Transcribing Solos

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There are very few things all jazz teachers agree upon. By very few, I mean that the only three I've found universally are learning tunes, practicing scales and copying solos. To be sure, most jazz teachers will disagree on exactly how to carry out the learning of tunes, practicing of scales, and copying of solos; but most will agree that they are indeed good things to do. Every great jazz musician from Louis Armstrong through the present learned their craft, at least in part, by copying their favorite lines from their favorite players. In my opinion, this may be the single most important facet of learning jazz.

My method

The player must feel free, of course, to choose whatever method works the best for him. Some advocate memorizing, others writing down as you go. Some advocate transcribing whole solos, others will tell you just to pick and choose your favorite lines. Some teachers prohibit the use of any kind of "slowing down" technology, calling it a crutch; others insist on it, arguing that even for advanced players, there is much to be gained by looking at your favorite player's style under the proverbial magnifying glass. I even had a teacher tell me to only learn the solo by singing the correct pitches and rhythms, never even transferring this to the horn! There are certain advantages to all these methods, depending on your individual style of learning. If you have not yet arrived at such a method, I believe mine will help you get started on the right path. I have had success with it with myself as well as many of my students.

1) Learn every note, every rhythm, every articulation, even every mistake on the solo. Be anal-retentive about it. Record yourself playing a measure, then play back the original disc and nit-pick your own playing. When he scoops, you scoop. When he slurs, you slur. When he fracks a note, you frack that same note. The goal is to play the solo so perfectly that, in a "blind taste test," a sensitive listener would have a hard time distinguishing you from the record.

Don't be alarmed if step 1 takes a long time. By a long time, I mean possibly **several months** if you are a first-time transcriber. Learn one note at a time if you have to, and you may have to relearn on Tuesday what you practiced on Monday. Quality over quantity – the quantity will take care of itself. If your first good-length solo takes you three months to learn, the next one may only take two months to learn, the next one month, and so on. I know people who can transcribe a five-chorus solo in a half hour, but that's only because they've transcribed literally hundreds of them.

2) After achieving mastery with the solo, write it down. Do this preferably without your instrument or the CD, if you can. Also write in the changes to the tune above the actual solo.

3) Analyze the solo with whatever theoretical knowledge you currently posses. Although this step is not always necessary, it is often illuminating to analyze the solo melodically,

harmonically, and thematically. There are certain elements that pop up more often than others in great solos, and I like to highlight each one I see in a different color of pen. A good book to aid in this type of analysis is Jerry Coker's *Elements of the Jazz Language*.

4) Take this solo and play it out of order. For example, if it is a 5-chorus solo, play the choruses in the order 3-4-2-1-5. It is not necessary to do all permutations, but do enough so that you feel you could do any order of choruses on cue. Some choruses may not line up – in other words, chorus #4 may end on a low G, and chorus #1 may start on a high F. Invent your own connecting material to make these transitions smoother. After you've played the choruses out of order, take pieces from various choruses and make a chorus out of them. For example, if I have a 5-chorus 12-bar blues in front of me, I might take the 1st four bars of chorus #5, the 2nd four bars of chorus #2, and the last four bars of chorus #1. Again, it is not necessary to do all permutations, and you will have to sometimes invent your own connecting material.

5) This is my favorite step. Here is where you steal some lines and actually learn to use them out of their original context, making them your own and increasing your jazz vocabulary. Certain harmonic sequences appear more often than others. Here are what I believe to be the eight most common sequences:

- Short (1-measure) ii-V
- Long (2-measure) ii-V
- Short minor ii-V
- Long minor ii-V
- iii-vi-ii-V
- dominant cycle patterns (E7-A7-D7-G7…)
- "Back-door" ii-V's (eg. Dm7-G7-Amaj7)
- I-II7 (a la A Train, Girl From Ipanima, Watch What Happens, etc.)

Every time you see a line you like over one of these chord progressions, write it down, learn it in all twelve keys, and file it away for future use.

Why Transcribe?

Jazz is supposed to be a creative, individual art, isn't it? So why spend all this time copying other people's music? Because jazz is also a language, and as such, we need to learn it as you would learn a language. In particular, how you learned your first language. From as young as three days old, infants attempt to communicate by copying their parents. The child learns verbal communication by listening to it constantly and trying to imitate it. At the first hint of "da-da," the parents are ecstatic with joy. Five minutes later, they realize they still have lots of work to do when the baby points to the dog and says "da-da." The child has learned the word, but not yet the context of it. As the child grows, he learns more words and their proper contexts until he is able to form complete sentences, paragraphs, and even do his own creative writing. All this happens before he ever takes his first grammar class.

Learning jazz should be the same way. You absorb yourself in it by listening to it constantly. From this alone, you will be amazed how much music is absorbed just through "osmosis," so to speak. You learn licks (words) and try to plug them into every context you can. Sometimes, they don't fit with the chord changes (contexts), and so you have to learn when the appropriate place is for each line. Pretty soon you're linking lines together to form longer musical sentences, essays and poetry. Now you're communicating. And when you finally take a Music Theory (Grammar) class, it makes sense because it jibes with your previous experience.

Don't misunderstand: by "pretty soon" I'm talking about a number of years. Just think how long it takes a child before he even enough of a vocabulary to make himself understood to adults. I would say between 3 and 4 years, and that is being exposed to the English language every waking minute! But be patient with yourself. This way of learning is far preferable to the alternative. The alternative, which I see far too often in jazz education, is to accumulate lots of theoretical knowledge, lots of technique, and learn lots of lines from books. The result is usually a poor player who can't apply what he knows, and the few lines he can play sound "square" because he has learned them with his eyes and not his ears. This is analogous to how most of us learn our second languages. We take four years of Spanish in high school, writing more than we are speaking, and learning the strange grammar rules at the same time. Much better would be to live in a foreign country for a period of time and immerse yourself in the language and culture. I have personal experience with both, and I can say with certainty that the latter method is far superior for language acquisition. To my own students who are reading this article and remembering my office wall stacked with jazz books, let me explain my hypocrisy. I think jazz books are great, but not as a starting point. Even beginning jazz books should be used only after you have learned about 10 solos by ear. By then you'll have the beginnings of a personal style, and the lines you learn out of books will not sound "square." Also, by this point, any explanation of theoretical concepts will solidify and expand on things of which you already have an internal concept, rather than eliciting confusion.

Am I ready to transcribe? If so, where do I start?

I believe anyone who has had at least a year of training on their instrument is ready for some sort of transcribing. I would, or course, recommend starting simple. Miles Davis is always a good first choice, because he played so few notes, yet so beautifully. As soon as possible, however, I would try to move to a player on your instrument. For a young player with chops that are just beginning to develop, I would start with Lee Konitz on alto sax, Dexter Gordon or Stan Getz on tenor sax, Miles Davis or Chet Baker on trumpet, Curtis Fuller on trombone, Red Garland or Horace Silver on piano, Jimmy Cobb on drums, or Slam Stewart on bass. I picked these players because they make a lot of music without a lot of notes. If you already have "chops," great. Just pick your favorite player and go for it. Transcribe every day, even if you can only get through a bar or two. Besides being the best way to learn jazz, I've seen from experience that your time feeel, intonation, technique, articulation, style, aural skills, memorization, short-term memory, ability to concentrate, and knowledge of music theory will also improve. Happy transcribing!