his courageous but not-so-supreme (and not-so-stupid either) forces; who then got into their flimsy boats and went home, merely to find out that the only jobs left for them there were in local jazz bands! But hey, that's what can happen when your leave a good thing to go invade another country.

As far as choosing a career goes, I think that Confucius, the ancient wise man, probably summed it up best when he said: *Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.* Now, *that's* the job for me.

So, think long and hard about all this before you choose to do jazz exclusively for a living. And if you decide to go for it, remember to bring along a strong, reliable sense of humor, because scientific studies have shown: *You are personally going to need it!*

From Hal Crook's "Ready, Aim, Improvise!"

The Practice Plan

Whether you ultimately decide to do jazz full time, or part time, or just to keep your relatives from visiting, an organized plan can be very helpful to get the most out of your daily practice. When designing such a practice plan, it is important to realize that just as you do not go into a restaurant and attempt to eat everything on the menu in one meal, you do not go into a practice room and attempt to improve every area of your playing in one session either. Your plan, therefore, must involve selecting and limiting the quantity of individual topics that you will focus on every day, as well as determining a specified period of time to work on them (e.g., 10 to 60 minutes per day each, for two months or longer).

Once you have selected a topic of improvisation that is appropriate for your level of musical development, you must then create one or more topic-related exercises to practice in various harmonic settings, at various tempos, and with various modes of accompaniment, all of which must be suitable to your level of musical development as well. (For help determining your level of musical development see 16. SELF-CRITIQUING, page 277; for other related information see 18. DESIGNING A PERSONAL PRACTICE ROUTINE, page 296; for examples of topic-related exercises see HOW TO IMPROVISE, HOW TO COMP and this text.) And, of course, you can always choose new or additional topics and exercises to practice after you have made some progress and experienced some success with your initial selections.

Your practice plan could also be designed to cover a several year period. This can be achieved by first listing the musical areas or topics in which you need and want to improve, such as – well, if your situation is like mine and everyone else's, *all* of them! – including: instrumental technique, major and minor scales, triad and four-part chord arpeggios, sound quality, intonation, register development, range, sight reading, repertoire, ear training, improvisation (with regard to: pacing, phrase lengths, rhythmic density, melodic accuracy, melodic lyricism, jazz vocabulary, chord-tone soloing, chord-scale soloing, syncopation, rhythmic feel, dynamics, articulation, accents, triplets, motive development, through composed soloing, extreme tempos, etc.).

Then, for the first year's study, select several (eight to twelve) musical topics (perhaps with the help of a private teacher) and work on two or three of them for three months or so, then move on to two or three different topics for the next three months, etc., until you have spent some time on each topic on your list. Select topics of fundamental importance to quality improvising to work on first (e.g., instrumental technique, melodic accuracy, rhythmic feel, etc.), or those topics in which you need the most improvement and which are suitable to your level of development as well.

Note: If you are a beginner, it may be advisable to try to make a small amount of progress with many different topics over a certain period of time, rather than to try to make a lot of progress with only one or two topics. Or, perhaps

you could choose one topic to practice extensively over a long period of time while you change the other selected topics in your routine after only a few months of practice.

The above strategies can be used to organize your approach to practicing for each subsequent year of the overall plan as well. And you can always change or amend the plan at any time, or quit and return to the plan as often as you want to, or need to, once it has been created. Even if you only use certain parts of the plan, or if you only use the plan periodically, this will still be an improvement over not using a plan at all.

And, since it is much easier to make a commitment to a written practice routine than to occasional thoughts about practicing this or that topic using this or that exercise, I highly recommend writing your plan down. Goals tend to get accomplished eventually when they're written down. (See the EXAMPLE PLAN for practice routines on pages 303, 304 and 305 for help.)

The next step is to try out the plan to discover what works and what doesn't. Do not be discouraged, however, if your attempts to design the perfect practice plan are not immediately successful. Only through trial and error (and patience) does the right plan take shape. ***It takes practice to learn how and what to practice!*** Ask private teachers or more advanced players for suggestions and guidance also, or simply follow the advice offered throughout this part of the book. If you dare!

