Melodic Techniques in Jazz Improvisation

Article #1

In this new column about utilizing the art of melody in jazz improvisation I would like to present my ideas and examples as a series. Two questions that come up immediately - "what is a melody?", and "what is melodic improvising?" - lead me to begin the discussion with a definition of melody and of melodic playing, and then to present an overview of the topics that I'll address in subsequent columns - the compositional techniques of melody writing, those aspects of a solo which lead us to think of it as melodic, and how to apply them. I'd also like to offer a short list of those soloists whom I consider to be quite melodic, and a few of their recorded solos in order to establish a frame of reference.

The very term melodic improvising seems at first to be redundant, but on second glance reveals itself to be a very appropriate category within the broad spectrum of jazz improvisation. Given the four basic elements of music - rhythm, melody, harmony and tone color - the improvised line most clearly falls under the category of melody, although not always, and not on every instrument or solo. Although the boundaries between these four categories tend to blur at the edges, we can still distinguish separate approaches to improvising based on these categories.

Harmonic improvising, the domain of chordal instruments, downplays the importance of the voicing's lead line in favor of the creation of harmonic color and flow, and is usually found as an episode within a solo. Rhythmic improvising, while certainly a drummer's art, is a significant element of many horn, piano, guitar and bass solos (Sonny Rollins comes to mind immediately!). While one can't really define tone color improvisation, manipulation of tone color for expressive effect adds nuance to many soloists' work (guitarists and keyboardists use electronics; bassists use fingers, bows and other objects; horn players use mutes and other techniques to expressively alter their tone.)

So what is melodic improvising? To answer that question, let's look at several definitions and descriptions of melody to understand what it is, and to identify how it functions as the central element in jazz improvisation. My Collins English Dictionary defines melody as "a succession of notes forming a distinctive sequence; tune". The New College Encyclopedia of Music has a much longer definition that includes "a succession of single musical sounds. The factors which determine the character and effect of a melody are its Mode, its Rhythm, and its Contour. " Aaron Copland, in his book What to Listen for in Music, points out that the idea of melody is associated with emotion, and that while the power a good melody has over us is clear, "we cannot even say ... what constitutes a good melody." Finally, my thesaurus includes tunefulness,
euphony, mellifluence and harmoniousness (to which I would add lyrical) as words related to melody.

Every improvised solo is in itself a melody, being a succession of notes, yet that alone won't make it melodic. The mode, intervals and contour of each phrase in a solo are the elements defining it melodically, but since every phrase, strong or weak, has these elements, they don't make it melodic by themselves, either. That characteristic of good melodies to which Copland refers is the emotional impact of the line and its lyricism and tunefulness. We can analyse good melodies and melodic solos to develop a set of techniques and approaches that, when musically applied, will lead to melodic playing which rises above licks, tricks, riffs, cliches and change-running and connects with us emotionally as well as intellectually.

Creating melody is an innate and natural human ability, and the modern tendency in jazz toward intellectual, technical approaches to studying and improvising can block us from fully realizing our native gifts. The richness of melody in ethnic musics from all corners of the globe attests to our natural musical propensities, especially considering that most of it was written or improvised by "unschooled" musicians. A friend of mine was actually transcribing the songs his 2 year old son would sing upon awakening in the morning because they were completely original and sincere melodies. This intuitive melodic gift is something that we can all connect with regardless of our level of educational training, and it generates the passion and emotional depth in all great music. I've always felt that the greatest jazz soloists brought together the intellectual and the intuitive aspects of their musicianship, and that both elements are primary in the process of improvising. Charlie Parker alluded to this wedding of the intuitive and the intellectual in his famous quote about learning everything that you could and then forgetting it all and just playing.

Consider the emotional power and ability to connect with audiences that many unschooled musicians bring to rock, R&B, folk and ethnic musical styles (and jazz, too, although more in the earlier part of the century than now). Without a doubt these musicians are intuitively applying many of the same techniques and approaches that schooled musicians analyse, extract and use, but for purely instinctive reasons. There is a temptation for schooled musicians to play something because they know that it "works" rather than to let the inner hearing abilities that they have cultivated (their "ear") guide their choices.

The recorded history of jazz provides us with many notable examples of melodic improvising, and we can even define a number of soloists as being purely melodic improvisers. Some of those soloists who strove for melody most clearly in their solos are Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Lester Young, Ornette Coleman, Johnny Hodges, Chet Baker, Paul Desmond and Jan Garbarek. Other players I include as being very melodic are (and this
doesn't purport to be an all-inclusive list) Charlie Parker, Keith Jarrett, John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Count Basie, Lawrence Brown, Wynton Kelly, Max Roach, Wes Montgomery, Paul Chambers, Jaco Pastorius and Wayne Shorter. All of these musicians often approached their improvising in a way that emphasized the melodic over the rhythmic, harmonic or tone color elements of music, and there are similarities to their approaches from which we can distill essential principles for utilizing the art of melody in jazz solos.

I don't want to give the impression that the melodic qualities that these musicians demonstrate automatically makes them better than those whose solos emphasized other elements more often (even though this list comprises some of the most influential jazz musicians of all time). Copland notes that "composers are far from equally gifted as melodists. Nor should their music be valued solely according to the richness of their melodic gifts." The focus of this column is on the melodic, therefore that is our priority.

In future columns I will address, discuss, analyse and compare techniques from both the improvisational and the compositional perspectives, because I feel that the two are mutually enriching for the jazz soloist. The topics I'm planning include the materials of melody, techniques of melodic development, the relationship of style and content, melodic sources, diatonicism and chromaticism, methods of melodic analysis and their application, the inter-relationships between melodic, harmonic and rhythmic soloing and accompaniment approaches, concepts for playing melodies of different styles, and a discussion of great melodies by jazz and classical composers and of ethnic melodies from around the world. I will include musical examples throughout to illustrate the principles and techniques.