

## Reflections on the creative process

Tips on improvising from the Pros

By Ted Eschliman



### The Muse Continuum. Where do good solos come from?

A mandolinist has two approaches to crafting a solo. One is **objective**, the **intellectual**, the analysis of **chord structure**, **modes**, **arpeggios**, **riff** repetition and regeneration of familiar **motifs**. We bang out the notes of a familiar **scale**, pluck out the members of a **chord**, and revive **licks** we've heard somewhere else. The other tack is **subjective**, innate, intuitive--the spontaneous creation of "**the Muse**," the ethereal material of the soul that's inspired or seems to come out of nowhere. The first is conscious and calculated, the second is subconscious, reactive, indefinable and illusively of the moment.

Ultimately, everybody has their own strategy for what works for them. More than likely, it's a combination of the two tactics mentioned above, and we thought it would be interesting to pose the question to some of our favorite mandolin heroes. We interviewed some of the pros with the following for their responses:

*"Where does your material come from? No doubt it's a blend of music theory and spontaneous "soul," but how would describe the sparks in your individual creative process? What are the elements, how do other great artists or other ensemble members impact your playing, what makes for a more satisfying solo for you, your bandmates, and your audience?"*

Their replies are enlightening. There remain the threads of commonality; nobody wrote off "know your theory!" (*No excuses for not boning up on this here, folks.*) Conversely, nobody depended entirely on bare soul, either. It was all part of a continuum of sorts. Some had neat tricks, singing your lines, constructing a beginning and a thoughtful end, filling out the stuff in

the middle. Many emphasized playing off each other and being "in the moment." One offered melding left side brain with right, and one compared improvisation to madness.

Here are their thoughts to give you some insights into developing your own soloing:

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## **Michael Lampert**

I've spent many years searching different sources (written and otherwise) in order to broaden my creative choices when given the opportunity to take a solo. To play jazz solos, it is imperative to *listen* to jazz solos. While I certainly have my favorites (including **John Coltrane**, **Lester Young**, **Thelonious Monk**, **Grant Green**, etc.), there are literally hundreds of great players (actually thousands) who I could listen to all night (and in fact, I have). Without having some sort of idea of how a solo might sound, it's very easy to lose one's way. I probably learned the greatest amount from my teacher **Harry Leahey**. He emphasized **chord construction**, **chord alteration**, and **extensions** and **substitutions** and the application of the **modes** and **synthetic scales** to that end. I also took lessons from **Charlie Banacos**, **John Carter** and an important lesson or two from **Dave Pike** (among other); they all taught me important concepts that were based upon their personal approaches.

I was actually able to **sing solos** and make up songs and structures before I could do it on the mandolin. The lessons and practicing help one obtain technique and an understanding of how the pieces fit together. I am really not particularly analytical; I really play by ear and at this point I have my own style, which is partly a function of technique (or lack thereof) and taste.

Playing a solo that sounds good *is* actually a magical thing and like other kinds of magic there is preparation, performance and mystery. When one is playing with other like-minded players in front of an appreciative and sympathetic audience, the chances that real magic will occur are greatly increased.

*(Michael, a Los Angeles area electric mandolinist has another CD release coming in Spring of 2012, "Ephemeral.")*

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## **Don Julin**

The way I see it, improvisation is a combination of vocabulary and being present with the music. To be present with the music, I need to be relaxed and confident with my vocabulary. My musical vocabulary is my own collection of **tunes**, **scales**, **licks**, **arpeggios**, **chord progressions**, and **rhythms**, combined with my **personality** or **story**. My favorite musical ensemble experiences are the ones that are the most **conversational**. Listening and responding with musicians who are *also* listening and responding, is where the magic of improvising lives.

*(Don has a new CD coming out Summer 2012, "Vibe," on the Acoustic Oasis label. Also, look for his tome, "Mandolin For Dummies" scheduled to be released Aug 10, 2012 by Wiley & Sons.)*

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## **Craig Schmoller**

What a question! What sparks my subjective, spontaneous, indefinable and illusively 'of the moment' individual creative process?

If the task is to come up with something on the fly, like a solo, I use a pretty simple recipe a lot, and it seems to work pretty well. I try to dream up a strong **entrance** and **exit** to the solo, like bookends, a fast repetitive flurry for a few bars, or a dramatically slow build. Then it's **easy** to fill in the space in between. That's because we know good **first impressions** are very important, they can win over the audience, and that buys a lot of audience forgiveness in the middle of the solo – which I really need. A strong exit can **absolve** you of a lot of fumbles in the solo body (which I really need). So now that a lot of the pressure is off, I can try and create pretty freely in the middle. What happens in the middle? Short **motifs** applying **repetition** and **variation in rhythm, transposition, contour, "bluesification," time** – Grabbing any tool in the toolbox I can get my hands on. You never know what you'll find there.

