

Using Concepts You've Practiced in Live Improvisation

by Dennis Winge

A while ago I wrote an article called, "The Lag-Time Between Practicing New Things and Using them on Gigs," which explored the variety of reasons why it is common that musicians cannot implement what they've learned on the fly during gigs, even they've spent a significant amount of time practicing them. Recently, that topic came up in a live webinar I watched which was hosted by David Berkman, author of "The Jazz Musician's Guide to Creative Practicing." I was curious to see how he would handle that question.

He said that usually it was because the musician wasn't thoroughly comfortable with the material, which is reminiscent of my article's point about how on gigs you mainly go by instinct or intuition. In other words, if something is not entirely comfortable, you may steer away from it or simply not be able to remember it, or remember it well enough to use on the fly.

Secondly, David said that it could be something that wasn't part of the "core" of the musician's toolbox for improvisation. For example, it could be something the musician found 'interesting' but was more on the fringe of their basic repertoire of skills than something fundamental.

So knowing all of this, is there anything we can do to speed up the process? My advice is to practice fewer things, but practice implementing them more. Think about it: would you rather have a handy man who carries only 3 tools, but knows how to use them in many situations and uses them extremely well, or would you rather have someone show up with a giant, shiny, expensive tool box who hardly knows which end of drill gun fits the drill bits?

This advice for musicians is both easy and hard. It's 'easy' because we get to clear away the clutter of all this 'stuff' we feel that we need to practice. Instead, we relax as we explore only one tool. It's "hard" because:

a) Musicians who are dissatisfied with their playing always feel they need more and more tools, and so being told that they have enough tools can go against that kind of restlessness that makes us crave collecting more and more licks, riffs, and information. And so even if we do make time to explore one concept only in many different permutations and uses, we may not even feel like we were being productive! After all, the restless voice says, we "only practiced one thing."

b) We have a short attention span, generally. In this fast-paced, addicted-to-cell-phone world, we may simply not be able to focus for long periods of time on one thing.

Fortunately, both of these are easy to fix. Simply remind yourself frequently that working on one thing and one thing only is very productive time, perhaps even the most productive way to spend your time. Jazz pianist Bill Evans: "Practicing 1 tune for 24

hours is better than practicing 24 tunes in 1 hour.” This is a famous quote that is frequently referenced, because it is something that most of us need to continually hear so that our restless ego doesn’t nag at us with thoughts such as, “there is too much to do and too little time.”

In addition, my advice doesn’t mean that you have to spend long amounts of time on one thing in one sitting. It can mean you work with it for weeks or months. The important thing is that you stick with it and really explore what it means to you and how you want to use it.

Of course, this could bring up the question, “Well, can’t I just do that for all the things I’m working on?” Yes, you can. So I’m not suggesting you only work on one thing at the exclusion of everything else for months. But I am saying that if you have too many of these tools, they will be hard to carry around for that long and you’ll either drop a couple of them or simply get them mixed up.

So the message could really be refined to: “of the things you practice, choose one to go very deep into and make it a point to use that item at least once per gig.” This way, your overall practice routine can still be well-rounded, but you will allow a good chunk of the total practice time each week to pushing, pulling, stretching, contracting, and otherwise messing with the one thing you choose.

Once you’re able to start implementing it on gigs without difficulty or much effort, you could then choose the next item. That item could be something you already have been practicing, but that wasn’t chosen as the ‘thing’ to be implemented. Of course, some ‘things’ are easier than others and may show up in your playing without even having been chosen as the ‘thing,’ which is a bonus. But managing your time in the way I have described is really about managing your expectations, so that you allow plenty of time for the ‘thing’ to become part of your ‘core.’

A word of caution here before we close: without a teacher, these things are almost impossible:

a) to know the most important ‘thing’ to choose to work on based on your overall musical goals. Very frequently over 20 years of teaching, I see students who have spent time on something that was 2 or 3 steps ahead of what they really needed to be doing, which is why they were having such a hard time with it. But because students “don’t know what they don’t know” (to quote world-renowned guitar teacher Tom Hess), they could have saved vast amounts of time by consulting with a teacher first.

b) to know what the easiest ways to use the ‘thing’ are. Left to their own devices, students, eventually, may come up with ways to ‘keep it simple’ in their heads so that they can use new things on gigs, but this is usually only after wrestling with complicated ways of doing it for a long period of time. Exploration is in general a good thing, but with a teacher, the whole process can be not only sped up, but also made much easier, because of the experienced perspective the student doesn’t initially have.

c) to know how to integrate the 'thing' so it can be combined with other 'things.' In other words, students frequently practice things so that they can do them in isolation, but what about in combination with other things? After all, if you heard a musician who only used 3 tools separately, don't you think it would be limiting? I'm no mathematician, but the factorial of 3 (meaning number of possible combinations) is 6. So using the tools in combination in this case doubles the possibilities. With 4, tools, the number goes up to 24, and with 5, it shoots all the way to 120.

So, I really hope this helps. Practice fewer things, and really go deep into them. How can you use this new 'thing?' At how many different tempos (for example)? In how many different keys? In what kind of songs? In what kind of chord progressions, etc.?

Best of luck.