

David Friedman on Melodic Improvising:

Transcription, Analysis, and Interview

By Tristan Rogers

In addition to being an internationally acclaimed performer and composer, vibraphonist David Friedman is probably best known to percussionists as the author of *Vibraphone Technique: Dampening and Pedaling*. In that study, Friedman addresses an obstacle inherent to making music on the vibraphone, which is that the vibraphone, due to its mechanical nature, is limited in terms of expressive capabilities.

Unlike a saxophone or a trumpet, for instance, which relies on the breath for sound production, the vibraphone cannot easily imitate the human voice. This makes it a challenge to “sing” through the instrument, a central feature of expressive music. Only through careful study of dampening and pedaling techniques can the vibraphonist hope to achieve the subtleties of articulation required for such music.

Articulation and phrasing are one aspect of music for which the human voice serves as an ideal. I believe it also serves as an ideal for melodicism. Effective melodies are typically singable and memorable. They are what stay in our minds after we leave the concert hall or club. For the composer and improviser alike, then, an understanding of melodic construction and development is essential to communicating with an audience. This is the core musical material that technique serves.

What follows is a transcription and analysis of Friedman demonstrating melodic improvising over the chord changes to a wellknown standard tune, “It Could Happen to You” in the key of G major.¹ This tune is a good vehicle for demonstrating improvisational concepts, as it has a sing-able melody, retains the common 32 bar ABAC form, and contains most of the standard harmonic progressions found in the jazz repertoire. Friedman’s performance reflects both his mastery of the techniques mentioned above and his keen sense of melody, two qualities essential to overcoming the expressive limitations of the vibraphone.

The accompanying recording is from a 2010 video lesson posted on vibesworkshop.com², an educational resource and promotional website for the instrument, founded and maintained by Philadelphia-based vibraphonist Tony Miceli. Significantly, the original lesson contains no formal instruction; the student is to learn from listening and emulating, rather than intellectually digesting the core concepts without internalizing them first. For instance, at this medium swing tempo, Friedman has a tendency to lay back on the beat, while accenting offbeats. Any analysis, then, must be a handmaiden to what is there in the feeling and sound of the music.

FIRST CHORUS

The solo begins four measures into the top of the form with a phrase from the G-major pentatonic scale, followed by an idea targeting the third and fifth of the major scale over the moving harmony (mm. 4–7). Pentatonic scale usage is significant to playing melodically, as it universally serves as a basis for folk music around the world. Indeed, many simple instruments are tuned to a pentatonic scale, including ancestors of the vibraphone (e.g., the balafon).

Another feature of melodic playing is judicious use of diatonic chord tones and harmonic extensions (e.g., 9ths, 11ths, 13ths, etc.). For the most part, we find Friedman emphasizing 3rds, 5ths, and 7ths (mm. 11, 14), and when extensions are employed they are resolved to chord tones (mm. 9, 13). The phrases also follow melodic intervals, such as 6ths (m. 21), 3rds (mm. 9–10) or moving stepwise (m. 20), all of which are characteristics of effective melodies. In this way, the music balances the qualities of tension and release without losing the listener in the upper

echelons of the harmony.

Rhythmically speaking, the opening chorus consists mostly of quarter and eighth notes, with eighth notes predominating at the end of four-bar phrases (mm. 15–16, 19–20, 23–24). This gives the music what Hal Galper calls “forward motion”; it maintains the listener’s interest, anticipating the next phrase.

Well-constructed eighth-note melodies also clearly outline the underlying harmony, keeping the listener’s interest by relating the improvisation to the melody and harmony of the song. As a result, Friedman’s simple songlike phrases are propelled forward by clear statements of the harmony (mm. 8, 12, 24, 28). Likewise, in the last phrase of the first chorus (mm. 29–32), Friedman plays a long diatonic line over the ii-V-I progression utilizing eighth-note triplets, which creates a nice effect of building excitement for the next chorus.

SECOND CHORUS

The first four measures of the second chorus illustrate the strong compositional device of motivic development. Friedman plays a descending m7 flat-5 arpeggio beginning on the flat 5 over the Bm7 flat-5 – E7 flat-9, and then repeats the same idea up a whole step over the C-sharp m7 flat-5 – F-sharp 7 flat-9, albeit with rhythmic variation. This device creates a sense of continuity in the listener, avoiding the pitfall of stringing lines together without a sense of development.