Practicing can be as much of an art as performing, and, as such, there is a lot to be learned about how to do it well. Practicing jazz should not be a confusing, energy-draining, unfulfilling period of mundane preparation, in which you are mainly conscious of your failures, and which you regard as dreadful but necessary. Nor should it be a totally care-free, play-whatever-you-want blowing session, in which you improvise more or less constantly and never examine your solos critically, and from which you cannot measure improvement.

Your daily practice session should be a relatively organized event in which you are mainly conscious of your successes; in which you balance working on individual topics and settings with playing for the fun of it; in which you balance playing your instrument with listening to and critiquing recordings of your practicing; and from which you can clearly see and measure improvement. Practicing can (ultimately) be a rejuvenating, therapeutic and even spiritual musical experience which you look forward to daily, the way an athlete looks forward to exercising or a monk looks forward to meditating.

Just as performing with the right attitude can be experienced as another form of practicing, practicing with the right attitude can be experienced as another form of performing. Practicing and performing are, indeed, more similar than not. Except for things like the clothes you may be wearing, the money you may be making, and the audience you may be thrilling, etc., the differences you perceive between practicing and performing are due more to your own mental attitude towards them than to any external condition or absolute reality. And remember, your mental attitude can be adjusted when necessary!

Remember also that you can pursue any musical goal with any amount of practice, but your expectations for making progress with a certain goal should be proportionate to the quantity and quality of your daily practice and experience with that goal over a considerable length of time.

Regardless of how many topics or areas there are in which you want and need to improve, and how much you need to improve in them, a well-structured, realistic practice plan using challenging but playable exercises will help you get there. Slowly but surely. And with a minimum amount of attitude adjustments!

How and What to Practice

The most basic concern regarding learning how to improvise is your ability to play a musical instrument. Technical practice (instrumental technique), therefore, is crucial to each daily practice session, especially during the early stages of your development.

This, of course, is quite obvious, but, nonetheless, it is an issue to be considered carefully. Preparation is the key to advancing; and making continual progress depends on acquiring the proper background to support advanced knowledge and ability. Just as you don't go for a ten-mile bicycle ride without first learning how to ride a bike, you don't study jazz improvisation without first learning how to play an instrument.

Some advanced players continue to practice instrumental technique on a daily basis. Others practice technique only on the band stand, i.e., while improvising. Advanced soloists no longer need to practice technique to the degree that less evolved players must, unless they want to continue advancing technically. But at some point along the way, all aspiring improvisers must go through a period where they spend a serious amount of time and energy developing their instrumental technique and becoming a virtuoso on their instument. There's just no way around it: You must be a proficient instrumentalist to become even a marginal improviser.

If you are a beginning level instrumentalist and your daily practice time is short (one hour or less), instrumental technique should probably be the *only* area you practice every day, perhaps for a year or more, in order to build up enough ability to begin a successful study of improvisation.

If you are an advanced beginner or intermediate-level instrumentalist and your daily practice time is longer than one hour, you might be able to work on instrumental technique for two thirds or one half of your total daily practice time, and then include one or two topics of improvisation for the remaining time. Advanced level instrumentalists have the option of reducing their daily technical practice to as little as one third or one quarter of the total time and then spend the remaining time on improvisation. (See ahead to 16. SELF-CRITIQUING, page 277, and 18. DESIGNING A PERSONAL DAILY PRACTICE ROUTINE, page 296.) And, master-level instrumentalists can even improve their playing by *not practicing at all*, or by practicing through a technique known as visualization.

