

# The Concept of Leading or Following in PB-Style Rotations and the Suggested Practice of Either Responsibility

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In the PaperBag style of rotation-based conducting of improvisations, the responsibility of each member of the ensemble varied between leading and following. In the 4-member band, I would be a leader of improvisations  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the time, and a follower of them  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the time. The amount of time you got to lead in no way reflects the relative importance of either role. It could be said, however, that since one must necessarily follow more often than not, that this support aspect of the PB style of improvisation might bear a little more examination than the role of leader, which is perhaps less abstract and easily understood.

As leader, it is your core idea(s) being acted upon, and you are in total control of that genesis. On very rare occasions when one of us was to take the role of conductor, but had nothing to suggest (usually this only happened when one of us was really burnt-out from work or something) we were even allowed a pass, moving the responsibility for the rotation to the next member. That only rarely would one of us fail to rise to the challenge of leading an improvised rotation is a kind of testament to the go-for-broke & gung-ho attitude we brought to this. I can tell you that trying to be musically creative, original, and interesting ON DEMAND is not very easy—most artists have to wait for some muse to come along and inspire them, where the PB approach demands that you instantly yoke that muse to the wheel and get it rolling on command! There is no room for laziness or lack of inspiration—we treated those as feeble excuses or wimpy retreats. (*Interestingly, this “we’re in the Army now!” kind of demanding treatment is one of the reasons often cited by musicians that sat in with us to play as being simultaneously the most frightening and the most enjoyable thing about working in the PB style. It’s as if they never knew their own musical empowerment until forced to tap that creative well at gunpoint, so to speak. I personally believe that the PB style of improvisation also works as a self-contained musical rite of passage for some—once having done this kind of thing for a while, musicians develop a kind of creative fearlessness that is akin to having faced down a boogie man and survived to tell the tale. This is yet another reason why improvisation of this sort is a valuable training exercise for any would-be musician—it’s a tremendous confidence builder and a fairly accurate measure of many kinds of musical and communication skills.*)

When it was one’s turn to lead, there were only a couple of mandatory requirements imposed by the PB method. The most visibly important one was the need to be timely and efficient: when playing live we never wanted to test the audience’s attention span, so we always endeavored to keep the minimal dialog between pieces to as little as possible. Ideally, only a couple of words, or one sentence should be enough to convey some skeleton of an idea for the next improvisation. This was judged so important that we would also do this when rehearsing. (Note: improvisation rehearsal sounds like an oxymoron, but it isn’t—more on this later!)

A second requirement for the leader of any improvisation to bear in mind was the need for the “roller coaster effect” that we found a very important factor in keeping the improvisations varied and creative. Basically, the idea was that each piece be dramatically different from the one before it.

Third and most loosely handled, was the necessity to actively control and direct the improvisation one was leading. This necessity was not only nearly impossible to do while in the midst of loud playing, but also the feeling was that too much control hampered the creative process, and perhaps too tight a direction of the improvised events might compromise the possibility that the piece could take on its own life and its own direction. It should be noted that we were of the philosophical bent to believe that indeed music may only need to be initially catalyzed at a minimal level, and then in many cases it could become a somewhat self-sustaining interactive vehicle that spontaneously generated idea after idea almost by itself, the same way that blowing on an ember can spark a wildfire that feeds itself. The best improvisations did indeed develop into these self-sustaining kinds of musical platforms, where the only further direction required was making a decision about when it had gone on too long and when to end it!

Just like an organism without enough to feed upon, however, a paucity of good ideas or playing would quickly threaten to “starve” a piece to death, dooming it to “turkey” status. Sometimes the kindling of a good idea didn’t get enough development to go anywhere. The rule was that if this was perceived to be the case, the leader of the piece, OR anyone else following that had something else to offer, could introduce a radical left-turn in mid-musical stream, in attempt to salvage the piece and breath new life into it. The truth is that sometimes this happened far too late in a piece to save it entirely from being marginal.

