

4. *Advanced Playing Concepts Series Part 4*

a. *Listening While Playing* - I want to leave you with a couple of theoretic principles you can start to improve on. I'm sure you've read enough about outer body experiences at this point. The number one thing I find blocking highly skilled players from reaching a new level is always listening. They are only hearing a certain amount of sound from the group. This may be from the drummer or bass player, or bass and drums, or just the sax, or the just the drummer's ride cymbal, or just the bass players walking lines or worse, just themselves. People get so caught up with how good they are trying to sound that they forget there are other people in the band to listen to! The sooner you can realize that you're playing will increase by listening more to others, the better off you will be. I'm going to list out all of the components I see people fail to listen to or are lacking in their listening. A lot of musicians may be listening very hard to 90% but are not hearing one little detail that may be holding their playing back drastically.

i. *Listening to the Bass*

1. *Walking Lines* - Just listening to the time and feel of the bass player is a topic I had to state up top because even a lot of pianist are not doing this easy task. You must keep your ears open to the general time feel and lines the bass player is creating. If you can't sing back the line the bass player just played then you are not listening hard enough. Or someone is playing too loud. Ha! Will assume however there is perfect balance.
2. *Harmonies he's playing* - While listening to the general sound of the bass player, you must be open to the harmonies he is using. If he chooses to use a tritone substitution or pedal in one area of a tune, then you must be ready to adapt to this and go with him. There

should be a push and pull relationship in which both of you can suggest different harmonic movements. If you are not listening to the specific notes they are choosing then you have a big problem.

3. *Playing Roots and fifths* - Listen to whether they are playing lots of roots and fifths or moving outside the key a lot. If they are sticking to the standard roots and fifths with a couple of diatonic filler notes then you will be able to take more liberties with your harmonizations. If they tend to stray from the traditional roots and fifths then you will be required to be more attentive to the lines they are walking so you two are not clashing.
4. *Walking strange lines* - If you are playing a with a bass player that is not walking correct harmonies, generally, the best course of action is to simplify your playing. Give them room to express what they want. At the same time, see if you can latch on to the lines they are playing. Do they always play specific out of key notes or is it random? Listen to patterns that may emerge so you can gain some insight into their approach.
5. *Solid or moving* - Like any musicians, bass players will have been influenced by previous bass players. These bass players might have come from an era where they simply laid the time down or they might have come from an era where they were moving around and creating alternate melodies. The better you can distinguish what the style is of the bass player is the better you will be able to fit your style with them. Remember jazz is about adaption and unity. When you find any musician you are playing with that has a different style than you are used to, always try and meet at a middle ground. Getting frustrated because they are not playing a certain way isn't going to solve anything. Try the other way and create beautiful

music with them, no matter what they are playing or what their skill level may be.

6. *Following you or not listening* - If you are lucky enough you will be playing with a bass player that will always follow your lead, granted you are the leader. If this is the case then you can take full rein and drive the band however you'd like. If you have suggested a couple of harmonic movements and the bass player has seemed completely oblivious to what you are doing, then it's best to try and follow him through certain progressions. Try to suggest and state simple ideas so they might have a chance of actually catching on to what you are playing.
7. *The strength of their pull* - Some bass players will dig in a pull like they mean it. Some will stand relaxed and pull effortlessly. Each style is going to invoke a certain atmosphere you need to be aware of. Neither is bad or good but mostly depends on your preference for the sound you like the most. If you are not on the look out for how the bassist pulls, you will be left wandering without direction.
8. *Their Listening skills* - Finally you need to be aware of how much they are listening too. If the bass player is catching rhythmic phrases with the drummer and yourself, while being aware of dynamical movements you are suggesting then they are obviously listening very hard. Unfortunately, it's rare to find musicians who are that sensitive to other people's playing. This is what you must strive to be. The better you can determine how much they are listening, the better you will be adapt yourself to make up for the lack of listening you might be experiencing.

ii. *Listening to the drums* - Certain factors will arise more depending upon the instrument. There will be a couple of similarities from the bass section

but there will be also some factors that have more weight due to sound the particular instrument can create and its purpose within jazz.

1. *Swing Feel, of ride Cymbal* - Listening to the pattern that the drummer is playing on their ride cymbal is a must. You can gain a lot of insight into the feeling, style, amount of energy and groove the drummer is providing, all by listening to their ride pattern. Listen to whether it is loud or soft, is it driving or laid back, is it thin and dry, or full and wide. Once you have an idea of the way the drummer prefers to play their swing pattern you can again adjust and come together with them.
2. *How he feels eighth notes and quarter notes* - Time is a funny thing because everyone can feel the eighth note swing differently. Some one might feel it pushing more, other might feel it pulling. You want to determine how the drummer is feeling the swing of the eighth note. It could be right in the middle of the pocket. Once you have determined where it is in comparison to the beat you can know how you will need to phrase your lines. If both of you are playing on the top of the beat then you will know the pocket will have little room for error. There will not be a wide margin. On the other hand, if you are playing more behind the beat while the drummer is pushing, you will be creating a bigger pocket. If the bass player is listening he would do well to sit his lines directly in the middle of both of you. And yes this is actually how much everyone in the group must be listening and aware of each other.
3. *Volume* - Because the drums have the power to take over a band you need to be aware of the drummers volume at all times. If you are the one leading the band and the drummer is being too loud you can play quieter to suggest you want a different volume level. The

