

20 simple but powerful ideas for releasing the master jazz improviser within you.

by Harry Pickens

1. Warm up your mind and body before you begin to improvise. Stretch, sing, dance, listen to a minute or two of one of your favorite recordings -- do what you need to do in order to get 'in the groove'.
2. Sing! Sing along with recordings; scat-sing by yourself, with play-alongs, with other musicians; sing melodies, scales, patterns -- get the musical flow going with your voice, and transfer your inner music to the instrument.
3. Keep a record/journal of your best performances, and refer to it often. Remember, the more vividly and frequently you can recall your best musical moments, the more these moments will arrive.
4. Vividly imagine yourself performing at your best. Use the Guided Imagery for Jazz Mastery CD. Take 10 minutes each morning and 10 minutes each evening to imagine yourself playing with fluency, ease, and joy. Take 60 seconds to see, hear, and feel yourself playing at your best -- before you begin a practice session. Stop whatever you're doing several times a day and play a quick 'snapshot' or 'mental movie' of yourself at your best. Remember, what you see is what you get.
5. Fake it 'till you make it. Look confident, move with confidence, play with confidence - - eventually your feelings and thinking will catch up with your body's action.
6. Use the power of affirmations to re-pattern your brain-mind for better performance. Affirmations represent what you say to yourself about your musical abilities. One of my favorites is this: I trust the music within me and easily allow it to flow through me.' Dozens more are included on the Guided Imagery for Jazz Mastery CD, available through Jamey Aebersold Jazz.
7. Take time each day to 'daydream' about your ultimate musical ideal. As you listen to different musicians, ask yourself what quality of their playing/singing you would like to eventually express in your own music-making. Envision your highest possible musical ideal -- simply mentally 'play' with this idea on a regular basis. Over time, this ideal will begin to 'come alive' within you, and will bring you greater focus and clarity as you work towards your short and long-term goals.
8. Allow your life experiences to shape your musical expression. One of the great joys of music is that we can allow ourselves to fully express our emotions. When you experience something difficult or challenging in life, express your feelings through your voice and/or instrument. Use the energy of your emotion to infuse your music with greater passion and power.
9. Recognize that learning and playing jazz is a LIFELONG journey. Your experience this week is one tiny part of that journey. With patience and practice, you will be able to master aspects of jazz that you can only glimpse right now.
10. Take a long-term perspective. It takes about 10 years to become really proficient with the jazz language -- to begin to speak with your own voice -- to really have a sense of naturalness and facility. Be patient with your progress. Persistence overcomes all odds.
11. Break your long-term goals down into simple, achievable steps. You might focus for the next year on a dozen tunes -- really mastering them to a level you've not reached

before. Or you may focus on certain chord-scale relationships, or on delving deeply into a specific player -- listening to many of their recordings, transcribing and learning their solos, and imitating their style. The more precise your focus, the more progress you will make.

12. Listen to as wide a variety of music (primarily jazz -- but also other styles of music) as you can. This is necessary so that you can get a good sense of what really appeals to you, and what aspects of what you hear you will eventually incorporate into your own unique style of playing.

13. Find a mentor to help you along the journey. This could be a teacher, another aspiring jazz musician who is a bit more advanced than you, a professional performer, a faculty member at your local college or university -- someone who you can go to when you have questions, when moments of doubt and discouragement arise, when you need a bit of support and/or constructive feedback. Look for a person with a positive, upbeat attitude who you respect for more than music. With the wonderful possibilities of phone and email communication, your mentor can help guide you even if he/she does not live in your area.

14. Have fun making music. The purpose of music (from my perspective) is to express that which cannot be expressed in words -- to share beauty, harmony, and positive energy -- to bring a vibration of radiance and joy into this world. Music is not meant to be a burden, a source of stress and/or neurosis, a cause of inner dissatisfaction and self-doubt. Give yourself (and your audiences/listeners) the gift of having fun when you play/sing.

15. Remember why you began playing/singing in the first place, and give yourself the gift of enjoying the music you make today -- even as you aspire to make better and better music tomorrow. Remember, your value as a human being is NOT determined by how well you improvise jazz.

16. Develop the discipline to practice consistently. Success eventually comes to those who make practice a daily habit. Even if you have only 10 minutes per day, use that 10 minutes wisely.

17. Play with musicians who are better than you, who will inspire, challenge, and support you in becoming the best you can be.

18. Use every resource at your disposal to help you become a better musician and a better human being. Talk to professionals -- ask them questions. Use the play-along recordings. Talk to other musicians and ask them how they solve certain musical problems. Read books, articles, magazines, websites, blogs that are relevant to your goals. Listen to a wide variety of music. Allow your curiosity to blossom.

19. Remember that life is about much more than music. As musicians, we often can develop a kind of 'tunnel-vision' that limits our perspective and increases our stress. It's a good thing to aspire to become the best musician you can be; it's not such a good thing to allow this aspiration to so take over your life that you neglect other important aspects, such as your health, relationships, and/or general well-being. Keep it all in perspective.

20. Enjoy every step of the journey. Life is a precious gift and every moment is an unrepeatable miracle. Keep this in mind even as you are practicing and focusing on your musical goals.

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Guided Imagery For Jazz Mastery CD Program -- Available from Aebersold Jazz