What was important to recognize in such instance was that improvisation is dangerous territory, and that if one is not fore-armed with every possible mental tool and awareness, that the “turkey factor” could take hold at any time. There is no fallback position for the improviser, except perhaps to pull out an old familiar groove or riff and start beating it, hoping that you can generate a bit of something interesting. My personal take on this is that it is something of a cop-out to do so, and whenever I might find myself resorting to musical cliché or self-plagiarism, I get very depressed about my lack of creativity and ability to muster new ideas on the spot, and I realize that the fault for this is my inattention to my personal musical growth—I’ll have more to say on this later as well.

In the course of leading an improvisation, one can resort to whatever signaling apparatus works. We often used some basic hand signals, or shouting at each other across the stage, or body language, in order to get some sort of conducting direction across to the others in mid-piece. If you want someone to take a solo in a given spot, you could signal them to do so, etc.

Further, there was no particular onus that the leader be the first player to play or the last. In your rotation, you could just as easily turn to another member and ask them to play your idea, as you could start riffing on your own and ask all to follow you. You had the latitude to sit out until you wished to solo, conducting the others to create a framework. The idea and it’s exposition to the others was your responsibility, but within the few constraints already mentioned, there was nothing else that limited you when you were to lead a piece.

To sum up, a leader’s role is to 1) provide the germinal idea, 2) provide a germinal idea significantly different from the one just played in the prior rotation, and 3) use any means of communication possible to direct the piece throughout the rotation to whatever degree necessary.

An all-important reminder though, is to always be vigilant for the possibilities that things can take a left-turn at any moment in an improvised piece. Not just the unfortunate “turkey factor”, but there is always the possibility that someone other than the leader will introduce a part or thematic element that is so compelling and powerful that it causes the piece to veer partially or completely away from the original germinal idea—in fact it has happened that one’s “leadership” role is effectively taken by such a musical coup, the leadership role transferred to the player that introduced the new and compelling element, and that this can temporarily or completely force the previous leader role into one of support of the new part. Someone’s killer solo can suggest a new path for the improvisation that is inexorable, and thus a piece evolves based on the continuous feedback mechanism at work between all the players in communal improvisations.

When this happens, it happens for a variety of reasons, not all predictable. If you happen to improvise with other players of unequal talent and experience, or of unequal degree of spontaneous creative innovation, this can happen more often than not, as the “cream” of the best ideas from the best players will tend to dominate the direction of a piece. If this is the case in your improvisations, you should develop the stance of humility and gratitude that is proper in this context: someone just saved the communal ass from spiraling into turkey-land. The communal improvisation effort is analogous to a relay race where the baton can be handed off moment to moment, and just like in a relay race where the victory often turns on the fastest runner, so too the best improvisations sometimes turn on the coolest part...this never means the other slower runners, or the support players, have anything to feel bad about, because in the final analysis, it’s a team sport. Improvising in an ensemble is also a team sport, believe me. There have been numerous times when playing live that I have been grateful that someone else stepped in to save a piece I had begun, and there have been numerous times when the baton was handed to me knowingly, or when I urged someone else with my signals to please take over!

Just remember that your fellows on the journey of ensemble improvisations are TRULY your support mechanism, your safety net, & your escape hatch. Breathe a sigh of relief when your personal top hat is empty of rabbits, but they’ve got a live one on the line for you.

This brings me to the next section—the role of the support players, that role I spent  $\frac{3}{4}$  of my time in the 4-member ensemble fulfilling. I called it a follower role, and it is, at least initially, but there may be some logic behind describing the support role using more of a chess game analogy, as I will do here. The responsibilities of the non-leading or support players may subtly change throughout a piece's beginning, middle and end-games.

In the beginning of a piece, the leader may not have a fully-formed idea yet; if I give you an abstract idea, let's say that as leader I have given the direction, "let's interpret a sunny day..." and we've begun to generate sounds (I'm not calling it music yet—this primal stage of an improvisation is like a coalescence of matter—it's exploratory and expository, and many musical elements may be present but as yet have no recognizable shape or focus) while we each zero in on our own musical interpretation of what a sunny day might sound like. Using this abstraction as an example underlines an important point of improvisational context—namely that the context itself is often improvised, and has no ready coherent musical foundation, but must needs rely entirely upon subjective interpretation that borders on requiring an almost deliberate self-induced *synaesthesia*, which is a mental disorder that causes people to mix up their sensory apperceptions, ascribing colors to sounds, tastes to colors, sounds to textures, etc. In other words, to be an effective and creative and sensitive improviser, you need to begin to cultivate this sort of view of the world—that textures can be colors, sounds can have tastes, and so on. You must begin to appreciate the language of your instrument as poly-glottal, and the range of its particular palette as not merely notes and sounds, but as colors, tastes, textures, and emotional shades of meaning beyond what they physically are. Music is not objective, but subjective, and so you must begin to think in non-verbal terms how to be musically descriptive. If your instrument were your mouth, how would you use it to convey any idea? There are obviously many real difficulties and challenges here.

