

On Practicing

Kim Ratcliffe /07/14

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? That's right. Knuckle down, buckle down, do it, do it, do it. But how? When working on music that involves improvisation there are three big areas of study, and different approaches to accumulating and applying new knowledge and internalizing what we may already know. When we're focussed, improving, and involved with the music, it's very rewarding.

1. Instrument

- Sound/ Technique/ Basics - mechanics, posture, economy of movement, being relaxed and letting go of tension (for wind players - breathing, long tones and instrument specific warmups,). Technical exercises - scales, intervals, arpeggios, register and range ex. For string/piano players this might also include left/ right hand exercises, fingering ex. and so on. For drummers - 4 way independence, rudiments on drums and mallet instruments. For all players - sound production, touch, control of dynamics, gear issues.
- also includes sight reading practice, working on rhythmic concepts, ear training.

2. Vocabulary, Transcription, Playing along with Recordings

Developing vocabulary, (as in language learning), is a key component for an improviser. Listening, transcribing, playing along with records, learning licks and solos and analyzing musical structures are the ways that generations of players have developed vocabulary.

Imitate

Transcribing - Transcribing music by ear is probably the most rewarding and useful thing we can do. It takes a lot of time, which may be in short supply for many of us. Start by doing short bits of things, as opposed to a whole solo. Work your way up to it. Do what you can, but also make use of print resources (someone else's transcription) as a back up to get you started on the process or if you really don't have the hours to devote to doing it yourself.

To start, listen to the selection over and over before you go to the instrument. Really get it in your head. This can not be underestimated! Sing along. Slow it down. Try to sing the lines without the recording! Then start figuring it out on your axe, bit by bit. Take a phrase, sing it, try to figure out. Keep in mind what the changes are (if there are changes) and relate everything to the harmonic foundation. Know the form. Try to mimic the original - phrasing, articulation and so on, as closely as possible. Try to sound just like the record! Write it out. Analyze the lines, their relationship to the chords, form, groove, compositional structure of the solo, and so on. Write down the chord changes along with the lines, so you can make sense of it later.

Assimilate

Break down the licks and work them over changes to develop and expand motivic ideas and vocabulary. Play the lines in other keys and in different ranges of the instrument. Work the motifs through tunes. Start getting a repertoire of ii/V/I licks. Work on different kinds of vocabulary for different kinds of playing and tunes. Work on tempos - medium swing, burners, ballads. Notice how players may have different vocabulary for different

tempos. Learn vocabulary 'styles,' (or language streams) - bebop, post bop, contemporary, modal, chromatic, blues, inside/outside, rock, and so on. Work on rhythm. Expand your thinking by listening to and trying to figure out non-western musics. Focus on one style, or even one player, for a while to get it together. Then keep checking out new things.

Notice how great players (Jim Hall, Miles, Sonny Rollins, Bill Evans) build a solo by developing themes (motifs), using great phrasing, having rhythmic interest, leaving space, building intensity, using repetition, etc. Try to notice these things when you're listening, how they do it, and learn to think about these concepts in your own playing. We want to work towards having our 'own' vocabulary, and a personal approach to the music. The great, innovative players have done this by learning from others and then by making it their own, but it doesn't happen overnight.

3. Repertoire

Try learning a tune a week. Listen to a few recordings of it. How do the great players phrase the melody? Play along. Play it in other keys. Use play-along recordings. Analyze the structure. Incorporate your vocabulary into the tune that you're doing. Learn the top standards, the American songbook, tunes by the great jazz composers and the great pop tunes. Also, review material that you already know, perhaps going through your list of tunes 'Readers Digest' style, playing the head on each, soloing over the changes once or twice, and going through your list, so that you don't forget the tunes that you've already learned. On the guitar, we can work on a tune for different playing formats, solo, trio, and quartet. Each requires it's own approach.

The 'Practice'

Saxophone great Dave Liebman says "practicing is trying to cause behavior to change from a conscious activity to an intuitive process."¹ There are ways to do this, conventions that are established and have been proven to work by many generations of musicians before us, and also newer approaches, for instance using the latest technology. Eventually we'll figure out what we need to do to make it happen. Here's a few ideas:

Sometimes I like to start my practicing with some creative noodling (Note - one may need to do more of a focussed technical warmup first, particularly if you're a horn player). I like to play around with a little idea, maybe something I've got from a transcription or score, and improvise on the theme or concept. Or I'll put the metronome on a slow tempo and play through a tune that I know well, just being relaxed, not thinking too much, letting go of tension. Then I feel like I've got a physical warmup, and I'm getting into a groove. If an idea comes along that seems like a keeper, write it down, or record it. Could be compositional material. Other times I'll get into the zone by sight reading some Bach, or doing short improvs that might focus on a technical thing on the instrument, or an unusual sound. I don't like to start with playing scales, or technical drills, as it seems to kill the spark before it's started the engine. Sometimes getting going is the hardest part, so begin with something that's engaging.

