, where pitch and tempo correction disallows bent notes and tempo variation, and practiced "solos" replace improvisation.

But folks like Aimee Nolte, or Scott Bradlee with any of his collaborations like Post Modern Jukebox cheer me up.



James Coryell says:

As someone who has been listening to jazz for over 5 decades, I contend that the current jazz scene is a caricature of what "jazz" was in the past. The last 20 years of Jazz education has generated technically proficient players who create harmonically correct improvisations, but very few creative artists that truly take their music to a new place.



Gary Campbell says:

You are correct in suggesting that jazz can, and often is, becoming a caricature of itself – a reenactment. This is part of learning the language but not too much beyond that. artistically.

Regarding the obsession on instrumental technique – we know that technique is "the ability to handle a given musical content" – an old definition. However technique in NOT MUSICAL CONTENT or substance.

The individual artist's technique and related matters are discovered/developed in order to execute his or her musical vision. The accomplished artists discover how to do this and accordingly have different techniques. – tone, touch, response, and

so forth. (Bill Evans/McCoy Tyner are examples of this.)

I doubt that John Coltrane worked like crazy just to have chops. He was following his musical vision and figured out how to make it happen. We hear how "Trane's chops evolved as a result of his MUSICAL evolution. Compare his mid-fifties recordings with Miles (Workin', 'Round Midnight, etc.) with his records with his legendary quartet (Crescent, Live at the Vanguard, Love Supreme) and beyond. Not only is this a great study in an artist's honest and genuine evolution, it is all beautiful, great music by the same human being. This is high art, not business.



Ted says:

Is jazz becoming a caricature of itself? Of course it is. The truth is that few people have the talent to improvise. And copying is easier. I was/am? primarily a blues guy.

But I've quit standing in with some bands because they demand that I play my harmonica exactly the way it was recorded back when Big Walter did it. And they don't have a clue that the recording is the way he played it **THAT** time, and maybe no other time.

I was raised in country music, back in the days when the recordings were not great, and the music wasn't great, but man was it full of life. Now it is perfect, and plastic, and dead. Much the same has happened to the blues, and yes, jazz is going down the same path. Talented, but maybe marginally so, performers copying what has gone on before because they don't have anything to add.



John Kafalas says:

The whole art form has stagnated. For awhile, I was going to some excellent sessions at a music store in Boston, and having a great time... but I couldn't help being struck by the fact that they were exactly the same as an equivalent session, say, 30 years ago!

This is with mostly Berklee students (the shop is right next to where Rayburn used to be). I couldn't help thinking, almost nothing had changed between 1988 and 2018... but if you had gone back another 30 years, and compared a typical open session in 1988 with one in 1958, it would have been a completely different story.

In '58, you'd have had a lot of guys playing the Great American Songbook, probably some old-timers still wanting to play Tiger Rag or Rose Room, and maybe a few hip cats who wanted to play the latest stuff from *Kind of Blue* or *Miles Ahead*. Somewhere along the way, things stopped — and “jazz” became codified, curriculum-ified, and otherwise embalmed.

As for the chords-and-scales situation you describe, though, two words: Kenny Wheeler. One of the greatest, most creative and original composers and performers of the modern era, and he was basically melody-based. In fact, he stated that his compositional method was essentially, “write the melody first, then go back and figure out what the chords are that tie it together.” His solos are untranscribable, rhythmically free with a cadence more like speech than like quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes — yet at the same time, tonally colorful, beautiful, and utterly unlike any other player.



Bill Dobbins says:

Everything you said fully resonated with me. Check out what Gary Bartz had to say in the recent *Downbeat*. The solos of the masters are compositions created as the music in the ear is seamlessly expressed through the instrument, not improvisations in the sense of playing something you have never played before, although the musical vocabulary can be expressed in infinite combinations and variants.

This is only possible if the musical language involved is internalized to the same degree as our native verbal language. The ability to sing melody and speak or tap rhythms, then play what you sang and tapped on your instrument is the most comprehensive and economical way to start, as Indian musicians have practiced for many centuries.



