

# GETTING THE MOST OUT OF EVERY PRACTICE SESSION!



## Accompanying A Vocalist: Do's and Don'ts

*By Gunnar Mossblad*

**A**n often neglected aspect of many young horn players' development is the proper way to accompany a vocalist (or even another horn player) on a gig. Most of the time the gig is what is often referred to as a "fake" gig, where the horn player must make up or "fake" the arrangements. There is hardly ever the benefit of a rehearsal, and if you don't know the tune the most that will be available is a chord sheet in the key the vocalist sings the tune.

Rhythm players, by the nature of their function as both a soloist and accompanist in a small group, usually learn proper accompanying techniques early in their development. In contrast, horn players whose primary function is normally a lead voice often do not know how to assume an accompanying role. Like many other horn players I learned to accompany "on the job." I have had the opportunity to work with some outstanding vocalists, as well as other vocalists. Through these practical experiences I have developed

a few do's and don'ts so I can help make a fake gig sound and feel like a rehearsed group with arrangements.

First and foremost be a good listener and follower both musically and verbally. If you have an opportunity to visit with the vocalist before the gig starts, please do! Find out what tunes you have in common. Most accomplished vocalists will have at least chord sheets if not head arrangements in the proper key for most tunes they sing. Look at them and follow them during the tune. It can make all the difference.

Like all jazz artists every vocalist approaches a tune in a unique way. For that reason a horn player must be flexible and listen carefully in order to accompany without getting in the way of the vocalist. Fortunately, most great jazz vocalists approach the music like a horn player or an instrumentalist would. In the same regard, a horn player should try to approach the music the way a vocalist does, through the words and

melody.

Simply put, when there is a vocalist, the primary role of a horn player changes from a lead voice to an inner or accompanying voice. In the ensemble sections, usually the head in and out, the horn player must compliment what the vocalist is expressing in the melody. This means the horn player should be sensitive to the musical pace and attitude that the vocalist is expressing, and make appropriate musical decisions that contribute to the overall musicality of the performance.

A good rule to follow is know the melody and lyrics, and don't play them when the vocalist is singing either one. Lyrics convey a basic tone or feeling of the tune and directly affects the phrasing of a melody. By knowing the lyrics, a horn player can anticipate a vocalist's cadences and can either answer the vocalist and/or set up the next phrase melodically. Knowing the melody is also vital to successful accompanying. If for no other reason, know the melody to avoid playing it because it interferes and takes the lead voice away from the vocalist. This actually holds true for fake gigs with more than one horn player too. Since vocalists as well as horn players are free to incorporate "blue" notes, pitch bends, and personal interpretations of the pitch center, playing the melody in unison on a fake gig could be disastrous. Even one note of the melody in the wrong place can really negatively affect the overall musicality of the arrangement.

#### DON'T ROB THE MELODY

Whatever you do don't rob the melody away from the vocalist. There is nothing worse than having a singer approach the last note of a phrase, the resolution to a beautifully constructed phrase, and have the horn player sound the resolution note before the singer can. This really yanks the musical rug out from underneath the singer. It should also be noted that like any other lead player, a vocalist quite often delays the final resolution of a melody to build greater tension in the tune. It is usually a good idea to stay away from the melody note at cadence points until the singer has clearly finished the phrase. In fact whenever a horn player is playing while the vocalist is singing it is important not to anticipate any part of the melody. It is fine to answer or echo the melody in different places, but don't become the lead. The exception may be on Bebop tunes where the vocalist will be scatting the melody like a horn

player rather than using words.

#### ANTICIPATE APPROPRIATE FILLS WITH MELODIC FRAGMENTS

Knowing the melody also allows you to anticipate appropriate fills in the form of short melodic fragments that answer the previous phrase or set up the next phrase for the vocalist. Knowledge of the main guide tones and voice leading of the melody will also help the horn player to develop counter lines that can be played under the vocals. This counterpoint can develop into a wonderful interplay between the vocalist and the horn player when it is done right. After working with a singer for a while, these counter melodies or fills should weave together with the melody into a seamless melodic fabric. By knowing both the lyrics and the melody, the horn player can complete the musical picture by adding the appropriate musical color and emotion to the music.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE FUNDAMENTAL HARMONY

Know the harmony. A thorough knowledge of the fundamental harmony, as well as the upper partials or color tones (7,9,11, or 13<sup>th</sup>) of the harmony, is vital to playing solid melodic counter lines that work with the vocals. For instance one of the easiest and most effective accompaniment tools for a horn player is to

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play long notes often referred to as "goose eggs" through a section of the tune. By starting on the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> of a given chord and moving in small intervals through the fundamental harmony of the chord changes you will create a sonorous accompaniment or "bed" that can support the vocals.

