

DEVELOPING STYLE

Part 1

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Jazz great Miles Davis was once quoted as saying there were no innovators left, only stylists. Whether an accurate assessment of the state of jazz or not, one thing's for sure, there are certainly less of the former and more of the latter.

Webster's dictionary defines innovation as "...to change or alter by introducing something new..." Webster further defines style as "...distinction, excellence, originality and character in any form of artistic or literary expression..."

Most of us would aspire to introduce something new but it is a rare event. What we are best left with then is at least the ability to develop our own distinctive style of playing. To be sure, Most of the great jazz innovators, for example, Bird, Dizzy, Miles, Coltrane, Monk, Ornette, to mention just a few, all started out as stylists and transcended style to become innovators. Very few of us exited the womb as full fledged innovators. Developing "distinction, excellence, originality and character" in one's playing must be one of the primary goals of any jazz improviser. Only by acquiring your own musical voice can one hope to ever transcend style to achieve the rare status of an innovator.

Developing Your Own Voice

If you're a dedicated student of jazz history, and if you're not you should be, play any recording of any of the jazz greats from 1900 to 1970. Start the record at any point in the recording and there is no doubt who you're listening to. You'll understand what I mean about having your own voice. It was a point of personal pride for these musicians to have developed a personal style of playing that anyone could recognize within a few bars of hearing them solo. Although difficult to achieve, the elements of a personal voice are simply defined as having an individual sound or touch on your instrument, articulating time in your own way, developing your own musical vocabulary from the tradition, and a recognizable manner of articulating that vocabulary.

This article hopes to show that, although not as yet fully expressed, the seeds of these four elements are already established within each player's mind and body. It remains the student's job to develop a process of study for bringing their own personal voice to the fore.

Historically, the technique used for bringing out your own voice has been, and still is, to copy or "model" the music of players from preceding generations. This modeling generally took two forms: A student selected one single player to emulate or took the eclectic approach by modeling many players. In either case, the lineage of the model or models emulated became an integral and evident part of each new generation's playing. For example, just to name a few, one can easily hear the lineage in the music of the following players: Roy Eldridge's influence on Dizzy, Louis Smith's on Bird, Duke's on Monk, Dizzy on Miles, Prez on Sonny Rollins, Dexter on Coltrane, Errol Garner and Nat Cole on Ahmad Jamal. The list is endless. Over the years, through this process of "selection," the mentor's influence led each player to develop their own style. In a most basic sense, individual style is developed by through each individual's application of the selective process to the history of the music.

The Selection Process

Implicit in the preceding is that fact that to develop one's own voice, you have to listen to a lot of music for a long time. You have to expose yourself to every possible variety of jazz in order to be able to decide who or what you want to copy. As there is over one hundred years of musical history to select from and as there is not enough time in any one person's lifetime to select everything within that history to copy, it becomes evident that one cannot copy everything. The question then becomes "how do I decide what to copy that will bring out my own individual voice?"

The selective process is guided by being sensitive to and trusting in your intuition and emotions. Most students don't believe they have the instincts to make these decisions, or that you can make a wrong decision about what to copy. There is no such thing as a "wrong decision" when it comes to copying. In truth, most of the materiel you'll copy over the years you'll not ever play or throw out. Having a clear idea of how you want to play is a rarity and, to a great degree, you find out how you want to play though a process of elimination. You try something new and it either works for you or it doesn't. If it works, you keep it. If it doesn't, you throw it out. Truly, finding your own voice is often, through a process of elimination, a matter of finding where you don't want to be rather than knowing where you are going. There is no substitute for the agonizing and on-going process of experimentation and trial and error that is a part of each player's learning process!

As a teacher I've always felt uncomfortable with most student's tendency to diminish their discriminative abilities by casting the teacher in the role of the "expert" who knows everything, and the student as one who knows nothing. A teacher's true function is to develop the individual talents of each student as opposed to stamping out carbon copies of the teacher. In this way we are not so much teachers but more like coaches. We must be sensitive to and develop each student's own way of thinking and feeling about music. I can't tell how many times I've showed a student something and they've responded by saying "Gee Hal, I was feeling something like that but didn't understand it until you clarified it by putting it into words." This reaction can only mean one thing; that students do sense what's happening, but don't trust themselves or believe it because they have put themselves into the role of "students who don't know anything." The first element in developing your own style is to trust your instincts and emotions! With out this trust, you won't be able to apply the decision making process to the selective process.

