

FOR ALL INSTRUMENTALISTS



A Practical Approach To
Jazz
Improvisation

The David Hazeltine Method
(Creating Jazz Etudes Based On Transcription)

by Ben Markley

Jamey Aebersold Jazz®



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As a young student of jazz improvisation, I found myself curious as to not only what “the cat’s” were playing, but also what or how they were thinking about what they were playing. I knew of this distinction from my own experience, noticing that what I had thought about playing would often be quite different than what I actually played, relying most often on techniques and patterns I knew best.

So as I transcribed solos, I realized that what I was searching for was a deeper understanding of a player’s thought process, rather than just the arbitrary way a particular solo was constructed. I tried to see the patterns through repetition within each harmonic mode. Through this recognition of “tendencies,” I constructed exercises based on what I thought a player was thinking given a particular type of chord.

This process enabled me to practice my own jazz piano exercises for technique and facility, (similar to Hanon or Czerny in the classical world) ingraining in my mind the standard jazz vocabulary, while absorbing the nuances and thought processes of my favorite players, ultimately allowing me to sound very much like them when I improvised.

Jazz improvisation is habitual in nature much like conversational language. Developing melodic improvisational “habits” through the practice of these exercises, allows me to devote more of my intellect and musical mind (at the time of improvising) to the subtleties of playing (such as phrasing and phrase construction, rhythm, swinging, execution, and being in sync with the rest of the band).

Throughout my career as a jazz pianist and educator, I’ve learned and forgotten thousands of great solos, but I will always remember and continue to practice the exercises constructed from those solos.

-- David Hazeltine

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Introduction

The transcription process can be used as a means to an end. The use of transcriptions to assimilate a jazz artist's style is an essential component to the development of a jazz musician. However, the assimilation, use, and overall understanding of the transcribed material as it relates to one's own improvisation is where the true benefit lies. Jazz pianist David Hazeltine authored a method for creating etudes from transcriptions that analyze how an artist thinks while improvising. In Hazeltine's words, "I wanted to get beyond copying artists, and try to get inside their thought process."¹

Hazeltine published two articles in *Piano Stylist and Jazz Workshop*, titled "Assimilating a Pianist's Style," (Parts 1 and 2) that analyze and identify the different elements involved in assimilating a pianist's style.² Both articles are out of print and very difficult to find. In the articles, Hazeltine addresses principles that are involved in assimilating another artist's style, and he briefly describes creating etudes based on transcriptions. Hazeltine's method can be applied to all instruments. In this book, I will review information from Hazeltine's two *Workshop* articles and further develop his method of creating etudes.

Two common problems can arise when a musician attempts to use transcribed material while he improvises. The musician may have difficulty integrating the transcribed material into his own solo, or, as he develops proficiency using material from transcribed solos, he may rely too heavily on large portions of transcribed material and thus not improvise at all.

A common example of the second problem happens when a musician memorizes a "lick" that articulates a chord progression and then reproduces the entire "lick" during the course of a solo.³ Some people will see this as "memorizing complete sentences, and looking for the appropriate place to insert them into a conversation."⁴ A musician who simply quotes as part of his solo demonstrates his ability to reproduce the lick, but does not really improvise. However, if the musician divides the "lick" or sentence into a "series of connected smaller units," the problems of using material from a solo and trying to reproduce a lick in the course of improvising will be solved.⁵ Each problem will be addressed in more detail in the following two chapters.

I studied with Hazeltine regularly for more than two years while I lived in New York City and continue to apply his teachings and method in my practice. One of the first assignments he gave me was his Barry Harris etude (Ex. 1, which will be presented at the end of the introduction). His intention with the etude was to give me a better idea

¹ David Hazeltine, email message to author. February, 2, 2010.

² David Hazeltine "Assimilating Another Pianist's Style," pt.1, *The Piano Stylist and Jazz Workshop*. (October-November): 20-21; pt. 2, (December): 24-25,30.

³ Hazeltine, "Assimilating," pt.1, 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*

of articulation and swing. Although I came to many conclusions about the Harris etude retrospectively, I learned many of the basic principles that would guide me when I started to create my own etudes. The etudes I created are found in Part II of this book and have been approved by Hazeltine. In addition to presenting etudes, I will also demonstrate elements that make an exercise unsuccessful.

The definition of “etude” in this book varies from the traditional definition.⁶ Hazeltine’s process results in a unique etude based on the style of a particular jazz musician. An etude can be created when the student has learned at least six to seven solos by one artist. Material from these solos will be used to create an etude. Hazeltine’s etudes do not take the place of playing solos that the student learned and utilized in the creation process. The etude is to be practiced in conjunction with transcriptions. This means that the student’s practice session should begin by playing an etude, and proceed by playing the transcriptions upon which the etude is based. A Hazeltine etude is intended to isolate, group, and amplify specific features of an artist’s playing. The extraction and isolation of similar material can provide the musician with a better understanding of how to use the material learned from transcribing. The musician will understand the material more deeply because the material is broken down into smaller and more usable units. Hazeltine’s method captures the essence of an artist’s style and encompasses the pertinent aspects of an artist’s improvisation. Simply stated, the etude should sound not like the artist playing one specific solo that he recorded but rather like a representative sample of his recorded works.

According to Hazeltine in an email response on February 2, 2010, successful etudes created using this method are “precise and concise “enough to:

- 1) enthusiastically practice regularly at length without feeling time is being wasted.
- 2) have 8 bars of music yield 8-16 different ideas/motives/shapes that will be, as a result of practice, easily accessible when actually improvising.
- 3) sound exactly like the musician it is based on.
- 4) Swing and have the melodic integrity of a tune.

