

Seven Concepts for Successful Improvisation

1. **Know the melody.** Many good ideas can come from the melody of the tune. You can embellish what's already there, change the phrasing, create new rhythmic interest, etc. Many players forget this valuable resource that is present in every tune. Also, working off the melody is a good way to avoid getting lost in the form while you are improvising.
2. **Know the form.** Jazz improvisations are based on tunes with a specific number of measures, called the form. Once through the form is called a chorus. An improviser must decide how many choruses they will take, and must telegraph this information to the rhythm section nonverbally.
3. **Use space.** Don't try to fill up every beat of every bar. This is as exhausting for the listener as it is for you. What you leave out can be as important as what you put in. Many beginning improvisers forget this concept.
4. **Start simply, listen, develop.** The great saxophonist/clarinetist Sidney Bechet once complained that many bebop musicians didn't ever seem to develop a coherent solo, because they were consumed with playing too many 'licks'. It is usually more effective to start simply and build logically than it is to come at the listener with a wall of sound that leaves you nowhere to go.
5. **Know the tradition.** If you're playing jazz, you need to listen to jazz. Start with Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, then seek out recordings by Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, JJ Johnson, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Kenny Burrell, Sonny Rollins, Clifford Brown, Max Roach, and others. For many years, musicians learned to play by listening to the great innovators in jazz. To put it another way, imagine how difficult it would be to learn to speak French if you just studied it out of a book but never heard the language spoken aloud. Jazz is an aural tradition; your ears are your greatest tool.
6. **Keep it rhythmic.** If you're improvising on a swing tune, your improvisation has to swing. Seems obvious, but many beginners don't do it. Another pitfall: rushing, which is instant death to a swing feel. Dragging is OK in jazz, but rushing never is. Try taking one note and make something interesting out of it rhythmically--a device common to advanced players.
7. **Use interesting harmonic devices.** There is no substitute for knowing what is going on with the chord changes of a tune, but that is just the first step. Most jazz musicians commonly employ alterations to the written chord changes that utilize substitutions, harmonic anticipation, side-slipping into distant key centers, and other advanced techniques. See *Elements of the Jazz Language for the Developing Improvisor* by Jerry Coker for more info.