

PREFACE

Welcome!

This book is addressed to saxophonists, and will have some information that is specific to the saxophone, but it is meant for anyone interested in getting better at improvising. My main teacher, Charlie Shoemake, is a vibes player who teaches the language of jazz. He has taught over 1500 people how to speak this language, and didn't limit himself to vibes players. I have followed that example in my teaching career, working with trumpet players, violinists, vocalists, pianists—anyone who is drawn to the magic of jazz improvisation.

The main goal of each chapter is to give you a tool you can use to practice. I've organized the chapters to identify skills you will need to be a fluent speaker of modern jazz. Feel free to use the book as you see fit—if you like to do things methodically, you can start at the beginning and work your way through in order. If you've been at this a while and want to get better at phrasing, you can jump right in at the phrasing chapter. If you feel the need to develop a disciplined practice routine, you can start at Chapter 20. My goal is for the early chapters to have something worthwhile in them even for someone who's been improvising for 20 years. I want you to have a resource you can turn to for information and inspiration. This is not meant to be the last book you will ever need, but one that can point you toward music and ideas that can help you improve.

In most chapters you will occasionally see a graphic that looks like this:

- [Video 30: Off the Deep End and Back](#)

These refer to video demonstrations that you can find on the web. On YouTube you can search for “Tim Armacost and the Jazz Saxophone Book.” This will take you to a page where the videos are displayed in lists by chapter. In the chapter lists you can also find links to the musical examples cited in each chapter. You can also find these links at www.timarmacost.com.

A FEW PRACTICAL MATTERS

Jazz at its best is a highly personal form of expression. In the practice of jazz education that creates a complication—that there isn't an agreed upon set of rules that we can all follow. In fact, a good part of the fun is breaking the rules once you've learned them. If I say 'X' there will always be someone who will say, 'no, Y.' For example, as a player, I like to have a lot of interaction and dialogue with the rhythm section, but there are players who prefer to have the rhythm section lay out a smooth, purely swinging groove. Which one is correct? I say this to point out that I am not here to establish a set of rules for you to follow, but to share the things I've learned through my experience. My hope is that you can use them to grow faster and develop an efficient and inspiring practice routine. If something here doesn't work for you, feel free to toss it out and keep looking...

Transposition:

This book is written assuming that you already have a working knowledge of your instrument and reading music. The most commonly played saxophones are pitched in either Bb or Eb. Rather than giving three versions of every example (Concert, Bb and Eb), I am going to rely on readers to transpose for their respective instruments. For an example in the key of C, let's say a line over a II-V-I progression (D-7, G7, Cmaj7), you can choose to study it in that key and have a piano player transpose it for you, or you can transpose the example yourself.

Another technique you can try is something I think of as “leaving breadcrumbs,” although, come to think of it, in this case the ‘crumbs’ are more an indication of where you’re going than where you’ve been ... It was inspired by something I heard Charlie Parker play on a recording, where he plays a long, beautiful four bar phrase, ending it abruptly with two 8th notes on the third beat of the fourth bar of the phrase. Then he does it again in the next four bar phrase, playing the two hanging 8th notes in the fourth bar again. By the third time, the drummer knows it’s coming and hits it with him. Here’s an example of what that might look like on a blues:

C⁷ F⁷ C⁷ C⁷
 Improvised line leading to -----> An open question

F⁷ C⁷ E-⁷ A⁷
 Another improvised line leading to -----> A possible answer

D-⁷ G⁷ C^{Δ7} A⁷ D-⁷ G⁷
 A third improvised line leading to -----> A more conclusive answer

If you’re having fun with it, there’s no reason you can’t play an inconclusive phrase on the third time, and keep going. Or play the conclusive phrase and keep going anyway...! It’s a matter of taste when you decide to move on to something else.

CHAPTER 21 • PHRASING

NOW THAT I CAN NAVIGATE THE CHANGES, WHAT'S NEXT?

After I'd been studying with Charlie Shoemake for about a year, I was starting to get a handle on how to play melodies and create lines. It was exciting to be able to sound like I knew what I was doing a little bit, and around that time I got a chance to sit in with a high-level rhythm section for the first time. They were swinging the music hard, and I had that first experience feeling like the energy lifted me off the ground. It was an inspiring moment, and I practiced extra-long hours for the next few months, wanting to feel like I was ready for it the next time I got into a situation like that.

Charlie is one of those rare teachers who knows how to deliver a message just at the right moment, and with the right combination of reminding you that you're not there yet, but that you could be if you keep at it. He gave me a lesson that week that I've never forgotten and have passed on to many a student since.

After I played everything I'd been working on in the space of one solo, Charlie said something like this to me:

"Tim, when you go to play your solo it sounds pretty good and I can hear what you're working on and it sounds like you're starting to get a handle on things and you're putting some pretty good lines together but you never really give me a chance to hear what you just said because you're on to the next idea right away and I hear that you have some things you got from Hank Mobley and some things from Dexter Gordon and especially the influence of Sonny Rollins is strong but you're playing everything you know in every chorus and you're hardly ever stopping to take a breath or to hear what's happening in the harmony or maybe consider whether there are other ways to approach the solo besides lots of long harmonic lines and then you go ahead and play some more lines and..."

—pausing after running out of breath, taking a huge breath and then continuing—

"...then you're off and running and maybe working off the melody a little but mostly just saying everything you have to say all at once and then doing that again and then doing that again....."

—pause—

"You see what I mean?"

Charlie acknowledged my youthful enthusiasm positively, and then demonstrated in a way that was impossible to miss that I had some work to do if I wanted to play music that was tolerable to listen to...

A short while later, after moving to Europe to live for a while, I read an interview with Joe Henderson where he talked about thinking like a writer. He described how he would try to improvise in sentences and paragraphs, as if he were creating short stories.

Charlie's message was basically that I was using nothing but run-on sentences. With Joe Henderson's comments I started to understand better what phrasing means.

That prompted me to pick Joe's *State of the Tenor, Volume I* as my next purchase, on LP. Ah yes, the good old days. CDs were still a few years away. Anyway, I remember distinctly having the experience for the first time of hearing not just the notes he was playing, which had been my primary focus for a few years, but the *ideas* as well. It was possible to "watch" him move from one idea to the next, and that was a revelation. Not long after that Joe came to Amsterdam, and hearing him in person for the first time was another revelation.