### **NO SUBSTITUTE CHANGES**

Don't play substitute changes. At least not with the vocalist on the head in, or out. It is important to use the changes that the rhythm section is sounding when accompanying the singer. Melodies utilizing substitute changes under the vocals, which follow the same changes being used by the rhythm section will more times than not clash! Save the substitutions for your solo. If you don't know the tune and have any question about the changes, follow the rhythm chart. Everything you play will have more credibility.

### **WATCH FOR CUES FROM THE VOCALIST**

Watch the vocalist. Beside musical cues, a vocalist will give physical gestures that will indicate their desire for you to accompany in a certain way or not accompany, i.e., layout. For example, the vocalist might gesture for you to play on the bridge of a tune simply by looking around at you. If you are not watching you may miss the cue. It comes down to being as observant and sensitive to all aspects of the musical performance as possible. After you have played with a singer several times and had a chance to talk with them in the breaks you will begin to understand the musical concepts and physical cues that the singer is giving.

### **DON'T BE A BULL IN A CHINA SHOP**

Whatever else happens don't be hesitant, nor a bull in a china shop. Less is more, especially if you are not familiar with the vocalist you are working with. If you jump right in, playing the same way you would with a horn player or vocalist you have worked with before, your probably going to step in one or more musical holes. It is better to listen carefully for a while to see how the vocalist phrases and paces the tune. Then begin contributing to the arrangement in a simple way, perhaps just long notes and become more active as the tune progresses.

### **DON'T PLAY TOO MUCH**

This is probably the most common mistake of younger horn players. The classic example is the horn player that plays lots of fast scales and chords with all kinds of alterations and harmonic substitutions while the singer is singing this lovely melody about some romantic subject. It is not technical prowess that is needed; it is feel expressed in good melody that is important. After spending hours and hours of practice time developing the technique necessary to reproduce those John Coltrane or Clifford Brown transcriptions, it is understandable why so many young horn players tend to play the same way with a vocalist. It is impor-

lant however, to remember that in this type kind of playing, less is definitely more. As valuable as transcribing Trane or Clifford is, transcribing Prez, Gerry Mulligan, or Phil Woods, accompanying a vocalist would just as valuable.

Inexperienced horn players also have a tendency to play a lot of notes when they don't really know the tune. This is a dead give away that you don't know the tune, and is inappropriate for accompanying a singer, so fight that tendency.

### **WHEN IN DOUBT DON'T PLAY**

Rather than play too much, or play off-mic in a hesitant way searching for the right notes, when in doubt don't play at all. If you do not know the tune, listen until you have it transcribed it in your head. If you are still not sure of what you are doing, instead of playing wrong notes or being hesitant, let one of the other instrumentalist play the first solo, and experiment in your solo. Or better yet, just sit out on that particular tune. There is nothing more frustrating and difficult for a vocalist than having inappropriate notes or lines being played while the singer is trying to sing the melody.

### **ORCHESTRATE THE TUNE**

This really brings me to another very important point. Orchestrating the tune. Faking an arrangement of a tune on a gig, even without a vocalist, requires a horn player to be sensitive to the orchestration of the tune. The same way a great pianist or guitarist adjusts the voicing and range of their comping so that it does not conflict with a soloist or vocalist, a horn player must be sensitive to the range and intensity of the lines he or she is improvising. The hippest counter line or fill is not going to sound appropriate if it is in a range that covers or conflicts with the vocalist. Even a very soft sustained pedal note will conflict with the vocals if it is above or right at the general range of the notes that vocalist is singing.