*(Craig is Twin Cities based software programmer, responsible for great innovative mandolin tools like **Mando ModeExplorer**, **Jazz CitternExplorer**, and most recently, the **Expedition Pack**. [www.jazz-cittern.com/modeexplorerweb/home/pages/ExpeditionPackWeb.aspx](http://www.jazz-cittern.com/modeexplorerweb/home/pages/ExpeditionPackWeb.aspx))*

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**Jason Anick**

The idea of **being in the moment** and **unique** is what drew me to jazz/improvised music, so my ultimate goal is to always live by those principles when I perform. At the same time I always strive to perform with intention and purpose so that I can construct interesting and meaningful solos. In order to achieve this equilibrium of intention and spontaneity takes a lot of practice both learning and **understanding the jazz language** and the ability to let go and **let your ear and creative side take over** while performing. A big part of learning the jazz language for me involved constantly **listening to the greats** and really dissecting how they approach chord changes, phrasing, and swing rhythm and feel. The deeper my understanding gets, the more I am able to let go and let my creative side take over in hopes of constantly surprising even myself when I improvise.

*(Jason's 2011 released CD "Sleepless" continues to wow critics and fans. The multi-instrumentalist is currently in the studio recording his next project when he's not on tour with his own band or the **John Jorgenson Quintet**.)*

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**Jamie Masefield**

I'm always hoping that my best solos will sound like a **clearly and earnestly told story**, a true story that is of importance. Even if I've played the tune a thousand times, it needs to sound as if it's being told for the first time in a way that is as curious to the teller as the audience, a gradual and logical uncovering of magical information. For that to happen, I need to be **in the moment**, open and connected to my band mates and the audience so that we all feel as if something special is happening.

(Keep in touch with Jazz Mandolin Project leader and pioneer Jamie at:

[www.facebook.com/jazzmandolinproject](http://www.facebook.com/jazzmandolinproject) Check out an article about JMP's current recording project; [www.burlingtonfreepress.com/article/20120205/ARTS04/120203026/-1/ARTS/A-source-inspiration-musicians-might-sitting-tree-branch-outside](http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/article/20120205/ARTS04/120203026/-1/ARTS/A-source-inspiration-musicians-might-sitting-tree-branch-outside))

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## Will Patton

Most students of improvisation know that the way into good solos is two-fold: the academic study of **scales, arpeggios, modes, harmony**, etc. and the more innate, **emotional**, 'just let it all go' approach. Both are required to make it all happen, but I'll focus on the latter.

Jazz and blues are, to me, very **vocal forms**, so my quick takeaway is: **sing!** Sing a riff from your favorite **Lester Young** or **Stan Getz** solo -- this will always be closer to what the artist felt than transcribing and analyzing (though both are valuable). **It's an aural tradition.** Play thru a progression you're very familiar with and SING a solo over it, then see if you can play what you sang. The more you listen to the greats the more vocabulary you'll have. It's tempting for an instrumentalist to run a stream of 8th notes because they can but a simple melody played with feeling will always be more effective. **The good stuff comes from that singing part of the brain.**

*(Vermont based Will has recorded and produced five of the finest acoustic jazz mandolin CDs in existence. Indeed, they sing... [www.wpatton.com/albums.html](http://www.wpatton.com/albums.html) )*

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## Scott Tichenor

An improvised solo should take into consideration the **spirit** of the music and what the other musicians are doing. I always want to respect the melody while trying to add something that's fun and interesting for the listener/s (band included). It must make sense within the chordal structure of the piece. To me this means **understanding the underlying chords** and working with **interesting substitutions** that pull the listener towards the melody and not away from it.

*(Anyone who has read about mandolin online has already heard of Scott's work, the creator of [MandolinCafe.com](http://MandolinCafe.com), the world's largest web resource for news, tips, events, builders, and discussion of mandolin.)*

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## John McGann

I believe that the **left side** of the brain, the 'information processor', is used when studying **chords, scales and modes**. These all represent *sounds* to be cataloged. We can practice these things slowly, until our intuition, in the **right side** of the brain, can deal with them. When we solo in real time, the right side of the brain is more engaged, with the "inner ear" and emotions, and there is less 'conscious thought' involved. In my case, I need to know what the chord changes are, and where I am in the form, to comfortably improvise.

*(Much of Berklee College of Music Professor John can be enjoyed in video splendor on his YouTube user account: <http://www.youtube.com/user/jmcgann00>)*

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## **Danny Williams**

Improvisation. For me, personally, I have always been an improvisationalist. When I was a kid and I didn't have the right tool to fix whatever needed fixing, I created one. I think improvisation in music is a lot like that idea: just going for it! In my years of playing and teaching, I have noticed that having the gumption to just **try an idea** and see how it works is the most important; its how it all starts. Serious musicians should learn **scales, arpeggios, tonal centers** and everything else. If you don't have the cajones to just go for it, then learn to read.... really well.

