



Andrew Clark

Rock 'N Roll Saxophone



The Influence Of Digital Technology On Transcribing

Happy New Year to all! New Year's is always the time when people are making resolutions, some more successfully than others. I sometimes use this time of year to get my students to make a simple resolution about their playing. I, myself, try to set some goals at this time of year. When I was attending Berklee in the mid 1980s, I made a resolution to learn how to transcribe. I had just inherited a Marantz tape recorder with a pitch wheel and half-speed and I was determined to use it. I will share with you what I have learned since then about transcribing.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

One of the most important developments in music in the past ten years has been the influence of digital technology. The introduction of the compact disc, sampling, and many other manifestations of this technology are now common place in today's music spectrum. What does this have to do with transcribing? Very simply, it means that when you turn on the radio or play a disc, you are hearing music that is in tune. This is very important to anyone wanting to learn to transcribe. When I began transcribing, compact disc players were out, but they were expensive and the discs were hard to find. When you put a record on a turntable, the pitch would not be consistent from album to album, or even turntable to turntable. This is even more noticeable with tape recorders. I'm sure you all realize that there is a difference in tape speed (often times, a very dramatic difference) from one tape deck to another. This was a daunting challenge for the musicians I went to school with. My roommate was (and

still is) a great guitar player who could play many amazing solos note for note, but he would have to re-tune drastically from song to song. This is a time consuming process. Imagine what we as saxophonists would have to do using the old limited technology. Compact discs will always play at concert pitch (A=440hz) so you know that if you hear it on your own disc player, or a radio station, or your friend's disc player the music you are listening to is in tune. This is a major element in learning to transcribe, making sure that you are in tune with the song you are trying to play with. I mentioned that I have a Marantz tape deck with a pitch wheel. This is how I overcame this obstacle of getting the recording to play at concert pitch. Another important feature of this tape deck is half-speed. Half-speed plays the tape so that it sounds an octave lower and plays half as fast. This is a crucial aid for figuring out fast licks in a solo. So, now we know that the first step to transcribing is making sure the selection is playing in tune.

WHAT TO TRANSCRIBE

The next thing we need to consider is what to transcribe. Sometimes you may find that you are assigned a particular tune to transcribe by a teacher, or perhaps a band you're playing with gives you a tune to learn. If you've never transcribed anything from a record before, pick something that's accessible to your range as a musician. When I first began transcribing, I picked out blues solos to start with. Blues is an easier idiom to transcribe from than others (like bebop) because the song forms and note selection will

be easier to figure out. My earliest transcriptions are of Sonny Stitt, Cannonball Adderley, Charlie Parker, and others playing a 12-bar blues.

TRANSCRIBING A SOLO

Now, let's talk about the step-by-step process of transcribing a solo. First, you need to transcribe the song itself and not the solo. Write out the chord changes for the song you are working on. If you've never figured out the chords to a song, then definitely pick a blues tune or a one chord jam (like *Shotgun* by Junior Walker) so that you will have a more productive practice session. Picking a complex jazz standard at first can be very daunting and it may leave you feeling confused and frustrated. Figure out the bass lines of a song first to get the form of the song and the chords mapped out. This will give you a framework to work with when figuring out the solo.

Now that you have a chord chart put together, count up how many measures of music you are going to transcribe. If it's a 12-bar blues, pick how many choruses you want to figure out. If it's a short solo on the bridge of a tune, count up how long it is. This framework is very important for organizing your efforts.

Now we get to the hard part, what is this person playing? Here's where the equipment you're using becomes a crucial factor. You are going to have to hear short phrases played over and over to get them in your ear and out of your horn. If you are using just a compact disc player, many of them have a loop feature that will play a short segment repeatedly. This is very useful, but it will only play at regular

speed. If you are using a tape recorder, at the very least, it must have cue and review. Cue and review is fast forward and rewind respectively that works when the play button is engaged, which makes a buzzing sound when it's used. If you don't have this feature on your tape deck, it's going to be a longer and more arduous chore to figure out licks in a solo. If you have a sampler, you can use that as well and it will also give you the option of playing the selection back at half-speed, down an octave for figuring out those faster licks.

