

How Can the Jazz Singer Improvise Through Vocalecosystems?

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Abstract

Knowledge of vocal improvised music, whether demonstrated by high or low obscure pitch sounds, the beating of the chest while making music sounds, vocal pitch matching or vocal animation with or without the use of technology, has paved the way for a steady stream of vocal artists through the years, each dedicated to vocal exploration. While jazz vocal improvisation appears on the surface to involve few or no rules, it is a form of communication between artist and listener, where the artist adheres to a set of rules or principles. Here the jazz improviser is treated as part of an ecosystem, a concept in the biological sciences that comprises a set of interacting organisms and environments in a particular place. Within the jazz vocal improvisational ecosystem there are various roles, approaches and activities. What follows is a description showing how the analogy with biological ecosystems can be applied to a 'vocal ecology' and how this viewpoint may also aid the improvising jazz vocalist in artistic expression.

The aim of this research is to help musicians, regardless of instrument, to better understand vocal improvisation and to be able to realize vocal improvisation. Despite a downspin of record sales in vocal jazz during the 1980's and 90s, talented and educated young jazz singers attracted large followings internationally. Part of a new generation, they made radical contributions to the art form while stepping delicately in the footprints of the classic 'canaries' and blues singers of the past. Their paths would be different, but their musical direction clear. From neo-classical to post-modernist these jazz singers searched to define and exhibit their musicianship with avant-garde and contemporary instrumentalists and composers. As one of those exhilarating nouveaux singers leading a new generation of vocal jazz artists and an academic, this paper researches the electric art form and presents a personal treatment to the discovery of vocal improvisation especially in, but not limited to, jazz.

The research has been presented with the intention of conveying a logical step-by-step procedure that makes realizing improvisation and integrating it into a performance simple, stimulating and rewarding. The realizations are accurate, historically correct and musically appropriate. Musical intelligence includes song structure, melody, harmony and rhythm and is a central part of the communication process in vocal improvisation performance. This is evidenced primarily through a combination of sonancy, intonation and cadence, which greatly informs the listener and singer of the quality of vocal production in performance rendering every singer with a unique fingerprint of sound. In jazz, the execution of vocal delivery is subjective largely due to the taste of the listener and the preparedness of the singer. Acquiring a trained skill level through dedication, instruction and regular practice remains a crucial element for attaining and improving vocal performance credibility.

Two examples of vocal improvisation provide an opportunity to hear the voice in free jazz music ensemble pieces with voice in small and large ensemble:

In the co-written piece Kenny Wheeler's *Gentle Piece* with Jeri Brown lyric, the use of tone matching in vocal language domain aids the vocal improviser, enhancing the harmonic musical language while reinforcing a mood between voice and flugel horn along with jazz piano, bass, and drums.

Who Are You, is another Kenny Wheeler composition demonstrating the use of tone matching in inventive vocal language domain as an aid for the vocal improviser, enhancing the harmonic musical language and mood.

In each piece, composer, trumpet and flugelhorn player Kenny Wheeler creates poetic artistry with voice, tenor and arranged orchestra. Horn and voice are well suited to the complex material fusing personas in the signature over layering of cadenzas that reoccur in his works with a focus on emotion and sentiment (Brown, 2013).

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Characteristics of Singing Jazz

In many respects human song is a form of sustained speech. Nearly anyone able to speak can also sing. Vocal music typically features sung words called lyrics or non-linguistic syllables or sounds and is often contained in a short piece broadly termed a song. While vocal music is generally performed by one or more singers, with or without instrumental accompaniment, vocal jazz is considered freer than in most other song forms, in which vocal performance provides the main focus of the piece, with an expected section devoted often to improvisation or vocal soloing allowing the singer to use their senses differently when processing music information systematically choosing how to approach or respond musically.

In these capacities she works with air, heart, soul, throat, diaphragm, tongue, guts and various other organs, substances and equipment necessary to produce vocal experimental wonders.

Vocal improvisation is a method of music making allowing the singer to perform without sheet music and to contribute socially in the process of creating within a music group. It is an art form involving technical virtuosity of the instrument harmonically, rhythmically and melodically. Vocal improvisation strengthens skills for the vocal artist in any genre as it demands creativity and the knowledge of a set of rules including carefully listening to other musicians, and leadership capability at any given moment.

Musicians trained in western music often show a fear when asked to improvise, even though they are aware of the important role it played in the origins of classical music. The absence of a fixed score, of a composition that was written down beforehand often creates a feeling of uncertainty.

