Thoughts on Practicing Jazz

Four great Jazz musicians & teachers: My experiences as a student

On Practicing in general

Practicing is perhaps the most important habit for every active musician. Talent and passion for the music or love for an individual instrument may still be the very reason to become a musician but, as it has been witnessed so many times in the past, the only way for someone to enjoy playing music is by first mastering the tools of the art form itself. Practicing is the single most important habit which will enable one to achieve this goal, assuming that some amount of talent[1] is already inherently present.

This is not true for instrumentalists only, as healthy practicing habits should also be acquired by theorists, composers, conductors, music teachers and so on. Music is a transcendent art form and can appear in many ways and shapes in our everyday life, but the very act of making music needs discipline and hard work.

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1 Levitin, Daniel. *This is your brain on music: The science of a human obsession.* New York: Dutton, 2006. (p. 190-191) "The scientific study of expertise has been a major topic within cognitive science for the past thirty years, and musical expertise has tended to be studied within the context of general expertise. In almost all cases, musical expertise has been defined as technical achievement—mastery of an instrument or of compositional skills. The late Michael Howe, and his collaborators Jane Davidson and John Sloboda, launched an international debate when they asked whether the lay notion of "talent" is scientifically defensible. They assumed the following dichotomy: Either high levels of musical achievement are based on innate brain structures (what we refer to as talent) or they are simply the result of training and practice. They define talent as something (1) that originates in genetic structures; (2) that is identifiable at an early stage by trained people who can recognize it even before exceptional levels of performance have been acquired; (3) that can be used to predict who is likely to excel; and (4) that only a minority can be identified as having because if everyone were "talented," the concept would lose meaning. The emphasis on early identification entails that we study the development of skills in children. They add that in a domain such as music, "talent" might be manifested differently in different children...The strongest evidence for the talent position is that some people simply acquire musical skills more rapidly than others. The evidence against the talent account—or rather, in favor of the view that practice makes perfect—comes from research on how much training the experts or high achievement people actually do. Like experts in mathematics, chess, or sports, experts in music require lengthy periods of instruction and practice in order to acquire the skills necessary to truly excel. In several studies, the very best conservatory students were found to have practiced the most, sometimes twice as much as those who weren't judged as good."

Both discipline and hard work are usually materialized in the form of practicing which, apart from improving body mechanics, should also be viewed as a form of exercising the brain[2].

Theater, Dance and Music are all performing Arts and are usually closely related with practicing in the form of self-study or group rehearsals but it should also be noted that we all actually get involved with practicing in everyday life in order to become more proficient at something: a young individual could very well practice playing a video game in order to become good at it, an athlete should spend time working out or running in order to improve his physical condition etc. As a bonus, music practice nowadays is also associated with general improvements in cognitive ability[3].

Being a Jazz saxophonist, I long ago realized that the key to unleashing one's creativity is by first being able to feel that the instrument is a natural extension of one's body. A musician has to have a true bond with his instrument and to achieve this, many years of hard practicing are often required.

Practicing many hours a day can usually lead to a successful musical career, but there are a few variables that need clarification.

First of all, long practicing sessions aren't necessarily required. Good practicing needs mental focus and a calm mental state[4]. It can usually be carried out in shorter periods of time than most people think.

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2 Chang, Chuan. *Fundamentals of Piano Practice*. Charleston: BookSurge Publishing, 2007. (p.26) "Many students think of piano practice as hours of intense finger calisthenics because they were never taught the proper definition of technique. The reality is that you are actually improving your brain when learning piano! Acquiring technique is a process of developing faster nerve connections, creating more brain cells for the proper movements and memory functions, and for "speaking the language of music". You are actually making yourself smarter and improving your memory; this is why learning piano correctly has so many beneficial consequences, such as the ability to better cope with everyday problems or the ability to retain memory longer as you age."

