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.

PREREOUISITES

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)

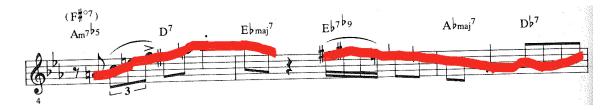
Questions? Want to show me a piece you came up with?

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



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



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):



Now with a line:



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.

