

Comping

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The Pianists role in a jazz group.

The piano is classed as a percussion instrument. It also has a strong melodic and harmonic component. In a jazz group, duplication of roles is to be avoided. As soon as two instruments take the same role (duplication) the music suffers. As a jazz group already has a percussion instrument (the drums), a harmonic instrument (the bass) and a melodic instrument (the soloist), the tendency for the piano to duplicate the roles is always present.

Because of the preceding, I have always considered the piano as being a superfluous instrument in a jazz group. It is just not needed. The other instruments are already fulfilling the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic roles. Because of it's ability to be so interruptive, the piano's role in a group is then very sensitive and must be used with restraint.

What then is the pianists role in a jazz group? One must assume that all the members of the group know the chord changes, hence the piano is not needed to plunk down the chords for them. The bass is already doing that. The group up already has a drummer so the piano is not needed to keep time and the soloist is already playing melody as well.

The pianists role as that of a rhythmic, melodic and harmonic colorist. As a matter of fact, all instruments are colorists. The pianist must strive to suppress the percussive aspects of the piano and make it, in a sense, "liquid". Chords that are attacked in a manner that is too percussive, too loud, or too active, will interrupt the rhythmic flow of the music and distract the soloist as well as the listener. Voicings with too many notes in them will confine the soloists choice of melody.

The question of "when" to do something is as important as "what" to do . The attitude of a professional accompanist is that: all comping ideas come from the soloist! The pianist must not impose their ideas on the soloist. In a

sense, the soloist is the leader of the group effort at that moment! The accompanists (including bass and drums) should strive to acquire the perception that every idea a soloist plays is a suggestion (a signal) to the accompanists as to what the soloist needs behind them to support the sound the soloist is trying to create. This means that all ideas of comping come from the soloist and are played after the soloist plays an idea. Only on a rare occasion does the compers lead the soloist or "feed" a soloist ideas. Not every idea a soloist plays needs a response from the compers. If every idea were responded to, the comping would be too active and would distract the soloist. If you run out of ideas while comping, it means that you are not listening to the soloist. If the soloist is playing interesting enough and leaving space in the solo for you to respond, you should never run out of comping ideas. Be advised that all soloists, especially students, are not aware of a compers perception of them. Quite often the student soloist is not aware of their responsibility to the rhythm section to play clear concise ideas and leave space in their solo for them to respond.

It should be cautioned at this point, that there are productive and non-productive uses of play-a-long records. To use them to develop repertoire and practice ideas upon will be helpful. As a substitute for playing with a live band, when none is available, they will be non-productive. You will not be learning the conversational skills needed to play in a group context. A play-a-long record does not respond to a soloist and you will actually be learning how to ignore a rhythm section rather how to play with one.

Note: I have made many Play-a-long records for Jamey. The challenge, as you can see from the preceding, is that there is no soloist playing on the record. Where then, did I get my comping ideas? In most cases, I imagined a soloist playing and reacted to the imagined solo. This was all right as far as it goes but this meant that the drums and bass may have been reacting to a different imagined solo than mine. On certain tunes on this recording, we had Jamey scat solo to us through the earphones. This made our task much easier and cohesive as we all had a common resource for our comping ideas.

It should also be understood that the interactive process of comping may not be as observable on a play-a-long as it would be on a recording of a jazz performance as the listener can not tell how the compers is reacting to a soloists ideas.

Listening:

The art of comping cannot be taught in a book. Comping is a self-taught process that can only be learned through the experience of live performance and trial and error. Working on the bandstand is the greatest classroom. The best teachers I have had were vocalists. It is from them that I learned to "Comp".

A good accompanist must be willing to be humble, willing to take a backseat to the soloist. Vocalists require that the accompanist listen intently, use

restraint, good taste and support their efforts. By support, I mean that, the accompanist must not distract the singers concentration by being too active nor must take the audiences attention away from the vocalist or soloist.

The accompanist must know how to listen and pay attention! Although this may seem an obvious statement, it is much more complex than appears.

Questions should occur in the readers mind:

What is listening?, What do I listen to? How do I listen? What do I do with what I hear when listening? Is there more than one way to listen? How do I pay attention and to what do I pay attention to? Is there more than one way to pay attention? What is the pianists role in a group context?

Early in my career, I had the good fortune to start my accompanists education by working with Chet Baker. As a vocalist and a soloist, he was most demanding.