I recommend that you create exercises for instrumental technique which in some way relate to or support the exercises you are practicing for improvisation. This will integrate your practice routine and help to sustain your enthusiasm for improving the more technical aspects of musical performance. For example: If your daily improvisation practice includes playing chord-tone solos on a particular chord progression, your daily technical practice should include playing chord arpeggio patterns on the specific chords of that progression. Or, if your daily improvisation practice includes exaggerating the execution of various articulation patterns, your daily technical practice should include these articulation patterns also.

The main issue here is to know yourself: To know how much time you are willing and able to devote *realistically* toward pursuing your goal on a daily basis. Then you must focus your efforts on learning specifically how and what to practice, because if you know how and what to practice and you do it daily, you will eventually learn how and what to play. Remember: When it comes to your musical development as a jazz player, the fundamental rule is: *As you practice, so do you play.*

The following classic story depicts in a humorous way the feelings of confusion, self-doubt and helplessness which can come from *not* knowing how and what to practice.

A trumpet player goes to his gig one night and the band leader tells him to play the first trumpet part from now on because the first trumpet player quit unexpectedly. The trumpet player suddenly gets very nervous and upset and begins complaining to the band leader, saying, "But I *can't* play the first part; there's a high C in it!" And so the band leader asks, "Well, why don't you just practice it?" To which the frustrated trumpet player replies, "How can I *practice* it if I can't *play* it???"

In the context of this story it is easy to realize the absurdity of the trumpet player's attitude and thinking. Yet I often hear students complain in a similar fashion that the particular exercise or topic of improvisation they are practicing is just too difficult for them to play as accurately and musically as they would like. So, they give up and either select a different topic to practice or play without one.

In certain cases, of course, selecting an easier topic or exercise to practice may indeed be the appropriate thing to do for the time being. In other cases, as with the unfortunate trumpet player in the story, it could be that the students cannot stand to hear themselves sound weak (now) in order to sound strong (later). It could be that they have no faith in their own resourcefulness or in their ability to help themselves. It could be that they are impatient and naive enough to expect ability to come without having to work hard and regularly for it. It could be that they need to consider the clever old saying: *Success comes before work only in the dictionary.* It could be that they need – yup, you guessed it – another attitude adjustment!

If these players could learn to break the bigger problems down into smaller, more manageable steps and practice each of them one at a time in controlled musical settings, they wouldn't have to listen to themselves sound weak because they would be playing within their ability to sound strong. Or, as strong as possible. And they would always experience success in the practice room. This *small steps* approach works well for solving or correcting most if not all musical problems. Those players who utilize such an approach will eventually acquire the ability they need to deal with the original musical problem, and with that gain valuable self-confidence also.

As an improvisation student, in fact, it is your responsibility to insure that each exercise you select or create to practice is not only challenging to you but also playable by you as well. I call this condition *practicing at the edge of your ability.* In this situation, the exercise is neither too difficult nor too easy, but just right for your level of musical ability. The "right" exercise is the one that does the work for you; all you should have to do is practice it! Therefore, choose or design exercises to practice that do the teaching, so you can relax and do the learning and improving. Herein lies a fundamental principle of productive practicing: *Let the exercise do the work – so you can have the fun!*

This approach to making improvement is nothing new, of course; it's just common sense based on the understanding that you cannot blame the target when you miss the bullseye. So, if you're not hitting the bullseye of a particular musical target, it's not necessary to completely change the target; instead, reposition the target (i.e., simplify the problem) until you can hit the bullseye every time, and work on it from there.

And when you can hit the bullseye every time, keep on doing so until such results become automatic and effortless; then re-position the target again (i.e., complicate the problem) to make it more challenging for you, etc. Take small steps; let the target improve your aim; let the exercise do the work. It is wise to first try to solve your musical problems using your own common sense. You may never need anything else.

Remember: Reaching and sustaining any desirable level of musical ability requires a personal commitment – a continual daily investment of your time and energy – that is at least equal to but more often greater than the level of

ability desired. To be sure of reaching the level of musical ability you desire, therefore, you should set (and maintain) your standards at an even higher level. When setting your standards, consider also how accomplished you would be at another subject – such as neurosurgery – with the same commitment you have made to playing jazz. This will help you keep your expectations for becoming a credible and successful jazz player in perspective.

