

Conti

The Turning Point

by Dave Ruggiero

A narrative about one student's struggle to play jazz, and what became the turning point in his endeavor.





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I prepared this narrative in an effort to apprise other aspiring jazz guitarists about my experience with the Ticket To Improv DVD series and The Jazz Lines by Robert Conti. I own all five products (the Ticket To Improv series has four current volumes for those unaware) and have spent several months working through the material and watching the DVDs. I am comfortable enough to share my experiences in a way that can benefit aspiring jazz guitarists. It is also my hope that this narrative will resonate with other aspiring jazz guitarists who are frustrated after struggling with the academic modes/scales approach.

I'm writing from the perspective of a hobbyist that doesn't have time for lessons and wants to make every second of practice time count. I have had my fill of

theory-intensive method books, and my experience with all of them goes a little something like this:

1. Practice scales and modes/read about theory.
2. Occasionally find a tidbit of jazz theory that would allegedly "crack the code" for me.
3. Get excited and believe that I was finally getting it.
4. Play the exercises and eventually get bored because I was playing exercises.
5. Fail miserably at every attempt to improvise over changes, without playing something other than a menial exercise.
6. Get frustrated, lose confidence and put down the instrument only to eventually.
7. Buy a different method book and repeat steps 1-6 all over again.



My Turning Point

In 2010, in lieu of yet another method book, my usual step 7 took a very different turn during my first visit to the Robert Conti website, as his No Modes No Scales® approach quickly caught my attention. After working through the free Take the A Train lesson on his website, and getting those lines under my fingers, I immediately realized that my prior lack of progress and frequent loss of interest was not the result of any inadequacies on my part. That free lesson convinced me that my prior lack of progress, was the result of mistakenly approaching jazz guitar from a predominantly academic/theory-based perspective, which was non-productive and did not translate into any meaningful playing skills.

I proceeded to purchase Volume 1 of the Ticket To Improv DVD Series. The lines are hip and they are very easy to learn. It was also a tremendous confidence booster that renewed my interest in improvising over standards. Robert's DVDs give the viewer the feel of being in a private lesson with him.

Ticket to Improv is no different. Robert takes each solo and breaks them down measure-by-measure, note-by-note and teaches students exactly how to play them. Robert does this in two-to-four measure increments, which is very useful as it allows students to easily navigate through the DVD's main menu.

Robert's introductory narrative alone is worth the \$24.95 price of the 4 Hour DVD. This is not a short introductory piece. It runs approximately 30 minutes and proved to be an extremely valuable and substantive educational experience for me. By imparting over 40 years of playing and teaching wisdom into a plainly-spoken and accessible narrative, I was convinced that all I needed to do to learn to play was to play my instrument and let the rest of it (i.e. the theory) take care of itself.

Robert's approach is modest and matter of fact. He speaks from experience when he says: "Play your instrument and get the

music under your hands and the light bulbs will come on.” There are no false promises here. What he said will happen, and it has happened for me. He is the real deal and my videos as a student further reinforce his credibility as an instructor.

The improvised solos contain the real jazz language, professional-quality jazz lines made very accessible to entry level players. Once again, going against everything I thought I knew from the theory/scales approach, I was immediately immersed in the jazz language without having to waste time with boring scales, modes, meaningless blocks of safe notes. I was employing chromatics without having to learn about them separately. I was adding dissonance over dominant chords without having to learn an “advanced” scale to do so. Robert’s fingering protocol, a system based on building lines from the major chords shape most guitarists will already know, puts these concepts right under the player’s hands. There is not a single entry-level jazz guitar textbook that comes remotely close to teaching these concepts in as comprehensive a fashion as Robert does, nor as efficiently.

Robert’s solos got me into changing positions on the fretboard very easily, and at no point does it feel overwhelming. In time, it became second nature. The line construction breaks from the convention of “box-scale” type thinking. I was moving all over the fretboard with ease and confidence, in a more effective way than any standalone fretboard method book could do. Again, to quote Robert, I’m “learning jazz by playing jazz.” A lot of thought was put into these lessons from the choices of standards to the solos becoming progressively more difficult from one project to the next. Furthermore, even to the players that can learn the lines quickly, in each of the projects, Conti presents additional impromptu thoughts, ideas and “off-the-sheet tips.”

