

Somewhere Master Class

JAZZ IMPROVISATION WORKSHOP

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April 2026

What This Session Was About

This master class focused on the fundamental building blocks of jazz improvisation, using the tune Somewhere as a vehicle. Rather than working on advanced harmonic concepts, we stripped everything down to the roots: **time, ideas, and harmony**—in that order.

The session revealed that the areas needing the most growth were **time feel** and **clear musical ideas**. These are not beginner concepts—they are the foundation that even the greatest players continually maintain. Everything else is built on top of them.

CORE PHILOSOPHY

You could have a skyscraper, but if the foundation isn't there, the whole thing falls down. Every great player returns to fundamentals. This is maintenance, not remediation.

The Three Pillars of Improvisation

These are the three fundamental skills that a large part of your practice should go toward, built in this specific order:

I

Rhythm & Time

Feel the swing. Feel the time.
Never rush. This is the
bedrock everything else sits
on.

II

Clear Ideas

Theme, variation, repetition.
Tell a story. If you don't have
an idea, don't play.

III

Harmony

Navigate the changes. Know
the function of every note. Be
intentional with every choice.

If you can't play a clear rhythmic idea on a single note with perfect time, you can't do anything else meaningfully. Everything is built on top of this foundation. Then you build what you do with harmony, and you build more complex lines. But if you skip the foundation, the complexity above it won't make sense.

"Have you ever heard how the great chess players learn chess? You start with two kings right next to each other. And you learn all the permutations of how those two kings can fight

each other after every other piece is done. Only when you've mastered that do you add one other piece. And then you figure out all the permutations of that. Until your brain intuitively can see the entire thread from now until the end of the game—and it sees it as a chunk, not linearly."

— from the session

This is exactly how to approach improvisation. Start with a single note and rhythm. Master that. Add a second note. Master those permutations. Eventually your subconscious handles it intuitively, and you stop thinking "I need a question, I need an answer." You just know.

Pillar I: Rhythm & Time

Slow Practice Is Everything

Whenever you learn a melody, slow it down **unimaginably slow** and get every nuance of it. When two people play a melody together, both must have the identical understanding at a super-slow speed, then gradually speed up. There is nothing cooler than a really burning melody played by two people simultaneously that's perfect.

KEY INSIGHT

You can only practice not rushing by starting at a really, really slow tempo. If you rush at slow tempos, it all sounds like trash when you get to performance speed.

Finding the Group Swing

The swing is an interesting thing—it could be the triplet, or a little later, or a little earlier. But it doesn't have to go to one individual person's feel: **everybody has to feel it at the same exact place**. Then you can stretch it and move it.

In the session, we clapped the swing together at a very slow tempo. Even in the room, everyone was feeling a different swing placement until we locked in using the hi-hat as a source of truth.

The Miles Davis Audition

When Miles auditioned musicians in the 1980s, he had them play a slow blues—the slowest possible. Most people couldn't do it well. The few who could (like Darryl Jones) had impeccable, perfectly-centered time. That's what separates the great from the good.

Pillar II: Clear Ideas

Theme and Variation

A musical idea has structure. Here's how it works:

1. **Bar 1:** State an idea (a rhythmic motif)
2. **Bar 2:** Play a variation of that idea (e.g., remove one note, alter the rhythm slightly)

3. **Bar 3+:** Everything that follows must relate to what you set up—either building tension (a question) or resolving (an answer)

If Bar 3 doesn't relate to Bars 1 and 2, you're not saying anything. You're just playing notes.

Space

"Miles Davis was the pinnacle of this. Space, space, space, space—BEEP!—and it hit you in the face. You're telling a story the whole time, even if it's just one note. And that story involves space and notes."

— from the session

If you don't have an idea, don't play. Leave space. Ideas only exist in space. You don't have to fill every bar. When you come back in after space, come in with conviction—own it.

Repetition as Power

It can be very powerful to just repeat an idea. Variation is important, but arbitrary variation muddies the story. You can either vary intentionally or repeat exactly. Both are valid. Arbitrary variation is not.

Pillar III: Harmony

Every Note Has a Meaning

When you're working within even a small range of notes, each scale degree carries a specific function and emotional weight:

DEGREE	CHARACTER	FUNCTION
1	Home base. Most static.	Resolution, arrival, stability. Your default anchor.
2	Adjacent tension.	Leads to the 1 (resolution) or the 3 (forward motion).
3	Abrasive voice.	Static with tension, especially in blues (major 3 below creates rub). Not really moving anywhere.
4	Suspended.	Leads down to 3 or up to 5. Wants to move.
b5	Maximum dissonance.	Related to the 3 (both are dissonant tones). Creates strong pull.
5	Second most static.	Stable, but not home. A resting point away from home.

These notes are your vocabulary for the story. Diverging from the 1 says "I'm going away." Hitting the 1 says "I'm home." You use all of this to tell a story of departure and return.

Goal Notes

Every phrase should **land somewhere**. A "goal note" is created by two things:

1. **Motion toward a place**—linear movement or consistent intervals pointing in a direction
2. **Stopping**—rhythmic consistency that suddenly ceases, marking arrival

Your goal notes should have their own progression. If your first goal is an F, your next goal should be nearby—within a couple of half steps. The goals themselves tell a story across phrases.