**Charlie Parker** once said, *"Master your instrument, master the music and forget all that and just play."* I always understood this to mean that you should know everything so well that it is second nature. That way, when you are playing a gig you play **intuitively** instead of letting thoughts of what you are "supposed to do" get in the way. I am really big on the intuitive part of the process, but I have also practiced **scales, modes, chord function, tonal centers**, etc... so much that when I play, I try and let the tune speak to me.

*(Danny is also an electric baritone mandolin pioneer with his Barry Mando Project at <http://www.barrymandoproject.com/> and his latest EP <http://www.nowonitunes.com/5bc>. Expect a follow up project later this year.)*

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## **Aaron Weinstein**

Without going into technical details, my favorite solos are ones in which the player makes clear musical points without overstating them. That's is my goal--**not to play more note than needed to express a musical idea**. It's a life's work. I see it in much the same way that **Jack Benny** edited his scripts. He'd cut a 12-word line down to 8 if the edit wouldn't compromise the quality of the joke.

Looking specifically at the mandolin, one of the most beautiful aspects of the instrument in my opinion is its chordal capabilities. **The mandolin is as well suited to jazz as the guitar**. When I'm soloing on the mandolin, a lot of the ideas that I hear and try executing revolve around the instrument's chordal capabilities. The possibilities are endless.

*(New York based violinist/mandolinist Aaron is both graduate of Berklee College of Music and private student of Don Stiernberg. He continues to play with some of the East Coast's finest jazz musicians.)*

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## **David Grisman**

Music is an amazing language. After much study and experience, 'improvising' musicians learn to use this language spontaneously, much as we use everyday speech. The most important thing is to **have something to say** — a purpose, such as:

- a) Serve and **respect the song** or piece of music you're playing.
- b) Convey **emotion** — play with feeling.
- c) **Don't overstep** your musical bounds (play what you can execute;)
- d) **LISTEN!** If you can do all of this, then express YOURSELF! Also remember that having a large vocabulary doesn't necessarily make one a poet or even a good story teller."

*(Of course, we're all aware of the Dawg's multi-decade genre generating discography and his label "Acoustic Disc" & [AcousticOasis.com](http://AcousticOasis.com) where they will soon be issuing High Definition Downloads of previously unreleased Garcia/Grisman material, David's Warner Brothers projects and a new series of Dawg Studios jam sessions featuring Grisman with the Del McCoury band, John Hartford, and guitarists Martin Taylor and Frank Vignola.)*

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### **Mike Marshall**

I think it's about **balancing** the two concepts of course. **Dionysos** vs. **Apollo**... It's the balance between **madness** and **order**. Right?

Both emotions need to be fully engaged while doing any creative act. Isn't that what they say? We must study, study, study, practice, practice, practice, think, think, think. And then--throw ALL that stuff away and just PLAY. Fly off into the wilderness of our own imagination. Dream up anything we wish at that moment and just see what might happen. That joyful expression of how much we love our friends, our family, our life, the sound of the music!

No? Isn't that it?

But always fully aware, engaged, lit up. With our ears, eyes, hearts and minds alert to what might be coming at us. Responding in milliseconds to each nuance of **tonal shift**, **rhythmic inflection**, **dynamic hint** or **creative impulse** that the persons around us might be suggesting or that we might wish to see happen.

Hard? Yes. But at times... oh so natural. Oh so easy. Logical.

Is this elusive? Yes. Maybe that's what keeps us coming back.... and back... and back.

*(Bay area based Mike, in addition to being one of the most stylistically versatile mandolinists on the planet, continues to tour the world, teach at clinics, and produce educational materials that can revolutionize your playing.)*

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Special thanks to all our contributors:

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By the way, if you ever want a title summary of all the **JazzMandology** topics (well over four dozen, now!) here's a page that lists links: [http://jazzmando.com/mandolin\\_sessions.shtml](http://jazzmando.com/mandolin_sessions.shtml). There's a lot to uncover there, and **Mel Bay Publishing** has brought these all to you for free. Share them with your **Facebook** and **Twitter** friends.

Take a few moments to check out the wealth of inexpensive resources you can buy at **Mel Bay Express**, many resources now available (immediately!) in an e-format.



We want you to know how much we've enjoyed working on the **Mandolin Sessions** columns since 2003. Though the series has come to a close, feel free to contact us at [http://jazzmando.com/contact\\_jazzmando.shtml](http://jazzmando.com/contact_jazzmando.shtml), and of course drop in on the [JazzMando.com](http://JazzMando.com) website, for the latest "**Tips and Tricks**" and jazz mandolin-related news!