

JASON'S 15 TIPS FOR TRANSCRIBING

By Jason Mingledorff

There are a number of philosophies about what is the most effective way to transcribe music. Some find that they can transcribe more quickly if they write it out as they learn what is being played. Some say you shouldn't write it out at all. Lennie Tristano would require his students to be able to sing the solo perfectly before ever trying to figure out on their instrument which notes are being played. The plethora of transcription books out there suggests that many people feel that they can learn enough just from reading transcriptions. I personally feel that there are important lessons to learn from all the aspects of transcription – using ear-training and deduction to figure out what notes are being played, playing along with the recording, writing it down, and analyzing what is being played. I recommend memorizing an entire solo (or large sections if it is long) before writing it down. Try to play it just like the recorded soloist, copying inflections, timing, and sound. During the process of writing it down, you'll figure out exactly what the rhythms are and how they relate to the chords being played. Finally, an in-depth analysis will help you see what exactly the improviser is doing as he solos and how to extract pieces of language to use for yourself. And as the years go by, you can always go back to your transcription to see what else you can glean from it. I also highly recommend that you don't restrict your transcribing to solos. Much can be learned from transcribing tunes and arrangements. Here are some tips on how to transcribe and ways to get the most out of the process.

1. Pick the right solo for you.

Ask friends, teachers, and musicians whose playing you like what solos they would recommend. If you're new to this, I'd stay away from something too fast or too slow (ballads are often hardest because of double time figures and rhythmic complexities). You don't have to do the whole solo either. You can pick a section that is your favorite and just work on that. The important thing is that you like it. If you've never transcribed a solo before, you might want to start by transcribing the melody.

2. Listen to the solo dozens of times before beginning to transcribe it.

As you listen to it, try to figure out what the time and key signatures are. I can usually find the key by listening to what note the bass plays at the *end* of the song. I recommend keeping a pitch pipe with you so you can quickly reference what key something is in. Also, you'll want to get a good quality recording and make sure that it's in the same key as other copies of the same recording (you don't want to transcribe some YouTube version of it in Db if it's really in C). As you continue to listen, see if you can tell what type of form it is. I recommend starting with a familiar form like a 12-bar blues, but remember, not all blues are the same. It could also be another common form, like AABA, ABAC, or just an open vamp on one chord. Also, most jazz and popular songs are made up of four bar phrases. Count and see if yours is too. Ask yourself these questions -

“How many choruses is the solo?” “What beat does it begin on?” “Is there a climax?” “What is my favorite part?”

3. Know what chords are being played and the song's exact form before you try to figure out the solo.

By knowing the chords and where they go, you will already be able to narrow down the probably note choices being played. Listen to the bass first to find out the roots. Then, using a piano or guitar, figure out the chord qualities. *Don't just rely on chord changes from a fake book* – they could be wrong. If you have a hard time figuring out a chord, remember that the form of a tune repeats throughout a performance, so there are probably several chances to figure out what the exact chord is. *Sometimes the easiest place to figure out the chords of the song is at the end of the recording.*

4. Sing each phrase before trying to figure out what notes are in it.

If you can sing the notes back, you can slow it down as slow as you need with your own voice. This works well with short little bits of a phrase (2-3 notes) that are hard to put a finger on. Interval training (see my handout “Intervals in Popular Music”) will greatly help this process. Some people transcribe with their instrument in hand, some use a piano, and others use only a tuning fork and their ears. I suggest you experiment and use whichever method works best for you.

5. Don't think of the solo as just one note after the other. Think of it as groups of notes, with each group having a function.

As you transcribe, pick out important notes in each phrase. These might be accented notes, down beats where a chord changes, or long notes. Then think of the groups of notes before, after, and between them in relation to those notes. Maybe the three notes preceding one important note are chromatic approach notes. Don't think of the three notes ending a phrase as, for example, first E then G then B. Listen to them as a group and think of them as an arpeggiation over the C Maj7 that's being played. Look for patterns in a group of notes. They very well could be there. What sounds like complex combinations of notes can often simply be a pattern of thirds, fourths, or pairs of triads.

6. There are great tools that can slow down the music (Amazing Slow Downer, Anytune app). It's ok to use them.

Way back in the day, people would play records at a different speed and it would be half the tempo and down an octave, thus making it a lot easier to learn. New programs can slow it down even more without changing the pitch. However, *don't slow it down more than 50%*. If it's any slower than that you'll start to hear unintentional notes. If you sing it first (see #4) you may not need to have it slowed down as much, but you're still using ear training even if it's slowed down by a machine. Also, a good pair of headphones is a great tool for hearing what is going on.

