

# Back to Basics

## *Evaluating the Pedagogical Strategies of Jamey Aebersold, David Baker and Jerry Coker*

by Brian C. Wesolowski

# It

It can be a daunting task to evaluate, analyze, incorporate and summarize the abundance of pedagogical materials available to us as educators in a world where information is at our fingertips. The institutionalization of jazz, particularly the repertory movement of the 1980s, has facilitated growth in the academic discipline of jazz studies. Accompanying this growth is an outpouring of educational jazz publications that assist some educators with methodologies for teaching improvisation, yet leave many with an ambiguous pedagogical approach.

In relation to the topic of information overload and the technology boom of the 1970s, American cognitive scientist and Nobel Laureate Herbert A. Simon stated:

In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.<sup>1</sup>

Simon's concept of "Attention Economics"<sup>2</sup> enlightens us to two problems: 1) the overabundance of information leads to a lesser chance of each piece of information being heard; and 2) with each new piece of information, censorship becomes more of a concern.<sup>3</sup>

Educators should reassess the publications of Jamey Aebersold, David Baker and Jerry Coker as a means to streamline the

vast array of pedagogical materials and to formulate a more comprehensive method for teaching improvisation. Aebersold, Baker and Coker have emerged in the jazz community as three of the leading figures in jazz pedagogy. The collective efforts of these three important educators, who have been deemed the "ABCs of Improvisation,"<sup>4</sup> have paved a path to help facilitate and establish the study of jazz and improvisation as viable, legitimate and worthy of study. A multifaceted approach to teaching jazz improvisation can be achieved by combining their diverse pedagogical strategies.

Aebersold's approach to jazz improvisation centers on his *Play-A-Long* books and recording publications. These publications are based on an aural approach that allows students to play along with a recorded rhythm section. The volumes that accompany the play-a-long tracks guide the student through common chord progressions, song forms and standard vehicles from the jazz repertory. In this mode of pedagogy, students focus on chord outlining combined with a linear method of improvising by engaging the eyes and ears in scale-to-chord relationships.

Baker's approach is based on repetition and permutation of melodic fragments. Baker's *How to Play Bebop* series focuses on the bebop language as a foundation for musical development. His scheme includes the presentation, explanation and application of scales, modes, chords, patterns and formulas associated with the bebop and modal vocabularies. Various melodic patterns and linking exercises

are presented in all 12 keys (either chromatically or through the cycle of fourths), permuted and applied to written solo improvisations in the bebop style.

Coker's pedagogical strategies in *Elements of the Jazz Language for the Developing Improvisor* include an analytical approach to the jazz language through an examination of isolated, common solo devices. Approximately 17 items are identified, classified and illustrated. The elements presented represent 73 percent of the material found in a typical solo by distinguished jazz artists.<sup>5</sup> While Coker does not transpose all motifs in every key (as in Baker's approach), he provides enough information for the student to develop further the devices discussed. He includes full solo transcriptions that display the solo devices as syntactical elements of the greater whole.

Combining these various methods allows the student opportunities to comprehend and apply the information according to his or her most suitable learning method. In a recent study, Lissa May suggested that four specific subskills contributing to the achievement of jazz improvisation must be learned:

- 1) development of theoretical knowledge of jazz scales and chords, aural skills and aural imitative ability;
- 2) acquisition of idiomatic melodic material through memorization of tunes;
- 3) experimentation with melodic and rhythmic development; and
- 4) manipulation of expressive elements.<sup>6</sup>

In combining the pedagogical strategies of Aebersold, Baker and Coker, the

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## Suggested Materials for Educators

### Jamey Aebersold

Volume 1: *How to Play Jazz and Improvise*, JA Jazz

Volume 2: *Nothin' But Blues: Jazz and Rock*, JA Jazz

Volume 3: *The ii/V/I Progression*, JA Jazz

Volume 16: *Turnarounds, Cycles, and ii/V's*, JA Jazz

Volume 42: *Blues in All Keys*, JA Jazz

Volume 47: *I Got Rhythm Changes in All Keys*, JA Jazz

Volume 57: *Minor Blues in All Keys*, JA Jazz

Volume 84: *Dominant 7th Workout*, JA Jazz

### David Baker

*Advanced Ear Training for Jazz Musicians*, Studio P/R

*David Baker's Modern Concepts in Jazz Improvisation: A Comprehensive Method for All Musicians*, Alfred Publishing

*David Baker's How to Play Bebop: For All Instruments*, Alfred Publishing

*Improvisational Patterns: The Bebop Era*, C. Colin

*Improvisational Patterns: The Blues*, C. Colin

*Modal & Contemporary Patterns*, C. Colin

### Jerry Coker

*Clear Solutions for Jazz Improvisers*, JA Jazz

*The Complete Method for Improvisation*, Studio P/R

*Hearin' the Changes: Dealing with Unknown Tunes By Ear*, Advance Music

*How to Practice Jazz*, Jamey Aebersold Jazz

*Improvising Jazz*, Prentice-Hall

*Listening to Jazz*, Prentice-Hall

*The Teaching of Jazz*, Advance Music

*Elements of the Jazz Language for the Developing Improvisor*, CCP/Belwin

*Patterns for Jazz*, Studio P/R

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first three elements are addressed. The fourth element (manipulation of expressive elements) can be addressed through listening, transcribing and emulating recordings. Aebersold, Baker and Coker stress the importance of listening and transcription in conjunction with their methods. Even more specifically, Coker dedicates two entire books to this activity alone in *Listening to Jazz* (with forewords by Aebersold and Baker) and *Hearin' the Changes: Dealing with Unknown Tunes By Ear*.

Many other methods and approaches to improvisation exist on the market today. The use of these, in addition to the methodologies of Aebersold, Baker and Coker, would certainly enhance the learning experience for any student of jazz improvisation. However, the combining of the procedural devices presented by Aebersold, Baker and Coker provide a multifaceted approach to jazz improvisation that can serve as a strong foundation to beginning stages of teaching the art of jazz improvisation. ☐

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Herbert Simon, "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World," in *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest*, by Martin Greenberger (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins Press, 1971), 40-41.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>Timothy R. Clark, *Epic Change: How to Lead Change in the Global Age* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 164.

<sup>4</sup>John Kuzmich, "An Interview with the A,B,C's of Improvisation," *Jazz Educators Journal* 16 (1984): 22-23.

<sup>5</sup>Jerry Coker, *Clear Solutions for Jazz Improvisers* (New Albany: JA Jazz, 2002), 30.

<sup>6</sup>Lissa May, "Factors and abilities influencing achievement in instrumental jazz improvisation," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 51 (2003): 255-256.

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