

At some point in every improvising musician's life, you end up in a situation in which you seem to run out of ideas. What do you do when you can't play anything improvised without falling back on hackneyed clichés, or without plagiarizing your own past, or simply just repeating yourself without saying anything truly new?

In the course of working in an improvised music project for any extended period of time, the musician will invariably face this seeming limitation of their personal ability to continue to be innovative and break new ground.

Part of this is because all of us are creatures of habit. We reuse favorite licks, favorite grooves, favorite patterns, textures, styles, riffs, etc. Part of this also happens because the demand of spontaneous creation often takes one unawares, forcing one to the knee-jerk musical reaction—when you are put on the spot and you have to produce a solo, etc. A third reason this happens is that there is poverty in your idea vault that is resulting in a lack of interest.

When you find that this is happening A LOT, there's a problem. All improvisers work interactively in an ensemble context, and the interaction takes the form of a cause and effect cascade: you do something which makes me do something which makes the other guy do something which then makes you do something, etc., etc...and thereby an improvisation is evolved. The problem is, if you do something with a great degree of sameness to something you've done in the past, you are stacking the odds in favor of generating an improvisation not too fundamentally different from previously executed ones, even if it eventually evolves into something wholly new, and the audience doesn't know the difference. You the musician knows the difference and so you ask yourself, "How can I be bleeding-edge and wholly original and innovative time and again?"

The answer might not be easy, but there are potential ways around this conundrum. One is to always enter into every improvisation with the consciousness that the knee-jerk reaction is always there to fall back on, but you determine to not allow yourself that fundamentally lazy recourse. By actively being aware that you can fall into this trap, you may seek to avoid it. All this takes is a little forethought—maybe you don't want to indulge your first instinctive response (the effect) to the other musician's cause, because that's the knee-jerk predictable one. Maybe you simply want to be wary of quoting yourself, repeating yourself, traveling the same old path.

An improvising musician can and must of course rely on instinct and prior training, but this is the paradox we all wrestle with when we play. How do I use my instinct and prior training WITHOUT becoming cliché or predictable? I believe the answer is to frame the instinct in the conscious mind, rather than continue to allow it to be only under the control of the subconscious mind. By actively moving the instinctive knowledge, the self-knowledge of where your instincts tend to lead you, into the conscious forefront of your thinking, *you can now see where you have been without having to actually go there again!* You can see all the well-traveled paths through the musical jungle, and decide to

not take any of them, instead hacking out a new trail with the machete of your conscious intent. In other words, you start to think about what you DON'T want to play, instead of what you do want to play. As any behavioral psychologist will tell you, it requires a great deal of conscious effort to break a habit. The first thing you must do is acknowledge that the habit exists, and then you must keep the desire to change it in the forefront of your mind at all times, lest you fall back into the unconscious habitual response.

Another consideration is that each and every musician is a collection of influences and experiences that are unique. Your unique musical self is like a bank vault. What you “deposit” in it in terms of the influences you’ve had, the music you’ve admired, and the experiences and knowledge you have accrued is all the “collateral” you have. This is a “zero sum” system. You cannot withdraw from this bank vault any more than you have deposited!

If as a musician you find yourself drawing blanks on ideas or falling back on knee jerk reactions, it is because your “vault” is not enriched with enough “collateral” to generate much “interest.” To extend my analogy, *the “interest” you generate is the capacity to synthesize new value from old deposits.* As everyone with a bank account knows, the more you have deposited, the more interest you can accrue over and above what you could otherwise withdraw from your vault. If you only withdraw from your deposits, there is no net gain, no net loss: zero sum.

What is fascinating is that the word “Interest” literally applies here: the more you have deposited in your vault, the more interesting and varied your playing can become.

Therefore, it is incumbent on musicians that do not want to continually fall back on their tried-and-true, stale, non-innovative instincts, to always enhance and expand their account by adding to their vault, making more and more deposits all the time, in the effort to be able to always draw on the new interest that will continually accumulate this way. The interest in your playing grows the more you know, the more you have added to your vault in terms of the various forms of collateral there are. It isn't so much a case of “garbage in, garbage out” so much as “nothing in, nothing out.” If you never add to your vault through meaningful study of new things, you will find pitifully little to withdraw over time—you'll find yourself always withdrawing the same old tired musical approaches, the same old clichéd riffs and grooves and patterns and textures, and you'll start to bore people you play with, because they have all heard what you are doing before, and there's not much new there. Been there, done that. This is death for an improvising musician, or at least a purgatory, a limbo in which the wheel of karma always spins in only one direction, until it feels like you're a hamster in an exerciser, running but never getting anywhere new. (Note: if you find you *just have to* quote previous music, it's better if you quote someone else other than yourself! Igor Stravinsky once quipped, “hack composers plagiarize; great composers *steal*.”

Improvising music is not necessarily about always being innovative and never repeating yourself, but if it is important to you to feel that your ability to express your art must be continually expanding and refining and re-defining itself, then you should give some thought to these ideas. In the various “Bag” projects I have been a part of, one of the main tenets was to try to not repeat one's self. This has been a continual challenge to me

and the other fellows in these projects, and it's only been through our own diligence that we manage to keep things fresh and exciting. None of us want to be any less than completely original, unique, and challenging to ourselves and our listeners, but with that desire comes the responsibility of making a conscious effort to grow, and thereby always have something new to contribute to the project.