Dorian vs. Dominant: Know the Difference

The Dorian scale (with its b7 and major 6) is static—it doesn't lead anywhere. When you need a chord to resolve (e.g., a V chord going to I), you need the notes that point forward:

- On a D7 going to G: **F# and Eb** say "going to G"
- F natural and E natural (Dorian) say "I'm staying right here"

Octaves

An octave is both the same note and a different note—same pitch class but with a different affect in a different register. Landing on a note and leaping to its octave is not truly diverging; it's like an accent that stays home while adding color. This is its own universe of expression.

Sound Choice & Texture

Your choice of sounds is critical, and **there always has to be a reason** for the sound you choose. That reason should be musical or cultural.

PRINCIPLE

A complex, winding melody that speaks for itself doesn't need an unusual texture on top of it—that detracts from its essence. Save unconventional sounds for vamps, modal sections, or moments where the texture is the musical statement.

Herbie Hancock's trajectory is instructive: he explored electronic sounds increasingly throughout his career—from the early acoustic work through Head Hunters through the wild sounds of Dis Is Da Drum in the '90s and 2000s. But there was always a reason, musical or cultural, behind each choice.

When instruments share a similar frequency range (like Rhodes and guitar), be intentional about how they engage with each other and how they occupy sonic space.

Notes for Each Player

Saxophone

- **Time:** Watch for rushing, especially on eighth notes at slow tempos. Tap your foot. Feel the time before you play a single note.
- **Ideas:** You have a lot of interesting musical fragments—the next step is making the relevance between them tighter. There should be a clear thread connecting each phrase to the last.
- **Space:** Leave at least a full bar of rest between phrases. Let ideas breathe. When you come back in after space, commit fully.
- **Goal notes:** Practice landing on a specific target note at the end of every phrase. Keep your goals in a consistent register (within a few half steps of each other).
- **Harmony:** Be aware of Dorian vs. dominant contexts. When the harmony needs to move, use the notes that propel it (leading tones, tritone).

Guitar

- **Melody:** Lock in with the sax on unison lines. Slow the melody down drastically and match every nuance—articulation, timing, phrasing. Speed up only after it's perfect at half tempo.
- **Sonic space:** Guitar and Rhodes share similar frequency territory. Be conscious of when to lay out, comp differently, or change register to avoid muddying the texture.
- **Swing alignment:** Your swing placement must match the rhythm section. Practice clapping triplets with the drummer until you find the same landing point.
- **Soloing:** Apply the same principles—start with just a few notes, focus on clear rhythmic ideas and goal notes before adding harmonic complexity.

Keys (Chris)

- **Sound selection:** Use piano on melodies like Somewhere where the melody is complex and speaks for itself. Save the EWI and unusual textures for vamps or modal tunes where the sound is the statement.
- **Rhodes vs. piano:** If the guitar is present, Rhodes occupies a similar space. Consider acoustic piano or a contrasting texture to differentiate.
- **Pre-set sounds:** Have sounds ready to go for different sections of the tune. Don't search mid-performance.
- **Comping:** When accompanying soloists, focus on rhythmic and harmonic support without cluttering the frequency range the soloist occupies.

Bass

- **You are the foundation.** More so than the drums in a small-group context. You outline the 1; everyone is listening to you for the harmonic and rhythmic anchor.
- **Time is everything:** Practice with a metronome religiously. This is ongoing maintenance, not a one-time fix. Quarter notes must be perfectly placed.
- **Slow blues:** This is the ultimate test. If your time wavers at a crawling tempo, it will betray you at every other tempo. Make slow blues a regular part of your practice.
- **Conviction:** Play each note with commitment. Don't be tentative. You set the foundation for everyone else's confidence.

Drums

- **Rushing:** This was the most consistent issue. At slow tempos, every player tends to push. You must be the anchor that holds it back. Practice with a metronome constantly.
- **Ride cymbal:** Study Tony Williams' approach on the early Miles Quintet records. Don't stop the cymbal every quarter note. Let it ring through and create propulsion—like you're moving the whole thing forward. The ride is your instrument; play it like you're having fun.
- **Solo ideas:** Apply the same "clear ideas with space" concept. Play a phrase, leave an entire bar of rest, then play the next. Goal notes apply rhythmically too.
- **Relaxation:** Watch for excess tension—arm movement, body stiffness. You'll play smoother and more fluidly if you eliminate unnecessary motion. Let the stick and gravity do the work.
- **Brushes:** Keep it chill. A brush solo at a slow tempo should be conversational, not a display of chops. Simple ideas, clear phrasing, lots of space.

Practice Exercises

These exercises are designed to be done with a metronome or drum machine at a **very slow tempo** (50–70 BPM). Do not speed up until you have fully internalized each one. These are the same exercises we worked through in the session.

