







## CHAPTER ONE - ESSENTIALS

# WHY SHOULD WE JAM?

Whether you think of it as 'having a jam' or 'staging an improvisation' this activity is a very healthy chance for musicians to get together and make music. It shouldn't feel like something you have to do, it should feel like something that you want to do.

**Enjoy yourself.** Maybe you are a little nervous at first, that's perfectly normal.

We're aiming for a place that Stephen Nachmanovitch calls 'free play' - where the ideas are flowing out. Making something new, but where everything we are doing is **drawing on all the experience that we have** - all those hours listening, thinking, individual and group playing. It's a massive library to reference. We're not going to read bits of it out, rather, to do new things with it.

These new things are where we **introduce a little magic** into the equation; the irrational and most wonderful imagination.

# LISTENING

Listening is so important that I've given it two separate entries ([see also the Offers System p.69](#)).

If we think of improvisation **as a conversation, a dialogue** between two or more players, then it won't work unless we are listening to what the other players are saying. Yes, there are points when you'll need to be very much focused on what you're doing yourself. But a lot of the time this seeming 'starter for ten' is a big problem – indeed it can be THE problem; the players simply aren't listening to each other. The sounds are there, but they're not picking up on them.

Exercise: To start to consider the issue of listening practically, in your group, try a really simple exercise.

- Improvise together briefly.
- Then together, decide which was the quietest instrument.
- Now play again but with the agreement that everyone plays more quietly than the previously identified quietest instrument.
- Improvise together again but ask the person playing that quietest instrument to vary their volume over the course of the improvisation.
- (Optional) Discuss the exercise.

This exercise looks as nothing written down, but I've found these types of simple practical approaches fundamentally help both individual and group develop. Here, through **having to listen to each other**, placing their focus away from themselves, the players' awareness of each other starts to improve.

## **Anton Hunter – Ripsaw Catfish, Beck Hunters & Article XI**

*[What makes a great improviser?] If I knew that... I guess some of things I like most in improvisers are unpredictability, always searching for new territory, not too “clean”, good ears.*

*[How did you learn?] I was lucky enough to grow up with my brother Johnny and we had a couple of bands, one post-rock Mogwai/Radiohead/Spiritualized-influenced and we would jam a lot, figuring out how to make a load of noise and then a bit later a blues-and-soul covers band, which was where I learned more about improvising “guitar solos”. I’ve had some really inspiring guitar tutors too, who really helped.*

*[What advice would you have for those new to improvising or trying to improve their existing practice?] Play as often as possible in as many different situations as possible. Free improv jam sessions, rock bands, folk music. Go to lots of concerts. Listen to lots of albums.*

*[When you are improvising, how do you know what to play?] When it’s going well, it’s instinctive, and I can hear something missing from the music and how I can contribute. When it’s going less well, I need to remind myself to stop and listen more deeply before playing.*





# IT'S A DOING THING

Improvisation is **all about the doing**. It's not the same as sitting down and pre-composing a piece - making decisions to end up with a fixed product, where everything (hopefully) works perfectly. Improvisation is raw creativity and as such there will be moments that are more interesting than others. It's about those unpredictable, potent moments when you are interacting with those people and exciting things start to happen.

When I'm sat at home listening to recordings of CBS improvising, I often wonder, *exactly what am I doing?* After (too) many years teaching, am I trying to assess the recordings, work out their value and somehow judge them? If I was, and I tried to apply the parameters that I would to a fixed, precomposed piece of music, some of those simply aren't going to apply. Certainly, there would be lots of 'mistakes' and parts of the music that were compositionally weak (see chapter 4). However, if I'm listening out for the interactions in **the moment, the dialogue, the communication**, the playing that arises through these means, then it all starts to make a lot more sense. That's a lot of what it's about.

# IT'S A GROUP THING

One of the cornerstones of improvisation is the interaction with other people – **playing together**. If you're not interested in that, you're wasting your time. This activity basically is **communicating and interacting** with others through sound. Park your ego at the door. Don't see it as a competition, trying to outwit, outplay, or to deceive - it's co-creating. Yes, of course you've done lots of preparation, you want it to sound good, but that's a secondary concern to the interaction in the moment.

Over-simplified as a place to start, the players get together in a room with the aim to have a musical conversation. You **listen** to what the other people have got to say and **respond** to it. At the same time they are listening and responding to you. A genuine group sound begins to be formed.