¹ Developing A Personal Saxophone Sound, p.42, by Dave Liebman

What next? Here's where the three different approaches come into play. I'm going to quote Nigel 'Maynstreet' Maynard, drummer and former Humber student:

"Think of practicing as a meal...

Break the meal into three parts: The stuff you love to eat, the stuff you are ok eating, and the stuff that is good for you, but you'd rather not eat at all."

It's easy to practice the things we're already good at, the 'stuff we love to eat.' It feels good, and it's like 'yeah, I can play.' But... we need to work on the new stuff, the things we're not good at *yet*, in order to get better. So after the warmup, we can tackle the difficult, more challenging things that we're working on. This might be a combination of the three areas above. Say it's a transcription that's hard technically (a fast tempo for example). We might have to run through passages at a very slow tempo, slowing down the recording and playing along with it. It might mean going over phrases repeatedly. We need to analyzing the material. Also to work on related technical issues. There might be new concepts to figure out. We might take those ideas and apply them to the new tune we're learning, motivically working a phrase through the changes. While working on this stuff we might not sound very good. It can be frustrating. No problem, just hang in there and stick with it. Don't be too attached. Just do it. Practice with focus and intensity, and the reward will be there when it starts to come together.

Work through an idea until it starts to feel easier. You might feel a shift to more fluidity. Perhaps follow this focussed work by switching to looser playing on a familiar form or vocabulary, and then re-introduce the new idea into that context. New vocabulary might come together in a few minutes, or it might take hours, weeks, months. Choices have to be made. Work on harmonic vocabulary and rhythmic ideas as with lines, learning new voicings, incorporating them into our comping and rhythmic concept.

Next you can move on to the things that you know you should do, they're good for you, and these are more of the 'constants.' This could include technical studies, ear training, sight reading, sight singing, scales, chords/ arpeggios, rhythm and time studies, and so on. Some of these we might do every day. Some we might do a few times a week. For instance, I like to practice sight reading every day if I can, even if it's only for 15 minutes. I find it relaxing, and it's a chance to check out some new music. It's also enjoyable because I find the process easier, as there's not as much decision making in the moment. I'm just trying to follow the page.

So we've been working for a while, we're making some progress, and now it's time for some looser playing. Pick something familiar, a tune, a groove, and let yourself free associate and dig into your musicality. You can review vocabulary, a lick, maybe something that you know but have forgotten. Sit on a tune for a while and try to get a real flow happening, playing simply with good time. Let the ideas move from one to another organically. Comp through some choruses. Or play along with some recordings. Having some familiar tunes that we can keep coming back to also give us an opportunity to do it a different way each time, and further hone our improvising skills.

When you put the instrument down you've worked on some new stuff, practiced the exercises that you need to do, and finished up with some more intuitive playing. There's motivation to do it all again tomorrow.

Stick to a routine for at least a couple of weeks before altering it or moving on to the next thing. We'd like to have all the time in the world to practice, but a few hours, if you're focussed, is also very good. I have days when I can only get in an hour, and those sessions, when you know you only have a little time, can be very focussed and productive. A day when I have two to three hours would typically include working on no more than half a dozen (or fewer) areas, for instance; learning/ transcribing a solo, developing lines/ voicings/ rhythms from the transcription that you're working on, playing some of these ideas on a tune, technical work, sight reading, listening. Or just play a tune with the metronome for an hour, or hours, in different keys, tempos. Play in front of a mirror periodically to check posture.

If one can, aim to practice 6 days a week, and take a day off, for a mental and physical break. The time off will give you a fresh perspective on things too.