1 One-Note Rhythm Solo

ALL INSTRUMENTS

Set a metronome to 55 BPM. Play an F blues. Solo using **only the root note** (concert F). No ornaments—just the root, played as quarter notes, eighth notes, or triplets. Focus entirely on:

- Playing perfectly in time (not ahead, not behind)
- Creating rhythmic ideas: a motif in Bar 1, a variation in Bar 2, then develop or resolve
- Leaving at least one full bar of space between phrases
- Coming in with conviction after space

Goal: Can you tell a compelling story with only one note and rhythm? Record yourself and listen back. Are your ideas clear? Are you rushing?

2 Five-Note Story

ALL INSTRUMENTS

Same slow blues, same tempo. Now you have five notes: **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** (with optional **b5**). Treat each note as a character with its own meaning (see the scale degree chart). Solo using only these notes.

- The 1 is home. Leaving home creates tension. Returning resolves it.
- Use the 4 and b5 to create pull and dissonance
- Keep creating clear rhythmic ideas—don't let the added notes distract from time and phrasing
- Use the b5-to-5 resolution and the 2-to-1 resolution intentionally

Goal: Every phrase should have a clear relationship to the one before it. Theme → variation → development → resolution.

3 Goal Note Landing

ALL INSTRUMENTS

Play over changes (blues or a standard). For each phrase, pick a **goal note** before you play it. Use linear motion or intervallic patterns to lead to that note, then **stop** on it and let it breathe.

- Start by making every goal the same note (e.g., Bb) for one full chorus
- Next chorus: pick goals freely, but keep them within a half step of each other
- Focus on the two elements that create a goal: **motion toward** + **stopping**
- Let the goals themselves tell a story across the whole solo

Goal: Every phrase has a clear destination. Your goals form their own melodic progression.

4 Octave Constraint

ALL INSTRUMENTS

Play a standard (try Autumn Leaves or a blues). Restrict yourself to **one octave** (e.g., F to F). Solo through the entire form within that range only.

- This forces you to find creative melodic solutions within limited space
- You'll discover how much story you can tell with very few notes
- Pay attention to how octave leaps (when you have them) create emphasis without truly leaving home

Goal: Prove to yourself that range is not the same as expression. Some of the most powerful solos live in a tiny range.

5 Slow Melody Unison

SAX + GUITAR (OR ANY TWO MELODY INSTRUMENTS)

Take the head of Somewhere (or any tune with a complex melody). Set the metronome to **half the performance tempo**—or slower. Play the melody together in unison.

- Match every articulation, every rhythm, every dynamic exactly
- If anything is off, slow down further
- Only speed up when it's locked at the current tempo
- Spend weeks or months on this—this is how melodies are truly learned

Goal: Two instruments playing a burning melody simultaneously in perfect unison. There is nothing cooler.

6 Swing Alignment (Group)

FULL ENSEMBLE

Set a metronome to 60 BPM with clicks on beats 1 and 3 only. The whole group claps the swing pattern together—quarter notes with the swing eighth between beats.

- Start as exact triplets. Lock in until everyone's swing lands at the same point.
- Use one instrument (hi-hat or ride) as the source of truth
- Once aligned, have the melody instruments play the head over the group clap
- Gradually speed up only when the group feel is unified

Goal: The ensemble feels like one organism, not five individuals approximating the same groove.

7 Tony Williams Ride Study

DRUMS

Listen to the Miles Davis Quintet recordings from the 1960s (E.S.P., Miles Smiles, Nefertiti). Focus on Tony Williams' ride cymbal. Notice how he lets the cymbal ring through rather than stopping every quarter note.

- Practice the ride pattern letting the stick bounce and the cymbal sustain
- Don't accent every beat. Play the "chord notes" of the rhythm evenly.
- Add the swing embellishment as propulsion, not punctuation
- Play like you're moving the whole band forward—with energy and joy

Goal: Your ride cymbal should feel like a wave carrying the band, not a metronome chopping time into pieces.

Listening Recommendations

These came up during the session as reference points:

- **Miles Davis Quintet (1960s)** — E.S.P., Miles Smiles, Nefertiti: Tony Williams' ride, Miles' use of space, the group interplay
- **Herbie Hancock** — Early acoustic recordings through Head Hunters and Dis Is Da Drum: the evolution of sound choice with musical purpose
- **Miles Davis (1980s bands)** — Darryl Jones, the slow blues auditions: impeccable time as the standard
- **Freddie Hubbard** — Vamp-based tunes where texture and affect are the musical statement

The Path Forward

REMEMBER

You are a storyteller through sonic motion. Every note, every rest, every sound choice is a word in your story. Start with the simplest vocabulary. Master it. Then add complexity, one element at a time. The foundation must be unshakable.

1. **Practice the metronome.** Slow. Painfully slow. This is maintenance you never stop doing.

2. **Record yourself** and listen back. Are you rushing? Are your ideas clear?
3. **Constrain yourself.** One note, five notes, one octave. Constraints force creativity and reveal weaknesses.
4. **Leave space.** The space is where the music lives.
5. **Be intentional.** Every note has a meaning. Every phrase has a goal. Every silence has a purpose.

Greg Spero — Jazz Master Class, WSU — April 2026
Supplementary materials referenced: composition paper (distributed separately)