3 Nutley-Bergman, Sissela Darki, Fahimeh Klingberg, Torkel. "*Music practice is associated with development of working memory during childhood and adolescence*", Frontiers in Human Neuroscience 7/926, 2014. (p.1) "Formal music practice involves several cognitively challenging elements, e.g., long periods of controlled attention, keeping musical passages in working memory or encoding them into long-term memory, decoding music scores, and translating the product into corresponding motor commands. This type of activity taxes complex cognitive functions as seen in brain imaging research. Other investigations suggest that music practice is associated with cognitive benefits (for a review,see Schellenberg and Weiss, 2013). Associations between formal music training and cognitive ability have mostly been reported in retrospective studies of musicians and non-musicians. Individuals practicing music demonstrate higher performance in tasks requiring visuo-spatial reasoning processing speed as well as working memory. These effects point to a quite general cognitive advantage for music players compared with non-music players. There are also reports of associations between the number of months of music practice and academic performance in math, reading and spelling after controlling for general intelligence and parental education, although these findings are not always consistent."

4 Werner, Kenny. *Effortless Mastery, Liberating the Master Musician Within.* New Albany: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 1996. (p.60) "A fearful mind won't allow you to concentrate and absorb. Even while focusing on one thing, the mind is exerting subtle or

Second, as the musician matures musically, some of the practicing parameters may have to shift direction and that's where a good teacher can come handy. Third, one's musical style may require focusing on special practicing routines and this is true for different instrument families as well.

I have been blessed to have acquired my musical education within a very competitive and musically creative environment. Having studied with some of the leading artists in Jazz, I would like to elaborate a little on the way each one of them viewed the act of practicing and also mention some of the directions they gave me on evolving as a Jazz musician both technically and aesthetically during our lessons.

Still, after almost 30 years, my practicing routines continue to incorporate these directions. I'll be forever thankful to these great artists.

On taking lessons from Joe Lovano

When I arrived at William Paterson College for my first lesson with Joe Lovano, I was surprised to see him sitting behind a drum set and tuning the snare drum. He stood up, greeted me with a smile and told me how the lesson was going to take place. Lovano being such a natural player and improviser, made the music flow out of him in an amazing way whether he was behind the drum set or playing the saxophone. The lesson was more like a seminar on improvisation and musicality which was incredible, but not without shortcomings.

Let me explain this. He would throw tons of information on students, mostly during playing drum duets, and this could sometimes be overwhelming. I mean, one had to be at least way above average in musical chops to be able to follow. This should be expected by all college students but as usual it wasn't the case for most of us, especially for freshmen and juniors.

The lesson would center in providing playing and improvising tips on tunes chosen. Playing over the changes and phrasing in the Jazz tradition were the usual topics. Practicing was never thought of as a means for making advances on instrument technique only, but mostly as a “holistic” musical

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not-so-subtle pressure with the thought of the other things that need tending to. This creates a very anxious and insecure feeling. When you skim the surface, you acquire many bad habits with regard to tempo, fingering and other details. Repetition of these bad habits causes them to grow ingrained ever more deeply into your subconscious, so that you are actually doing what I call negative practice. In this way, one hour of practicing is better than two, thirty minutes is better than an hour, and no practicing at all would be preferable to that kind of negative practice!”

development in Jazz. This was perhaps because Joe Lovano would expect one to practice technique exercises according to one's own schedule. Tips on practicing the saxophone mechanics and sound projection were also often given in terms of playing scales over the full range of the saxophone and doing long tone exercises. Practicing patterns was never suggested, but he did nevertheless agree on the usefulness of the concept. He was actually the person who introduced me to Slonimsky's "Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns"[5] and advised me to work on patterns from that book as I pleased. I should also mention that every pattern I chose, I had to transpose it in all keys (most of them were symmetric in terms of intervals so the possibilities of transposition weren't that many anyway).