Jim Mattavi says:

I agree that a musician shouldn't try to "copy" another musician but should play what is in their head. However I also believe that an aspiring musician should spend a lot of time listening to other musicians including jazz greats. It is that listening that puts the things into one's head to play on one's "machine". To carry this point to an extreme, if someone was a classical trained musician and never listened to jazz, I doubt if he/she could improvise a solo that would sound cool to you and me.

I do like your recommendation to sing before you play but here again would suggest that theory also plays an important role. For example, if one wins a running race is it their left leg or their right leg which caused them to win.

Obviously it's both legs working together that did it. It certainly is important to keep theory and creative "playing from head" in balance. In my own case, I believe I am too bound up in music theory, mainly due to my technical background (I have a Ph D in Engineering), and should just play what I hear in my head instead

of trying to recall scale-chord acceptable notes to hit while playing each measure.

It also seems like this is a habit which is hard to break. Thanks for your thoughts to get out of this trap.that tie it together.” His solos are untranscribable, rhythmically free with a cadence more like speech than like quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes — yet at the same time, tonally colorful, beautiful, and utterly unlike any other player.



Alice Hudder says:

As a very junior musician, I struggle with facility on the instrument and thinking too much about what notes to play. Both of these get in the way of expression of ideas, but are necessary. Every once in a while all the forces come together and in the moment I am part of the music, part of the band, expressing myself and it feels like magic! Then that moment is gone and I yearn for it to happen again. So I practice my scales, chords, and work on tunes....



Vic Schermer says:

First of all, it's natural for all disciplines to go through periods of imitation in acquiring the necessarily skills and insights. Second, a musician's voice is not planned; it arises spontaneously in the process of playing gigs, practicing, introspecting, conversations, etc, etc. Third, there are many terrific players out there who represent the best of what jazz can be. They are virtuosic because they are the newest generation and many have been to conservatory or jazz school. Jazz has plenty of terrific musicians doing great things. What they need is bigger audiences and ways of getting a good income.

The problem you discuss, Mike, is the problem in part of digitalization. It draws people into a world of information, and there is less of an opportunity for people, whatever their endeavors, to live in their own bodies, homes, neighborhoods, etc

and savor the excitement of each ones own embodied, authentic existence. I congratulate the musicians who sustain their deep connection to jazz history, their own culture of origin, and the passion that comes from living ones life fully. I think this is what you are trying to communicate in your article.



Linda Gould says:

Totally agree! When we teach, we often start with form and scales and things the left brain loves. I don't think the George Harrison had any of that in his head when he wrote Here Comes the Sun... 3/8, 5/8, 4/4, 2/4... really?!? AND it sounds great! (Not a Jazz tune but illustrates a point). I think teachers need more of the Bobby McFerrin approach. Get a crowd singing, learn to listen and join in.

Copying a jazz solo is very similar to learning a Chopin Etude from the notes. An admirable talent, and easier to teach than true Jazz improv.

I love Victor Wooten's quote from his book *The Music Lesson...* "It is impossible to 'teach' someone. Teacher is a title. No technology exists to supplant information in someone's brain. The student must teach themselves. The teacher can only guide them." I try very hard to be a guide to my students.

I enjoy what you are doing, Michael. Thank you!

A Reflection and a Lesson in Jazz Interaction

by Richie Beirach with Michael Lake

*E*legy for Bill Evans recorded by me is a recording specifically devoted to the music of Bill Evans. It features pieces that Evans wrote and music that he played. Bassist George Mraz, drummer Al Foster, and I recorded the album right after he died in 1980. I was close to Bill in the last five years of his life. Both George and Al had played with Bill, so this record date was an emotional experience that meant something special to all three of us.

“Nardis” was a tune Bill played right up to the end of his life, and I wanted to record it in a unique way. I wanted to honor Bill without simply copying his musical approach. So my arrangement of the tune was up-tempo, which gave it the stamp of individuality.

The three of us were very much on our game that day, and we were very relaxed. Remember, we had been playing together as a band. We were the rhythm section for the first Quest recording with Dave Liebman. In fact, the day before, we had recorded the first Quest record with Dave, so we were a very tight group.

The recording of “Nardis” that you hear on the album was the first take. The first take is usually the best, because even if the second or third take is good, the problem is that through those next takes, you’re unconsciously trying to improve on the first one; but there is only one first take.