Friedman’s second chorus is more active rhythmically than the first, as eighth-note lines predominant. This is another example of “weaving” through the chord changes, as illustrated in measures 37–40 and 41–43. We also see more use of extensions: targeting the natural 9th over the Bm7 flat-5 chord in bar 39, followed by the sharp-9, flat-9 combination over the E7. Similarly, the first use of altered dominant material over the V7 of the tonic appears in the last two beats of bar 48, implying a D7 with a flat 9 and sharp 5.

Moving to the second half of the chorus, the first two phrases (beginning at mm. 49 and 53) return to ideas based on simple intervals of 3rds and 6ths, while the last two phrases emphasize eighth-note triplets in more active rhythmic permutations in order to build anticipation for the following chorus. Both of these devices were introduced in the first chorus and are now varied to create interest and continuity in the improvisation.

THIRD CHORUS

Stepwise scalar lines continue to increase in the third chorus, connecting successive chords through simple voice leading (mm. 65–68). This is a matter of finding common tones between chords or looking for half-step movements to connect two chords, utilizing smooth voice leading, e.g. Am7 to C-sharp m7 flat-5 via D–C-sharp. This prevents the improvisation from sounding disjointed and unconnected.

The second four-bar phrase is significant as an example of a motif using a simple sequence. After an idea employing the 6th and 9th over the tonic chord, a simple three-note diatonic cell descends in thirds over the Cmaj7 – Bm7 flat-5 – E7 flat-9 progression, making alterations in the line as necessary to fit the chord. In contrast to heavily patterned playing, the sequence is musical without sounding formulaic because of the way it is integrated in proportion to other improvisational ideas.

Another sequence is used to set up the second half of the chorus. Over the ii – V in measures 79–80, Friedman plays descending 7th chord arpeggios from the G major scale. Interest is created through the use of anticipating the first note of the eighth-note triplets. The phrase is completed by surrounding the third of the D7 chord before resolving to the fifth of the Gmaj7. With this technique, a chord tone is approached from above or below by either scalar or chromatic tones, ornamenting the target note (see also mm. 8, 15, 45, 51).

The second half of the third chorus increases intensity through extensive employment of triplets. Friedman begins with a simple idea in measure 81 over the Gmaj7 making use of a 6th interval. And the rhythmic idea over the Bm7 flat-5 – E7 flat-9 is retained over the C-sharp 7 flat-5 – F-sharp 7 flat-9, following a descending scalar line in the high

register of the instrument. Triplet rhythms then dominate, continuing the motif suggested in measure 77, interspersed with long eighth-note lines. Friedman plays an ascending inverted Fdim7 arpeggio in triplets, suggesting the flat 9 sound over the E7. Again, the final four measures build the tension for the climax of the solo with a four-note idea grouped in triplets (mm. 94) followed by rhythmically displaced triplets continuing into the final chorus. Appropriately, this portion of the improvisation leaves much less space than earlier.

FOURTH CHORUS

In the height of its rhythmic excitement, the fourth chorus begins with a similar descending arpeggio idea we saw earlier outlining the chord changes, but this time phrased in displaced triplets (mm. 97–100). At this point, the final chorus elaborates on and brings to conclusion many of the improvisational ideas we have already seen. Measures 101–104 employ strings of eighth notes, and for the first time, sixteenth-note lines that outline the chord changes. Measures 105–107 return to the triplet idea introduced in the same place in the form at measure 43.

Chromaticism and use of extensions also increase in the final chorus. While the sharp-11 was used earlier as a passing or approach note over the Em7 – A7 sequence, in measure 110 it is emphasized before being resolved. Similarly, a sharp 5 and flat 5 are played on strong beats over the D7 in bar 112, implying an altered sound. These uses are especially effective at this stage in the improvisation, as earlier diatonic melodic material has conditioned the listener's ear to notice alterations. There is no risk of them becoming stale.