Other issues to think about -

- at what point when we're working on something have we reached a point of diminishing returns? When do we leave a particular issue and move on? This takes observation, awareness of our process, and pushing ourselves past our comfort zone. When we've devoted a substantial amount of attention to a piece or a concept, it might be time to move on to the next thing. We can come back to it. Also, if we're working on something that isn't coming together, maybe it's best to change our approach, or find another way around it. Refresh the browser.
- When practicing, try to deal with a manageable amount of information that you can absorb, and try to internalize it as efficiently as possible. Stick with it. Get it in your ears and fingers. Don't bite off more than you can chew.
- Source your materials from a top quality grade A supplier. That's why we listen and take ideas from the 'greats.' Listen to and steal ideas from the very best players and composers. If you get great input from a variety of art, and tend the garden with care and attention so that everything works together, you'll end up with a very nice stew. And it'll be your own recipe. Don't make the mistake of thinking that the way to develop an original sound is by working in a vacuum.
- Keep a rhythmic focus to everything that you do. Learn 'Konnakkol,' (Solkattu) the Indian art of speaking rhythmic syllables.²
- Sometimes what we 'like' to do is not what we 'need' to do to keep learning. Keep assessing and reassessing your playing. Keep working on 'time' and fundamentals.

² The Art of Konnakkol (Solkattu), (book & cd) by Trichy Sankaran, Laliith Publishers www.trichysankaran.com/ and The Gateway to Rhythm, (DVD), by John McLaughlin & S. Ganesh Vinayakram www.abstactlogix.com

We all like to play 'fancy' stuff, but maybe we just need to play simply through a song form and do something that makes sense and feels good. What are your most glaring weaknesses? Listen to recordings of yourself in a live playing situation. Jerry Bergonzi once pointed out in a workshop that when listening to recordings the most interesting ideas can often be the unintentional moments that you thought were 'filler' while you were actually playing them, (in between the stuff that you thought was 'really happening'). These can be the DNA to unravelling your own personal sound.

- Look for ways to *develop* ideas by looking for permutations of the initial concept. Alter (corrupt) the intervals of a motif (changing the harmonic implication), or place the line on a different scale/chord degree and make it fit. Move voicings sequentially up a scale. Shift information rhythmically along the horizontal plane, contract and elongate notes and phrases, and so on.
- When going through a period of learning new vocabulary, it's more about the concepts and the idea of working through things, than about being able to regurgitate each of those particular licks perfectly in your next jam session, or even remembering them. For better or worse, I find that only a small percentage of the lines/voicings/rhythms that I work on actually find their way more or less verbatim into my playing.
- Keep a practice log. Stardate 36.25.1. Use a manuscript book and keep track of the main issues that you're working on, and ideas, licks and so on. Review it from time to time. It helps to stay focussed, and you're probably going to forget some of that cool stuff you were working on yesterday, or 2 months ago.

Further Observations and Rambling -

We also want to periodically change the focus of our practice to keep it fresh. When working on classical repertoire, for instance, a challenging piece will require a lot of effort, but allow us to reach to a higher level. We'll work on it for a few weeks, leave it, then revisit it in a few months until gradually we get it. Very satisfying. On the other hand we'll also play some easier pieces, allowing us to gain a deeper understanding of the compositions and our performance techniques. We may use this as an opportunity to try to be as expressive as possible, working on dynamics and fluidity. There will also be days where we just write, or work on a particular thing till we can do it.

Check out different styles of music. Learn some of the great pop tunes by playing along with recordings of the Beatles, Stevie Wonder etc. Play a melody along with an amazing singer like Ray Charles or Sarah Vaughan and match their phrasing. There's the great blues players, classic funk and R&B, classical and contemporary chamber music to explore, hip hop grooves. Karnatic music in the morning, a Beethoven string quartet in the afternoon, and the Smalls Jazz Club live webcam in the evening anyone?

Observation - if I'm working on new concepts, perhaps something challenging that I'm struggling with, then I might want to keep going till I get it. Great, but during this process, it can feel like '*I can't play the guitar.*' If I don't keep my practicing balanced, then when I'm playing a gig or jam session, it might also feel like '*I can't play the guitar.*'

Nothing is flowing. Maybe my brain has shifted into the mode it needs in order to grapple with the new stuff, but then it gets a bit stuck. The other well rounded aspects of what I do have been shoved aside, and it might take a bit of backtracking and playing to wake up everything up again. This is something many of us go through when we're in a big 'practice' phase. So, getting back to the earlier point, it's important to practice the new and hard stuff, but we need to work on all the other things, vocabulary, repertoire, in a balanced way. Keep the tunes and the ideas cycling around. Constantly revisit the things you've been working on to bring them into the 'whole.'

Or still another way to think about it. There's three kinds of 'chops' to get together. 'Practicing chops' involve developing our skill set, building stamina, new ideas and so on. This is not enough. We also need 'jam session chops' so we can learn to listen, play with others, stretch out, improvise fluid ideas in a musical context. And the third thing - 'gig chops,' where we perform for an audience, make each piece a musical whole with a compositional framework, get relaxed with the process, get used to working in different sonic environments, playing different styles and roles. We need a balance of these three areas to develop as players.

