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KEYBOARDS & MUSIC

Myths, Part II: The Myth Of Improvisation, by Chick Corea

I was talking last issue about how the process of learning depends on copying what other people have done. There's a myth to the effect that you should try to not sound like anybody else, but this can be very destructive because it can keep you from using what you've learned. There's a similar myth about improvising, which is that if you know ahead of time what you're going to play during a solo, you're some-how cheating. I'd like to blow this myth, too, because it puts some severe limits on the soloist, limits that aren't necessary at all.

I see improvisation as a decision by the improviser to not know what he or she is going to play. There's always the possibility of a fresh idea occurring, even in a piece that the artist knows well; but if you interpret your own decision (to not know) too rigidly, you can get trapped by the myth. Trying too hard to be spontaneous, to always be creating something new, can hang up your ability to build an effective solo.

There's a mysteriousness that surrounds improvisation. There seems to be some element present in the playing of the music that isn't known about. But it's really very simple. A musician learns his instrument and his art form, learns about melody and harmony and rhythm, and this gives him a certain knowledge of music. But for him to be able to control his music, he has to be able to imagine a piece: he has to be able to conceive how it will sound before he ever plays it. This is the only way he can make that piece of music be that piece of music, and not some other piece of music.

So with improvisation, he conceives of and controls some of the aspects of what he's going to play before he starts, but other aspects he decides to not know about. In bebop, for example, there is a chord progression which follows, say, a 32-bar form. The chords are very predictable, so that's not improvised; and the player knows that there are certain notes that fit into certain chords, and he knows he'll use those notes, so that's not improvised. What happens is that he takes certain fragments of melodic phrases and strings them together. And they're usually fragments that he already knows. If he didn't, he wouldn't be able to execute them on his instrument. Obviously, those fragments are what people started referring to as ticks.

The thing I've discovered is that the better the improviser gets at what he's doing, the more he's able to predict the shape of the longer phrase. He can predict whole four or eight or sixteen bar units before he plays them. He just decides before he starts a particular chorus that he's going to do such-and-such.

I've heard a story about trumpeter Fats Navarro that illustrates this. I'm not sure the story is true, but I could conceive of its being true, because I do this myself, and I see other musicians doing it. Navarro would write out a whole chorus of improvisation on, say, "I Got Rhythm." He'd write it down, note for note. And then he would take that chorus of solo and improvise on it. He would string out five or ten choruses based not on the original melody but on the chorus he'd written out. It would be like writing his own tune. And that process put him very much in control of his art form.

Another way of looking at it is that the more capable a musician is, and the more logical he is about what he's creating, the harder it is for him to not know what he's going to play. It starts to become an effort to improvise, unless he's willing to admit to himself that improvising is a game he's playing. He'll get a strained expression on his face, and contort his body in all sorts of weird ways, because he's trying to be spontaneous.

In *Return To Forever*, we find that as we perfect each piece, as we perfect the improvisation within it, the improvisation becomes more stable and predictable, and even more lyrical. It's a thing that we acknowledge to be a good thing - it's not harmful. The myth is that you always have to play something different for it to be spontaneous. But that's not true. What's important is how 'there' you are when you're playing; that's really the point. Good music is just good music, whether it's composed, or improvised, or whatever.

When a musician decides to not know what he's going to play, it can still be very unspontaneous, for the same reasons that composed music is not always spontaneous. It simply has to do with whether the person who is playing has his whole attention and control of what he's doing there, at the moment that he's doing it. That's what makes something spontaneous. How different it might be from the last rendition has nothing to do with it. There's a myth that spontaneity has something to do with the musical phrase being different from anything that has come before. But newness is just viewing something from now, from the present moment. It doesn't matter if the tree you're looking at today is the same tree you looked at yesterday. If you're looking at the tree right now, it's a new experience. That's what life is about.

It's a constant problem for a classical pianist to make a piece come to life, when all the notes and all the expression marks are set in advance. The way it's made to come to life, of course, is by the performer's being right where he is at the moment that he's there, playing the piece as though it had never been done before.

There are various decisions that the performer could make about how to improvise. Certain things can be set up in advance, while others are left open. You could have only a set rhythm, or a set

chord pattern. You could also have to a large degree a set melody, which you would leave open to minor alterations. Or any or all of these things could be left open. The thing is, the less you decide in advance, the more effort it's going to be to put a piece of music together. The more you decide to not know, the further away you put yourself from the truth, which is that on some level you really do know what you're going to play.

When a musician really doesn't know what he's going to do next, the improvisation tends to be very erratic. You've got to go along a path once or twice or a hundred times before what you're doing comes out as a flow. When a piece comes out as a flow, it's because it's being controlled by the musician. He knows about it. He's done it before. It's a question of relative degrees of composing. From a present moment, you can decide to compose the next note, or the next five notes, or the next phrase, or the next two phrases, or the whole piece. What makes a good improvisation isn't lack of advance knowledge about the solo; it's the way you put it all together at the moment you're playing, no matter how often you might have played those notes before, that makes the difference.