THE CHORD CHART

So, you've got your chord chart written out, your playback device is set up to play this selection in small segments over and over, now what? This brings me to an important piece of advice I learned from my first college teacher at SUNY Fredonia, Dr. Laurence Wyman (no relation to ex-Rolling Stone Bill), "If you can't sing it, you can't play it." Truer words were never spoken! Take the very first lick of the solo you have chosen and listen to it over and over until you can sing along with it exactly. You don't need a beautiful voice to do this. You just need to sing the notes in tune and in rhythm. The shorter the phrases you select, the better. Then, using your knowledge of the chords behind the solo, find these sounds on your horn. It may take a long time to get just one phrase correct at first. Be patient and you will get it. Transcribing is like anything else in life, keep at it with an organized approach and you will improve.

THE FINAL STEP: WRITING OUT WHAT YOU HEAR

The final step is writing out what you hear. I've found that the most important thing to figure out first is the rhythms. Some soloists are very free with their rhythmic approach to playing and you may find that some lines are hard to fit into a specific rhythmic notation. I think you will find that 90% of what you hear can be accurately written out. To figure out the rhythms of a phrase, I sing it slowly while tapping out the tempo. I will use a simple conducting pattern to visualize the beats of the measure

while I'm singing the phrase (for those of you who know how to conduct a 4/4 pattern). This is very important in writing out the phrase. Once you have the rhythms accurately written out, it's very simple to fill in the appropriate notes.

TO SUMMARIZE

Let's summarize this transcribing approach. First, make sure you have the proper equipment to play your selection on. Next, figure out the structure of the song (chords, arrangement, number of bars or choruses, etc.), then learn to sing each phrase one at a time accurately, which is the single most important step. Finding the notes and sounds on your horn is next. Finally, you need to write it all down so that you will remember what you have figured out. I mentioned in last month's column that I had played out of the Omnibook in the past (and the present and future like any other dedicated saxophonist!). Maybe you can try to pick a blues out of that book, find the actual recording of the solo, and transcribe it yourself using the book as a reference. You may find that your interpretation may differ from Jamey Aebersold's, and that's okay as long as you're sure you are playing the solo accurately along with the recording. I did a transcription of Bob Berg's solo on Mike Stern's composition *Mood Swings*, and while at the Berklee bookstore one day, I saw a Trent Kynaston book which had the same solo in it. I was very happy to see that 95% of what I had written out was exactly the same! So, this may be an approach that works for you as well. Learning to play by ear is just as important as learning to play by reading music. When I'm on gigs with a band for the first time, the skills I've developed by transcribing music become very important. Being able to play by ear gives me the ability to play with others on tunes I've never heard and make it sound like I've been rehearsing with the band for days. These are the kinds of skills that make the phone ring and the calendar fill up, if you know what I mean.

So, now you can go dig into that long list of rock and roll sax tunes and find some hot licks to transcribe! I think you'll find that once you get started, it's like doing crossword

puzzles. You use the clues of the song form and chords to figure out what the soloist is doing. After awhile you'll hear these things coming out of your playing, which is where the real satisfaction of transcribing comes from. Speaking of satisfaction, I believe it was Keith Richards who said, "I always steal from the rich, musically speaking!" So get out that blank music paper and get to work!

I think next we should discuss stage gear. In the rock n' roll world, amplification rules. If it's too loud, you're too old! So, we as saxophonists must find a way to be heard and to hear ourselves amidst the crushing din of guitars, bass, and drums. I've assembled my own little arsenal of gear to help in that struggle to be seen and heard on stage. I'll discuss mics, effects, amps, monitors, and the like, so stay tuned and keep rocking!

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