The full range of rhythmic variation is also on display here, as Friedman shifts between eighth notes, triplets, sixteenth notes, and rhythmic anticipations, while the final two phrases bring the solo to a compelling conclusion. Here we see the displaced triplet idea return briefly in bar 121, before a winding eighth-note phrase lands on a resounding octave idea reminiscent of a commonly used piano technique to signal the end of a solo. Finally, the whole thing is brought to a close with a descending eighth-note line landing on the tonic followed by the fifth, an idea, with variations, found throughout the improvisation (see mm. 7, 10–11, 43, 107).

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID FRIEDMAN

Rogers: Could you explain how you conceive of melodic improvising in contrast to other improvisational styles?

Friedman: Earlier in my career I was more interested in angular lines containing large intervallic jumps, reminiscent of [Thelonius] Monk, saxophonist Benny Wallace, and Jane Ira Bloom's compositions. Because of the large intervals, the lines weren't considered "melodic" because they weren't really "singable." After all, the word "melody" comes from the Greek word, "melos," which means "song." Later, when I became more fascinated by free tonal improvisation, I began to practice improvising melodic motifs and transposing them into different keys. I noticed that if these motifs had strong melodic content they retained their melodic integrity, even over seemingly dissonant harmonic backgrounds. So I started doing more of this kind of improvisation, incorporating these concepts in all kinds of styles of music.

Rogers: Your performance is remarkable for its clean phrasing and "horn-like" articulations, in particular the slur effects you get in measures 10–11. How do you approach phrasing on the vibraphone?

Friedman: I think you phrase according to what you hear in your head. I hear saxophone players and singers in my head when I'm playing. I'm not satisfied until a line is articulated the way I hear it. The reason I wrote the dampening and pedaling book was to create exercises for myself to help me sculpt, shape, and phrase lines the way I heard them. How does the sculptor create a figure out of stone? He sees the end result before the first piece of stone is chipped away and he continues chipping until the image in his mind's eye manifests itself. Instrumentalists should approach phrasing the same way. The slur effect is achieved by dampening between two notes, playing the second one like a ghost note. That means, if I'm slurring from E-natural to F-natural I play the E-natural mezzo forte or forte and dampen to the F-natural, playing it piano or pianissimo. [Measures 10 and 11, C natural to D natural in both measures.]

Rogers: *Your improvisation would make a great study in rhythmic feel and development. Could you discuss swinging on a tune at a medium tempo such as this?*

Friedman: “Swinging” at a medium tempo on the vibraphone is a major challenge. When I first started playing jazz in my early 20s I played way too far ahead of the beat for my taste. I hated listening to myself. As time went on, I started “hearing” another way of playing lines. I then started recording myself constantly. I consciously started “pulling back” on the beat and then listening back to how it felt and sounded. I played lines over recordings such as Miles Smiles and Miles in Europe, recorded myself and listened back, hearing the end result and remembering the physical feeling of pulling back on the beat. I did this until I was satisfied with what I heard.

Rogers: *Pacing is an important aspect of improvising at length. Your improvisation over “It Could Happen to You” is four choruses. What are the most important things to consider for maintaining interest when improvising at greater lengths?*

Friedman: I would say start simple, find a melodic and/or rhythmic motif. Don’t be afraid to repeat an idea. Repetition helps to solidify it, especially rhythmically, and communicate the idea to the audience. Leaving space for beginning improvisers— and some experienced ones, as well— is difficult because people have the misconception that when you don’t play nothing is happening. Nothing is more untrue. The music continues whether you are playing or not. There’s simply a change

Handwritten musical notation for the first staff, showing a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The staff contains a whole rest followed by a series of chords: Gma7, B-7(9), E7, A-7, C#-7(9), and F#7. The notation includes a single eighth note and a quarter note at the end of the staff.

Handwritten musical notation for the second staff, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The staff contains a series of chords: Gma7, Cma7, B-7(9), and E7. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes.

Handwritten musical notation for the third staff, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The staff contains a series of chords: A-7, F7, Gma7, F#-7(9), and B7. The melody includes a triplet of eighth notes.

Handwritten musical notation for the fourth staff, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The staff contains a series of chords: E-7, A7, A-7, and D7. The melody includes a triplet of eighth notes.

