

The Numbers Game

I like the movie “A Beautiful Mind,” including the scene where numbers flash by on the screen as the main character is thinking. As I watched, I realized that there is a basic similarity with improvisation. No, we don’t process numbers in such a huge or dramatic way as gifted mathematicians. We are, however, aware of basic numbers as they flow by in a stream of time. Our challenge is to find and recognize the numbers we need, letting the others go by.

Here are some of the numbers we deal with in improvisation, on a quick-reaction basis:

- Chord extensions (6, 7, 9, etc.) in chord symbols.
- The number position of the note you’re playing (1 through 8) compared to the current chord. This helps you select notes that fit, as well as focus on color tones or non-harmonic tones.
- Where in the bar you attack a note: on the beat (whole number), off the beat in straight time (1/2), or off the beat in swing (2/3).
- The number of the current bar compared to where you are in the tune form. This keeps you oriented in the tune and helps you make transitions between sections.

Starting Easy

You can take the shape-and-number approach back to its basic form – flexible scales. This helps you start with very limited number focus as you work with SHAPE. For more discussion on this, see the “Left and Right” article in the Insights folder.

The Power of Focus

Now you may be thinking that this is all too overwhelming. And you’re right – if you try to focus on all the numbers at once. The key is to bring the things we need in and out of focus when we need them. For example, once we get an interesting rhythm started on the offbeat of 3, we can look for color tone numbers, or a non-harmonic tone number, then quickly switch back to focusing on rhythmic beats, etc. All the while, a counter is ticking in the back of our mind to keep us oriented in the tune form. With practice, you learn to shift your awareness between numbers and shapes so your ideas flourish.

To make the number-focus work better, you combine it with the visual approach (SHAPE). The visual shapes and patterns that emerge are the first priority; the numbers that go along with them are like the ID labels on the merchandise, helping us keep everything in order.

Reducing the Complexity

There’s another aspect to numbers – the total number of things you could think about as you improvise. There are hundreds of topics in this book and countless ways you could use them in solos. That alone could overwhelm anyone. But the key is to choose something, work with it, develop into something else, etc. Essentially you have hundreds of paintbrushes and colors, or hundreds of tools on your belt. Choose just what you need and use it well.

One of my favorite quotes, by Benjamin Franklin, is “It isn’t what you know that counts, it’s what you think of in time.” (For comments, see “Expressions” in the More folder). So with the vast number of possibilities ... just pick a few good ones.