7. Don't write it down until you can play it from memory with the recording.

This could mean the entire solo (ideally) or each chorus or even each 8 bar phrase. The bottom line is – if you write it out as you figure it out, it will be much harder to memorize. Why memorize it? The best way to internalize something is to memorize it, make it a part of your self. Don't forget – notes are only one part of the transcription. One of the most valuable things you can pull from learning a solo, in addition to recreating their sound as close as you can, is copying the soloist's swing feel and overall timing. When you can "lay it in the pocket" with the recording, you're ready to write it down.

8. It's ok to skip over the hard parts – for now.

If you're getting hung up on a hard lick, don't let it grind things to a halt. You very well may not have the experience yet to figure it out. Come back to it after you've finished the rest of the solo. You'll probably find it to be easier. However, try your best to figure it out as best you can before you're done. This may mean only picking out the downbeats or accented notes. Remember, singing it slowly is a great tool for slowing it down and knowing the chords that accompany it will narrow down the note choices. Knowledge of the soloist's style (they may have played a similar lick at a slower tempo somewhere else) and jazz theory (knowing common substitutions will help you deduce what those "out" notes are) will assist you with these hard parts, but they come with time. So don't beat yourself up for not figuring it out – yet.

9. Write the chords down over the solo!

This is essential to understanding what the soloist is intending with his note choice. For example, you may notice that a soloist keeps ending phrases on the note "A." If you don't know the chords, you'll come away thinking that he just liked that note. However, if you know the chords you'll notice that he plays those "A"s over a C major chord (making them major 6ths). So, now you know that it's not just that he like "A" (which could be the case), but also he likes the sound of the 6th as a last note of a phrase over a major chord.

10. Don't try to finish the whole solo in one sitting.

Space it out to about 30 min to an hour every day. Remember, transcribing is just one of the ways you become a better soloist. It should be part of a balanced diet of technical studies, sound development, rhythmic development, musical etudes, sight-reading, tune learning, and free play.

11. Don't forget the importance of inflections.

The parts of the solo that are hard to put into writing – vibrato, growls, effects, time feel– are some of the most important aspects of the solo. They are also the aspects that most transcribers seem to ignore. And, they are also the hardest to learn. Challenge yourself to be able to internalize these inflections as you play the solo.

12. Find everything you can in the solo that you can use and practice ways to apply it to your playing.

An in-depth analysis of what the improviser is playing during their solo is the next step in getting the most out of your transcription. Some things you can look for include nice melodic lines over particular chords or progressions (ii7-V7 licks), places where a soloist might repeat themselves, patterns in their groupings of notes, how they use space and connect phrases, devices they use to create tension or excitement, or even places where they might not have played what they intended. You also may notice that they might effectively use some type of rhythm or implied meter or use certain scales over certain chords. Try using these devices as you practice soloing. Write your favorite licks on a separate sheet of paper and learn them in all twelve keys. Feel free to change them to make them work better for you or work over different chords. A good solo can give you countless things to work on if you dig deep enough.

13. Remember – quality, not quantity!

You will get a lot more out of learning one or two solos inside and out than from transcribing 20 solos without in-depth internalization. This is why it's important to pick something that you like, because it will hopefully become a part of you. For those of you who say, "But I don't want to sound just like Freddie Hubbard or Sonny Rollins," don't worry, you won't. It's not until you dig deep into someone's style that you begin to discriminate what you like and don't like, what you take with you and what you leave behind.

14. The process of transcribing is just as beneficial as the end product of a written out solo.

Don't fall into the trap of relying on transcription books or rushing through the process by writing down each phrase as you figure it out. The more you go through the process of figuring out what it is you're hearing, the better you'll be at it. The more you play one phrase over and over while memorizing it, the better chance that it'll stick with you – not just the notes, but the phrasing, sound, and feel.

15. Make transcribing a daily habit!

Whenever you are listening to music, see if you can figure out what is going on musically. Using your interval training, see if you can tell where the chords are going or which note in a scale a melody starts on. You can do this with all types of music. In fact, the repetitive nature of lots of popular music makes it perfect for practicing these skills. Keep a pitch pipe with you so that you can practice finding keys and check your guesswork. For example, after you figure out a song is in F, you hear that the melody notes go from the 6 to the 5, or D to C. You can check those notes on your pitch pipe to see if you were right. You don't have to write something down to be transcribing. This type of listening is essential for a developing what musicians call "a good ear."