Handwritten musical notation for the fifth staff, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The staff contains a series of chords: Gma7, B-7(9), E7, A-7, C#-7(9), and F#7. The melody consists of eighth notes.

Handwritten musical notation for the sixth staff, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The staff contains a series of chords: Gma7, Cma7, B-7(9), and E7. The melody consists of eighth notes.

Handwritten musical notation for the seventh staff, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The staff contains a series of chords: A-7, F7, Gma7, C7, B-7(9), and E7. The melody includes a triplet of eighth notes.

Handwritten musical notation for the eighth staff, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The staff contains a series of chords: A-7, D7, Gma7, E7, A-7, and D7. The melody includes a triplet of eighth notes.

Handwritten musical notation for the ninth staff, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The staff contains a series of chords: Gma7, B-7(9), E7, A-7, C#-7(9), and F#7. The melody includes a triplet of eighth notes.

Handwritten musical notation for the tenth staff, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The staff contains a series of chords: Gma7, Cma7, B-7(9), and E7. The melody consists of eighth notes.

Handwritten musical notation for the eleventh staff, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The staff contains a series of chords: A-7, F7, Gma7, F#-7(9), and B7. The melody includes a triplet of eighth notes.

This page of musical notation is for guitar, written in G major. It consists of ten staves of music, each starting with a measure number. The notation includes various chords and rhythmic patterns:

- Staff 41:** Chords: E-7, A7, A-7, D7. Includes a triplet.
- Staff 45:** Chords: GMA7, B-7(b9), E7, A-7, C#-7(b9), F#7.
- Staff 49:** Chords: GMA7, CMA7, B-7(b9), E7. Includes a triplet.
- Staff 53:** Chords: A-7, F7, GMA7, C7, B-7(b9), E7. Includes triplets.
- Staff 57:** Chords: A-7, D7, GMA7, E7, A-7, D7. Includes triplets.
- Staff 61:** Chords: GMA7, B-7(b9), E7, A-7, C#-7(b9), F#7. Includes a triplet.
- Staff 65:** Chords: GMA7, CMA7, B-7(b9), E7. Includes a triplet.
- Staff 69:** Chords: A-7, F7, GMA7, F#-7(b9), B7. Includes triplets.
- Staff 73:** Chords: E-7, A7, A-7, D7. Includes triplets.
- Staff 77:** Chords: GMA7, B-7(b9), E7, A-7, C#-7(b9), F#7.
- Staff 81:** Chords: GMA7, CMA7, B-7(b9), E7. Includes triplets.

E-7 A7 A-7 D7
 A-7 F7 GMA7 C7 B-7(b9) E7
 85
 A-7 D7 GMA7 E7 A-7 D7
 89
 GMA7 B-7(b9) E7 A-7 C#-7(b9) F#7(b9)
 93
 GMA7 CMA7 B-7(b9) E7
 97
 A-7 F7 GMA7 F#-7(b9) B7
 101
 E-7 A7 A-7 D7
 105
 GMA7 B-7(b9) E7 A-7 C#-7(b9) F#7
 109
 GMA7 CMA7 B-7(b9) E7
 113
 A-7 F7 GMA7 C7 B-7(b9) E7
 117
 A-7 D7 GMA7
 121
 1 3 3 3 3 3

of texture, which we're not always aware of when we're in the middle of an improvised solo. If you listen more you notice this and use it to your best advantage and to the best advantage of the band.

Rogers: *Do you have any suggestions on how to practice these ideas to integrate them into one's playing?*

Friedman: Improvise every day, focus on your sound, phrasing, and time. Improvise over harmonies, melodic structures, rhythmic ideas, visual images; record yourself doing it. Listen back and make notes, not so much about the content of the improvisation but rather about the sound, phrasing, time, and flow. Do it every day before you practice other things, such as pieces, technical exercises, etc. If you do this consistently, you won't need the technical exercises anyway!

ENDNOTES

1. Readers may want to compare my Friedman transcription with Gustavo Agatiello's transcription of Joe Locke playing over the same tune (but in E-flat). See *Percussive Notes*, vol. 52, no. 1 (January 2014).

2. <http://www.vibesworkshop.com/node/4457> (available to subscribers only)

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