Key characteristics necessary for the jazz vocal improviser include:

- Personalized sound
- Fluid tonal delivery throughout registers
- Pristine, smooth vocal expression
- Impeccable sense of rhythm
- Internal feeling of chord roots
- Clear, limber ornamentations
- Animated, creative, whimsical temperament
- Refined working knowledge of music language as in song structure, melody, harmony, rhythm
- Instrumental awareness
- Proficient breath support
- Use of performative inflections when stating phrases
- Perspicuous diction and the use of words as in lyrics, song stories and nonsense syllables including actual or sub-languages
- Demonstrated ability to work on material production toward the consumption and delivery of music, sound, noise and silence

The Improviser as Part of an Ecosystem

In the biological sciences an ecosystem is a concept that comprises a set of interacting organisms and environments in a particular place. Similarly, a vocal ecosystem is a concept

that comprises a set of interacting domains that enhance musical stimuli in a particular way during the process of improvisation. It provides one systematic approach which may be useful when processing music for vocal expression when improvising. Each system has its own set of musicians, styles and interactions. These systems overlap, merge into one another and are probably impossible to circumscribe perfectly. When utilized in conscious free play they form the basis of a type of communication between artist and listener.

Hip-hop, avant-garde, jazz, swing and standards are all examples of vocal systems each with its own styles, performers, and rules.

When jazz vocalizing involves a deliberate quest for improvisation, the singing performer may intentionally use stimuli to prompt imitative behavior. The creation of vocal ecosystem as a term borrows parts of its philosophy from the 1969 study by anthropologist Ralph Holloway of contrasting human and non-human primate learning strategies. He describes the "ratchet effect" as a method that has enabled humans to evolve and adapt to complex social systems. In 1999 comparative psychologist Michael Tomasello expanded the metaphor to shed light on the evolution of human culture by renaming it the "cultural ratchet". Adding, "Once a certain invention has been made, it can jump from one mind to another (by means of imitation) and thus a whole population can acquire a new trait..." A similar effect takes place in the interaction of the jazz vocal improviser as one idea stimulates a significant reaction between the singer, contributing musicians and listener. Stimulation becomes a key factor in aiding the creative and musical interaction of the vocalist.

The great Duke Ellington once said about improvisation, "Another theory they hold is that there is no such thing as an unadulterated improvisation without any preparation or anticipation. It is my firm belief that there has never been anybody who has blown even two bars worth listening to who didn't have some idea about what he was going to play, before he started. If you just ramble through the scales or play around the chords, that's nothing more

than musical exercises. Improvisation really consists of picking here and connecting it with a device there, changing the rhythm here and pausing there; there has to be some thought preceding each phrase that is played, otherwise it is meaningless. So, as I say, jazz today, as always in the past is a matter of thoughtful creation, not mere unaided instinct [10].”

When this view is expanded to include the improvising vocalist, the vocal ecosystem viewpoint posits that musical stimulation in a vocal improvisation can be enhanced with the implementation of four principle domains—vocal language, culture, sound and environment. These domains behave like living organisms because they evolve, propagate their organization and interact among themselves.

For the jazz vocalist, including one or more of these domains in a musical improvisation will aid his or her ability to create, build and participate in improvisation, establishing and introducing them to new traditions, forethoughts and perhaps new rules.

Vocal Language Domain as Improvisation Aid

In the vocal language domain the vocal improviser uses music as a language to communicate and create a body of music, often using music as a metaphor from which to resonate an authentic texture of heartfelt personal expression. Vocalists may also use their voice as an instrument to further break apart limits of traditional communication, thus pioneering sounds with and without the use of effects that transmit language to convey meaning. Much like systems in sciences, a vocal improviser equipped with a common language system can be stimulated to communicate.

In Jimmy Rowles’ *The Peacocks*, the use of an invented vocal language and ethereal environment domain aids the vocal improviser in painting a story about two peacocks while interacting with a Chinese flutist with jazz piano, bass and drum. With Michel Dubeau on flute, sensuality is enhanced in the call and response of the voice and shakuhachi flute, relating to the senses of sight, smell, hearing and touch [9]. The vocalist’s expressive powers

are heard at their best on this set during her lengthy, wordless interplay with flute. We hear the improvising voice and Chinese flute interacting in a seemingly seamless erotic communication where the sounds of the two 'voices' begin to connect with the listener as if they were both of human form in conversation [4]. Here the vocal improviser deconstructs American jazz pianist and composer Jimmy Rowles' classic turning it into a rich vocalization.

In a later recording of *The Peacocks* aka *A Timeless Place*, with Rowles at the piano, lyrics have been added by lyricist and singer Norma Winstone without disturbing the original ethereal environment domain aid. This classic improvisation in 1994 features the vocal improviser in a lyrical vocalese with Jimmy Rowles and is part of a rare album containing his compositions with jazz voice (The Penguin Guide to Jazz, 2004).

Humans have been capable of acting on objects and sound stimuli, reproducing an instrumental act understood intentionally since infancy. The dynamic "joint vocal engagement" or "joint vocal attention" describes a process for the vocal improviser to recognize others in the ensemble as intentional agents while demonstrating leaderships, skill and power to control their spontaneous vocal behavior. The joint engagement allows the singer to concurrently select and demonstrate vocal choices leading the musicians toward a type of communal cohesiveness.

In *The Peacocks*, the interaction between voice, flute and piano demonstrate such a joint engagement with all musical participants enhancing the vocal improvisation. The delicate, sensual improvisation is handed down by the vocal improviser's light, clear-tone delivery setting the tone for Rufus Reid on bass and Kirk Lightsey on piano to follow in kind with key aesthetics.