As I mentioned earlier, the elements of your individual style are already part of your mind and body. No two people are the same. No two players body's are the same. The science of psycho acoustics is based on the scientific fact that no two people hear the same way either. We are already individuals, we just don't know have a technique for bringing this individuality out.

The Mystery

It would be safe to say that we spend most of our musical careers trying to solve the mystery of "how do I want to play?" As in any mystery, finding it's solution is a matter of looking for musical clues. These clues exist in the history of the music and in ourselves. In this sense we are detectives, ever on the lookout for clues to lead us down the path of developing our own voices. This is what makes learning how to play more of an exciting adventure than an onerous task. Learning how to play music is a process of self-discovery, of learning more about ourselves and how we feel about music, and for that matter, life.

The clues can be found only by trusting your instincts and emotions and listening to a lot of music. It is a matter of using outside stimuli to discover your internal emotional individuality.

No two people have the same life experiences. When you're a viewer or listener of any artistic event, you bring your total life's experience to the event along with you. The event is perceived through these experiences and appreciated to the degree that the artist has established a resonance with the you as the viewer. An art can only be appreciated if a bond has been created between the artist and viewer and the viewer can "relate" to what the artist is trying to portray on an emotional and intuitive level. If you don't relate to it, you don't appreciate or understand it. The function of art is to create a greater understanding of oneself and the world, both as artist and viewer.

For example: You're listening to a Coltrane solo. It will be a sure bet that not every idea within his solo will have a uniform emotional effect upon you. Some ideas will strike you harder than others. Those ideas that hit you on a gut level are clues to the way you feel about music. A relationship was established between you and Coltrane and he showed you something about yourself. These clues must be copied and explored (I'll show how you explore these clues in Part 2). They will lead the way to your own individuality. You may not know what it is in the idea that appealed to you. You may never know. It's not important to know that. What is important is to follow the musical clue to where ever it takes you as a guide to solving the mystery "how I want to play."

A case in point: Rather than select one particular model to emulate, I ended up, over the years, picking a series of models. When someone asked me who's playing I liked, my answer was "anyone

that can play something I can't." I started out copying pianists Dave Brubeck and George Shearing. I guess at that early stage, they were the easiest for me to hear. Then I graduated to John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet until I heard Red Garland. I copied everything I could about Red's playing for years. Now at this point, you might wonder how copying someone so closely could lead you to your own individuality as opposed to stifling it?

In the 1950's I attended the Berklee School of Music, as it was called at the time. A wonderful man named Harry Smith, was teaching there as a vocal coach and pianist. He had perfect pitch and could hear anything under the sun. He also was very generous with his spare time and had a notation hand that was almost machine-like in its perfection. At that time there weren't as many published transcriptions as there are now. You could go to Harry and request a copy of any solo or voicings and two weeks later he have them for you.

I'd run to the piano and play Red's solo's and voicings along with his recordings. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how accurately I emulated his playing, I sounded nothing like him. At first I found this to be depressing. After trying this for a while the truth became evident. I didn't have the same hands as Red. Nor the same ears. The only thing I could do was my own version of Red's playing. And that's what everyone who copies does, their own version of who they're copying. The only thing you can do is your own version because no two people are alike.

After a few years of trying to copy Red, I then went on to copy a whole series of bebop pianists: Tommy Flannigan, Bud Powell, Hank Jones, Wynton Kelly, Errol Garner, Lennie Tristano, Bill Evans, McCoy Tyner, and more. Each one of them had something to show me about myself, although I never knew what it was they were trying to show me. I just followed my feelings. For one period I'd say, "hey, I want to play like him" and get into their playing for along time. Then after a while of absorbing that players music I'd say, "Nah, I don't want to play like him anymore, I want to play like this other guy." And so on and so on. It was the eclectic approach at work. That's when I began to trust my instincts and started going where ever the music took me.

