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## Master and Apprentice: Lessons From Six Jazz Masters

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## Master and Apprentice: Lessons From Six Jazz Masters

### Cover Page Footnote

This article is written by Richie Beirach and edited for the IASJ Journal of Applied Jazz Research by Wouter Turkenburg.

# My most important lessons from six of my jazz masters

## Stories from the life and career of Richie Beirach

### Stan Getz on the role of improvisation overcomplicated tunes

I played my first gig with Stan Getz in 1972 with Jack DeJohnette on drums and Dave Holland on bass. Our first week was in Toronto at the Toronto Show Bar.

It was a great venue. We played six nights starting on Tuesday. I rehearsed with the rhythm section and met Stan, who liked my playing. I was young and this was my first major gig. I played a lot with my friends like Dave Liebman, Randy Brecker, and John Abercrombie, but this was my first big name gig.

I was nervous but excited. I was talented and I could play, but I was inexperienced. The rhythm section was Dave Holland and Jack DeJohnette who had just finished playing with Miles Davis and Chick Corea for three years. That was the top of the top for jazz musicians.

Chick, Dave, and Jack were Miles's most recent rhythm section, so it felt like I was walking into history. Stan was an amazing player and at that time, one of the most popular jazz musicians in the world due to his astounding success of his recording of the bossa nova hit, *The Girl from Ipanema*. Stan basically brought Brazilian Bossa Nova into jazz and into America.

After our first set, Stan takes me aside and says, "Your intros are beautiful. Short and concise. Keep it up."

That was a good first lesson because I didn't know if they were good or what he wanted. At the time, I had nothing to compare it to.

I also learned how to program a jazz set—the type of tunes to play and in what order. This is stuff you only get by observing how the masters do it.

We played the same two sets every night, which, I thought, was strange. I thought we should have had a much bigger repertoire, but Stan's idea was to play the same two sets with the same 10 or 12 tunes, even if you're on tour. The point is to create something new with those tunes on a night-to-night basis. This is exactly what Miles did with his quintets.

After all, jazz compositions are not the focus. They are just the vehicle for improvisation. I first learned and experienced this from Stan. One of the tunes we played each night was *Lush Life*. *Lush Life* has a beautiful verse that I played rubato with Stan. Then we moved into the tune and played one chorus of the melody. We then played an ending with a cadenza, and that was the tune. It was short. So I asked him why he didn't play a solo over the changes to *Lush Life*.

Stan looked at me, smiled and said, "Kid, that *melody* is the best chorus. Why would you want to fuck around trying to improve on Billy Strayhorn's great melody? The light bulb went on in my head.

For a tune whose entire form you want to improvise over, don't use something like *Lush Life* with its long, involved head. For that type of tune, improvise something short, powerful, and evocative. Play something pregnant with ideas, like the melody of *Lush Life*. I learned this lesson long ago that was a prime example of the master-apprentice process of learning jazz.

### **Chet Baker on extreme dynamic sensitivity**

It was 1976, and I was on the road with Chet Baker. Throughout that time, Chet gave me his heart and his kind support, and was very generous with his information about music. He could be pretty hard on his players at times, but remember, this was the old-school jazz master-apprentice method of on-the-job teaching and learning.

We performed one night in June in 1978 at the Jazz Gallery in Washington DC. Chet had just returned to the US, and he had a new record contract with Horizon Records. His band consisted of me, Eddie Gomez on bass, and Eliot Zigmund on drums.

This gig was a big deal mainly because it was the return of Chet Baker from Europe. The place was packed, and the front row consisted of the music press, everyone with their notebook and pen, eager to review what they were about to hear that night.

We began with the beautiful ballad by Richard Rogers, *My Foolish Heart*. Leave it to Chet to open with a ballad. I played the intro and Chet came in with the first couple of phrases, but then he suddenly stopped playing, reaches for the microphone and without hesitation, says, "Richie, you're playing too fucking loud."

I was stunned, and the audience was silent. After all, I was not playing loud. I was playing what I *thought* was soft.

So we continued with the next two phrases while I had my foot pressed on the soft pedal playing as lightly as I could. Chet grabbed the microphone again and yelled, "Richie, you're still playing too fucking loud, kid."