Rhythm was always discussed in lessons and the concept of having "good time" was very important to him. Just playing duets with Joe Lovano on the drums was a test for good timekeeping. To practice playing saxophone and drum duets, first of all I would use my metronome for timekeeping. I would then go through as many choruses as I could trying to achieve both a harmonic and rhythmic coherence in my solo, while still making everything sound relaxed and flowing. I should also stress that one needed strong timekeeping chops to play duets with Joe Lovano on the drum set, as he would seldom play the first downbeat of the measure or point out sections in the tune. It was a real brain exercise trying to concentrate on the form while also trying not to "turn the beat around" and at the same time coming up with a "strong" line melodically speaking.

He was also regularly passing out handouts to students from Joe Allard's book called "Advanced Rhythms" (Lovano was a student of Allard's). I would practice four to eight etudes a week and played them during my lesson. Practicing these rather contemporary etudes enhanced my rhythmic concept. It also helped my sight-reading to develop.

As for polyrhythms, they were never on the table. I think that for Lovano, superimposing a rhythmic layer on top of another was part of the intuitive improvisational flow that he had while improvising. Even though his playing is full of polyrhythmic interaction with the band, I believe that this is a spontaneous process of a genius mind rather than a thought out approach. This topic was not discussed nor was I given any tips on practicing polyrhythms.

In short, practicing for my lessons with Joe Lovano would mainly focus on "making the changes" and playing in sync with the metronome as I was improvising over jazz standards. Practicing scales,

5 Slonimsky, Nicolas. *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1947.

arpeggios and patterns was something I would do on my own and as I pleased. Practicing rhythmic drills and polyrhythms was never stressed but the general direction of William Paterson College, a very strong mainstream Jazz school at the time, was more into transcribing solos and preserving the Jazz tradition.

On taking lessons from Dick Oats

Dick Oats is a player and a teacher of great caliber and could be placed next to Joe Lovano despite him being a bit more obscure in terms of recognition. Oats would substitute for Lovano whenever he had to go on tour. He would start out the lesson by dealing with the technical aspects of saxophone playing and gradually go into improvising. Practicing for his lesson included different scale types in all keys as well as bebop phrases. Taking a phrase and transposing it to different keys was among his favorite suggestions for practicing[6].

Dick Oats was (and still is!) a great improviser and, like Joe Lovano, insisted on practicing improvised choruses on different jazz standards keeping time with the metronome as well as transcribing and learning as many tunes as possible. Developing a sound harmonic concept was his main concern. Oats had an incredible time feel and he always suggested the use of a metronome, especially when practicing technical exercises. During the lesson, we used to improvise a Capella on different tunes exchanging choruses or sections and keeping a steady tempo while trying to swing as hard as possible. This was one of the main goals. Other goals included building melodic direction, harmonic integrity and exercising the virtue of patience while building up a solo.

During my practicing sessions, I would trade four bar or eight bar sections with an imaginary player (!) staying quiet when not playing but following through the chord changes and the rhythmic flow in my head so as to be ready to jump right in when my turn to solo came up again. Some times, I would even scat whole choruses in the accompaniment of my metronome and then at the end of the last chorus I would jump in, playing more choruses on the saxophone.

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6 Czerny, Carl. *A systematic Introduction To Improvisation on the Pianoforte.* Translated and Edited by Alice L. Mitchell. New York: Longman Inc, 1983. (p.11) Indeed, this method of practicing is even mentioned in the Czerny book written in 1829: "Naturally, one must transpose these and similar examples into all keys, alternate the passagework with other suitable sections, and know how to execute everything with such ease and lack of restraint that the preludes maintain the character of the momentary fancy"

As far as I can remember, we never talked about odd meters or polyrhythms. Dick Oats' rhythmic approach was nested on Bebop and his concept of a great melodic line was based firstly on projecting the underlying harmony and then dealing with rhythmic structures. Of course he often used to incorporate rhythmic sequences in his improvisations and made me try to do so myself. I would often practice taking a rhythmic pattern and placing it over different chords or moving its starting position within a bar-line.

