

Intro to Improv 3, 2016 - Bruce Cassidy

Want to ace this course? **Every day play something in every key!**

I'm going to quiz you on this statement. You will do fine here and in the pro world if you do this I assure you.

We spend too much time in class sorting out technical issues (often, lack of familiarity with 'other' keys). Let's get some ability to change keys quickly so we can concentrate on 'the music'. Oh yes, and play assigned phrases over the range of your instrument.

Helpful stuff: These are some issues that are perennial.

- Get a Theme Book. i.e. a loose leaf or preferably a bound music book that you can make notes in. Paper is better than digital. Paper lasts - digital formats change regularly. In this book you can put ideas for songs, phrases that you want to practice - many musical related things.
- Practice with a metronome - If you're not practicing with a metronome you're not practicing.
- Accuracy first and last - speed will come.
- Doing something difficult? - just play the notes first, then apply the rhythm - slowly at first.
- Keep a practice log - this really makes a difference if you want to improve.

Horn players: • If you want the band to play softer then play softly and if they are good musicians they will turn down - if they never turn down don't work with them. Don't try to match the level of those with an amp. Rock bands are a special case - be careful - hearing is a precious sense for us.

• Vibrato is not corny - unless applied mechanically or habitually. There is a wealth of expression there. Listen to how great instrumental stylists and vocalists use it. Music is the language of feeling and vibrato (and teasing the pitch) is an important element.

Guitarists: • play something in every key, or comp a song, within the same 5 frets across the keyboard. Then on one string in the same key on different strings. No fair just changing position to transpose - let's get some chops.

Vocalists: • Do you really know what key you want to sing this song in? Fake books are just fake books and not the authority on your voice. Also you should know different keys for a song depending on whether it is delivered in a high-energy or gentle setting. Just knowing your top and bottom comfort notes is not enough.

- If possible avoid E and A unless playing with a guitar band or top pros. (horn players might screw up)
- If you sing a song in a non-standard key then you should have readable (charts (at least lead lines and changes) in concert, Bb and Eb at hand. 'At hand' in this course means the if the syllabus says we are playing All The Things You Are then have parts for everyone that week, you'll get to sing more.
- Know the lyrics from memory to *many* common songs so you can sit in on demand. (or, at least, have them quickly at hand in your own book or on an iPad).

Drummers: • Can you hear the soloist?

- Remember brushes? These should be within easy reach.
- Avoid playing at mm=60 and 120 too much when practicing (this applies to everyone). Too much music is played at these tempos. If we start a song above 60 or 120 we tend to slow down to it or if we start a song slightly slower we tend to speed up to those tempos.
- Get a pro metronome and be prepared to count in the band (don't be shy - is everyone with you?). Many leaders will appreciate it (but not all!).
- Piano is a percussion instrument - be prepared to get into it - or get at the vibraphone - they sound great (unless you play them like drums) - oh yes, and vibes have a pedal...
- Be able to play the rhythm of the melody of any song on snare (and sing it too). If the soloist gets lost then be prepared (tactfully) to sing the melody to him/her.
- Be appropriate to the song and situation in terms of playing 'fours'. It's easy to lose horn players who don't have your metric chops. Playing in a big band will cure you of getting too far out on breaks.
- "Know why players get lost when drummers play fours? It's often because the drummer's time is so bad". (Terry Clarke)

Bassists: • Turn down.

- Learn to play the melody - but don't do it while comping.
- Don't be afraid to roll a bit of bottom off your sound depending on the situation. Woofy is sweet but sometimes you have to bark to telegraph the pitch to the band.

Keyboardists: • Comp like Horace Silver, Red Garland or other masterful traditional players if you want horn players to love playing with you.

- Don't wait till the third beat of the bar to lay down the next change if you are playing with semi-pros or if the player you are backing isn't familiar with the tune (that's almost always the case in these classes).

Everyone: • Show up for class. You can expect 50% just for being here on time, paying attention and trying. Having got this far means you have jumped through quite a few hoops - keep it up - it's not over yet. As a matter of fact it's never over.

- Forget about being the best - there is none. Mohammed Ali was finally defeated and so will everyone else. Forget about the jazz olympics, Wynton Marsalis has already won that. Just imagine you are playing for your mother - don't get fancy. Do this and you'll get work - and 'move' people.
- To have to assign marks in art is an odious thing and the product of the industrial revolution - it sucks, but we have to have some way of indicating your technical ability. Because you don't get a great mark doesn't mean you are not any good - it just means there is room for improvement - and there always is! Welcome criticism - often non-musicians have very useful comments *and* they pay to listen to you - or not.

- Want to impress others? then don't try to impress them - that really stands out - in a musical way.
- Be prepared to be uncomfortable. Improvisation is about dealing with the unexpected. If you enter every conversation by telling the same story or using a lot of big words then you'll have few friends - see what I mean? Interesting that we can wail over an Aebersold track and suck on the same tune when playing it live - think about this.
- Don't miss a chance to play with musicians that are better than you - good for your ego (the less ego the better) and great for your playing.
- Play within your bubble. "What's that?" you ask... Well, if you play three wrong notes in a row then you are outside it. The cure: slow down, play fewer notes or play the melody.
- Hear it then play it. Don't just jump in. One tactic is to wait until you have something to say. If you are poised to play then (usually) responsive players will give you a few bars, depending on the tune and energy level, to start your solo. Listen to the previous soloist and the general vibe as your solo approaches and that will feed you ideas.
- The hip thing you played yesterday that knocked everyone out is sure to fail today... I promise you.
- I recommend practicing phrases and patterns. This is just for familiarity with keys and your instrument. Best leave these licks in the woodshed though. Don't trot out these things during solos - boring and mechanical. Just play what you hear and feel.
- Doing a lift? Do it by ear and play it from memory. The published transcriptions are often full of mistakes and music notation gives no indication of energy, time subtleties and vibrato.
- Do lifts of performances of other instruments than your own.
- The programs 'Transcribe' and 'Amazing Slow Downer' are very helpful. If the lines are fast (even if they aren't) play the song at half speed and down an octave to hear subtleties that can easily be missed at the regular tempo.
- Have a mission. Maynard Ferguson wanted to play the Arban's Trumpet Method up an octave. A virtuoso saxophone player friend of mine decided to learn to trill from every note to every other note. It was their mission and they developed beyond the norm. They set lofty goals that suited them. To try to 'beat' another player is a lower goal. To indulge in your passion to the nth degree is to develop uniquely.
- Develop relationships with other musicians. It's always been the case that 'work goes to friends'.
- Finally a quote from the masterful teacher and bandleader Herb Pomeroy: "A player should come to a gig first as a human spirit, second as a musician and third as an instrumentalist. Too many players reverse that order."