I was now obviously sweating through my red silk shirt that I bought specifically for this gig and saw the reporters in the front-row writing like mad. I thought to myself, "This is not good."

We finished out the set and all went well. A few minutes later, I went to Chet's dressing room. I asked him, "Why did you humiliate me like that in front of all those people? Why couldn't you just wait until after the set to tell me"?

He looked at me straight in the eye and smiled and said, "Because now you will never forget it. You will never forget to think about your dynamics when playing a soft ballad with horn player or singer."

He was right. There was something about my touch that he didn't like and that wasn't sensitive enough to accompany Chet in a ballad. He had a different level of sensitivity.

To this day, when I'm playing a ballad with anyone, there's this little spark of attention that reminds me to check my dynamics, all because of that moment on stage with Chet.

## **Jack DeJohnette on not always needing to focus on beat one**

That same week playing with Stan, Jack, and Dave in the Toronto Show bar, I learned something else I would remember forever. They were each more rhythmically advanced and experienced than me at the time.

I was trying to follow Jack. Keep in mind that Jack's playing could be brilliantly complicated with an illusive quality. He rarely played beat one of the next eight-bar phrase in the traditional place. Sometimes it felt like two different bands because when Jack was accompanying Stan, Jack played in a more conservative manner. He was still swinging and strong but cool. But with my piano solos, because I played in a more modern

way similar to what he was used to with Chick, he would open up and become the full Jack DeJohnette. And in those moments, I had trouble following Jack's phrasing because of his innovative rhythmic playing across the bars.

I was trying to shadow Jack. I was trying to ghost him, aiming to hit beat one along with him. It was the wrong approach because it made me sound hesitant. The rest of the band heard it, but they were really kind to me and hadn't admonished me about it.

But that first night of the gig, Jack and Dave came to my room after the gig. I heard a knock on the door, and when I opened it, there they were asking if they could come in.

So I'm thinking the worst. They got another piano player because I'm not good enough to play with them.

We start talking and Jack says, "Rich, don't listen to me for the time. Even I can't listen to me! You have good time so trust yourself.

Now Dave, being British, gave his own translation on what Jack said. He looked at me and said, "What Jack means is that you're trying to follow where Jack puts the one. Don't do it. Let him orchestrate it with his creative phrasing and accents. He's not always going to hit beat one, but it doesn't matter. You have a good sense of time and form. Trust yourself. Don't try to follow that shit. You will never catch him, and it will sound stupid when you try."

So they both smiled, assuring me that the music had a great vibe. I felt very relieved and lucky to be playing with these two, who felt like my older brothers.

The next night, the club was packed. We started with *Invitation* and Stan's solo sounded wonderful. Next was my piano solo, and I was roaring. I was feeling good, Jack was burning, and then I heard him doing something insane against the beat I was playing. I said to myself, just relax and do what they told me last night. You have good form. Here's the beat. Just put it where you think.

I did exactly that, closed my eyes, and I came out right where I should have. Jack and Dave both looked at me, smiling and nodding. That was

an important lesson which came from the master-apprentice relationship with two great colleagues.

## **How I learned to survive hostile sit-ins with the great alto sax master Sonny Stitt**

Another lesson I learned from an old-school jazz master saxophonist occurred one night playing again with Stan, Jack, and Dave at a New York jazz club called Fat Tuesdays.

It was a great gig playing for packed houses each night, and several people showed up to sit in with us that week, including my good friends Dave Liebman and Randy Brecker.

On one of those nights, I saw Sonny Stitt walk into the club with his alto. Sonny was a mentor to Stan, so obviously he would be welcomed to sit in with us.

Sonny was a complicated man, who at one moment could be a loving grandfatherly type, and then the next, he could be a real nasty MOFO. Seeing him walk in, I wondered to myself which personality would be joining us on stage that night.

Stan turned around to us and said that he was going to ask Sonny to sit in with the band. I said, "Great!" Stan looked at me and said, "No. Stitt sometimes likes to fuck with the piano player. He thinks he's teaching. He's going to come up here and call a hard tune in a difficult key and count it off at a fast tempo. Expecting all that to trip you up, he'll then yell at you. He'll be testing you and thinking that he's training you to be a better player."