COMMUNAL: The ownership isn't with one person or another. **The group are deciding** about where the music will go and what will happen. This doesn't mean to say that individuals can't have their input.

TIP: Make your practice session long enough to cover different ideas - parts that encompass everyone's interests. This helps everyone feel included and valued. If you play for two or three hours there's more than enough time... Experiment :)



### **Leslie Gillon – Firetower 4 & Agents of Karma**

*Just practice improvising as much and as often as you can. Don't be too concerned about 'getting it right' – just keep playing and improvising with other musicians... There are of course great improvisers like Keith Jarrett who can conjure up brilliant improvisations drawing only upon their own resources. That's not how it works for me. It is always a conversation with at least one other musician... it's about listening and responding, the joy of improvisation for me is the joy of creating music communally.*

*Great improvisers have an ability to listen to the whole of the music to get inside it and to understand it. That involves stepping away from a concentration on your own part and instead hearing the totality of the music and making judgements very quickly/ instantly about what is needed and what is not needed.*

### **Liz Hodgson – Firetower 4 & The Tragic**

*I absolutely love making music with people as I think it's a special experience of producing something together, bouncing off and blending together with harmonies. It can be extremely rewarding and it's quite magic(al) how a group of people playing together can reach a special symbiosis, a wonderful feeling!!*

*My advice would be listen first and focus on fitting in. Can you add a different layer? If there's no room to fit in, wait and listen instead of playing.*



# SYSTEMS BY WHICH WE LEARN AND MAKE MUSIC

How musicians learn to play is very important, not just to how they play, but also *what they think playing is and what it involves*.

*Consider where you sit with this? How did you learn? What impact has this had on you?*

When I was at school, lots of my classmates were being taught through 'grades'. This seemed to be a very serious occupation and one that not many enjoyed. Being fair, when you heard these young people play, it often sounded OK, sometimes really good. When I started playing, I was listening to and later going to see bands. I didn't really associate that with grades at all – *was it simply a different thing?* This division went further again when you saw pop/rock bands playing live. There was no score, no sheet music, they weren't even playing exactly what was on the record - *was this an entirely different occupation?*

You may wonder why I mention this. Surely all rock' n' roll musicians jam and classical musicians (*whatever that means*) play precomposed material from score? Actually, not in my experience. In the last twenty years I've seen less and less of the jamming musician - possibly it's a dying art? Other skills have flourished - home recording and sharing of music across the globe - but the jams, whether in rehearsal room or pub, appear to be becoming rarer, as consequently are the musicians who can just drop into a situation and start playing.



To me, the ultimate musician can both play from a traditional score, jam around charts, or improvise freely – **their options are wide.**

### ***Jon Aveyard – Preston Music Workshops***

*Having spent a childhood playing music only using notation, I came to improvisation when as an adult I began playing found sound objects, percussion and live electroacoustics. The skills and confidence I acquired with these sound sources could then be applied to the other instruments I had been using. Although I have definitely benefitted from things I have read and been told by experienced improvisers, I consider the great majority of my improvisation ability to have been acquired through the act of improvisation itself alongside a variety of people in a variety of genres and with a variety of different prompts.*

*[How do you know what to play..?] Much of what I play is spontaneous and intuitive but there remains a focused alertness, a continually checking of myself, questioning whether I should stop playing, whether I need to change direction or stick with the material I am adding, whether someone else's contribution needs to be supported or challenged.*

# CRAFT

Bizarrely, as somebody who's worked with music in a university for a long time, I don't think of my playing as an intellectual activity. I'm a craftsperson working with materials. I can do it reasonably well as I've put a lot of time into it, but I don't think that what I'm doing has any significant meaning. I'm not trying to say anything with the music. I'm just **using physical tools, addressing practical concerns to make things** - forms, shapes, texture, dynamics et al.

From what I've witnessed, it's these practical concerns that most musicians who want to do improv battle with. There isn't some big struggle with a weighty concept. Generally, the musicians are just trying to deal with the sounds in the moment and finding it understandably complex, partly as there are so many options to be dealt with concurrently.

TIP: Be patient with yourself. Take your time and do your thing. Don't beat yourself up if you can't do it all. **Keep working on your own artistic voice**, experimenting and researching, including things that you find along the way.

