

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF EVERY PRACTICE SESSION!



Transcriptions & Duplications: How Far Should You Go?

By Gunnar Mossblad

In my last column (April/May 1999 *Jazz Player*), I discussed the importance of utilizing scales and chords as a way of developing technique on your instrument and learning the basic vocabulary and grammar of the jazz language. Just as scales and chords provide a fundamental understanding of the structures of music, transcribing and duplicating performances of great jazz masters teach you how to use that vocabulary and grammar in cohesive musical statements. It is by far the fastest way to learn how to improvise, and in many ways it is like studying with the master you imitating. With each new transcription and duplication you will relate to and retain some musical element or thought that will become part of your playing. This process will eventually help define your own unique, but recognizable style. In essence, you are studying and learning what has been said before in order to be creative and say something new.

The art of transcription and duplication can be as

simple as hearing a note or musical thought and reproducing it on your instrument. It can be as extensive as learning and reproducing an entire performance like John Coltrane's solo on *One Up, One Down*, a solo that is in excess of 40 or 50 minutes long. In recent years educators and publishers have realized the value of transcriptions, and as a result the art of transcription is very well documented through countless transcription books that include entire solos or just phrases. An excellent "how to" video by David Liebman titled *The Improviser's Guide to Transcription* (Caris Music Services CMS002), methodically describes the importance and methodology of transcription as well as duplication.

How much you should transcribe and duplicate is different for everyone. Some established jazz artists swear they have never transcribed anything in its entirety, just phrases they really wanted to learn. Others have indicated that they transcribed and duplicated only one historically significant solo and based all of their playing

on that solo. Still others (the majority) admit to having transcribed quite a bit during the years they were trying to learn how to improvise and develop their own voice. These professionals still do some transcribing when they hear something that really interests them. Either way, the value of transcribing and duplicating solos of the great jazz masters is well established, and everyone should go through the full process at least once in their musical life..

THE FULL TRANSCRIPTION PROCESS

Musical transcription; the act or process of notating the content of a recording, and duplication; the art of reproducing a performance of the recording exactly, can be broken down into four basic steps:

1. Aural retention
2. Execution
3. Notation
4. Analysis and extraction

Aural retention is simply listening until you can sing it with or without the recording. The amount of time this takes is strictly dependent on your pitch memory skills. However, the more you transcribe, the better your pitch recognition and retention becomes. I encourage my students to fill up a cassette tape with multiple copies of the solo they are learning, and listen to it every chance they get. Listening so much that you can sing every aspect of the solo, internalizes not only the pitch, rhythms and articulations, but the subtle musical aspects that make up the soloist's musical style.

Once you have internalized the solo and can sing along with, and without the recording, it is time to learn how to play it. The execution of the solo on your instrument can start without the recording. Sing the solo and 'find it' on your instrument. Periodically, play the solo with the recording until you can faithfully execute or duplicate every nuance of the performance. You should eventually be able to duplicate the solo note for and nuance for nuance utilizing just a metronome or play-along recording.

In addition to the notes and rhythms, make sure that the articulation, pitch bends, tone color (and changes), and even the subtle time-feel is exactly reproduced. This is the only way that you will begin to understand or comprehend what the soloist was thinking when they performed the solo. An invaluable aid in this process is a 1/2 speed copy of the solo. Subtleties of the performance like articulations, grace notes, scoops, even the time-feel is clearer and more obvious at 1/2 speed. Many of the subtleties are missed when listening to the solo at full speed.

Once you can play the solo, the painstaking, but important process of notating the solo on paper begins. This is a particularly challenging process with jazz, because so much of the music cannot be notated precisely. May of the musical devices, and even articulations can only be approximated with musical notation. Therefore the written solos are usually at best, a guide for analysis and extraction, and should always be used in

conjunction with the original, recording.

Analysis and extraction can only be done once the solo is committed to paper. Obviously the more knowledge of standard theory and analysis that a student has, the more thorough the analysis can be. However, even a young student will find phrases or passages that they would like to be able play in their own improvisations. These phrases, passages or motives should be extracted for practice in different keys, tempos, and even in different rhythmic variations.

APPLYING WHAT YOU LEARN

Successfully applying what you learn from a transcription to your playing is a process that in itself can take some time. Even after successfully completing an entire transcription and duplication process, you may have difficulty incorporating what you have learned into your own improvisations. To speed the successful transfer from practicing to performance play the solo out of order. Using a play-along recording, play the solo in a different order, mixing up choruses, sections or even phrases. Eventually use the solo as a point of departure for your own improvisations, returning to the transcription periodically. Ideally your solo and the transcription should be seamless in style and character.

Extracted material should be practiced in a variety of different keys and over different harmonic progressions. Generally, the first time you try using an extracted 'lick' in your own improvisation, you might start it in the wrong place or fumble technically. After several (or even many) attempts you will successfully play the lick, but it will sound as if you are inserting someone else's 'lick' into your solo. If you keep trying to use the material you will eventually be able to play it naturally in your solo, successfully approaching and resolving the phrase. Finally, you will change the extracted material around until it is your own unique musical statement.

HOW MUCH TO DO

The process may seem overwhelming, and the first time can be difficult, but it is worth every minute you spend as long as you select a solo that is appropriate for your level. Even an 8-bar solo can be a valuable endeavor. It is not the length nor difficulty of the transcription that is really important, it is the quality of the solo and the thoroughness of the process that will help your playing. In fact, it is never too early to try to transcribe something. Once a student can hold their instrument and can play the basic notes on the instrument, short 4 or 8-bar phrases can be a fun and valuable endeavor as part of a weekly lesson. After a few weeks even a raw beginner will enjoy and learn from the process.

Since transcription and duplication is a long process and there is so much jazz literature to learn, published transcriptions serve as a valuable resource. They serve as an overview of a player's style, a creative stimulus for theoretical or compositional material and an excellent way of developing technical, and stylistic aspects in your playing. Written transcriptions can be studied, analyzed and duplicated in same way that you do your own transcriptions. You obviously miss the ear training benefits of

doing your own transcription, but as long as the original recording is used in conjunction with the published transcriptions they can be extremely valuable.

As an example of what I have been talking about I included a David Liebman solo transcription on Rogers and Hart's *I Didn't Know What Time It Was* that I completed several years ago. I spent a great deal of time at

full and 1/2 speed playing and trying to notate every aspect of the solo. If this solo interests you it can be found along with ten other transcriptions in a publication titled *Improvisations-Concepts et techniques (Transcriptions et commentaires)*, HL Music, distributed by Caris Music Service. This publication includes the original solos on a CD and analytical suggestions. §

Dave Liebman's Solo on *I Didn't Know What Time It Was* Transcribed By Gunnar Mossblad

SOLO

End of Piano Solo

2

3

6

9

13

17

21

3

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