As Sonny walked up on to the stage, Stan announced that his great friend and mentor Sonny Stitt will now play a tune with the band. The audience gave him a standing ovation.

Sonny then turned around to Jack, Dave, and me and yelled, "*All the Things You Are*. Key of F# minor. 1, 2 - 1, 2, 3, 4..."

What Sonny didn't know is that by now, I'd had enough experience playing in New York where it was expected of you to play any standard in any key at any tempo.

But this wasn't just about music. It was more like sport. Stan was looking at me smiling, well aware of the game that was being played. Jack and Dave had been through this before and were not phased by any of this in the slightest.

As Sonny played the head, he was staring directly at me. I looked right back at him keeping up with every beat and chord. Remember, I'm from Brooklyn, where we never back down from a challenge.

We played the head and Sonny yelled, "Piano solo"! I started tearing it up. I was burning right from the start. I forgot about any kind of traditional motivic development and the building and development of themes. I was just burning eighth notes throughout the solo.

All the while I was staring right back at Sonny who, after he realized I was more than up for the challenge, cracked a smile. Everybody took a solo including Sonny, who sounded great. And after we finished the tune, Sonny came over to me, took my hand, and said, "Nice job kid." So, at that moment, I was cool in Sonny's eyes.

Stan took me aside afterward and said, "He did the same thing to me a long time ago, but with *Cherokee* in the key of B"!

Sonny was one of those old bebop guys who wanted to pass on the tradition and do it in a certain way out of his love for the music.

Now, let me add that I would never do that to anyone. If anyone sits in with a group I'm playing with, I want everyone to feel comfortable and for all of us to sound our best. But Sonny was another example of a master who had his own way of passing on his knowledge.

### **George Coleman on thinking about 'wrong' notes**

Another amazing lesson as an apprentice was with George Coleman. I recorded a duo album with George Coleman because I loved his playing, and we knew each other. George was a more conservative saxophone player who played with Miles before Wayne Shorter. George plays on a number of classic albums. He has a remarkable time feel with hard swinging eighth notes and a great lyrical melodic sense.

I wanted to learn something from George, who was a real master. I wasn't going to take lessons with him, so I hired him to do a duo recording called *Convergence*.

That experience taught me a lot of things. We recorded mostly standards with a couple of my originals. We did a take of the standard called *The Lamp is Low*. I did a reharmonization of it that George loved. He played soprano on it and sounds fantastic.

The first take was good, but it didn't have enough of what I wanted. So, we did a second take, and, in that take, I messed up something in my solo. My finger slipped off a key resulting in an unintended note. It was no big deal, and the rest of the take was excellent and had the fire I wanted, and George sounded great.

After the take, we were sitting in the studio and I said, "I really liked what we played except I fucked up. That missed note was really a drag." George looked at me, and said, "Really Rich? That was my favorite note that you played on that solo." I looked at him and I thought he must be kidding. To me, it was an obvious wrong note, but George said, "Stop trying to make that note go with what you think it should be and instead let it be what it is." Another light bulb turned on for me.

I realized that George was right. I heard that note as a mistake because I heard something else, and my finger slipped. But it was not a mistake. My finger slipped into the root of the A minor/major instead of the G# that

I intended. It turned out to be cool. It was just a different note, and it was fresh.

George talked to me about so-called mistakes. He said Miles used to play notes on chords that at first, sounded wrong. But Miles had the courage of his convictions and let his playing be what it was. A wrong note from a beginner is very different when played by a master improviser like Miles.

Listen to Miles' solo on *Blue in Green* on the *Kind of Blue* album. Miles hits a natural nine instead of a flat nine and it sounded terrible to me at first. Miles probably didn't intend to play that exact note. *But unintended doesn't mean wrong*. Unintended can mean surprise. Just because you didn't play exactly what you heard at the time doesn't make it wrong.

Context plays an important role in the decision which will affect the

outcome. It was Bill Evans playing for Miles. Bill's voicings were so broad that Miles' note worked at that moment. Another example is McCoy and Trane. Trane couldn't play a wrong note because McCoy was there to immediately create the chromatic context for Trane's playing.

I learned something important from George Coleman about the performance of jazz. You must think about the larger context. What you play is determined by everything else going on. That was very important for me to learn.