I remember that after playing the melody, instead of going into

a burning 4/4 tempo, which you would think would be natural because of the speed of the arrangement, I put away my left hand and was concentrating on my right hand, playing short, melodic phrases in the middle of the piano. And then a space.

This is a great way to start a solo in an up-tempo tune if you want interaction. If I start out playing eighth notes, there's no room for interaction with the bass and the drums because I'm filling it all in. So George, being a professional and an artist, would walk 4/4, as would Al.

Now, sometimes I do play tunes burning right from the beginning. But this day, I chose to do something different. I played a one-bar phrase, and I think I left two or three bars open. George was a superb listener, with amazing chops and very creative. So he was able to interact with me melodically at that fast tempo. And Al immediately went into an accompaniment mode, articulating very clear time at a soft up-tempo, but still intense.

Next, there was an interesting melodic dialogue between George and me. For example, I played a phrase, stopped, and then George answered it. This was the way we began, answering each other with phrases. The fast tempo helped, because it's going by so quickly that the time flows by itself.

Then, after a while, we played right through the changes in the tune's form. It became not so much trading phrases or cat and mouse but, instead, we were interacting in a much shorter distance in time. Then George and I would play contrasting phrases, together but still not in 4/4.

We arrived at the bridge, and I'm playing big, clear phrases while George is walking with a bright 2/4 feel. We kept this going for the second chorus. I played something that was like a perpetual motion thing. Very smooth. George was shadowing me and supporting me at the same time. We kept that going until the bridge and we still weren't playing an obvious 4/4.

In the second chorus, George went to a pedal point but still wasn't walking. That repeated pedal point on E gave a sense of stability and a building feel.

When you're in a piano trio, dynamics can be a problem because you don't have much of a dynamic range with just the piano. You don't have a trumpet player or a sax player or a guitar player for that higher level of dynamics. Those instruments as soloists allow the rhythm section to create power and dynamics and the sense of a journey to a climactic arrival. With a piano trio, you really have to think about dynamics, and at a certain point, dynamics becomes intuitive, both individually and as a group.

We are now in the second chorus going into the third chorus, and George is starting to walk 4/4 time, and now we're in the burn. Now the interaction shifts between me and Al. Not as much interaction as between George and me, because that was melodic. But Al and I had some interesting rhythmic interaction. George was playing a supportive role, walking strong and swinging, and then things grew very intense and it became impossible to delineate because it was just one creative moment after another.

At the start of George's solo, I laid out for much of it because I had just played a gigantic solo—almost like a piano concerto—that ended in a big climax. So it was time for a change in texture and dynamics. I comped sparsely, using sustained chords under George, which was appropriate for creating contrast from my previous solo.

George took his solo out of time. It was in the form, but it didn't have to be in time, which was a great idea for contrast. So when George began his solo, he kind of went back to the beginning and started at a different level of dynamics so he could build it back up.

Toward the end of the bass solo, George came back into the form and back into the time, and then I comped with more rhythmic variety. George was the kind of bass player who was so well

equipped that you could completely lay out and he still sounded great. With some bass players, you have to comp in order to support the player if they cannot sustain a solo without the piano.

You can never predict what's going to happen with George and Al, and that's why I love group interaction with great players.

That's why I ended up playing jazz for my career. Even though I saw when I was young that classical piano music was wonderful and satisfying, it was always going to be basically the same. Because with the music of Beethoven or Chopin or Ligeti, you know what's coming. I didn't want to know what was coming next, and jazz is always a creative surprise for the performer and the audience.

Remember, this was the first take of "Nardis," which, looking back, was like a nugget of gold. We followed that up with another take, because you always want to do that just in case something goes wrong with the head, so you can more easily edit. The second take was okay but nothing special. We tried to do something different, but realize that when you're playing jazz and you're "trying," you're dead.

Now sometimes you record a first take and it's messed up because of intonation or some other problem, especially with something up-tempo. Then you record a second take, and then usually it's the third take that has the accuracy you're looking for, with good intonation, swing, and inspiration. But this was the first take, and I remember we were all very happy with it.

