

Paraphrasing The Greats

I believe that paraphrasing is one of the most valuable techniques a musician can use to develop a unique playing style, and yet many developing players have never done any paraphrasing at all.

To practice paraphrasing as I'm going to describe it, we'll learn small parts (one phrase or motif at a time) from your favorite players' recorded solos and then play those phrases over and over, slowly changing one or two things on each repetition. The goal is to take the phrases that you love and make them your own so that these phrases act as inspiration for new ideas.

The two phrases we'll be working with are from Charlie Parker's classic solo on "Billie's Bounce," which can be heard on the album *Charlie "Bird" Parker, The Complete Savoy And Dial Master Takes*.

Example 1

Listen to the simple two-bar phrase that comes at the end of Parker's solo.

It sounds so good because of Bird's phrasing, time, articulation and sound; in other words, it's not just what he played but how he played it. Try and sound as close to the original line as possible. For help transcribing onto paper, you might want to use a software program that allows you to slow the music down without changing pitch. I use one called Transcribe from seventhstring.com.

I'd like you to do two things before we start the actual paraphrasing:

- 1) Practice the original line over and over until you sound as close as you can to Charlie Parker.
- 2) Identify all the components that make this line interesting to you, e.g., rhythm, embellishments, placement of chord tones, etc.

Grace notes and bending are two embellishments that add a lot of character to this simple line.

Once you can play the original line, you can play through my variations, which show the slow paraphrasing process. With each repetition you should change as little as possible, and any time you don't feel good about a line you can keep playing it until you have it down or you decide to discard it. I believe when possible that it's a good idea to play your paraphrasing ideas with a play-along accompaniment.

Once you have a handle on the paraphrasing process I encourage you to write down your own variations of the original idea. Change things very slowly, but don't be afraid to come up with fantastic, brilliant ideas. I advocate studying the history of jazz, not to mimic it but to let the past inspire you to do something new. Create, don't imitate.

Example 1

Example 1 shows a musical score in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat. It features the original Charlie Parker phrase and several variations. The original phrase is a two-bar line starting on the second beat of the first bar. The variations show different phrasings and articulations of the same line. Chord changes are indicated above the staff: F7, Bb7, Gm7, C7, D7, and Gm7 C7.

Example 2

Example 2 shows a musical score in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat. It features the original Charlie Parker phrase and several variations. The original phrase is a three-bar line starting on the second beat of the first bar. The variations show different phrasings and articulations of the same line, including triplets. Chord changes are indicated above the staff: F7, Bb7, Gm7, C7, D7, and Gm7 C7.

Example 2

Now we'll listen to the three-bar phrase that begins Bird's solo. Transcribe it onto paper and practice it over and over before you begin to play through my variations.

Here's my short list of items of interest from this phrase:

- 1) The line starts on the *and* of four, before the actual chorus begins. This is important because many inexperienced improvisers



times going through the process.

The “jazz greats” are called that because they are the best at what they do, they inspire us and they have original voices. The greats all studied the greats before them and they became great, so you can, too. If you become a “great” or even

a “pretty good,” and this article helped you, I’d love to hear about it. **DB**

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- start on the down beat of one too often.
- 2) The first two notes are the 5th degree up to the root of the chord. Can you think of any other songs that start this way? “Here Comes The Bride” and “Auld Lang Syne” are a couple.
 - 3) There is a half step leading tone on the *and* of two and the *and* of four in the first measure, and those leading tones take you right to a chord tone.
 - 4) Notice the rhythms in each measure. We can focus on rhythm only when paraphrasing and come up with some very different harmonic/melodic choices that still have some grounding in the original line.
 - 5) If you isolate beat one and three of each measure, this line is a simple triad, and if you consider all the notes, it’s almost a simple scale from the root up to the 5th and back down with small embellishments. It doesn’t get more simple or logical than this, and yet the line sounds so good.
 - 6) Play through all of my paraphrased variations, then start creating your own. Take a look at the last line of variations—this might be a resulting line after 100 or so



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