Dick Oats was playing a lot of gigs in New York at the time, and besides his regular job as lead alto player in the Mel Lewis (Vanguard) Orchestra, he also played with lots of Latin bands.

He was the one to give me a more detailed insight on Latin music and its need for absolute accuracy on interpreting the various rhythmic figures and keeping the pulse going. He suggested I keep a strong attachment to the clave rhythm while improvising or just reading a chart. I would practice clapping the clave rhythm over a metronome beat in various tempos before even taking the saxophone in my hands. Playing Latin music greatly helped me develop my “sense of time”.

My lessons with Dick Oats definitely introduced to me another perspective of practicing which was not that different from Joe Lovano's, but surely a more organized one.

On taking lessons from Andy Fusco

Andy Fusco came to William Paterson during my senior year and since Joe Lovano was going to be away for quite some time he took over most of his students including myself. He was a fantastic alto player and was on first call for New York gigs including the alto chairs of the Mel Lewis Band. His teaching concept was similar to Joe Lovano's and Dick Oats' but definitely more organized than both.

After the first lesson, and having detected my shortcomings in the various aspects of playing the saxophone, he started working with me on sound and rhythm accuracy. He also made me sight-read a lot. It was he who introduced me to a more organized approach to studying Jazz phrasing and to the series of books by Lennie Niehaus, which by the way I still use with my own students.

Practicing for my saxophone lesson with Andy Fusco became a more specific task than practicing had previously been. I still practiced improvising on tunes and playing lots of choruses to the beat of my

metronome in order to improve my creativity as a Jazz musician, but I also started devoting more time in the precise execution of exercises on technique. I slowed down the metronome speed and played my scales and patterns trying to feel the rhythmic pulse and every subdivision of it in my fingers and body. With the metronome set at 2 & 4 (cut time), I would sometimes spend hours reviewing exercises I thought I could play well but actually didn't. Sometimes I would even turn the lights out in the practice room (which was of course against the rules) just to be able to focus more on the beat of the metronome.

Practicing Jazz phrasing, I would once again use the metronome and starting very slowly almost like in slow motion, I would gradually build up the tempo depending on the etude. The Lennie Niehaus books are excellent for this purpose and during the lesson, Andy Fusco would demonstrate the right way to do it. He was very meticulous in pointing out mistakes or things that needed closer attention.

As a result my practicing habits became more precise and whenever I had ample time at my disposal I would go back to the bare basics practicing long tones, scales and arpeggios before it was time to really "dig in". My practicing had become more focused and it really showed during ensemble playing with some of my schoolmates commenting highly on my sound and timekeeping abilities.

Generally speaking, the saxophone lesson with Andy Fusco was very organized in many aspects. The weight was equally distributed among improving the technique on the instrument and expanding on the creative aspect of Jazz improvising. Overall a very balanced lesson.

On taking lessons from Henry Butler

Upon my arrival at Eastern Illinois University for my Master's Degree I met with faculty member Henry Butler, a real Jazz giant. Henry Butler being a pianist (and also blind from an early age), introduced me to a slightly different mode of practicing. For a blind man, every sound can represent a vivid image, a snapshot of the world around him.

All musicians must use the sense of hearing to a much greater degree than non musicians in everyday life and most importantly, during the act of music making. As many musicians do not consciously strive hard enough to partly put away the visual stimuli and concentrate on "hearing", being around a blind person can really open up new paths in the way one should deal with all perceived sounds.

Taking Jazz lessons with Henry Butler really made me try to rely on my ears, first on an unconscious level and later on a conscious one. Even when practicing the routines I had developed during my previous years of music instruction, just being around him made me realize that the level of execution of these routines had become more focused. Even playing long tones seemed different than before. At least, that's how it sounded to my ears!