Hazeltine’s method is most applicable to solos from the bebop and post-bop era.

It is ineffective for a musician to practice an etude he did not create. The greatest benefit is achieved by going through Hazeltine’s process of etude creation for the following three reasons. 1) The musician who read the etude would not have learned the solos that were used to create the etude. 2) Skipping the transcription process would negate most of the benefit found when focusing on stylistic aspects that are the essence of the artist. 3) Finally, etudes created using this method are unique to each author. If two people were to create an etude based on the same artist, each etude would be different, because each musician would be drawn to different solos within an

⁶ Etude Study. Comp. intended as a basis for the improvement of the performer's technique. In pf. mus. the term is especially applied to a short piece restricted to the exploitation of one kind of passage. See "Étude." *The Oxford Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. rev. Ed. Michael Kennedy. *Oxford Music Online*. 18 Feb. 2010 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t237/e3513>>.

artist's recorded works. Even if each musician chose to write an etude from the same solos of an artist, each would choose to use different material within each solo. Even if some of the material chosen was the same, it would most likely be grouped and connected in a different order.

This is similar to asking two people to give an account of a book they just read. They would most likely highlight the main points; however, the manner in which each person gave his account would be different. Their syntax (sentence organization), articulation, and pronunciation would differ. Based on their own personal experiences, they would be inclined to highlight details that appealed to them. I do acknowledge that elements such as connection and even device choice (which will be discussed in more detail) could be similar or identical between two musicians' etudes. If each etude were created successfully, they would both embody similar musical tendencies of an artist. Hazeltine's etudes are created based on a musician's perception of an artist. The overall perception will undoubtedly differ between musicians and produce two unique results. In terms of creating etudes, differing perspectives will produce individual results.

The benefits of using Hazeltine's method yield noticeable results in one's improvising. A musician who has produced etudes from multiple artists will have learned six or seven solos for each artist and will have a good understanding of each artist's stylistic tendencies. Furthermore, he will have a greater perspective on how to use material from solos in particular passages when improvising. If the necessary steps are followed to create etudes for multiple artists, the musician's musical palette and thought process will broaden. Applying Hazeltine's method to multiple artists provides the opportunity for the musician to pick and choose from different approaches learned in each etude that will result in creating something unique and stylistically informed. The work involved in learning solos and creating etudes heavily influences a musician's playing and eventually starts to become part of the basic fundamental material he uses to improvise. The various material practiced in etudes gives the musician a better chance to employ idiomatic "sentences" that are stylistically authentic when improvising. The following chapter addresses the role of transcription in jazz history, offers practical advice for the transcriber, and outlines the benefits of the process.

Ex. 1

Barry Harris Major Etude

by David Hazeltine

The musical score for "Barry Harris Major Etude" is written in treble clef, 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The piece consists of ten staves of music. The first staff begins with a CΔ chord. The second staff starts with a 5-finger fingering. The third staff begins with a 9-finger fingering. The fourth staff starts with a 15-finger fingering. The fifth staff begins with a 17-finger fingering. The sixth staff starts with a 21-finger fingering. The seventh staff begins with a 25-finger fingering. The eighth staff starts with a 29-finger fingering. The ninth staff begins with a 33-finger fingering. The tenth staff ends with a final measure. Chord symbols CΔ and G7 are placed above the staff. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5.

Part I: Transcription

Purpose

Some argue that transcription is a noncreative way to learn jazz. This point of view has arisen for two reasons. First, there are those who use the process merely to copy and reproduce. In these cases, style and nuance are overlooked. One reason for this is because the musician learns the solo from a transcription book and does not go through the process of reproducing the sound of the artist on his instrument. When a musician learns in this manner, he will not completely understand the material he wants to extract and use in his improvising. When a musician uses material from a written transcribed solo while improvising, it is often disingenuous and used incorrectly because he has not reconstructed the solo from the recording first.

A musician who learns a solo from a book first creates more work for himself. If he learns a solo from a book, elements of style, sense of swing, and nuance become secondary. Learning a solo from a book shifts the focus from *how* to play the solo to *what* to play. The musician should learn the stylistic elements of a solo in conjunction with learning notes so he will be able to reproduce the style and material learned from solos while improvising.

Second, learning solos from a recording is a skill that takes lots of time and effort. It can be discouraging to transcribe material that is harmonically or technically challenging. A musician new to transcription won't always choose a solo that is most accessible for him. Selecting a solo that is too difficult can be discouraging and can result in the musician's only exposure to learning solos from the recording. I propose that most opinions against transcription come from limited or no exposure to transcription. Aural assimilation or transcription has played an integral part in jazz since the beginning of its history and is primarily because of jazz's longstanding aural tradition. Much of the material has been transferred through recordings and by teachers.

Teaching jazz in an academic setting is relatively new, as compared to the traditions of Western classical music. Jazz was not prominently within formal educational systems until the 1950s.⁷ If musicians had formal training before this, it was generally in Western classical music. For example, in 1944 Miles Davis moved to New York City to study at the Juilliard School of Music. Davis said "going to Juilliard was a smokescreen for being around Dizzy and Bird."⁸ It was Davis' musical encounters with Parker and Gillespie that greatly influenced his playing. "One conventional way for young artists to share information is through informal study sessions, a mixture of socializing, shoptalk, and demonstrations known as hanging out."⁹ This alternative form of study also includes learning at jam sessions and/or sitting in at concerts, as well as apprenticeships with professional groups.

⁷ Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 55.

⁸ Miles Davis and Quincy Troupe. *Miles*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 58-59.

⁹ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 37.