

CHALLENGING THE ASSUMPTIONS

"Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains" - the French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote in 1762,

The same could be said about jazz today. Instead of jazz being the voice of freedom, rebellion and creativity, allowing the spontaneous expression of individual players, it has become highly stylised, hidebound by convention - the conventional ways of doing things.

Jazz played by combos follows the same format as in the 1930s/40s and big band music all too often resembles "respectable" safe classical music serving as a showcase for the arranger with a few short solos thrown in as sops to appease any genuine jazz fans.

The innovations of early jazz - collective improvisation, interludes, introductions, etc. have largely been dispensed with to give a bland type of standardisation. Bands sound like other bands, musicians sound like other musicians, and the public turns to other types of music to get stimulation which jazz could and should provide.

As Rousseau also wrote:

"I may be no better, but at least I am different."

This should be the guiding spirit behind jazz.

It is time to challenge the assumptions; time to think outside the box.

The assumptions relate to all aspects of jazz and concern players and arrangers/composers.

FORMAT AND FORM

The **format** that most combos adopt for every tune follows the same lines: *(intro), tune, horn solo/s, piano, bass solos, drum solo or 4s/8s, tune*

There is no reason why the tune has to come first, or why the rhythm section solos should come after the horns, or why the drums have to come last. Or why more than 1 person can't solo at the same time. Or why the piano or bass can't play the tune.

The **form** of most standards (the American songbook) is AABA and often consists of 8 bars/measures in each section. There is also the AB form, made up of 2 sections of 8 or 16 bars. Usually the first 4 or 8 bars are identical in each section.

You can change this in various ways. Cut out the 1st A in an AABA tune, Repeat the B or the last A. Add an interlude or bridge section. Hunt around and find some other tunes which are more adventurous - some Cole Porter and Jerome Kern tunes are different. Find some tunes by jazz musicians.

Write something yourself. It does not have to conform to these patterns. Neither do the number of bars in each section have to be confined to the usual 8 bars. For the tune itself, you can have any number of bars - whatever sounds natural. For the solos, it is best to stick to an even number of bars.

RHYTHM

There seems to be a belief that the bass player should play one note to each beat - "walking" in 4/4 tempo. Even in 3/4, bass players will play 3 notes to a bar unless you tell them not to. Yet there are slowish tempos which tend to plod when the bass walks. But better to play with a 2-feel, using other notes here and there (skipping notes) to liven it up. In jazz waltzes, a 1-feel often has more of a lilt (a swing) than you can get by going into 3.

At one time, swing was the only option. Nowadays, straight 8s are an alternative. Tunes can have a strong accented Latin pulse or a gentler bossa feel. Or the rhythm can be broken-up.

Sometimes *colla voce* passages can be effective, as can the use of *rits* and *accels*.

The same rhythm does not have to be used throughout a piece.

TIME SIGNATURES

Most tunes are in 4/4 or 3/4. But there are lots of other time signatures you can use. If the tune/ensemble passage seems to want an odd number of beats here or there, there is no reason why it can't have. (Note though that this can be tricky for a lot of soloists.) Liberate your mind.

KEY

Many standards are very tonally-based. The tune might wander off into another key occasionally but not for long and you are always aware of what the home key is. The trouble with this is that it can sound monotonous. Take a risk - go into another key and stay there for a while, and then into another one. Use more tonic chords and fewer dominant sevenths.

In the last few bars there is often a *turn-around* which gets you back to the original key again. But why not have a sequence which lasts for the entire tune so that going from the ending of each chorus to the start of the next one is an integral part of the whole progression. If you try this, you could end up in a totally different key from the one you start off in, such as a semitone away. Even in some standards this device has been used - My Funny Valentine, for instance starts in Cm and ends in the relative major key of Eb.

The *bridge*, often called the *middle eight*, is so often very unimaginative. It's as if the composer thought he/she had to have one, but didn't have the time or inspiration to dream up anything of interest. It often consists of part of the cycle of fifths, or a few predictable *II Vs* or *II V Is* to get back to the initial key. How refreshing it is to hear a bridge that is interesting in its own right.

HARMONY

The bebop generation added // Vs and // V /s to everything. It has its merits, but it has been overdone. The trouble with them is that they trigger off a well-learned response people develop in coping with them so that the music comes from the fingers instead of the brain. Using the tritone substitute for the V doesn't add up to radical new thinking. It's all been done before. There are lots of other progressions that can be used. Try some unconnected chords and find ways of linking them up.

MELODY

Melodies can so often sound trite. Doo da doo da doo, Doo da doo da day. A few rhythmic displacements can sometimes help distract from the predictability as can a few shifts away from what is expected. Tunes can be of any length. They need not end up on the tonic note of the home chord. Writing a bebop line on the chords of an existing standard's sequence may be fun to do, but it is no substitution for an original melody on an original sequence. Why be confined to someone else's material when you can contribute something yourself.

STYLE/GENRE

Jazz need not be in what is taken to be the jazz style. Various other cultures and genres have aspects which can be adapted and adopted. The important thing is to produce something which is interesting. Forget the purists, the jazz police, the critics. Do what you can do and what you want to do and you will attract an audience simply because it is different from whatever else is around.

ABOUT YOU

You can play jazz anywhere - you don't have to be in New York, or anywhere else in the USA, or in a city. You don't have to be black, American or male. You can come from any country, belong to any faith or none, believe in any political creed, be heterosexual or homosexual, be of any age, be able-bodied or have some sort of handicap. Ignore anyone who tells you otherwise.