

Painting with Sound

Improvisation plays a vital role in much of contemporary music. So much so, that some people have devoted their lives to mastering this art. By improvisation, I mean a freedom granted to the musician to convey emotions through sound within a given time frame, and without a fully compositional approach. Elements of composition may occur within an improvised solo, but they cannot make the entire moment. On the same note, preconceived concepts usually make up a large part of improvisation. These preconceived ideas and approaches help to prepare the musician for the moment, but are not meant to dictate the moment, they are merely tools. One prepares ideas in hopes of surpassing their own abilities and maybe limitations. It is my belief that this art has intrigued so many people due to its mystery and possibilities. Moments have and continue to occur, where musicians are pushed beyond their own knowledge and sometimes beyond what one could rehearse or prepare.

I will be using the song “Snakes,” by Marcus Miller, to discuss improvisational preparation and performance. This song is a perfect modal example for musicians of all levels and stylistic back rounds to experiment with. By utilizing only one tonic for most of the solo section, the improviser has a lot of freedom to imply their emotions at the moment. Lots of changes are more limiting and become more of a mental challenge. However, this does not imply that one should stick to one scale if there is only one chord. Let’s explore the possibilities on this song, “Snakes.”

The beginning of the solo section is a vamp in the key of G minor. It has a slow funk groove with minimal variation until the B section, which doesn’t occur for thirty-two bars. So, let’s open up the possibilities. In G minor, the soloist should first identify the obvious scale choices. In this case they are, in this order, G minor pentatonic (G, Bb, C, D, F) and G natural minor (G, A, Bb, C, D, Eb, F). Within these two scales, the soloist can also add chromatic embellishment. The first, and most obvious chromatic choice would be the flatted fifth, or blue note (making the pentatonic a blues scale). Now let’s move to some other forms of minor within this same tonic. These scales are still within the realm of G minor, but imply different emotions and contain sounds bringing attention

to certain void notes. They include G Dorian (G, A, Bb, C, D, E, F), G Melodic Minor (G, A, Bb, C, D, F#), G Harmonic Minor (G, A, Bb, C, D, Eb, F#), and G Phrygian (G, Ab, Bb, C, D, Eb, F). All of these scales differ very slightly from one another, but each has a separate tonality. For this type of tune, I would take a recorder (Garage Band, Eight Track, or Tape Recorder), record the G minor vamp, and then play over it. Each time I play, I would try to use only one of the scales, listen back, and then switch. This process allows me to figure out what sounds I like, and then which ones push the envelope and grab the listeners attention.

After doing this, I would go beyond G minor and dive into scales that imply alternate tonalities. The best, and in my opinion easiest, way to do this is to play off of the V chord, which in this case is D. Since the G minor vamp is still being applied in the bass, the improviser has freedom to add altered tensions to the D tonality, as no other players are dictating any limitations. Now you have a whole new pallet of colors. Lets start with D Mixolydian (D, E, F#, G, A, B, C), then try D Altered (D, Eb, F, F#, Ab, Bb, C), then try my favorite, D Whole Tone (D, E, F#, Ab, Bb, C). While your at it, try D Half Whole (D, Eb, F, F#, Ab, A, B, C) and D Whole Half (D, E, F, G, Ab, A, B, C). All of these scales include very “wrong” notes and should be applied with caution. The best way to find out what works and what doesn’t, is to record and listen back. By doing this, you are finding your personal preferences. These scales are best used in short bursts in between tonal G minor implications.

Other ways to go “outside” include chromatic approaches and resolutions and wide intervals. None of the scales listed above should ever be used from top to bottom. I like to take pieces of each scale and use them to imply different effects. When I record, I will practice using different techniques, including: wide intervals within each scale, sequences, taking licks up in different intervals (half steps, minor thirds, Augmented Fourth, etc...), playing lines a half step below and above the key, moving from scales to scale, utilizing space, rhythmic diversity, building intensity, starting each scale from different roots, finding arpeggios within each scale and connecting them, and every day I will come across new ideas. The most important thing is to listen back, throw away the things you don’t like, and identify and keep the ones you do.

In the bridge of this song, which has two basic tonalities (G minor and G major), I try, more or less, to hit the changes. It is hard, after a one-chord vamp, to maintain intensity through changes. In this tune, I tend to leave my intense playing for the last sixteen bars. This allows me more room in the bridge so I don't lose any intensity I might have built. I will use the same approach for the bridge as I did for the A section, in that I will use the same techniques when recording to find out what I like and dislike. For this section, I will loop it by itself, and then play over and over until I feel comfortable that I can nail each tonality without question. This needs to be over emphasized while practicing so that I can assure that I will be free once real musicians enter the picture. After the bridge, I will continue building intensity, and I find, for me, this is where I start to play a lot of "outside" material. The finally to the solo section is a vamp in Eb with hits. The only scale I've found that works well is Eb altered. The more people that play, the more limited you are in your solo. However, this limitation tends to actually make things easier, because by this point, a good solo would be at its peak, and it's much easier to maintain that when you only have one option.

When recording my own improvisations for practice, I always try to attempt things that I can't physically pull off. Then, when I listen back, I identify those ideas, and work them out on their own to a metronome. I then go back and try to put them into my solo. This is how I practice my chops. Warming up is important, but when I approach a tune, I always identify the scale possibilities, and then use those scales to warm up so that my hands get warm while my brain starts remembering where all the notes are. When practicing, I find it's best to find things that exercise multiple facets of the hands and mind. This does mean that I short change myself, or take the easy route; it just implies that I want to get the most out of my time. I will also record myself with different guitar tones, and stylistic approaches. Finding sounds is always the hardest part for musicians and I can't say that I have entirely found my own yet, but I am searching and that is all anyone can do. Try everything and discard what doesn't strike a chord inside.

I suppose the final step in preparing to improvise, is entirely mental. A great trumpeter once told me, after I had frozen twice and played poorly in a rehearsal, "Look, if you practiced it, really practiced it, then it's there, and all you have to do is let go, your hands and heart will take care of the rest." These were some of the most important words

I ever heard throughout my development as a player. When I improvise now, I try to calm myself down, and believe in the work that I put in. When I'm at my best, I've let go, but that's when I'm at my best. It is actually something that is very hard to do. Musicians have a tendency to worry about what everyone listening is going to think, and what their peers are thinking of them. These thoughts cloud the mind, and limit the possibilities of greatness. Competition can motivate a performer, but it cannot be allowed to dictate and take control. The absolute final step is to play, just let yourself go, and improvise. For me, the feeling I get when I'm improvising at my best cannot be matched, it is why I still play and still practice, and still push myself everyday.