Practice and Talent

I advise students not to be concerned if it takes more practice (i.e., work and time) than they had anticipated to learn something worthwhile, provided they are doing the right things about it. Practicing (itself) is what makes the ability achieved from it respectable. And that includes learning from the mistakes made in the process. After all, we may appreciate someone's natural talent for the more or less abstract gift that it is, but we don't respect and admire it. We don't respect and admire someone's good luck or good fortune to have tremendous talent. (We usually *resent* it!) No, seriously, we may appreciate talent but we respect and admire hard work, self-discipline and perseverance – for which we can find an abundance of inspiration and motivation, but which we must produce on our own and by ourselves.

Having talent is like having knowledge of where a treasure is buried. Yes, this knowledge is important, perhaps even essential. But we still have to dig up the treasure to own it, which takes time and work. In other words, talent by itself will never enable us to reach our full potential as improvisers; practice will always be necessary to *mine the treasure*, to develop whatever talent we have been given.

I have known many extremely young and talented jazz players who initially relied more on their talent than on their practicing to advance musically. All of these players eventually experienced musical difficulty (and some have even suffered emotional trauma) when they encountered the inevitable musical problem or learning situation that could not be solved or handled by their talent alone. Since they had little or no experience at solving problems and making progress through practice, they began to fall behind, and players with perhaps less musical talent but lots of successful experience with practicing continued to progress steadily, sometimes even passing them by.

All you really need, then, is an ounce of talent and the desire and will to cultivate it to the maximum through practice. The more time and work it takes you to learn something of value, therefore, the more worthy of self respect and admiration your efforts are. Focus on *that* instead of feeling disappointed and impatient with yourself the next time you cannot solve a musical problem or play an exercise perfectly in a short period of time.

It is also important that your efforts happen without obsession or stress, since wanting something to the point of obsession often repels the very thing you want. Mental and emotional stress can produce tension in the body which may instigate severe, disabling physical reactions, making it impossible for you to practice, play and improve. If you can see yourself becoming obsessed with learning how to improvise, and if you're beginning to feel worried and stressed out from the usual slow (or non-existent) rate of progress, you may be able to correct the situation through a better understanding of the issues related to practicing and improving. In fact, an effective daily practice routine can be exceedingly helpful to reduce the anxiety you may feel about making progress.

Note: For anyone already experiencing the pain syndromes commonly associated with stress and tension, such as backache, headache, stomach ulcers, insomnia, tendonitis, and various gastrointestinal disorders, I highly recommend the book HEALING BACK PAIN: THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION, by John E. Sarno, M.D., Warner Books, Inc., ISBN 0-446-39230-8. For additional help, see 19. EGO AND IMPROVISING, RELAXATION EXERCISE at the end of the chapter.

Practicing is to your musical health what exercising is to your physical health. When you do physical exercise in the morning, you don't typically worry all day about whether or not you did it well. If the exercise is appropriate for your level of physical development, just doing the exercise *is* the job done well. It's the same with practicing music. Let the exercise (itself) do the work; let the target (itself) improve your aim; so you can relax, learn and enjoy improving.

When tomorrow comes you will (hopefully) exercise again. The fact that you do more or less the same exercises every day with generally good results is what nourishes and promotes your physical well-being, and, likewise, your musical well-being. The more you do the same thing the better you get at doing it, which has nothing whatsoever to do with musical talent. Once you have an effective practice plan, then, just keep on doing it. Trust that in time the musical results you seek will come, and enjoy the process that leads to these results.

So then, regarding the question of how much talent you personally have for jazz improvisation, or how much you will need to become a monster jazz player – I suggest that you concentrate on using the *small steps* approach for a while and keep your attention focussed on the immutable law of music *(as you practice, so do you play)* and just see what happens.

