

Just Improvise !

by Wayne McConnell

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I genuinely believe everybody is able to improvise in one form or another. This basic ability is the very essence of how we get through life. Music aside, the ability to put together words and construct sentences is essential in everyday living. Free thinking is a better word to describe the processes involved in improvising. I often find myself in situations where I might not have the necessary tools, the right frame of mind or even the ability to get through a problem. Somehow though, I always do. This isn't unique but a part of what we can do as humans. Do improvising musicians have a special ability that allows them to tap into a special 'music improvisation' part of the brain? I'm no expert but I suspect not. Musicians are trained (or have studied on their own) the art of improvising in various genres. The freedom of thought is what I strive for as an improvising musician. Most jazz musicians want to be in the place where they can translate whatever they are hearing in their mind to their instruments. This is difficult to do as there are many issues governing the ability to extract music from ones mind instantly. Firstly you must be able to have the musical techniques to improvise, knowledge and understanding of the function of melody, harmony and rhythm. Instrumental technique is also essential. All of that stuff is do-able.

I've recently been thinking about the things that are out of our control. The times when music theory become obsolete and the pure musical flow of ideas rejects any notion of what is wrong and right (harmonically). I think the best improvisers are able to throw aside the cognitive aspects of creating music and be open to any stimuli, music or otherwise. How we can improve the flow of ideas when improvising and being an open channel to whatever crosses our minds? Moods and tensions greatly affect our improvising ability - sometimes for the better and other times for the worse. I'm sitting here listening to pianist Brad Mehldau and can hear a variety of techniques - firstly his refined and beautiful harmonic concept but also his ability to push the boundaries of melodic and rhythmic dissonance - the shades of colour that we associate with being correct and incorrect (e.g out of key) become blended into a new pallet opening up a whole new world of colour and possibilities.

Essentially though I think it all comes from the same area of the mind that allows us to get through daily life. We might not all be 'Brad Mehldau's' but we can certainly all tap into our unique solutions to things that require us to improvise or think on our feet.

Would be interested in other peoples' take on improvisation, musical or non...