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When it comes to the learning process, it did not end when I mastered the three main project solos. The more obvious aspect of this experience is that each DVD has a Project 4, which is yet another improvised solo on a different standard. However, learning the Project 4 solo note-for-note, while helpful, is not the key takeaway from these lessons. Robert constructed the Project 4 solo simply by re-employing lines that I already learned in the first three projects on the DVD. A light bulb went on, and it then became apparent to me, if someone else can take lines that I now know, and create new lines and solos with them, why can’t I? The point is, I can, and I will. I have to work for it, but I now have a viable and readily employable foundation of jazz vocabulary that I’ve learned from the improvised solos, and other harmonic devices in those DVDs.

It’s now a matter of making them work the way I want them to work (all of this being accomplished without wasting a single second with abstract concepts and theory). As strange as it may look on paper, I not only learned real jazz vocabulary but I learned how to learn. This has prepared me to move on to more advanced material (Note: since the time of this writing, Dave has recorded advanced material as seen above, and in the Players Gallery). On that note, I think the Ticket To Improv DVD series delivers on its ability to teach entry-level jazz to students and to prepare them for what is to come.

Peeking Under The Hood

That said, there are other benefits to the Ticket To Improv series that I began to appreciate more as my skill level has progressed. As I like to peek under the hood and get to the “nuts and bolts,” shortly after getting through the first Ticket To Improv DVD, I purchased The Jazz Lines in the Source Code DVD Series. I have viewed that material as a critically important supplement to my learning. The Jazz Lines goes into greater detail about the harmonic devices that Robert uses



to construct his lines. For a lack of a better term, I will call it “applied theory.” There are discussions of theory but they are only there to illustrate why the lines work the way they do. Perhaps other players would reach the same conclusions I did a different way, but after spending considerable time working through the first five or six lessons in that book along with the After The Gig section (a section worth at least twice the price of the DVD/Book), I started to internalize those concepts (still a work in progress).

The more I continued to work with the Ticket To Improv series, the more the light bulbs went on for me, as I was able to discover how Robert employed the same harmonic devices that he uses in his solos on the bandstand at 300 bpm. However, he has made those harmonic devices accessible to entry-level players. As I see it, by design, Robert has successfully created a platform for entry level students that gives them his absolute best at that level of ability, through his selections of lines and harmonic devices. I later discovered that the entry level lines and harmonic

devices from the Ticket To Improv series appeared again in The Jazz Lines, and in the Advanced DVD Series. However, Robert presented those lines and harmonic devices at the far more complex pro level. I was already prepared to move on to more challenging material simply because I had already played the easier versions of those lines and other devices. In essence, I was able to understand the harmonic devices and “applied theory” after the fact, because I had played these very same things so many times before. Only now, instead of seeing a series of notes on the page, I started seeing them in blocks because of my growing familiarity with them.

Conclusion

By no means is learning a short process. However, my experience with both The Jazz Lines and Ticket To Improv has been continuously productive, and they have unquestionably made the journey easier and far more enjoyable. No hobbyist should have to

worry about learning the theory before learning to play. I have no aspirations of becoming a music instructor or joining the academy. I play jazz guitar for fun so if my lack of knowledge does not sit well amongst certain people, that's not my problem. The old school approach has been working for me, so I see no reason to approach improvisation through any other means than the effective way Robert has taught me.

Through that education, I have learned that I have no use for abstract concepts without the meat and potatoes behind them. Jazz was an art form learned in the streets, and there is no concept out there that can not be communicated through playing. No entry level student needs to sit through a course of theory, scales and modes before being ready to play (especially players new to jazz coming from other areas). Robert's Ticket To Improv DVD Series completely blows the concept of modes and scales out of the water.

I was one of those aspiring bedroom players that knew more theory than I cared to, yet I was still discouraged about improvising. Today, while I am pleased about the progress that I have made, what excites me more is that I feel that I am finally on the right path. No longer do I practice my instrument every night. I play my instrument. No longer do I sit and hope that learning some scale is going to help my jazz vocabulary, I take lines that I have learned, play them enjoyably, almost until my fingers bleed, and I am now neck deep in making those lines my own. Most importantly, The Ticket To Improv series and The Jazz Lines have made learning and playing jazz guitar fun, and if it's not fun, then what's the point?

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Robert Conti

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