As a saxophonist I very seldom if ever play my soprano saxophone with a female vocalist. The range of the soprano is just too close to the range of most female vocalists. The soprano saxophone also tends to have a more cutting timbre so even at a soft volume it tends to dominate. The tenor saxophone, while powerful, can have a less intense or cutting timbre and is in a range that compliments the female voice. The lower and middle range of the tenor saxophone allows lines to be played under the range of the vocalist and fill out the arrangement. In the high range, the tenor is very useful to play closer harmonies as well as duets with the vocalists and still not over power the situation.

### **BE CLEAR AND DEFINITE ON INTRODUCTIONS AND ENDINGS**

Introductions are most often optional for horn players. The chord player will usually take care of the introduction. However, by the time the end of a tune

comes, it is important that horn player maintain a level of activity that keeps the ending memorable. If there is not a written ending on the chord chart, the horn player should be ready to answer or sting the end of the tune with a concise, but interesting ending. This means that the horn player should know several standard endings that can be played along with the vocalist, as well as doing an appropriate solo fill on the last chord. Either way, **DON'T EXTEND THE LAST NOTE TOO LONG** or the vocalist might run out of steam. Remember the vocalist has probably been holding the last note the longest time. Under normal circumstances, the vocalist should be the last band member to end. Keep one eye on the vocalist all the time for the proper place to end the tune.

#### **PACE THE PERFORMANCE & FILL IN THE BLANKS**

A horn player can be very powerful both dynamically and technically. As a result the horn player is critical to the overall musical development or contour of the performance. As important as it is to fill the spaces, remember it is just as important to leave some space for the tune to breathe. Keeping in mind that there is an exception to every rule, the performance of a typical tune will go from less intense to more intense. For a horn player trying to accompany a singer, this translates into less activity at the beginning of the tune and more activity at the end of the tune.

#### **A TYPICAL BALLAD**

Keeping in mind all what I've discussed in my do's and don'ts discussion, a typical performance of a ballad might go something like this.

##### **• INTRO**

The horn player usually does play the introduction. The pianist will handle the introduction, but if the horn player does play the introductions, the improvised melody should end on an appropriate harmonic and melodic cadence that will set up and cue the vocalist into the melody. This often means the first note the vocalist sings.

##### **• FIRST A SECTION**

In the first 'A' section the horn should **NOT** play.

##### **• MAYBE WAIT FOR THE BRIDGE**

The horn may or may not come in on the 2<sup>nd</sup> 'A'. If the tune is fast, it is more effective to wait for the bridge. If it is slow to medium, the horn should play light fills only.

##### **• WHERE TO ENTER ON A BALLAD**

On a ballad, the bridge is a good place to introduce a horn accompaniment. If the melody is active, long notes are appropriate. If the melody is less active, fills with long notes between would be good.

##### **• THE LAST A OF THE TUNE**

The last 'A' of the tune could use more fills and in closer harmony.

##### **• SOLO SECTION**

The solo section is just that. Follow standard solo etiquette, but **DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE VOCALIST**. Some vocalists scat and some do not. Either way, whether in individual solos or trading 4s make sure you do not forget about including the vocalist. The last soloists should be careful to end the solo in a manner that sets up the vocalist for the head out, whether it goes to the top of the form or common to ballads goes to the bridge. The last soloist must end a bar or two earlier than the end of the form in order to set up the vocalists' entrance. It is especially important to end early if the tune has pick up notes to either the top of the chorus or the bridge as often happens in a ballad.

##### **• HEAD OUT**

The head-out can follow a similar plan as the head in. If the horn player is the last to solo, then the first 'A' section should definitely **NOT** have any horn playing.

##### **• ENDING**

The ending should be as described above. The horn player should just make should that a certain level of activity be maintained to keep the musical interest of the tune all the way to the end.

A horn player might not play on a medium tempo tune until the last 'A' or even until the 2<sup>nd</sup> chorus. Uptempo tunes might not require any counter lines until the solo section and then accompany on the out chorus. Every singer and every music musical situation requires a slightly different accompaniment.

There is no real mystery to accompanying vocalists. It does require the horn player to be a good listener and be musically flexible. I hope these few do's and don'ts help to make your next gig a little more musically rewarding. Listen and be flexible. §

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