Listening!

Listening, again, is a key part of what we do. Without listening, where is it going to come from? All the ideas, likes and dislikes, direction, tying things together, making cognitive leaps, it all comes from listening. We should listen to one thing or one type of thing repeatedly, until we start to thoroughly internalize it. We should also listen to a great variety of music, to expand our horizons and give us a wide area in which to cast our net. All the great musicians and composers have been well versed, and open to, many kinds of music.

Ideally, we might divide our time equally between listening, practicing and playing. You could think of 'practicing' as the body, which has to coordinate many different functions and ensure that they are all working optimally and in balance. 'Listening' is like the senses, which gather information, try to make 'sense' of it all, and fuel our perceptions. 'Playing' is like the head, which ultimately organizes everything and runs the ship. So make time for listening, playing with recordings, going out to hear live music. Some people say that you should spend as much time listening as you do practicing.

Play Along With Classic Recordings

This is half way between listening and transcribing, and personally this is my favorite way to practice. Say I want to work on 'How Deep is the Ocean'. I'll learn the tune first, either by ear, listening to the recording, or with the help of a chart. Even with a chart, try to always be referencing a recording. In this case let's say it's the Jim Hall Trio (with Don Thompson and Terry Clarke). The first thing is to learn the tune itself, the melody and the changes, listening and playing along. Are they using the standard chords? Get comfortable with the form. Focus on the melody and the bass line, and fill in the chords by ear and by listening to the bass. Next, I'll play along by comping, or playing a bass line, or even trying to be a second soloist along with Jim. I'm going to be starting and stopping a lot as I hear little bits that I want to figure out, like the way the melody is

phrased, a nice line, or a voicing. I might try to lift a few of these small segments. Sometimes I can't figure out the voicing or the line so easily, but in the process I come up with some similar things, which open up all kinds of new possibilities and ideas. It's exciting! I'll keep trying to figure out exactly what the part is. Then I'll go back to playing along with the recording, in whole or in part. There's a huge amount of information, like time feel, phrasing, sound, and so on, to be absorbing. I'm always amazed when students say they've never done this. When I was starting it was the only way to learn.

Nowadays, some students skip this step altogether by getting a chart and going right to the iRealB and other play-alongs. As useful as these things are as practice tools, (I use them too) it's absolutely no substitute for going the traditional route of learning by ear. If you haven't done any transcribing or playing along, don't be intimidated by it. Start with something on the easier side and just do a little bit. With computers and the ability to slow recordings down and keep the pitch the same, it's not too difficult. In the process you'll develop your ears and it'll be gratifying when you figure something out yourself. This process will help your playing tremendously.

Developing Your Own Sound

The great innovators in art and music have all had a solid understanding of the tradition and the fundamentals of their craft, combined with a restless spirit and curiosity to pursue their own path and explore things that were new and challenging. As this relates to practicing, we might think of practice with a capital P. Our own big wide Practice. Study the masters and your instrument, aim to function at a high level, and at the same time keep your senses open to where your own interests are at, (or might be in the future). What gave you the spark to follow this path in the first place? What's the most exciting music around for you at this moment? Be open to new ideas and possibilities. Who are the people on the cutting edge? What great music from the tradition have you missed? What catches your interest? How to combine these interests in a personal way that expresses who you are and what you believe in? Sometimes the answer isn't straight ahead of us, but off in our peripheral vision. We might also find that 'two steps forward one step back' is a good way to work on new things and keep progressing in the tradition as well.

Mental Practice

As we gain more experience working on music, we might find that we spend more and more time practicing mentally, away from the instrument. We get better at 'hearing' our imagination playing tunes, lines, whatever it is, in our heads.

I find particularly if I'm not getting enough time to physically practice, then my brain can take on the properties of a yappy terrier that won't go away, as it works out musical problems and puzzles. This is great, but sometimes gets out of hand. I can wake up in the middle of the night with ideas going through my mind, and can't shut it off. My wife is also used to seeing the glazed expression on my face when I'm supposed to be making a grocery list or plan the day, but my mind wants to run the changes to 'Prelude to a Kiss' in different keys. Most musicians do this to one degree or another. It might not be so good for your social life, but it keeps one engaged with the task at hand.