At that time, I had thought I was a good "listener", when it came to comping but, Chet made me see otherwise. His method of education was (as was most of the great band leaders I eventually worked with) to use fear, intimidation and public humiliation as a teaching tool.

EXAMPLE: In 1962, I was playing with Chet's group at a club in Chicago called the "Plugged Nickel". It was a Saturday night and the club was filled. Chet was singing, the club was dark and hushed. The spotlight was on him. It seemed that I could never comp soft enough for him (I am rather large physically and have big arms) and he had been on my case about it for quite a while. I had the soft pedal on and was comping as lightly as I could but in the middle of a chorus, I slipped and played one chord just a little bit to loud for him. He stopped singing, turned around and looked at me and said, so that the audience could hear him; "You've got it Hal". At that point, the light man turned the spotlight on me and the audience all turned to look at me . All of a sudden, I was the center of the audiences attention and 120 sets of eyes were looking at me. You can be sure that after that embarrassing experience, I played a lot softer.

It finally occurred to me what Chet was trying to tell me. He wasn't just trying to get me to play softly. He was trying to get me away from paying attention to just my own sound and pay attention to the total sound of the group, blending my sound in with it! His point being that the group sound takes precedence over any individual member of the groups sound!

After that lesson was learned, I realized I could hear myself better if I picked a point in the room (a lamp, or poster or whatever) to focus upon while playing. I could therefore hear myself in relation to the whole group and control the sound of the piano better.

As beginning accompanists, it is understandable that one might be focused on their own playing. You are trying to get your voicings together, achieve smooth voice leading, create harmonic interest and respond to the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic signals the soloist is creating, all of which is quite a challenge. But in truth, all this becomes easier when you direct your attention away from yourself!

Listening Logistics:

A challenge for the compers is how to "hook up" with the drums, bass and soloist to create a group sound that is cohesive. I never forgot some advice that Dizzy gave to piano players in an interview in Down Beat many years ago. He said: " If your having trouble 'hooking up' with a rhythm section and a soloist, the pianist should listen to the snare of the drums and try to syncopate with its rhythms." In other words, the compers should get rhythmic comping ideas from the drummers snare as opposed to listening directly to the soloist for rhythmic ideas.

The logistics work this way: The drummer is listening directly to the soloist for rhythmic comping ideas and the snare is the drummers accompaniment line to the soloist. By having the piano listen to the snare drum (assuming the drummer is comping appropriately), the pianist is automatically "hooking up" with the soloists rhythmic ideas through the drummer.

However, the pianist does listen directly to the soloist for harmonic signals. These signals should suggest the color (alterations and substitutions) and density (number of notes and their spacing) for voicings that would compliment what a soloist is playing. I have often described this process as providing a harmonic "carpet" for the soloist to walk on. The pianist may also give and take harmonic suggestions to and from the bassist as well

Physical Signals:

It is advisable that pianists not comp with their eyes closed! One should be looking at the soloist and the members of the rhythm section at all times. Playing with your eyes closed makes one too introspective and liable to miss any physical signals that may occur. Physical signals are quite common in group performance because talking during a performance is not allowed, except in exceptional circumstances. When a soloist is not looking at you during a solo and suddenly is looking you in the eye, you can be sure it is a signal and means something. Possibly a change that is desired or the end of the solo is coming. It could mean many things and signals and their meaning, can vary from moment, according to what is happening in the music at the time. Understanding signals means "thinking on your feet" while performing. Physical signals can take any form (shoulder movements, head nods, turning, looking, stomping, etc.) and the compers must learn a soloists style of signaling.

EXAMPLE: I was once doing a tour of the mid-west, as a single, playing with different rhythm sections each performance. One night, after a set with a new rhythm section, the drummer came up and apologized to for having missed an "eyebrow" signal.

Harmony :

A soloist will often give harmonic que's if a specific chord change or alteration is desired at certain place. It is a general rule of signaling that: All signals (rhythmic, harmonic or melodic) should be given at least twice! If the same thing happens at the same place twice, it is usually a signal, especially if accompanied by a physical signal.

A soloist may be playing "Inside" the key or chord. When a soloist plays something "outside" a chord it may be difficult to hear.