There is a Zen koan, "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" that is appropriate to consider here. If one were blind from birth, how would one understand the concept of color at all? Note that since music is abstract, there is no need to perfectly describe color to the naturally blind, one need only acknowledge that there are layers of meaning that blind people can understand, that to them represent with as much richness as a full spectrum of light. Your job as an improviser is not to translate word-for-word, but just to get the emotional gist across. Impressionistic communication is still communication that is rich and full of suggestion and resonance, and that is what you must convey as well as you can. The beautiful thing about this means of communication is precisely that it invites subjective interpretation, and so it is an interactive experience, where the richness within an individual enhances the richness of the music outside the individual, and this experience is necessarily different for everyone. Just because you and I might see that flower differently doesn't mean we might not both find it beautiful, right? Even though we hear the same notes, they move me differently than they might move you, and cast different impressions in our minds. The important thing is that they move you at all, and not how they move you.

Improvisation practice can teach much in the way of developing these abilities, but it also helps a lot if you listen to a lot of instrumental music with a deliberate effort to tap into your own sense of subjective interpretation. Of course, there are numerous examples to study, but the idea here is to avoid the cultural influence that tells you something like Grofe's Grand Canyon Suite movement "Sunrise" movement perfectly evokes the impression of a real sunrise because of it's use of flutes and swelling strings and etc, blah, blah, blah. You need to make up your own mind what musical meanings are, and then play them. In other words, there is no wrong way to "interpret a sunny day," really...as long as you play what you sincerely feel it is, then you are being "true" and that is the only validation you need for your efforts.

*Perhaps I ought to say a few words about my emphasis on "sincerity". There are very few yardsticks that one could reasonably apply to improvisation music, although critics of improvisation do insist on trying to fit measures on it that are really only appropriately applied to composed music forms. From a standpoint of "artistic integrity" which I take to mean a personal insistence on uncompromising presentation of one's own art works and concomitant opinions about one's own art, sincerity becomes the only true measure of an improvisation's relative success or failure in execution. I'm not speaking of the arts' subjective interpretation here, but I am addressing the state of mind and heart of the improvisers themselves in the execution of the art. Using Webster's definitions, to play "sincerely" is to play "earnestly, seriously, with a quality of naturalness and simplicity, being open and truthful, not deceitful or hypocritical."*

*One might reasonably ask, how can one play anything BUT sincerely? How can non-verbal and subjective mediums of expression such as music even contain a concept of deceit or hypocrisy that represent the opposite of sincerity? I submit that insincerity in musical expression is possible because deceit takes on many forms, including plagiarism, blind formalism, and deliberate laxity masquerading as serious intent. Musicians that repeatedly fall back on their playing strengths for fear of taking chances musically are being false, or at least cowardly. Musicians that liberally quote themselves and their own or other's repertoire instead of forcing themselves to take chances on new directions are likewise being untrue to the spirit of improvisation. Musicians that repeatedly bend to formalism in their playing to assure a pleasant outcome for the improvisation and cater to the audience are also not being true to the muse within.*

*While I point the finger at you, I also point it at me—the demands of being constantly creative are incredibly lofty, as I wrote earlier. We all will fail from time to time, and be guilty of these sorts of insincere efforts—I've been guilty of it myself. My focus here is to make you aware of this pitfall, give it a name and a definition, so that you can identify if when it's happening, and take the appropriate steps to pull yourself out of the safe and warm and cozy and uninspired and cowardly place you've been playing from, and really, really jump off that cliff!*

But getting back to the subject, during the initial phase of a developing improvisation where ideas are coalescing, hopefully you are listening very carefully for the ideas suggested by the leading parts, and the threads of the ideas forming at the hands of your band mates. This is a very interesting time and one that requires the ability to immediately react to incoming musical impressions with your own musical impressions. Picture yourselves as chefs simultaneously and repeatedly sampling and seasoning the broth you are cooking, adding and refining flavors, forming textures and bringing out nuances and subtleties of taste. Out of this soup will materialize one or two dominating flavors that will set the entire vibe for what is to come.

