

How Phrasing AND SPACE CAN RADICALLY IMPROVE YOUR SOLOS

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Have you ever had a conversation with someone who just wouldn't stop talking? I'm talking about the kind of conversation where you worry for the other person's safety; there couldn't possibly be oxygen going to their brain for minutes on end. Just a stream of endless words pouring into space and flooding your ears. It probably felt kind of exhausting, right?

On the other side of the spectrum, have you ever had a conversation with someone who had difficulty getting their point across? They stuttered, paused, started one thought, but continued into another. At moments you may have felt as if you were stuck inside the screen of a lagging computer, with no hopes of escape lest you perform a manual shutdown.

Both of these conversational situations can be equally frustrating for different reasons, and perhaps you may admit you've been an offender.

On this blog we often stress that music (and in this particular case, jazz) is a **language**. It's not like a language, **it is a language**. And even if you know the right words to say (playing the right notes) and have a grasp of the accent, it doesn't mean you are ready to communicate effectively.

In the same way I have described some frustrating conversational experiences, jazz soloists can often sound cluttered and wordy, or sparse and incomplete. This is because the soloist may be ignoring two very important aspects of playing a great solo:

PHRASING AND SPACE

Phrasing

So what is phrasing? Well, it's essentially both the definition of a phrase and how to play a phrase. For our purposes and in this context, phrasing is simply: **a complete musical idea and how you execute it**. In other words, you take a breath and you express a complete thought that provides context and meaning to your musical conversation. We could go more in depth into what makes good phrasing (rhythm, harmonic context) but that's for another time.

Let's look at some examples of bad phrases in the English language:

Charlie Parker is good. He has a saxophone. He plays it well. I want to be like him. He pioneered bebop. Charlie Parker is a really smart guy.

What's wrong with this phrase? It's choppy and it's constantly starting and stopping. Essentially it's a bunch of mini phrases, that could be combined into one or two phrases to provide better flow. Here is another one:

Charlie Parker is a great saxophone player and I also think that pizza is one of the best inventions in culinary history. Seriously I love the cheese, the sauce, the crust, and penguins are birds that can't fly.

This one probably sounds funny to you and it should! What we have here is a series of connected ideas that aren't related to each other, nor do they build off of each other. The two sentences go from Charlie Parker, to pizza, and then to penguins. There is no logical connection between them. This phrase might sound ridiculous to you, but I've also heard a lot of soloists connect ideas together that made absolutely no sense. Sometimes this is because they are regurgitating licks they have learned and trying to force them to work together. Other times it can just be a scramble to try to "play the right note" rather than creating a melody.

Here's another one to look at:

Charlie Parker was an iconic saxophonist who came to the forefront when he lead the pioneering of bebop which was a departure from the danceable style of jazz playing in the swing era and bebop turned jazz into more of a virtuoso music that

focused on the talent and ability of the musicians which has in many ways still remained a staple part of modern jazz today.

I'm sure you may have identified the problem with this one. Just don't try to read it out loud or you may lose your breath! Looking at this through the lens of music, this constant flow of notes can often end up sounding un-musical. It may have a coherent thought and direction, but there is no breathing room. This is a particular tendency for instruments that actually don't need to breathe to play their instruments, such as pianists and guitarists. Horn players tend to naturally limit the length of their phrases because they have to come back up for air. This leads me to our next important aspect of playing a great solo:

Space

As we have already concluded from the previous phrase, an endless stream of words and run-on sentences makes for a bad phrase. So what is it that we need to break it up? **Space**.

Not only do we need space to break up our phrases, we also need space to help us create impacting solos. Miles Davis said it best:

“IT’S NOT THE NOTES YOU PLAY, IT’S THE NOTES YOU DON’T PLAY.” -- MILES DAVIS

Sometimes not playing is the best way to drive home the idea you are trying to express. Space can make the phrases you do play, all that more powerful!

The key is to listen to the other players you are making music with. Try playing a phrase and then listening to what the band is playing behind you for a second. So what if you miss that ii-V-I or you start your solo two bars late! **Don't play something just for the sake of playing, play because you *actually want* to play it.**

Practice: Try an exercise where you **play a two bar phrase over a jazz standard and then rest for the next two**. It may not be how you actually play in a live playing situation, but it will help you practice combining phrasing and space.

Let's take a look and a listen to how Charlie Parker approaches phrasing and space in his solo on "**Blues For Alice.**"

The image displays a musical score for the jazz standard "Blues For Alice" in 4/4 time, featuring Charlie Parker's solo. The score is divided into three systems of staves, with red annotations highlighting phrasing and space.

- System 1 (Measures 1-3):** Chords F, E[∅], A7, D-7. A red line labeled "Phrase" spans measures 1-3. A red circle labeled "Space" is around the final note of measure 3.
- System 2 (Measures 4-6):** Chords C-7, F7, B[∅]7, B[∅]min6. A red line labeled "Phrase" spans measures 4-6. A red circle labeled "Space" is around the first note of measure 4. A red circle labeled "Space" is around the final note of measure 6.
- System 3 (Measures 7-9):** Chords A-7, A^b-7, D^b7, G-7. A red line labeled "Phrase" spans measures 7-9. A red circle labeled "Space" is around the final note of measure 8.

Notice how each idea builds off of the next, and each is separated by space. Charlie Parker sounds exactly as if he is speaking in full sentences because in fact he is!

So the next time you go to take a solo, think about your phrasing and your space. Consider these just as important as playing the “right notes” and your solos will be much better for it.