

4) Compose your Solo

by Yasmina Zack

The more you

- train your melodic, rhythmic and harmonic ear/ listening abilities,
- know languages (the Jazz language varies relative to styles and players),
- listen to music carefully (fully concentrated to the exclusion of outside distractions, using a moderate volume, focusing on short sections to give your brain a chance to process),
- remember licks and phrases (learning them by ear and/ or through transcribing your favorite solos) and experiment with them,
- write (your own) music,

the further you will grow as an improvising Jazz singer.

The exercise of composing a Jazz solo serves as a preparation for improvising in a real situation. It gives you time to construct and reflect over your ideas (and the ones you took from other players as quotations). The more you write, revise and practice your own solos, the more you will remember your phrases and become fluent improvising without such a detailed preparation.

1) Write your solo over a Jazz standard song you know very well

- a. Know the melody and lyrics (and of course the song form- if it's AABA or ABABAC, etc.).
- b. Know the roots and chords.
- c. Know 2 to 3 or more solos (analyze how they work concerning their structure, main ideas and interesting moments and make yourself a plan/ road map/ visualization of them; transcribing or learning them by heart is up to you).
- d. Write your own solo (playing the chords on the piano while doing that may help).

Experiment with different ideas and choose one that works best for you. This might be a short motif as an opener in the first bar, for instance, developing over the next 3 bars, becoming something different in the 5th bar, appearing as a variation or sequence, giving closure coming back in its pure form in the end.

2) Sing your solo playing the chords on the piano.

Improve passages you're not satisfied with melodically/ harmonically: often fewer notes are better than trying to say everything in 2 or 4 bars and then repeating yourself over and over again. Also check to make sure that what you have written goes well with the chords and their upper structures/ scales. If it doesn't, think about if you really want to have a dissonant note on an accentuated beat of a measure or if you'd prefer it on a weak beat as a passing tone, or if you would like to replace it with another.

Singing your solo while playing the piano yourself allows you to take the time you need to check notes- even playing the melodic part without rhythm/ time or playing only the rhythmic part without pitch is possible.

3) Sing your solo with a playback of the song- in tempo.

Make sure the rhythmic groups you wrote work.

4) Practice your written solo.

Revise your solo. Is it playable/ singable for you? Make it work for you. Replace notes and insert breaks that you find work best. If what you wrote seems too boring, reevaluate your main idea and/ or the possibilities the upper structures of the chords suggest to you. Also review the rhythmic aspects of your solo.

5) Record yourself singing your solo with a playback.

If possible, recording yourself singing your solo while playing piano (the right hand playing quarter notes marking the pulse while the left hand plays every new root note) may be the best thing.

6) Listen to your solo and analyze the strong and weak passages.

Revise your written solo: did you make mistakes while recording, perhaps because you were nervous or hadn't practiced enough or because the composition isn't singable enough (pitched too high or too low, note values such as 16th or 32nd notes occurring too quickly in a faster tempo)?

Be patient, acknowledge what worked well and think about what you could do to repeat such a positive result. Write a detailed pro- (what you liked) and contra- (what you would like to change) list in order to continue improving your solo in the future.