We did not discuss how we would record "Nardis" or any of the other tunes before the session because, remember, we were a working band with our own way of playing. I didn't need to say, "Okay, in the first chorus, let's just be cool and have melodic interplay, and then..." No. Because sometimes when we played in a club like the Vanguard or Sweet Basil, we might have used "Nardis" as a closer, playing live in front of an audience where

we didn't have much interplay. We would go right into the time and right into the highest dynamic, because we were using it as a closer. Recording in the studio is different. We didn't discuss how we would approach the tune for that recording, and that spontaneity is the essence of jazz.

Now, we did rehearse the head and the ending so that we all hit the accents of the melody together. And the ending was an arrangement we rehearsed. We wanted the head and the end to be a tight arrangement, but we intentionally didn't speak about the rest of the tune because we wanted to create musical surprises.

To create an environment for improvised surprises, you've got to be light-footed, because you must constantly be shifting direction. That's the benefit of being older. You have experience, you're not nervous, you have confidence—all of which allows you to pull off your creative ideas. Our guide for this, of course, was the second Miles Davis quintet. That group's concepts in the 1960s gave our generation our inspiration.

To play with this level of musical dexterity and interaction requires exceptional abilities. George Mraz was one in a million. He was one of those unusual players who had amazing technique on the bass. The bass is a very difficult instrument to play, especially soloistically and melodically, because it's so big. It has a wide range from its gigantic soundboard that goes from top to bottom. The intonation is difficult, and to get a big, fat sound and play the instrument fluently, as George did, is very rare.

There were and are many wonderful bass players—Charlie Haden and Jimmy Garrison and Rufus Reed and Ray Drummond—but they lack George's fluency in the upper register of the bass. They played with great time and feel. But George was a great soloist who we called a gazelle, because it felt like George was jumping 20 feet up in the air.

George wasn't just about technique, however. He had humanity,

and expression and understanding of harmony and melody. He was also a wonderful composer, as evidenced by his tune “Wisteria” on the first Quest album, entitled *Quest*.

He had the quickness of ear to hear exactly what I was playing. He didn't just copy it; he answered it and extended it. There were and are still a few bass players like George. Eddie Gomez is like that. Dave Holland and Mark Johnson, and Miroslav Vitouš played like that when he was younger. They played with a flexibility, facility, and fluency that allow the bass to interact with the piano. Of course, Scott LaFaro on bass in the original Bill Evans trio was the beginning of that type of interaction.

Regarding Al Foster: I've known Al for 40 years. He is a very simple cat. He grew up in a lower east side Manhattan project in a very tough neighborhood. He became a smooth, warm, and humble player devoted to jazz. He could swing. Al had the time feel. He had the right hand, that feeling in his ride cymbal that just made you want to play.

Al was strong like a horse. He could really hit hard without it being an ugly sound. He had power. But the most important thing was that he had great taste and sensitivity along with spontaneous, intuitive dynamics. He didn't have to play loud all the time to prove himself. He loved playing ballads. He had such great taste that he could make a musical moment just using brushes and a soft hit.

Al was very traditional but not orthodox. He was very creative. He didn't play like Billy Hart or Tony Williams or Jack DeJohnette or Adam Nussbaum. Those drummers played more against you and more orchestral. Al played with you rhythmically.

I'm thinking back to the Pendulum album we recorded live at the Village Vanguard in 1978 — me, Lieb, Randy Brecker, Frank Tusa, and Al. When I started a rhythmic pattern, Al would instantly hear it and play it with me almost like a big band, but without it being

corny. In a piano trio, Al was ideal because of the wide range of his dynamics. He could play intense and swing, but softly.

Al was also an excellent soloist. He always played compositional solos. They were not typical, boring drum solos that make you look at your watch. He was very aware of what he played, so during a set or a night or in a recording, he would vary his solos. In a recording, he gave you variety within multiple takes.

Al loved playing with George; they felt the time exactly in the same part of the beat. I'm not talking just about just one, two, three, four. Because each beat has three basic parts: the top of the beat, on the beat, and then behind the beat. Al and George agreed where they put the time for a quarter note. And for me, it was so great because I could just go in and out as I pleased. Because of that, everything I played ended up swinging. I had their solid support.

Remember, the piano was invented a little more than three hundred years ago, and the bass a little after that. But the trap drum set is a relatively new instrument, so it doesn't have the long history of the piano and bass. I think that's an advantage, because that means the jazz drum kit is still fertile ground and fresh for innovation.

