

The Improviser as Musical Philosopher

AS IMPROVISERS AND CREATIVE MUSICIANS, we must realize that each of us comes from a different “place.” This important realization is a musical and creative paradigm to embrace.

The paradigm of cultural, ethnic, social, emotional and educational diversity contributes to our ability to take each of these attributes and/or characteristics, and allows this combination to manifest in our soloing. This manifestation is one of connectedness that benefits from the roles, contributions and direction of others.

If we step aside from music for a moment, we can parallel all of life in this way. We are all connected. There is a philosophy of “Ubuntu” here: No one *thrives* alone. We are *all* interconnected. Embracing this philosophy intellectually and spiritually will give each of us, as creators of spontaneously composed solos, the supreme ability to permit symbiosis to occur in our music.

If we define music, and especially improvising, as a very spontaneous yet inherently structured manifestation, we can greatly benefit from the roles and direction of the others with whom we are connecting. Improvisation flows from our hearts, our souls, our brains and life itself. Who we are is what we play.

In fact, if we investigate what sublime intervention gives each of us the gift of being able to improvise, we come away with a substantial deficit in the scientific determination or empirical evidence of what is actually taking place during this process.

As each of us knows, this truly spectacular and incredibly satisfying feeling is something very special that cannot easily be explained to others. There is no better feeling than knowing that we just made some real music ... spontaneously.

So, everything we have received in life—our early music lessons and teachers, the love and guidance from parents, the discipline of individual practice, the playing sessions, the gigs (good and bad), our thoughts, our spirituality, the difficulties encountered in whatever realm, and many more variables—all contribute to making a profoundly symbiotic and cohesive performance with others. For, we do not play alone; we play with others. Even if one is “blowing” a solo without any accompaniment, we are not alone. There are others listening, and in a sense they, too, are contributing in this amazing process of improvisation.

Remember: We are all connected.

If we take some time to find examples of this Ubuntu philosophy relating to jazz, we can easily find many examples in the music we know.

Listen to John Coltrane’s recording of “Giant Steps.” While listening, try to imagine what might have been going on with Trane’s vast creative and

theoretical resources. While composing this tune in the key of E \flat , he utilizes a descending major third principle in measures 1–3 and 5–7. We can see three different tonal centers starting with B and modulating to G and E \flat . The keys of E \flat , B and G are all related by the major third interval. The overall design of this composition is quite evident if one observes that the tonal centers at the beginning of every other measure (1, 3, 5, 7, etc.) ascend by major third intervals.

For me, this is an example of connectedness in musical terms. The playing of this music evokes connectedness within oneself, as it will when played with others.

Next, listen to Michael Brecker’s solo version of Coltrane’s “Naima” from *Directions In Music* (Verve) recorded live in 2001 at Massey Hall in Toronto.

What is going on as Brecker plays this beautiful rendition of the gorgeous ballad that Coltrane wrote for his first wife, Naima? Obviously, Brecker is sharing his vision, his feeling, his musical “voice,” his sensitivity, his virtuosity and, most importantly, his soul. He is also allowing us the opportunity to share what Coltrane gave to him. He is graciously giving himself to us through his playing, and we are giving him our devotion to experiencing his gift. Brecker is giving love, appreciation and his devotion to Coltrane, one of our masters. This is Ubuntu!

Another example for me is listening to the newly released Miles Davis Quintet recording *Live In Europe 1967: The Bootleg Series, Vol. 1* (Columbia/Legacy). Davis, Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Tony Williams epitomize what the aforementioned philosophical, spiritual, intellectual, emotional and psychological theories represent. There is a musical bond and interplay here that demonstrate mutual respect by and for each musician. We can feel the mutual divine intervention and supportive intention taking place during each and every bar of music.

The liner notes to the CD/DVD quote Davis reflecting on the year 1967: “Around that time everything was in flux. Music, politics, race relations, everything. Nobody seemed to know where things were going: Everybody seemed confused—even a lot of artists and musicians who all of a sudden seemed to have more freedom than we ever had to do our own thing.”

All of these things to which Davis refers were going on, and that is the very essence of what was played and recorded on this tour. Jazz impresario George Wein stated his opinion of this group: “That group was not ahead of its time. They *were* the time.”

So, we see reflected in the performances of

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the musicians we love, but we, as musicians, have the responsibility of moving this music authentically forward.

Don't be afraid to challenge yourself, and the others with whom you play, to stretch your supposed limits and take chances.

Don't *ever* be afraid to make mistakes. We learn from our mistakes. Realize and accept mistakes as a path to evolved learning.

Allow yourself to appreciate all of the things you have learned in the present, and to develop those skills even further.

In closing, the journey of jazz is an imposing,

yet wonderful, task.

Embrace it, and please share it with others:
Ubuntu! DB

Tenor saxophonist Michael Pedicin recently released his 12th CD as a leader, *Why Stop Now ... Ubuntu* (GroundBlue). His circuitous creative journey started with Philadelphia's modern jazz scene in the late 1960s and then sidestepped into an r&b phase with Philadelphia Sound hit-makers Gamble and Huff. Along the way he spent one year with Maynard Ferguson, two years with Dave Brubeck, two years with Pat Martino, founded jazz studies programs at Temple University and Richard Stockton College, and also earned a doctorate in psychology. Pedicin is currently performing with his quintet and continues his role as an educator at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. Visit him online at michaelpedicin.com.

those we love, respect and admire that there was a deep sense of interconnectedness. This great music exemplifies what is meant by the word *jazz*.

Jazz is music whose roots go very deep. From the origin of African sounds, songs and embryonic percussion to the shores of Louisiana, this music has widened its scope, direction and intention. The blueprint continued to be further developed in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, and is now being played in almost every corner of our world.

I will use the metaphor "we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us" to acknowledge that we learn from the masters and

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