EXAMPLE: I was once playing a gig with Sam Rivers. We were playing "Green Dolphin Street" in the key of E-flat. At one point, during the 1st. four bars of a chorus (which has a pedal point on E-flat) , Sam started "honking & quot; a repeated note all through that first four bar section. I could tell that it was a note that was "outside" the chords but couldn't tell what it was. In trying to find a voicing that would match his note, I first tried the sharp-11th. of the key. That was not it. It then tried the sharp-9th. of the key. That was not it. I then tried the +5th. of the key (that being the "outset" note I knew at the time), and that was not it. After the set was over , I asked Sam what the note was. He told me it was the flat-9th. of the key (an E-natural). A note I would have never considered at that time!

Some suggestions on simplifying harmonic "thinking on your feet":

If a note sounds "outside" on a "one" chord(Maj.), then it could be one of the "out" notes described in the story above. One can eventually tell which it is by the tension the note creates.

If a note sounds "out" on a Min.-7th. chord, it can be: a flat-5, flat-13 , or Maj.-7th.. If it sounds "out" on an altered two chord, it can be one of the altered note, played unaltered or natural or a flat-9.

If note sounds out on a Dominant Chord, it will be one of the altered notes: flat or sharp-9, sharp-11 , flat or sharp-5.

Needless to say, the professional comper will need many voicings under their hands in order to have a variety of ways to harmonize (color) a note.

It should also be noted that, although chords are built, in theory, from e bottom up (root, 3rd., 5th., 7th., 9th., 11th., 13th., etc.), in practice, they are constructed from the top down. Chord voicings are always harmonizations of top notes. These top notes are a secondary, obligated melody, that is

suggested by the soloist melodic line! This is a technique that is understood by most arrangers.

EXAMPLE: In order to develop this way of understanding complimentary harmonic accompaniment, I spent many hours listening to the background string arrangements on the recordings of Frank Sinatra and Barbara Streisand.

Rhythm:

The rhythmic aspect of the music is it's most important feature.

We have previously discussed some of these aspects but more need to be pointed out.

It is important to be able to control the intensity and volume of your chordal attack. Except for "fill in" chord sequences, chord volume should be a little bit "under" the total volume of the group. If the comper starts out by playing as hard as possible, there will be no place for the music to go. A solo must progress from a low end to a high end of intensity. If there is more than one soloist, this cycle must repeat itself for every solo. The comper must use emotional restraint and control at all times but especially in the beginning of a solo.

A little more rhythmic activity should occur between the pianist and drummer at the turn around's, these being, generally: the end of an 8-bar or 12-bar phrase (depending on the form of the tune) and most especially at the end of a chorus, going into a new chorus. This process exists to hide the resolutions that occur at these points and keeps the tension in the music. This should also occur at the end of a solo to "finish off" the solo. It will be educational, when listening to records or performances, if you pay attention to how different rhythm sections accomplish this technique.

Rhythmic placement and subdivisions of your chordal attacks on the beat should be well defined and contribute to the flow (groove) of the music. A weak or undefined attack can send uncomfortable "vibes" outdo the rest of the group, making them feel insecure. Work on getting comfortable with attacking "on top", "down the middle" and "behind the beat", varying your placement according to what's going on at the moment.

To keep your comping interesting, you should vary chords of different duration and volume, activity and inactivity.

Avoid hitting " one" of the bar. Hit the "and" of four in the bar preceding "one". Some soloist, can tolerate less "ones" than others. You can tell if you are avoiding to many "ones" if the soloist seems to be insecure by your doing so.

Be sure that you are hitting all the notes of a chord at exactly the same time!

Don't roll or "break" them. They will not ring as well. If you do roll a chord, do it from the outside fingers inward and make sure the roll is an exact subdivision of the beat.

Range:

The comping should avoid being in the same range as the soloist. Comping to high on the keyboard can be nerve wracking and will distract the soloist. The best range for comping voicings is about D below middle C to F an octave above middle C. Comping in the range of middle C is challenging because lower interval limits can make voicings muddy and you have to use less notes and space them well. Voicings of three to five notes are best. Rootless voicings should be used (The bass is already playing the roots). Single lines should not be played in comping. The exception to this rule is when pianist plays a single line behind vocalist.

Activity:

The pianist should avoid a hyperactive approach to rhythmic comping. The illusion of space must be created. The advice of "Less is best" applies here. During group playing, the comping will feel many internal rhythmic impulses but must learn not to respond to them all. There are times when activity should be increased. At turn around's (not all) or when the soloist leaves a longer space than usual. All rhythmic activity must coordinate with the drummer.