Al sometimes reacted spontaneously with a powerful, energetic smack that you want from a drummer. He is a scientist and a jazz historian. He knows all the old cats like Big Sid Catlett and Baby Dodds, and of course Max Roach, Art Taylor, Kenny Clark, Art Blakey, Tony Williams, and Jack DeJohnette and Billy Hart. Al was a peer of Billy Hart. They grew up and practiced together when they were 17-year-old boys, always dreaming of playing with Miles, which of course came true for them both.

Performing more interactively

For players who want to produce a more interactive performance experience, they have to first have their basic skills unconsciously together. They've got to be past thinking about the chords, the time, and the form. If you have to worry about the time or the form or the chords or your technique, you don't have the presence of mind or the ear to interact, because you're still focused on those more fundamental aspects, which have to be as automatic and subconscious as breathing.

Then you have to want to play interactively. A lot of players don't want to. They don't like it. They don't understand it, and it's not part of their vocabulary. But for those who do want to play more interactively, the best thing they can do is study the great players who played like Bill Evans. Bill was, in my estimation, the origination point of real melodic interaction between the bass and the piano. Bill also played interactively in a duo with Jim Hall. Paul Bley was another great example of interactivity, with Gary Peacock on bass and Barry Altschul on drums. They were chromatic and floating, with more pulse playing, which is a way of playing the time without emphasizing each beat in the bar.

As I've been influenced by Bill Evans and Paul Bley, I've played with a lot of interaction on many of my records with Dave Holland, Eddie Gomez, George Mraz, and Ron McClure. It provides me with other options besides playing the head with the predictable flow of 4/4 time, everyone takes a solo, trade with the drummer and head out. That bebop formula works, but it's already been done.

For the musician who wants to play interactively, listen to piano players who interact with bass players. If you're a piano player and you really want to interact, for example, put your left hand away and treat your right hand like a horn. This is what you'll learn especially if you listen to Paul Bley, because if you're starting your solo right away with right-hand lines and left-hand chords,

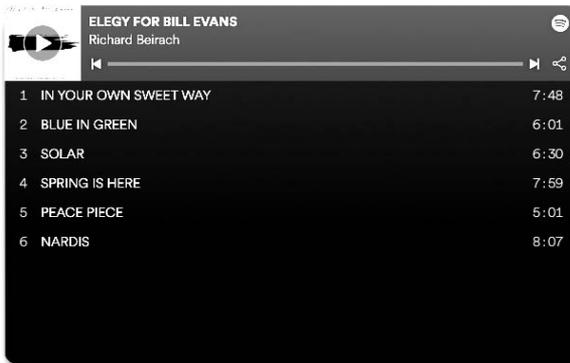
it's too crowded for a successful interaction. There's no room left.

You have to create a space for the interaction between the instruments in the group that want to interact. A piano player who wants to have more interaction with the drums could utilize two-handed chords.

My strongest and best advice is to strengthen your basic skills. If they're not there yet, work on them and then listen to players who play interactively with the other members of the group and make a loop to really hear what is going on.

Set the playback of an audio file to loop a Bill Evans trio record like "Portrait in Jazz". Listen to it all day to get what those musicians played into your ear. Work the nonverbal sound into your subconscious, so that you can draw upon that when you're in the moment of creation. If you wake up in the morning with the song swirling around in your head, you've succeeded in getting it into your subconscious to draw from when you play.

Listen to the Richie Beirach trio recording of "Nardis" within the *Elegy for Bill Evans* album on Spotify:



Wishing you well on your journey

We hope that we have provided you with some fresh ideas and a renewed perspective that will help you perform your jazz craft at a higher level, whether you consider yourself primarily a teacher or a player.

You don't have to agree with everything we have written in this frank commentary of jazz education. But we hope that as you've absorbed the experiences, ideas, and opinions we've expressed here, you will have been inspired to think a little differently and maybe even try something new.

Richie and Mike

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“Richie’s thoughts within this book are as tight as usual. He positions himself in a way that could be construed as argumentative on several subjects but always thought-out and logical (as he is musically as well.)

The mentors description with Richie as the centerpiece are historical in their implications considering the learning on the job atmosphere that our generation reveled in.

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