quickest way to gauge a drummer's listening awareness is by playing quieter than they are. The time it takes for them to follow you is directly proportionate to how well they are listening. I love using this trick. I'll say one thing, I've never had a problem with a drummer playing too quietly. That being said most of the time I would want to try and direct the drummer to starting out quietly then growing as we build the tune.

4. *Busy or relaxed* - Similar to the bass player, we want to see if the drummer is staying with a traditional pattern and snare or if they are adding movements, fills and phrases to the tune. The busier the drummer the less room you will have to talk on your instrument. With busy drummers I will always wait until they leave space and then say something. Almost always they start to play less or we begin to have nice conversations back and forth. Any drummer who continues to speak over me I usually verbally talk with after the rehearsal gig or performance, unless they are the leader of course. If you are the leader, you can't be afraid to tell people how you would like the band to sound.
5. *The snare* - A lot of the times drummers will try and match up their snare to your comping patterns. This is very common practice between pianists and drummers. Listen to whether the drummer is attempting to match their snare hits to your comping patterns. If they are, then you know you have a drummer who is listening hard. If not, then you can strongly suggest some comping patterns that they may catch on to. Once they realize you are suggesting rhythmic phrases you can pull back on how obvious you are being about the patterns. The snare and comps work best when they are light and rhythmic behind soloists or the melody you may be playing.

6. *Style and Groove* - This applies in different ways to the drummer and bass player, but the drummers should also be aware of any groove suggestions you make while playing. If you begin to suggest a 12/8 feeling the drummer should be following you. This also works the other way around. If the drummer is suggesting a backbeat or some different groove besides swing, within a moment's notice you should be able to follow them and suggest the groove in your playing.

iii. *Listening to yourself* - This shouldn't be your main focus but you must be conscious of a couple of things in order to ensure you are blending with the band properly.

1. *Volume* - Always, always be aware of how loud you are playing. You should match the level of the other members of the group in order to create balance. If the group is playing much louder than you, don't add fuel to the fire. Playing as loud as you can will only make the band sound worse. See if you can spread out your playing a little and set your level at medium. Hopefully the band will settle back down at a decent dynamic level for you all to play at.
2. *The register you are playing in* - The register you are playing in will have a large effect on the sound of the band. The lower register will create a totally different atmosphere than the high register. So which one do you choose? Usually you want to contrast the other components of the band for balance. If the bass player and soloist are playing up high then you should add some low end for support and vice versa. Always aim for balance when thinking about the register you are playing in.
3. *Long vs Short* - Be aware of the duration of your playing. Are you primarily holding your chords or notes down and playing them a

little long? Are you playing everything short and rhythmic? Both are good and should be used. Again your goal is to create a good balance amongst the group. Support what other members of the band are doing by giving contrast.

4. *Thick vs Thin* - This is similar to the long vs short concept. Be aware of the density of sound the group is creating. If things are feeling sparse then go ahead and add a little thickness into the mix to help balance it out. This can be done with fuller voicings or playing more notes. On the other hand, if everyone is playing a lot, then back off a little and add some thinner 2 or 3 note voicings and play a little less.
5. *Your engagement with other group members* - I'll hear a lot of pianist only interact with the drummer or maybe the bass player. Be aware of who you are playing off of. If you have only interacted with the drummer, try suggesting some ideas to the bass player, or the soloist. Make sure you are mixing it up and including everyone in the band.
6. *Groove and style* - Hopefully you have heard a number of different piano styles. They range from Art Tatum to Erroll Garner, to Red Garland, to Herbie Hancock. Be aware of your style and how it is effecting the other members of the group. If you are playing with a trumpet player who sounds like Clifford Brown, you may want to pull back on your McCoy a little and suggest more of an older bebop style to support him. This can get a little tricky because you want to be able to comp and play how you want to, but at the same time, jazz is about playing with other people and supporting each other. This means adapting to others and being flexible.

iv. *Listening to horns* - Listening to horns is probably the easiest task you will have because their sound normally stands out front. It doesn't take much active listening to hear what they are going for or doing. Still, here is a list of points you should keep your ears open for.

