

Speed-Writing

[what to do when you're stuck composing]

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Many times, when we're composing, we run into a situation when we're lacking in ideas. Sitting and staring at a blank page doesn't really help. Instead of giving up and chalking it up to writer's block, it's more helpful to try strategies to generate material quickly.

I've found that quickly generating musical ideas can happen in a structured way. We don't necessarily need to wait for inspiration when we're stuck. Often the material that gets generated is useful to our composing. It's not always perfect, but it gets us out of that "blank slate" mode and into the "working" mode.

PREREQUISITES

You need to know some basic music theory for this, including how to read a chord change accurately, and how to associate a scale to a given chord change.

PROCESS

1. Lay out the appropriate number of blank measures
2. If you have chord changes already, great. If not, just take them from another song (Charlie Parker and countless other composers did and still do this all the time). The blues and I've Got Rhythm are perfect.
3. Put the chord changes above the bar. Leave enough space underneath the changes and the measure to write rhythmic figures
4. Write out rhythms above the measures. If you're writing a typical bebop line, use about 66% eighth notes, 33% quarter notes, with the occasional longer tone. Don't forget rests. Good bebop rhythms tend to have a decent smattering of syncopations and ties.
5. Circle the first note. Circle the 'notes' that are followed by a quarter rest or longer. Circle also the long notes (longer than a quarter).
6. Now, in the measure, write a note that belongs to the chord (root, 3rd, 5th, or 7th) above every circled note.
7. To finish, simply "connect the dots" according to the remaining rhythms on top of the staff. Use a combination of straight and curvy lines. Put notes where the rhythms are and where the line is on the staff. Make sure the notes follow the scale associated with the chord change for that measure.
8. Play through your melody and make minor adjustments, if necessary.

- **We're going for quantity**, not necessarily quality
- Give yourself 10 minutes to finish 16 bars. Then 5 minutes. Then 2 (yes, two)

Questions? Want to show me a piece you came up with?

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Examples – from Red Garland’s solo on “It Could Happen to You,” from *Relaxin’ with the Miles Davis Quintet* (mm. 4-6 of his solo, this excerpt is ~4:16)

Just the notes

Musical notation for Red Garland's solo on "It Could Happen to You." The notation is in 4/4 time and features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes. The notes are: F#4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). The key signature has one flat (Bb). Chord symbols above the staff are: (F#°7) Am7b5, D7, Ebmaj7, Eb7b9, Abmaj7, and Db7. A circled '4' is at the beginning of the staff.

Notice the gestural direction – very indicative of bebop – I’ve drawn a line on top of the notes

The same musical notation as above, but with a thick red line drawn over the notes to indicate their gestural direction. The line starts at the level of the first note, rises to a peak above the second note, then falls to a level below the first note, rises again to a peak above the fourth note, and finally falls to a level below the first note.

Now, notice the line only, minus the notes. I’ve exaggerated the height to draw attention to the ups and downs of something like this. If we were to describe this visually, there’s an ascending line that drops off at the end, and then another line starting where the previous line left off, essentially dropping below where it started and then ending back at the same “height.”



Another example: Red Garland's solo on "If I Could Write a Book" from *Relaxin' with the Miles Davis Quintet* (m.m. 20-21 of his solo (this excerpt is ~3:07):

Musical notation for Red Garland's solo on "If I Could Write a Book". The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The tempo is marked as 20. The music is divided into three measures, each with a chord symbol above it: Fm⁷, B^b7, and E^bmaj⁷. The first measure contains a quarter rest. The second measure contains a quarter note followed by a triplet of eighth notes. The third measure contains a quarter note followed by a triplet of eighth notes. A slur covers the triplet in the second measure, and another slur covers the triplet in the third measure. The number '3' is written below each triplet.

Now with a line:

Musical notation for Red Garland's solo on "If I Could Write a Book", identical to the previous image. However, two thick red lines are drawn over the music. The first red line covers the quarter note and the first eighth note of the triplet in the second measure. The second red line covers the quarter note and the first eighth note of the triplet in the third measure.

Now the line only. Note the gesture (again, exaggerated vertically to prove the point)!



These lines are existing examples of the truly visual aspect of much of jazz playing when you look at it in notation form.

