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**Chuck Tumlinson, Jazz Corner Editor – Rob Walker: *Do Your Jazz Solos Meander?* (Jan 03/48)**

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## Do Your Jazz Solos Meander?

BY ROB WALKER

The dictionary defines meandering as moving aimlessly and idly without fixed direction. Does that sound like your jazz solos? When teaching high school and even college aged students, the biggest criticism I have of their playing is what I call meandering. If you surveyed all the jazz improvisation materials out in the marketplace, you would probably be led to believe that chord scale knowledge or ii-V7 licks are the prime deficiencies in the developing jazz player. I would disagree, observing that rambling and meandering are the most important problems to overcome.

Many young musicians are first attracted to jazz by the sheer virtuosity of some jazz players. Playing higher, faster, and louder seems the way to go. We have all heard sax players spewing notes or trumpeters squealing high notes attempting to demonstrate their virtuosity. The danger is that these devices become the main thrust of their solos. The result is playing that is analogous to speaking without punctuation. Here are some handy tips to reduce or eliminate meandering.

- 1) Use punctuation - Challenge yourself by pre-planning your solos to include commas, periods, exclamation points, and question marks. Each punctuation mark causes the speaker to pause or change direction. Be sure to pause when soloing.
- 2) Tell a story - Great jazz solos are just like great conversations. A statement is made, possibly repeated, a counter-statement is made to which another retort is offered. Have a conversation with yourself. Try this quick exercise. Play a solo while thinking of the following phrases in your mind. By doing so, your phrasing will be much better and you will not meander.

Went to the store.

Picked up some fruit.

Wanted some apples and maybe some pears.

Ended up with grapes.

Should I taste one before I go home?

Yuck! Yuck!

Sour, man!

These short phrases will help build logical ideas. Of course, you can choose your own story. Just vary the lengths of the phrases and use punctuation! The end result should be controlled, short phrases that build on one another to form a beautiful logical conversation.

- 3) Think about contour - Build your solos. Challenge yourself before you start by plotting the contour of

your solo. Many solos are structured like movies or books. They start with brief introductions of the characters, the plot is introduced, things develop, conflict is introduced, tensions heighten, and finally a resolution comes. Structure your solos to include these elements. This doesn't mean that every solo needs to be the same contour, but having a concept before you begin will help eliminate the meandering. Soloing in big bands has its unique issues. Typically, you are given 16 bars to say what you have to say. The contour for something like that is much different. Shape your contour plot to complement the situation in which you are playing.

- 4) Space - It's not what you play, but what you don't play! A jazz solo should be about conversations on different levels. I've already addressed the conversations that you can have with yourself while you solo. In addition, there is a conversation happening between you and the rhythm section. You need to allow space to give your supporting players a chance the comment (musically) on what you just said. Use space frequently. I realize that this is easier said than done, but it is the key to a logical solo.

Miles Davis was a master in the use of space. Listen to how he plays. Try to emulate it. Obviously, we do not know exactly what was going on in his head, but it appears as if he simply was editing what his inner voice was saying. It is my observation that when he was playing an extended passage of eighth notes that he actually heard a continuous line of notes in his head, but played on selected portions of the line. It sounds as if he was turning the sound on and off as he listened to his mind's CD player. I suppose it doesn't matter how he did this. The result was the same; he used space to his advantage.

*About the author:* Rob Walker is a jazz trumpeter/composer based in Boise, ID. He studied at the Berklee College of Music under Herb Pomeroy and at New York University and The Juilliard School. He has shared the stage with jazz artists such as Bobby Shew, Clay Jenkins, David "Fathead" Newman, Lanny Morgan, Kim Richmond, and Gary Foster as well as Ray Charles, Natalie Cole, The Temptations, The Supremes, and The Moody Blues. His group has performed at International Jazz festivals in Utah and Mexico. Visit his web site at: [www.mp3.com/robwalker](http://www.mp3.com/robwalker)

