



**Vision Music's**

# **Seven Steps to Changes Heaven**

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"Seven Steps to Changes Heaven" is a no-nonsense dissertation targeted directly at aspiring jazz guitarists, many of whom are spinning their wheels, confused and/or frustrated when it comes to understanding the most optimum way to acquire and speak the language of jazz. Why does this sad dilemma exist in jazz educational circles? While the reason is anything but simple and logical, the great news is that the solution is abundantly simple and logical. Read on...

Music is indeed a language, and the process of becoming conversant is no different than learning English or any other language. For just a moment, reflect back to when you were very young and consider how you first learned to communicate with others. You slowly began to imitate your parents until you could say a few common words, typically at about two years of age. Next you began stringing those words together, first forming phrases and later complete sentences. Years before you could read, write, or sit in an elementary school classroom studying the rules of proper grammar, you could communicate and express yourself in a unique manner. You had even developed a special personality all of your own. In other words, you were already "improvising" and you weren't even thinking about it. With me so far?

Now contemplate how four of jazz guitar's greatest legends, Charlie Christian, Wes Montgomery, George Benson, and Joe Pass, learned how to improvise in precisely the same manner that you learned how to speak as a child. They carefully listened to and imitated their mentors completely by ear until they acquired the sounds needed to fluently communicate, again without even thinking about it. And yes, they also developed an original personality and style along the way, just as you did during childhood. Ironically, they didn't read or write music, nor did they attend school after the fact to study theory. Why would they? It was everyone else who wanted desperately to sound like them, and make no mistake about it. In music, regardless of whether you're playing or listening, the *sound* is the bottom line.

So what happened over the years that caused so many jazz educators and students to miss the obvious truth, then falsely conclude that you should arm yourself with a plethora of hypothetical, esoteric, and abstract mind games in order to improvise? This misguided path has succeeded in making a genre of music far more complicated than it should be, resulting in players who are discouraged and often have doubts about their ability to even play jazz. My ongoing mission is to help simplify things for yourself and others, and to get you on track to becoming the player you wish to be.

## **Step One: Respect and Embrace the Blues as the Foundation of Jazz**

Historically speaking, blues lies at the very core of jazz music, and all of the genre's icons (Bird, Dizzy, Miles, Trane, Wes, etc) were blues masters who not only played it well but wrote numerous compositions using it as a vehicle for improvisation. With that in mind, don't make the fatal mistake of taking the blues for granted, because whatever skill you achieve as a jazz improviser will be greatly diminished without the presence of blues and the resulting soulful message in your work.

With regards to changes playing, strive to comprehend the full spectrum of the blues language (major, minor, and dominant sounds) without depending solely on scales. Also understand the distinction between the traditional I-IV-V blues progression and the essential swing blues format that employs II-Vs and turnarounds associated with jazz music (e.g. C Jam Blues, Billie's Bounce, Tenor Madness, etc). This progression is perfect for blending blues and jazz language, forming a natural doorway to further jazz adventures. Learn as many blues licks as you possibly can and play the blues every day for the rest of your life!

## **Step Two: Understand the Importance of the II-V Progression**

It has been stated on many an occasion that mastery of the II-V progression (e.g. Dm7 to G7 in the key of C) is critical to a jazz improviser's ultimate success in soloing over changes. A quick glance through the aforementioned swing blues progression or the multitude of standards in any fakebook underlines this importance, and bear in mind the fact that it's not just about the actual II-V in a given key, but any motion of a fourth between minor and dominant chords. Generally speaking, II-Vs are either long (two bars - four beats per chord) or short (one bar - two beats per chord).

As with the blues, don't depend on scales, modes, and arpeggios to develop a working vocabulary of II-V licks. Instead, learn the language through imitation, just as the forefathers of jazz did before you. You can use books and pre-existing solo transcriptions to increase your concepts and vocabulary, but personalize your path by writing your own book of licks that appeal to you, ideally organizing them by the starting pitch relative to the II chord (e.g. Dm7 to G7 starting on D, E, F, G, A, B, C). This way when you recognize a II-V you'll *instantly* have something to use. Practice your II-V licks in every position and octave, eventually rotating keys daily or weekly.

## **Step Three: Transcribe Daily to Acquire Core Language**

Given all of the above, it should come as no surprise to you that I would recommend transcribing (learning by ear) on a regular basis as your primary means of acquiring the core language critical to successful improvisation. While the word itself infers pen in hand, at first you should aim at playing what you hear, and only then should you consider the prospect of writing what you've learned as a way to improve your skill as a reader and to expand your understanding of timing and phrasing. Once again, keep in mind the fact that the great jazz guitarists cited above only did the former, so don't let your lack of writing and reading ability hold you back from learning by ear and picking up so many subtle nuances only gained by playing along with a mentor.