In Brown's *Time Suite* (aka *10.20*) the use of an invented vocal language, sound and ethereal environment domain aids the vocal improviser while interacting with a jazz piano. The use of vocal language domain and sound technology domain aids the vocal improviser in painting a story about the passage of time while interacting with jazz piano. In this example emulative interaction focuses on the environmental events.

Leon Thomas' *Echoes* features use of vocal language and culture domain as a device for storytelling the modal, Coltrane-ish piece by vocal improvisers Jeri Brown and Leon Thomas as they trade yodels, yelps, oohs and ahhs with jazz piano, bass, and drums [9].

Jeri Brown & Sandy Moore's *Chasing Cain* and *Mariner's Mourn* (both compositions for film), feature vocal language and sound domains as devices for vocal improvisation to set a mood while interacting world music ensemble and with string quartet. The overlaying of voices provides a unique blending of cultural sources with resonating and authentic texture. The effect is enhanced by Moore's use of the music as a metaphor to express an authentic texture of personal expression and the jazz vocal improviser's approach that fits somewhere between classic and experimentalist [8]. In *Chasing Cain*, Moore's the treatment for film from an originally improvised melody of voice is empirically shaped from a short composition with improvised vocal development to that of a final cut for a creative and impressionable work.

Culture Domain

Culture and vocal language have traditionally been viewed as essential components of a vocal improvisation performance. Vocal music is probably the oldest form of music and is present in nearly all musical cultures. Vocal ecosystem compositions that reflect a unique blending of cultural sources (e.g., Caribbean, eastern European, spiritual), add personal vocal artistry and ultimately increase the expression of an emotionally communicative style often depicting ethno-chanting, ethno-rhythms and ethno-dance.

In Harold Faustin's *Tam Tam Dance*, the combined use of culture, sound and vocal language domains aid the vocal improviser while interacting with sound technology, guitar and world music ensemble. In this example linguistic nonsense syllables are used as a vehicle to stimulate musical expression. Here voice and guitar interact in sync throughout the Haitian jazz folkloric piece in a seemingly danceable fashion. Prerecorded vocal sounds are layered, stacked and overdubbed atop each voice as directed by composer. Great technique and innate sense of adventure take this musical journey into new territory where classical, jazz and Afro-West Indian rhythms become one. This form of vocal improvisation instruction most readily occurs in the recording studio process and requires the vocalist to bring in all of their 'chops' as well as music literacy.

Brown's *Echo Thoughts*, and *African Echo* display enhanced improvisation with the inclusion of culture and invented vocal language domains to aid the vocal improviser in an emotional interaction between master drummer Clayton Cameron and voice.

In Avery Sharpe's *Uncle from Ghana* the use of culture domain through the combination of rhythm and mode aids the vocal improviser in a soulful interaction between voice and master acoustic bassist Avery Sharpe and voice.

Sound Domain

Brown's four compositions for dance, *Arising*, *Mid Day*, *Celestial Flight*, and *Night* utilize the sound technology design domain to aid vocal improvisation between voice, jazz pianist and accordionist. Improvisation is further enhanced through improvisation of sound design engineer Mark Corwin.

Environment Domain

In Jeri Browns' composition *Soul Shower*, spoken overlays utilizing inventive vocal language, sound technology and environment domains aid the vocal improviser in poetic expression while interacting with a multiple voices, and soulful rhythms combining jazz

piano, bass, and drums. With the support of sound engineering designer Dennis Moody, words, phrases and sentences are sequenced and used as a vehicle to inflect a musical work that tells a story.

Summary

There are many vocal systems and within each that allow for improvisation there is a vocal ecosystem. It is comprised of four domains: vocal language, culture, sound and environment. As in the sciences each evolve, propagate and interact. Including one or more of those domains in vocal improvisation can aid in the ability to create. With the focus of stimuli to prompt imitative behavior, aids may be used toward the enhancement to greatly influence harmonic musical language. Tone matching, vocal sound painting, culture source inclusions and linguistics, use of music language and sound design. The use of voicing improvisation can pioneer sounds with and without the use of effects – to transmit language – to convey meaning thus expanding the limits of traditional communication in jazz to further communication. The vocal improviser's performance can be aided by incorporating as many domains as possible in an inclusive and participatory manner with fellow musicians. Such benefit can stem from planning an improvisational strategy ahead of the activity to enhance the production, consumption and performance of a song creation.

Vocal ecosystem is an aid to the jazz vocalist reaching for new adventures and frontiers when improvising. It is offered as a concept to encourage self-directed collaboration of vocalists, artists and technologists in vocal improvisational performance.

Vocal ecosystem is a part of vocal ecology, offered as a method of providing stimulation when vocally interacting by accessing through the four principle domains of vocal language, culture, sound and environment. The interaction of these four domains

should be inclusive and utilized in a participatory manner to further jazz vocal improvisation exploration.

The next journey in this study will be to compare these aids with the notion of free will (Tallis, 2004).

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