Your primary responsibility is listening carefully to what is developing, and you have the choice of laying out and not playing until an idea begins to dominate that you can lend support to, or you can also drop in your own formative elements to see if any of them get picked up by others, emulated, echoed or otherwise boosted towards that place of dominant voice within the structure.

The structural elements are the key framework to be aware of during this phase, and these structural elements are as varied as the possibilities inherent in the instruments of your ensemble. Melody instruments that lead a rotation may suggest rhythmic possibilities and chordal possibilities, while rhythmic instruments may suggest melodies and chords as well. One must be sensitive to all metric and harmonic implications of the developing parts.

It's important to remember that the leader may or may not define framework elements, and that even if defined, the coalescence of that idea may not take place exactly as envisioned, but veer off elsewhere entirely. I may be so definite as to posit my rotation thus: "In 4/4 time, a blues-groove revolving around C minor, E flat Major and D diminished...", but once everyone starts interpreting this seemingly tightly constrained and directed formula for the improvisation, the latitudes that seemed close and defined can become wide and almost boundless indeed! Sometimes, even, the leader may say nothing, but just begin playing, providing only the framework that you hear them play. The territory of the beginning of a piece is wholly unknown, rocky, and maybe almost entirely unmapped, but you gotta start walking and hopefully find some firm footing amidst the landmarks that appear before you.

In the next phase of a piece, some main musical idea has perhaps precipitated out of the mixture of ideas and become the dominant voice or direction of the piece. Whatever this is, it is now your responsibility to support this voice with your own, in some musically astute way. The tools of standard musicianship are at your disposal now: knowledge of harmony, scales, chords, rhythms, and forms, as well as the textural, voicing and technique possibilities of your given instrument and also any tonal effects processing you might possess can all be drawn upon to improvise supportive parts for any dominant voice within the piece. Depending on your subjective assessment of what the dominant voice "needs", according to your individual sensitivities and abilities, you might decide to play in unison, in harmony, in counterpoint, in counter-rhythm. While you do this, you are also listening carefully for any hint that a new dominant voice is emerging, something as straightforward as a directed

solo, or something like a whole new direction for the piece suggested by the dominant voice movement and progression.

Ear awareness and eye contact are paramount and critical throughout the mid-game of an improvisation—I cannot stress this enough. There’s nothing quite like the embarrassment of getting so into developing and playing your own part that you forget to pay close enough attention to the developing piece around you, of which you are only one part. If the entire piece shifts context, but you don’t shift with it because you were off in your own world, you’ll stick out like a sore thumb and the piece will lose whatever unified feel it might have possessed. In the instance where the leader has said at the beginning of the piece that the support players should be aware of a change to come in the middle or some such thing, you must be obviously vigilant for the change. But I submit you must ALWAYS be clearly vigilant anyway, and not just because the leader said the piece will have an “A-B-A” structure. You must always allow for the inevitability that the piece may take on its own internal direction, or that someone may willfully or inadvertently turn the direction of the piece elsewhere than discussed prior to the piece’s start.

For a player to provide effective support for another player, particularly if that player is to be soloing, it is helpful for each player to have an understanding of the other instruments’ capabilities. In some instances it may be supportive to not play very much or very loudly behind a soloist—never forget that you can say as much musically with your absences (the ‘rests’) as you do with your notes. Specifically, some instruments with thinner sound, or acoustic un-amplified instruments will certainly benefit from getting a little more ‘space’ in the arrangement.