Motivation

Three things that may help us stay motivated to keep doing this -

1. Have something to practice for. Short and long term goals. A short term goal could be a gig. If one doesn't have any gigs, (not uncommon these days), set up jam sessions or rehearsals. Play engaging music with other like minded souls, and it'll keep the process rolling. A long term goal could be working towards putting your own band together (what do I want to do?), recording, becoming rich and famous (music? jazz? really?), and so on.
2. Keep it regular. Daily practice gets us into the groove. It's like exercise. If you don't do it for a while, its hard to crank it up again.
3. Look for inspiration. Go out to hear music (there was a time before YouTube when people actually met in social environments and enjoyed a communal music experience!), check out other players, listen to some 'sides', take lessons, discuss music with friends, go to an art gallery, ride your bike, whatever it may be, we have to keep looking for the spark.

Enough already

Practice can involve contradictions. On the one hand we work on getting things under our fingers to gain fluency, vocabulary, solid time etc. This involves repetition, review, technical practice and the methodical study of the greats. Yet as improvisors we're also working towards the goal of wanting to be in the moment, to respond instantly to outside stimulus, to instantly compose and play new things that we haven't done before, the unexpected. We may want to work towards doing our 'own thing'. To make it happen, we have to put in the hours on our own, and also practice improvising with others.

For a more detailed look at practicing issues, check out instructional videos and written material by Dave Liebman, Jerry Bergonzi, Hal Crook, and others.

When I can, I still love to practice daily for five, six hours or more, and sometimes that's possible. Between the guitar, writing, listening, studying scores, a bit of piano, drums, there's so much to check out, it's huge. When we're in the zone, it's easy, engrossing, and very satisfying to fill a day with music. The more time we have to indulge in the process, the more organic the creativity. But the more responsibilities one has, of course, then there just aren't enough hours in the day to do it all. On average, when I'm busy teaching, working, with my family and so on, I still try to get in 2 to 3 hours a day. So we do what we can, and try to enjoy the ride along the way.

Quotes

Imitate - Assimilate - Innovate. (anonymous)

"Follow your bliss" - Joseph Campbell

"Our goals can only be reached through a vehicle of a plan, in which we must fervently believe, and upon which we must vigorously act. There is no other route to success."

"I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it." "It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child." "Bad artists

copy, good artists steal." "Every act of creation is first an act of destruction." - Pablo Picasso

["A problem is a chance for you to do your best."](#) - Duke Ellington "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing" - Duke Ellington/ Irving Mills

"To me, rhythm and what you do with it is everything. Right after rhythm is melody."
["I saw A Hard Day's Night 12 or 13 times."](#) - Pat Metheny

["Imagination is more important than knowledge..."](#) - Albert Einstein

"Without deviation from the norm, progress is not possible." "So many books, so little time." "I bought my first Boulez album when I was in the twelfth grade: a Columbia recording of "Le Marteau Sans Maitre" (The Hammer Without a Master)... Within a year or so of that, I managed to get hold of a score. I listened to the record while following the score..." - Frank Zappa: The Real Frank Zappa Book

"I live a little bit on the seat of my pants, I try to be alert and available . . . for life to happen to me. We're in this life, and if you're not available, the sort of ordinary time goes past and you didn't live it. But if you're available, life gets huge. You're really living it." - Bill Murray

"Intentions are like magnets; the more we declare them, believe in them and act in ways to manifest them, the more powerful and real they become" - Flora Bowley, Brave Intuitive You

"In this life, the best spiritual practice is to become a monk. The next best spiritual practice is to get married and and raise a family. After that, being a musician is very good." (paraphrased)- Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn Haeng Won Dae Soen-sa

"I have to admit that more and more lately, the whole idea of jazz as an idiom is one that I've completely rejected. I just don't see it as an idiomatic thing any more...To me, if jazz is anything, it's a process, and maybe a verb, but it's not a thing. It's a form that demands that you bring to it things that are valuable to you, that are personal to you. That, for me, is a pretty serious distinction that doesn't have anything to do with blues, or swing, or any of these other things that tend to be listed as essentials in order for music to be jazz with a capital J." - Pat Metheny

"I am constantly finding new things that I'm incapable of playing." John McLaughlin, 1996

"It's an amazing paradox in music, but to achieve perfect freedom you have to be completely disciplined" - John McLaughlin

"Musicians practicing... it's a beautiful thing. To be playing your horn, or whatever... you're meditating in a sense. You know what is right, you're trying to get it better.

You're doing everything that a beautiful experience, in this world, can do, when you're practicing." - Sonny Rollins, in an interviewed response (online) to the infamous New Yorker article.