In a more recent situation, When I started my trio in 1990, I had fallen back in love with Ahmad Jamal's playing again. I listened to everything I could find that he recorded and caught him live whenever possible. During this period my arrangements became rather elaborate and I was heavy into his "formalism;" with sometimes alternate interludes and ostinato vamps. This went on for years. I knew that he was trying to tell me something but not exactly what it was. I just followed my instincts. After about three of four years of doing this, I started to change and wrote more open arrangements. Much less "formal." It was one of those rare times when I actually found out what it was that attracted me to his playing again. It wasn't the formalism of his arrangements that was I responding to but how to apply that kind of formalism to my soloing. By emulating my own version of his formal style of arranging, I was eventually able to add that kind of formalism to my own improvising.

How And What To Copy

As I mentioned, during the time I was a student, there weren't as many published transcriptions available as there are now. Unfortunately, though these transcriptions do us a service by making it easier to see what a musician is playing, making it easier doesn't really help us. Transcriptions have a value in showing the continuity of a solo but the process of transcribing should be left to the individual. Transcribing improves the ear. In the beginning, you may not be copying exactly what your hearing. That's okay. You want to do your own version what you're copying anyway. The more you copy, the more accurate your ears become.

What is important is to copy only those ideas that strike you on an emotional, gut level. Make them into exercises and learn them in all twelve keys. Once you've learned them, try to alter them to fit over other sets of changes. Redorder the components in the idea to find different ways to put them together. By exploring that idea in as many ways as possible you are exploring your own way of hearing and playing.

Deciding what to practice is always a challenge. When it comes to practicing use one rule and one rule only: Practice only what you like! I don't mean that once you learned a lick that you play it over and over again. I mean copy only the ideas you relate to strongly on an emotional level. Let your feelings be the guide. Trust them.

At this point most educators would jump up with accusations of "heretic, heretic!" Their concerns misguidedly being that by practicing only what you like you may not be thorough. Being thorough should not be one of your concerns. There is too much to work on to worry about that. Also, that's a particularly western attitude toward learning music that really doesn't apply here. Western attitudes tend to separate ideas into their smallest components in order to analyze and understand them. However, non-western thinking assumes that everything is connected to everything else. Thus is particularly so when discussing the body-mind-emotion relationship. When you learn something new you don't only improve just in that one area, you improve in all areas because the body-mind-emotion relationship is all connected together. Everything affects everything else. There are no isolated events! They only appear isolated.

A case in point: I joined the Phils Woods Quartet in 1980. During the ten to fifteen year before that I was heavily involved in learning how to play pentatonics. It took a while but eventually I became quite good at it. As you can see from some of my preceding anecdotes, my primary and earliest roots were based in the bebop tradition. Phil's band was a true bebop band in every sense of the word yet I was still playing a lot of pentatonics and I felt I was sounding out of context with the band.

One night we were to play a concert at a New York venue called The Bottom Line. I was grappling with this problem of being out of context and realized I was approaching the bandstand with a preconception of how I wanted to play - pentatonics. As if I was saying to myself "I'm going to play this way tonight." As any performing artist will attest, approaching the bandstand with any preconceptions about what you're going to play can lower the quality of your performance. I already knew this but had forgotten it.

That night, before the gig, while sitting at my kitchen table having coffee after my nap, I decided that I was going to approach the bandstand with the proper attitude, no preconceptions. My attitude was going to be "what comes out is what's happening." I'm just going to go up there and play and what ever comes out comes out. And that's what I did.

What was so illuminating about that experience was that all my earlier bebop roots came out. My bebop playing had improved over the fifteen years that I had been improving my pentatonic playing, as if I had been playing bebop during those intervening years!

It's not necessary to take a linear, straight lined approach to practicing. Jump around and practice a variety of things. It doesn't make any difference what you practice as long as you improve in that area. Any area you improve in improves all other areas of your music. Practicing should not be boring, it should be interesting and fun. It should be a process of self exploration and discovery. I can't think of anything more exciting in life than learning something new about yourself.

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