Henry Butler would take time during the lesson to talk about harmony and rhythm in Jazz and then would accompany my saxophone improvisations on the piano. Playing with someone of his caliber was of course awesome and this usually involved starting on one key and then transposing the song up or down after every other chorus. Transposition of chord progressions and melodies was to him an essential tool to develop a good Jazz vocabulary and agility on the horn. While in the practice room, I would sometimes mentally transpose chord progressions in all twelve keys. Then I would start to mainly arpeggiate the chords and after a chorus or two, I would slowly create melodies so that what I played gradually sounded more like a solo than like an exercise. I would then build on that.

Practicing also involved intensively working on saxophone technique, mainly using patterns out of Nicolas Slonimsky's book. Once again, I would start practicing at slow tempos gradually building up my speed. The patterns sounded better than before because I had become a more conscious listener of myself and I dedicated equal concentration on the individual parameters of execution such as fingerings, tempo and sound. Trying to make music out of a repetitive series of intervals was my main goal. Of course speed mattered, but first everything had to “sound” like music.

My practicing also involved working with songs of complex harmonic structure such as Giant Steps or Nefertiti. Trying to improvise on tunes with a “non functional” harmonic layout can be tough but also very rewarding. In order to create a flowing melodic line going through sets of chords that feature no cadences or other functional-type harmonic conveniences, one must be very alert in mind and very focused on the music. I would spend hours trying to devise ways to “connect” chords that had no apparent theoretical reason for following one another, by choosing small intervals to cross the bar lines with my improvised melodic lines. This was also a great exercise in resolving harmonic tensions in general and a very useful way for learning to deal with modulations.

Practicing for Henry Butler's lesson, made me feel particularly strong in terms of controlling my sound on the instrument and also enhanced both my rhythmic and harmonic foundations.

Conclusion

Talent or inclination towards a specific goal has always enhanced the motivation of an individual to excel at an activity, but achievers usually also engage themselves in focused practicing. During the music practice, hundreds of thousands of neurons that communicate with each other fire up and talk to each other through synapses which are tiny gaps between individual neurons. These synapses get strengthened as we engage in performing a piece we already know and they actually change when we learn a new piece of music or a new playing technique. In a few words, we actually change our brain every time we learn something new, especially when we do something on a daily basis as complicated and demanding as playing an instrument.

Apart from these obvious gains in cognitive processing, practicing a musical instrument diligently will allow for unleashing creativity and musicality in real world terms, as the technical boundaries will start gradually to disappear. In all my years of music involvement, practicing has proven to be the best medicine for artistic development not only as an instrumentalist but also as a composer and arranger.

If one asks a Jazz musician about practicing he will most likely refer to it as “wood-shedding”, a term showing the importance of practicing in his life. Improvisation in Jazz requires extra brain processing during practicing or performing and this means that most technical requirements on playing an instrument (singing also included) must be met in order for the brain to focus on creativity rather than on motor related actions.

All of my above mentioned teachers had repeatedly stressed the importance of practicing instrument technique using scales and patterns and doing so slowly and in a very focused way. As you might have seen, there were also differences in the approach or the weight given on different topics but in general they all agreed in the need of it in order for a musician to evolve.

It is also very important to point out that all of them favored practicing improvisational skills. Improvising on tunes and playing chorus after chorus non stop, can be closely related to a live performance and actually needs devoting a great deal of energy to achieve mental focus. This is where instrument technique becomes a simple vehicle to achieve a higher goal, one of creating music.

Transposing musical phrases or patterns also proved to accelerate my ability to "think ahead" during improvisations and really helped in the creation of a healthy jazz vocabulary.

Music practicing, being an art in itself, inherently benefits those who devote themselves in this process. The long path to musical accomplishment can seem shorter with diligent practice and the correct guidance from a good teacher. As I cannot claim for myself that I have finally arrived there, I can only stay focused to the teachings of the great masters and keep enjoying practicing as much I do performing. This is the only way I can perceive myself evolving musically!

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