7. Private Practice, Jam Sessions and Jazz Gigs: A Balancing Act

Any event, experience or activity in which you participate that involves the making or studying of music can be considered musical practice, the three main ones for jazz players being: private practice sessions, jam sessions and jazz gigs.

I recommend that you take as much control as possible over the more controllable areas of your learning experience, such as private practice sessions and jam sessions. Jazz gigs are much less controllable, in the sense that you just can't expect to play a jazz gig whenever you want – unless you happen to be a bass player. Or a night club owner. Or a trombone player who doubles on bass *and* owns a night club!

Engaging in a flexible balance of these three activities (private practice sessions, jam sessions and jazz gigs) is necessary for you to evolve as a jazz improviser because:

- **Private Practice Sessions** – are where you

  acquire and refine specific musical strengths by adjusting the exercises and practice settings to fit your level of ability,

  learn how to *listen first, play second* while you improvise with play-along recordings,

  record, discover and critique your musical strengths and weaknesses without being distracted or intimidated by other players and listeners,

  build a repertoire and develop material to use in your improvising,

  prepare yourself to play jam sessions; and

- **Jam Sessions** – are where you

  use the strengths acquired from private practice sessions (such as *listen first, play second* while you improvise) to create and explore music with other players (i.e., your peers) who confirm your development and from whom you get ideas and inspiration,

  try out and test (and record and critique) the musical discoveries you make in private practice sessions,

  find out what works and what doesn't work in a group setting on the bandstand,

  build a network of peers and discover the potential a group of players may have to form a working band,

  prepare yourself to play jazz gigs; and

- **Jazz Gigs, Concerts, etc.** – are where you

  encounter the added pressure of paying customers, all of whom will be expecting you to *listen first, play second* while you improvise,

  try out and test (and record and critique) the musical discoveries you make at jam sessions,

  find out what works and what doesn't work in a group setting on the bandstand before a live audience,

  build a professional reputation and discover the potential a working band may have to tour and record, and

  prepare yourself to perform nightly at world-renowned jazz venues in places like New York City – or, decide you might be better off getting a degree and teaching public school in Vermont.

During certain periods of time, such as from the beginning of January to the end of November of each year, you may do more private practicing and jam sessions and far fewer jazz gigs. During other periods, such as from the end of November to the beginning of January of each year, you may do fewer jazz gigs and far more practicing and jam sessions! Good luck with this one.

But whether you schedule a jam session instead of your regular private practicing two or three times a week, or just add several jam sessions a week to your current private practice schedule, combining this with one or two jazz gigs per week (or per month, or per year!) will be extremely beneficial to your growth and development as a jazz improviser. And don't ask yourself if you can afford to spend time playing jam sessions in addition to, or instead of, your regular private practice; ask yourself if you can afford ***not*** to – especially if you're a trombone player who doesn't double on bass ***or*** own a night club!

Important

If you are a beginner or intermediate-level improviser and rarely (or never) get the opportunity to play with players that are more experienced and evolved than you are, I recommend that you hire some advanced-level players to play sessions and/or perform with you occasionally. This practice may be ridiculed and rejected by some people (hopefully not by the players you try to hire), but it is entirely respectable behavior as long as you think of it as a private lesson and remember not to equate your own level of musicianship with that of the better players you pay to play with you. It is better to measure your musical ability not by who ***you*** call (and pay) to play, but instead by who calls (and pays) you. And, if you are serious about improving, don't wait for players to call you to play a jam session; ***you*** should take the initiative and call them.

Since it's very important to learn how to function musically with partial rhythm section accompaniment as well as with full accompaniment, include duo and trio jam sessions in your session schedule. Remember: The more players there are in the band, the less time there will be for each player to solo. This is an important consideration, because the quantity of soloing time and experience you get at each jam session will directly effect the quality you are able to produce, especially if you are a beginner or intermediate-level improviser. Plus, it is much more convenient and practical to schedule several duo and trio sessions per week than larger size bands.