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COMPING

By Hal Galper

The Pianist's 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 its 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 pianist's 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 bassist is already doing that. The group already has a drummer so the piano is not needed to keep time and the soloist is already playing melody as well.

The pianist's role is 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 soloist's 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 comper lead the soloist or "feed" a soloist ideas. Not every idea a soloist plays needs a response from the comper. 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 interestingly 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 comper's 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 recordings. To use them to develop repertoire and to 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. I can tell within four bars whether a person has been playing with play-a-longs because they usually totally ignore the rhythm section. A play-a-long recording does not respond to a soloist and you will actually be learning how to ignore a rhythm section rather than how to play with one.

Note: I have made many Play-a-long recordings 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 comping is reacting to a soloist's 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 back seat 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 singer's concentration by being too active nor must take the audience's 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 reader's 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? Is there more than one way to pay attention? What is the pianist's role in a group context?

Early in my career, I had the good fortune to start my accompanist's 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 softly 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 too 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 audience's 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 group's 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 comping pianist 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 you're 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 comping pianist should get rhythmic comping ideas from the drummer's 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 drummer's 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 soloist's rhythmic ideas through the drummer.

Hal Galper's piano comping to the chords of

All The Things You Are

1 $A\flat\Delta$ $G\flat\Delta$ $(G\Delta)$ $A\flat\Delta$ $G\flat\Delta$

Musical notation for measures 1-4. Treble and bass staves with chords and rhythmic notation.

5 $A\flat\Delta$ $G\flat\Delta$ $A\flat\Delta$ $G\phi$ $C7^{+9}$

Musical notation for measures 5-8. Treble and bass staves with chords and rhythmic notation.

9 F^- $B\flat^-$ $E\flat 7^{\flat 9}$ $E\flat / A\flat$ $A\flat 7$

Musical notation for measures 9-12. Treble and bass staves with chords and rhythmic notation.

13 $D\flat\Delta$ $D\phi$ $G7^{\flat 9}$ $C\Delta$ $C\Delta$

Musical notation for measures 13-16. Treble and bass staves with chords and rhythmic notation.

17 C^- F^- $B\flat 7^{\flat 9}$ $E\flat 7^{+4}$

Musical notation for measures 17-20. Treble and bass staves with chords and rhythmic notation.

21 $A\flat\Delta$ $A\phi$ $D7\flat9$ $G\Delta$ $E7+9$

25 $A\phi$ $D7+9$ $G\Delta$ $G\Delta$

29 $F\sharp\phi$ $B7+9$ $E\Delta$ $C7+5$ $C7\flat5$

33 $F-$ $B\flat-$ $E\flat7+5$ $A\flat\Delta$ $A\flat7$

37 $D\flat\Delta$ $G\flat7$ $C-$ $B\circ$

41 $B\flat-$ $E\flat7\flat9$ $(A\flat\circ) A\flat\Delta$ $G\phi$ $C7\flat9$

Hal Galper's piano comping to the chords of
The Song Is You

1 $C\Delta$ E_b° $D-$ $G7$ $G7^{b9}$

5 $C\Delta$ $A7^{b9}$ $D-$ $G7$

9 $Bb7$ $A7^{b9}$ $D-$ $G7$

13 $Bb7$ $A7^{b9}$ $A7^{+9}$ $D7^{+4}$ $D-$ $G7^{b9}$

17 $C\Delta$ E_b° $D-$ $G7^{b9}$

21 C Δ A7 \flat^9 D- D7 $^+4$ D- G7 $^+$

25 B \flat 7 $^+4$ A7 \flat^9 D- D7 $^+9$ D- G7 \flat^9

29 C Δ C Δ F $\sharp\phi$ B7 $^+9$

33 E Δ C \sharp 7 $^+9$ F $\sharp-$ B7 $^+9$

37 E Δ D $\flat-$ B $\flat\phi$ E \flat 7 \flat^9

41 A $\flat-$ A $\flat-\Delta$ A $\flat-7$ D \flat 7 D \flat 7 $^+9$