### **Manfred Eicher on "letting the improvisational moment guide you"**

Another very important master in my jazz education was Manfred Eicher, my producer for many ECM records. He was not a player, but his sensitivity and skill as a master creative producer gave me an enormous amount of musical knowledge and support.

I think I recorded nine albums as a leader and sideman for ECM, but the ECM album that stands out was my solo piano recording called *Hubris*.

This was 1977 and I was 30. At that time, ECM had produced some iconic solo piano records from Paul Bley's record, *Open to Love*, to Chick Corea's two solo piano improvisation albums, to Keith Jarrett's *Facing You*.

So, I was in serious company. I had talent and was confident, but I was still relatively inexperienced in terms of recording knowledge, at least compared to the other guys I just mentioned. I was practicing and practicing for the upcoming *Hubris* recording. To prepare, I held little concerts in home playing for friends, and I felt I was prepared.

The day arrived and at 9am I entered Bauer Studios in Ludwigsburg, Germany. It was a beautiful studio with a tremendous piano. Manfred walked in and said, "Let's begin." So, I started with the title song, *Hubris*. It's a beautiful Chopinesque kind of nocturne which I wrote and was perfect for the recording given all my classical training.

I started with a good musical idea but as I developed it, I suddenly played a scale or an arpeggio because it felt good, especially coming from the sound of that perfectly tuned studio piano and the legendary ECM reverb.

But as I would soon discover, it had nothing to do with the preceding idea and development of the motif.

I played the first take of *Hubris* and then walked into the control room thinking it was a good take and Manfred looked at me like I'd just insulted his mother. He said, "Richie, what's the matter with you? What were all those arpeggios? What is this decoration? This wallpaper?! Just play the idea and let the piano ring. Don't decorate!"

This is how the master teaches. He didn't say, "You know, in my opinion..." He just said it. Not nasty, just the truth, and he seemed a little bit surprised that I was not more aware of how I was overly ornamenting everything.

I started doubting myself, thinking maybe I shouldn't be doing this recording now. Maybe I'm not good enough or mature enough, and then I imagined Keith, Chick, and Bley in that studio.



And Manfred said in a quiet voice, "Listen, you can do this. I know you're a good piano player. Just play the music. Play a phrase, leave space, repeat the phrase, and develop that phrase. Then go somewhere else. Use the piano to play the music. *Don't let the piano play you.*

And in a flash, I understood what Manfred was saying. It's like playing Chopin, Mozart, or Bach who wrote no unnecessary ornamentation for that music.

You play the phrase, you play the motive, you have a breath, you play another phrase, then a development. Of course, you have technical passages and runs, but that decoration, as Manfred put it, is not the essence of the music.

That decoration is unnecessary. At times, you need technique to execute a complex musical idea, but Manfred was helping me understand the difference between what the music needs and doesn't.

So here I was in the studio with everything seemingly right on the line. Make or break time for me while Manfred is laying this information on me.

You cannot really receive information until you are ready, and that day I was ready. So, I recognized that the first take was terrible, the second take was better, but the third take was good which is what you hear on the album.

Manfred was very happy and so was I. It felt like I had given birth. As a result, the music was so much simpler and cleaner than what I had usually played, and that was because I was playing the music without unnecessary decoration.

That tune and Manfred's counseling on it was a big wake-up call for me. We ended up talking about those same elements on other tunes from the session. They would start out as a disaster, then Manfred would talk to me, saying, "You know what to do."

And then we recorded the ballads, and after those, Manfred finally said, "Okay, now do something with much more energy. Let's see what you've got, but not too long."

Manfred's advice was perfect for me at the time because he knew just the right thing to say and when to shut up. Because of that day, Manfred's lesson shaped my playing for the rest of my musical life.

I was thrilled with the entire two-day's worth of recording. The record came out great, and Manfred loved it. Now, if you had listened to the concert, I did of those same tunes a week before the Hubris session that I recorded on my little cassette machine, you'll hear two different piano players.

And that was the genius of Manfred Eicher. He was able to carve out from me the great music that was inside absent of the decoration. He was like a sculptor starting with a block of high-quality marble. He cut away all the unnecessary material and left the piece of art he envisioned. Not only did Manfred do that, but he taught me how to do it for myself.

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