Of course, a pianist will spend a lifetime developing various chord voicings or differing situations. But generally, comping voicings should not have so many notes in them that they will be dictatorial. This means that voicings with too many notes will confine the soloist.

A comping should also not be shoving voicings and substitutes down a soloist's throat.

Note: If you are trying to play these transcribed voicings and they don't sound to you like they sound on the record, it means that these voicings are not suited to your touch.

EXAMPLE: When I was studying at Berklee, there was, a teacher there that loved to transcribe. He had perfect pitch and could copy anything. He would always be glad to copy for you anything you couldn't hear yourself. You could put your order in for someone's solo or voicings and he would have them for you in two weeks. At the time, the person I was trying to copy was Red Garland. When I finally got home with the transcriptions in my hot little hands, I would listen to the record and play the solos and voicings. Much to my disappointment, they just didn't sound the same.

Red's voicings and lines sounded good when he played them because they fit his touch! That was when I realized that I had to find my own voicings and

lines that fit my own touch. The truth is that your particular "sound" on the instrument will have a lot to do with how and what you play.

I have had many students come to me, asking for my voicings and I try to encourage them to try to find their own. Sometimes copied voicings don't "ring" right but sound better with your touch by adding or subtracting a note from them. I found this to be true for me when copying Bill Evan's voicings.

Forward Motion:

When listening to a record or performance, it sometimes appears that the rhythmic attacks of the chords are isolated events, almost as if they exist only at the moment of playing them. This is a static perception. All music is played going toward certain points in the future, including comping. Because of this, it is sometimes possible to rhythmically (and harmonically) predict where a soloist is going. By playing with a particular soloist for a length of time, the compers begins to get a sense of how a soloist is going to go to the next chord or section of a tune. This should not be too difficult to understand as, for example, chord motions are always discussed as "going to" this chord or that.

Comping Styles:

It is important to learn as much about a soloists style as possible. Does the soloist prefer to be "comped close" or prefer that you comp "independently" (Phil Woods preferred close comping where as Joe Henderson and James Moody preferred independent comping)? "Close comping" is when you respond to the soloist quickly and "answer" a musical idea. Independent comping is when you stay away from what a soloists doing, doing your own thing with the soloist playing against the comping. Tests can be made to tell which kind of soloist you are comping for. If you match a soloists ideas and you notice them trying to get away from what you doing, then they prefer to be comped independent. If you match everything and there is no reaction from the soloist, then "close" comping is OK.

Some soloists prefer legato comping, where you are playing anticipated whole and half-note rhythms. Others may prefer a more staccato rhythmic concept, but be aware that chord attacks that are too staccato can be nerve wracking to the soloist and the listener.

Harmonically, you may notice certain stylistic patterns of a soloist, such as the use of a flat-5 substitute when a Dominant chord is going to a "one" chord.

EXAMPLE: I had the good fortune to play many gigs with Zoot Sims. On the first few gigs with him, I tried to use altered chords behind him. As I soon realized, he was a diatonic improviser and almost never used altered chords, consequently, I stopped trying to shove them down his throat because I thought my chords were so " ;Hip".

If you are not sure how a person likes to be comped, ask. The soloist will be flattered that you've shown interest in making their music better.

It is also advisable to do as much tune research as possible. If you know you are going to be playing with a particular player, then try to find as many of their records as you can and learn their tunes.

EXAMPLE: I got my first "big time" gig with Chet Baker this way. I was living in Boston and a bass player friend of mine called me from Providence R.I (where Chet was playing) and alerted me to the fact that Chet was coming to town the next week and was looking for a piano player. I went out and borrowed as many of his records and tried to find as many lead sheets of his tunes as I could. When he came to town, I went to the club and asked him if I could sit in. He said OK and when I got to the bandstand, he asked me what I would like to play. I mentioned "My Shining Hour and "But not for Me" (two of his big songs). He nodded his head at me and we were off. After the set, he offered me the job.

There are many differing sets of changes to a tune and you should know as many of them as possible. That way you will never be thrown by a new set of changes. If you can't hear them , then ask someone what they are. Buy as many tune books as possible and get a thorough education in chord substitution.

Acquiring the ability to be a good comper should be the first task of any pianist . You can then get work and refine both your comping and soloing in the only true school that exists: The Bandstand!

Note: Matters of touch, tone, timbre cannot be addressed in this book as they require "one on one" teaching techniques.