What and who to transcribe is always a personal call. For me, based upon my need and desire to become a superior blues player who could also handle jazz changes, I chose artists well-known for their skill in those areas. Don't limit yourself by choosing guitarists and ignoring other instrumentalists, because adapting piano, saxophone, and trumpet work to the guitar is one of the best ways to come up with unique ideas that will become part of your sum total and personality as an improviser.

#### **Step Four: Reviewing Your Language Vocabulary**

As your blues and jazz language vocabulary grows due to your transcribing efforts, you need to review it to the degree that it will always be accessible to you during the course of a solo. At one point in my career I used abstract scale and arpeggio study in a misguided quest, thinking that if I only knew all the "right notes" to play I would become a conversant soloist. I failed miserably with that approach and couldn't play my way out of a paper bag. On the other hand, the core language teaches you that there are no "wrong notes" to play, since it is based on sounds and therefore not limited by the shackles of scales.

So instead of reciting the alphabet, I used great blues and jazz licks gleaned from my mentors to break down the fingerboard, position by position. While this still left the challenge of connecting the dots and applying the language, at least I was armed and dangerous with something that represented a meaningful foundation. Gradually I saw the light and adopted my present day philosophy of only practicing something that I would actually *play* for someone. I haven't looked back since.

#### **Step Five: Application Using "Dry" Improvisation**

Once you are on the right path with regards to acquired language and actually have something potentially good to say as an improviser, the next stage is a transitional one. After all, the language doesn't do much good if it doesn't rear its head during the course of a solo, right? But getting that to happen in a live ensemble context is not the easiest thing to do. For me, once I hear a rhythm section of any kind my brain goes on hiatus, because I just want to close my eyes and let my ear and automatic pilot take over. This is just the way it should be in an ideal world, but few players have the luxury of performing and improvising jazz 6-7 nights a week, which gave many artists in the past the time for things to naturally evolve. In either case, I would get frustrated knowing that I had these great ideas under my belt that just weren't coming out, so I found two solutions that worked very effectively for me. The first is what I call "dry" improvisation, which is particularly appropriate for guitarists.

How does it work? Simple. There are many possible scenarios, but I'll create just one as an example. Let's say that you have a classic two-bar II-V cliché that you'd love to get into your playing, perhaps in measures 9 & 10 of a swing blues progression. You play rhythm guitar, comping the chords in the progression. When the 9th measure occurs, stop comping, ideally while maintaining the rhythmic flow, and play the lick. When it resolves after the 10th measure go back to your support role. Do this over and over until your ear and fingers naturally respond to the situation. Try using both shorter phrases (one measure) or longer phrases (four measures) in the same way.

## **Step Six: Arranging Model Solos to Put It All Together**

The second solution that I discovered is one that has been working for me for close to 30 years now. It also stemmed from a sense of frustration, because certain tunes and progressions would frequently beat me up. Good solo one night. Bad solo the next. Then it dawned on me that even the greatest jazz players in history (Bird, Trane, etc) depended on *favorite* solos that they had developed over the years. In the case of Bird (Charlie Parker), his improvisations were so good that they became popular melodies that today all other jazz musicians play, like Ornithology, Scapple the Apple, K.C. Blues, Anthropology, etc. Since I had acquired the language but knew I would never have the obsession to play jazz 24/7 like them, I concluded that the next best thing would be to arrange model solos that represented the best effort I could deliver, then practice the solos to both master the chord progression and get the core language under my fingertips.

Do I play these model solos during live performance? No, but I do play the language and parts of them unconsciously nowadays, using the components as a creative springboard in the same manner that Bird and others did in the past. In other words, mission accomplished. My bad solos today are like my best solos of yesterday.

## **Step Seven: Recording and Evaluating Your Work**

Recording your solos and work in general is an incredibly valuable tool for improving your ability as a musician. I learned long ago that the way we hear ourselves while playing as opposed to after-the-fact listening can be as different as night and day. What we *think* sounds good is sometimes terrible, and what we take for granted often sounds great, yet we can go on day after day, week after week, month after month, and even year after year not being cognizant of it if we don't allow ourselves the opportunity to make judgments from a neutral corner. You'll be astounded at how quickly you'll get rid of the weak stuff and build on your strengths directly as a result of frequent recording, so don't be intimidated. You have absolutely nothing to lose except what you *want* to lose and everything to gain in reaching your ultimate goal as a jazz improviser and artist!

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