Protocols

From Fundamentals of Jazz Improvisation: What Everybody Thinks You Already Know

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Protocols

Leader/sideman

Leader; The person that sets up the gig or is the designated director of the ensemble is the leader.

Sideman: A sideman is a member of the group but not the leader. The leader generally calls the tunes and designates who is to solo next.

Repertoire

There is a standard repertoire for jazz musicians. It consists of tunes from the Great American Songbook (primarily show tunes), jazz standards written primarily by jazz performers for jazz performance, blues heads, rhythm changes heads, Latin tunes (especially those by Antonio Carlos Jobim), and ballads.

Every region in the country has its own set of expected repertoire. One must go to gigs, play in the area for a while, and learn the literature. Amongst regional tunes there is music that jazz musicians around the world all know. (See the tune lists herein.)

Intros and Tags

One must come to the gig knowing standard ways to begin and end tunes. The leader will quickly inform the group what will be applied to the tune at hand. (See the Intros and Tags section herein.)

Count-off

There are several ways that a leader may wish to start a tune.

1. Count half notes for a bar with numbers 1 and 2, then quarter notes for a bar 1 2 3 4 thus:

2. Also common is to say a and 3 in the first bar of the count-off. This is more accurate to the best being stated.

3. Some leaders will substitute a guttural sound for the last two beats. It is intended to be both more accurate to the beat and to create an attitude toward the music.
Signals

Pointing to one’s head: When there has been enough solos, the leader may point to his or her head to indicate that it is time to play the *head out*. (The *head* is the tune upon which the performance is based.)

Pointing to a sideman: During the performance of a tune, the leader may point to a sideman indicating that he or she will take the next solo.

Holding up fingers: This can have two meanings. In a blues, it may represent the upcoming chord; four fingers equal the subdominant (or four) chord. In a larger ensemble where written backgrounds are present, the leader may hold up fingers to represent the number of measures leading up to the background entrance or shout chorus entrance.

Holding up a fist: Generally, this means the group is to proceed to the next section: next solo, last repetition before backgrounds enter, last time through the changes before short or head out, etc.

Vocalists

Vocalists will call tunes in the key that is best suited to their range. Instrumentalists will need to transpose.

When accompanying a vocalist, wind players and sometimes guitarists (depending on their role) can add contrapuntal lines. These lines are usually placed where sustained notes occur in the melody.

Multiple Horns

Melody: It is important to designate which horn will play the melody. Jazz interpretation of a melodic line is a rudiment of improvisation. No two players will interpret a melody in the same way. If there are two players, the second can embellish similarly to accompanying a vocalist. If there are three players, one might choose to sustain notes creating a pad for the other players.

Backgrounds: There are protocols for adding backgrounds. Generally, horns don’t play backgrounds during piano or bass solos; they may or may not for a guitar solo. When one horn player plays backgrounds for another horn player, the background player often plays guide tones (3rds progress to 7ths, 7ths to 3rds) or color tones of chords (9ths, 13ths, 11ths on minor chords, altered notes such as sharp—11, sharp of flat 5, sharp or flat 9). When two horns provide backgrounds one player should indicate a rhythmic context. Notes are chosen from the structural tones of a chord: 3rd or 7th. This may be predetermined or just first come first served. When there are three players providing backgrounds, the player not starting on a 3rd or 7th plays a color tones. Choices proceed 3rd, 7th, color tone.