That said another reminder is that it isn’t the quantity of notes you play that is important, it is their quality. Too often some improvising musicians fish around and noodle aimlessly on their instrument trying to find a part, thinking that they are simply dropping nuggets of notes until something inspiring surfaces. This is NOT the approach to take. You will simply muddy up the considered and concerted efforts of others with your baseless note-spewing and this also speaks to the sincerity issue I mentioned earlier. If you have nothing to add to the conversation of the music, then you are just babbling and noisy. It’s so much more forceful and effective to have just a few thoughtful and well-considered notes to play than a whole slew of ill-considered and random bursts of noise that you hope will resemble an improvisational idea. If you’re out of ideas, shut up and wait and listen to everyone else—undoubtedly soon you will find inspiration in someone else’s germinal idea and you can take off on that.

Moving on into the end-game of an improvised piece, the critical factor is eye-contact more than anything else. Again, if everyone else stops playing and you haven’t because you weren’t paying close attention; you’re going to feel like the rug was pulled out from under you.

Standard musical forms for endings like fade-outs, dead stops, crescendo, ritardando and denouement are fair game for the leaders to use if you can communicate these to your followers. Chord resolution is likewise. But the fact is that vigilance and readiness are the only things that will let you end a piece well, because that communication ability may not be there. Things to avoid are taking the sole responsibility for ending a piece when you haven’t got everyone’s attention yet, particularly if you are the drummer!

A fair question and one with no good answer is “when do you know to end a piece?” A lot of musicians that call themselves improvisers must fight a tendency to go overlong on pieces. I call these musicians “jammers” and not improvisers, because they just jam, oblivious to the audience’s relative attention span or whether they actually have anything musically interesting to offer. Some folks apparently feel obligated to whip out every single musical idea they ever had or learned or heard anywhere at all and will not end a piece until it has been crammed full of these tidbits of questionable musical value or import as if that jam was the last possible repository for all this sound effluvia. This is such an insult to serious musicians that improvise, as well as a complete snoring bore for the audience that it’s no wonder the term “jamming” is often met with a sneer and a wince.

I’m often asked how it can be that one doesn’t need to ever run out of ideas for improvisations, which I assert to be true. The answer is this: DON’T PUT ALL YOUR IDEAS IN ONE PIECE!!! This is analogous to cooking meals, but always using every spice you own in each dish. The complexity of flavors might be interesting once or twice, but you can get bored just as easily with too much complexity that has no deliberate

shape or form or focus. This is something that often Pop-song writers understand better than most composers—you don't really need more than one or two good ideas in a song to make it a good song. More than that and you risk being labeled "precious" or "clever" or "quirky". This is a concept that improvisers would do well to keep in mind as well.

This is a particular pitfall of improvisers that lack a mature confidence in their own musical ability. You feel you always must play to impress, to wow people. You think you must continually layer complexity onto your playing to avoid plagiarizing your own self! You think, "I did a three-note half-time solo in the first rotation, so I cannot possibly do another one remotely close to that feel for the rest of the night", and so the sad outcome is that you have improvised yourself into a corner as surely as if you'd been using paint as a boundary!

There's nothing wrong with being simple. There's nothing wrong with being direct. There's nothing wrong with only playing a couple of notes per piece. So long as these efforts are sincere, so long as they are considered, they are good choices.

There truly is infinity of musical possibility, but the reason that we exhaust ourselves early in the set sometimes and feel like we've run out of ideas is simply fear. We fear not being original, not having a voice. We fear comparisons to other musicians. We fear re-stating the obvious, repeating ourselves, and not saying something wonderful every time we open our musical mouths.

Well, it's time to get over that. First of all, what sort of delusions of grandeur do you have that you believe for even an instant that anything you do musically will ever be ultimately memorable, immortal, and perfect? When you converse in language, do you not use and re-use the same words, even the same ideas, all the time? You must always remember that it is NOT ONLY the *content of what you say*, but the *way in which it is said*, and the *context of the moment in which it is said* that gives it meaning, and that renders the thought "original" in scope and "fresh" by subjective appreciation. Music is like speech in that notes are like words, but it is the skill of the speaker, like the skill of the musician, that makes them more than just notes and words, that it is the manner of their speaking and the context of their exposition that gives them meaning and value. Thus, you need never worry that you will ever run out of things to say musically. Too often, we pay lip-service to the idea that music is not about competition, but our human nature is competitive and we play as if we are being judged competitively, to the detriment of our muse. In improvisation, to successfully meet the responsibilities of the muse, these fettering ideas have to be thrown away, to make room for the creative pioneer spirit to flourish.