1. *Tone* - You should try and match the tone the sax or trumpet player is going for. Some sax players might prefer a smooth, silky and fluid tone. In this case, you should try and comp a little more elegantly to match the sound they are creating. Others might go for a more gritty and dirty sound in which case, you can do the same with your comping and support. Maybe add some more clusters, and less drop 2's.
2. *Rhythmic Phrasing to their lines* - Since the sax and horn will only be able to play one note at a time, all of their emphasis is going to be on their individual note lines. Pay close attention to how they are phrasing their lines. Are they leaving a lot of space for you to speak like Miles would do? Or are they constantly blowing bebop lines like Sonny Stitt or Parker? Depending upon whether they are creating longer or shorter phrases should effect your comping and support behind them. The longer they are talking, the less you should be and vice versa. If they are phrasing more rhythmically it would be wise to lay down longer comps for harmonic support. If their phrases are running a little longer then can you opt for more short rhythmic comps behind them.
3. *Interaction with the band* - Some horn players love hearing just straight ahead time behind them with no interaction. Others will want you to suggest ideas for them to play off of. You have to determine whether the horn player is attempting to engage in conversation with the rhythm section. You can usually tell if he

starts to feed off some of the rhythmic patterns or grooves the rhythm section is creating. If you suggest some sus chords and hear the soloist start to play off of the sus then you can tell he is open for engagement. Most of the time a better player will want to have this type of engagement. It is still good for you to know you will come across the player who will just want solid support behind them with out any interference.

v. *Listening to the band in groups* – Finally, we come to groupings in the band and listening to the entire band as a whole. This is the fun part!

1. *Bass and drums* - Besides all the previous individual things you should be listening for it is good to also group instruments together for a combined listening experience. The bass and drums will truly be the engine that drives the group forward. Their synchronization will be heavily dependent upon their skill levels and styles but you still want to be able to pick out certain problems with your ears to adapt to different situations.

a. *Time* - The most important sound you want to be aware of is the time that the bass player's lines and the drummer's ride cymbal are creating. Are they locking up together or not? Is one person pushing the beat while the other is pulling? Depending upon how they are forming the pocket you will want to help balance on the other side just like a teeter-totter. If they are going to far in one direction try and help to pull it back to the other side with your comping or soloing.

b. *Interaction* - Bass players and drummers love feeding off each other rhythmically and stylistically. One may suggest something and before you know it you have a completely different feel being played behind you. It's important to keep

your ears out for how much they are interacting together if at all. Some bass drum duos will stay very still, others will be feeding off each other like siblings expressing playful banter. Once you determine the level of interaction you have a much easier time knowing your place for comping and soloing. Again, balance is the key.

c. *Volume and interaction with you* - The last component is whether they are both reacting to you spontaneously. Hopefully they are! It is at these moments that true music is created while everyone is listening very attentively.

2. *Bass and Horns*- When listening to the bass and sax combo we are looking for harmonic feedback. If the bassist and sax player are feeding off each other harmonically, magical things can happen when you step in with some chords. Let's say in a blues, the sax player chooses to make the iv chord minor with a lick, then play the lick up a minor third. If the bass player is good he will mimic the walking pattern to reflect the upward movement of the minor third. At this point, you can reinforce everything by laying down your harmonies up a minor third as well which will be a concrete foundation. The tune can begin to morph harmonically wherever the sax may want to go because everyone is listening. Should the sax and bass player not be listening to one another, this harmonic modulation could never occur.

vi. *Full band* - When listening to the band as a whole, you are trying to distinguish more general facts that will help you guide your playing.

1. *Energy* - What is the energy like of the entire band? Does it sound dead? Alive? Together? You are listening for an over barometer of

the togetherness of the band. Once you have determined this, look to either add or take away depending upon where the energy is at.

2. *Ebb and flow* - What is the general pattern of the group? Are the bass player and drummer generally interacting? Are the sax and bass the ones listening to each other? Whatever it may be see if you can conclude the ebb and flow of the band. Is the group repeating a certain section the same way or is everyone more focused on dynamics? Again, whatever the case may be, see if you can introduce something new or add to whatever is going on.
3. *The groove* - I probably should have listed this one first. Above all else, is the group swinging or grooving? If you feel at ease and are having fun then most likely everyone is playing in harmony together. Most of the time, when you feel the need to force your playing to swing a certain way then someone may not be upholding their end. Hopefully it's not you though. You may need to adapt your eighth note feel if it is continuously not matching up with the group.
4. *The atmosphere* - What sound is the group creating together? Soft and contemplative? Hard, dirty and grooving? Or laid back and soulful? You have to look for the characteristics that are sounding best in the group you are playing in. Some groups will tend do better creating certain atmospheres over others. If the group is doing specifically well with one type of feeling or emotion, then add to that and go with it. In this situation, you don't want to contrast, you want to emphasize as much as possible.

5. *How in the world to listen to all of this?*

1. So now that I've listed all these things to listen to, how in the world do you go about listening to all of it. Easy. Just take it in steps. Write down which component you are going to focus on one night. Maybe it's just the drummer, or just the bass player and focus on their components. Then, the next night, pick another category. In time, all of these categories will register like reading a book. You do have to take it slowly. Once you begin to recognize the certain elements they will come much faster as you begin to combine listening components. Do not start with combinations! There is simply too much going on unless you are used to picking out the individuals first.