

Borrow, Borrow, Borrow

Many students often underestimate the importance of imitation and emulation. For most (not all) “borrowing from the masters” is a crucial step in mastering the skills and concepts necessary to improvise successfully in a jazz style. In the jazz genre, the history of transcribing and memorizing solos from earlier generations is well documented in books and articles. The examples below are included to highlight those influences which led to the development of Bebop. Ironically most of the musicians listed here went on to develop profoundly unique musical personalities. **Emulation can be the best route to discovering your own voice.**

“Talent borrows, genius steals” – **Miles Davis**

Branford Marsalis: “We all did it. You play like Hawk, you play like Bird; you do your homework and in due time, parts of you start creeping in. Don’t spend any time worrying about or trying to find your sound. Do your homework and your sound will find you”.

The influence of King Oliver:

Louis Armstrong: The 1925 version of Fletcher Henderson’s ‘Sugarfoot’ (a reworking of Dippermouth Blues) featured a solo by Pops where he recreated the original **King Oliver** solo. Even as late as 1936 in a recording of Armstrong’s big band, Louis is still re-creating the same solo (with minor revisions).

Hundreds of younger trumpeters learned **King Oliver’s** solo on “Dippermouth Blues”. **Freddie Hubbard** opening phrase on Watermelon Man is very similar to the open of “Dippermouth”.

The influence of Louis Armstrong:

He's the father of us all, regardless of style or how modern we get. His influence is inescapable. Some of the things he was doing in the 20's and 30's, people still haven't dealt with." - *Nicholas Payton*

The influence of Roy Eldridge:

Dizzy Gillespie: “Gillespie was listening to the trumpeter Roy Eldridge, copying his solos and emulating his style, and was soon performing with Teddy Hill's band at the Savoy Ballroom on the basis of his ability to reproduce Mr. Eldridge's style.” New York Times Obituary

The influence of Coleman Hawkins:

Roy Eldridge: Roy Eldridge memorized a set of Hawkins solos, including his solo on ... *The Stampede*, recorded in 1926 by the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra by Columbia Records... (he) delighted local audiences with his ability to perform sax solos note-for-note on the trumpet and was soon asked to join a touring carnival band. (from Jazz.com)

Chu Berry and **Roy Eldridge’s** recorded Body and Soul in 1938 (eleven months before the more famous **Coleman Hawkins** version). Even a casual listening to the 1940 recording of **Charlie Parker** playing “Body and Soul” (w/ Jay McShann) reveals how Bird quoted liberally from both recordings.

Sonny Rollins: often used Coleman Hawkins' "Body and Soul" solo as a warm up. He was often heard playing it backstage before performances.

The influence of Lester Young:

According to numerous accounts **Charlie Parker's** main source of practice material was **Lester Young's** solos. He would supposedly memorize the solos and then practice them at two or three times the original tempo, as well as transposing them to all keys. "I was on tour with Charlie once and I was warming up in the dressing room – I happened to be playing one of Lester's choruses – and **Bird** came noodling into the room and said, 'Hey, you ever heard this one?' and he played 'Shoe Shine Boy' about twice as fast as the original recording. He knew all that. I believe he's probably whistling it up in heaven right now." - **Lee Konitz** talking about Bird.

Charlie Christian: "Charlie would get every new Basie record with Lester, and he knew all the solos by heart, could play them or sing them" – Jerry Jerome (band mate with Goodman)

Charlie (Christian) would sit there in the back of the bus, singing Lester's solo's over and over again. I believe he originally wanted to be a tenor sax player" – Jimmy Maxwell

Miles Davis talking about Lester Young: "Man, playing with Prez was something. I learned a lot from the way he played the saxophone. As a matter of fact, I tried to transpose some of his saxophone licks over to my trumpet." – From **Miles Davis'** autobiography.

Lee Konitz referring to **Lester Young's** solo on "Lady Be Good": "**Harold Danko** and I used to sing that solo together on gigs, and especially in workshops where we showed that learning a solo like this is essential, just for the discipline. How can you improvise two choruses like that? I suspect he laid for that, really. There's no second take, right?" (taken from the blog "Do The Math" by Ethan Iverson).

Lee Konitz referring to Lester Young's solo on "Pound Cake": "Warne Marsh and I played this as a 'head' ..."

Young saxophonists wishing to study with **Lee Konitz** were required to perform Lester Young's famous solo on Lady Be Good as an "entrance audition".

Benny Golson was once questioned: "Did you learn any solos of **Lester Young** when you were coming up? His answer: "Yes. 'D.B. Blues' I learned note for note. I was 17. 'These Foolish Things' and 'Lester Leaps Again' also. I learned "Polkadots and Moonbeams" – not note for note, but I played it because he did. He was the first tenor saxophonist who played without the wide vibrato – they thought he was crazy!

Jimmy Rowles: "I memorized every note that Lester Young recorded"

Lennie Tristano required all his students to transcribe and memorize a series of solos. "The most important thing was transcription...I didn't even get up to that. I got as far as singing with Lester Young and Count Basie on "Lester Leaps In," "Tickletoe" and then Billie-Lady Day, Sinatra's record "Come Fly With Me." I think he worked his way up to Bird." (**Dave Liebman** from 2001 Jazz Improv Interview).

Other examples of borrowing in jazz:

In her version of "Flying Home" from 1945, **Ella Fitzgerald** recreates the iconic Illinois Jacquet solos from

the original Lionel Hampton recording.

In **Ella Fitzgerald's** famous recording of "How High The Moon" she uses the melody to Ornithology (almost note for note) as material for her solo.

A young **Herbie Hancock** sounded remarkably similar to **Wynton Kelly** on his first recordings with Donald Bird. It is clear that he studied and emulated the style.

Michael Brecker claimed that his memorization of Trane's "Countdown" solo was a major turning point in his development as a jazz improviser (from his UNT Lecture Series talk).

Steely Dan recorded a "note for note" replication of Duke Ellington's "East St. Louis Toddle-oo" on their first album *Pretzel Logic*. Walter Becker plays Bubber Miley's trumpet solo note for note.

Bob Dylan (arguably the most iconic figure of pop music in the last half of the 20th century) began his career as a copy of Woody Guthrie and for a time played only Woody Guthrie songs.

Annie Ross put lyrics to **Wardell Grey's** blues choruses to create "Twisted" which was later reworked by Joanie Mitchell.

In 1958 **Sonny Stitt** recreated Charlie Parker's "Ko Ko" solo (Cherokee changes). Although the performance isn't "note for note" recreation, the bulk of the solo lines are direct quotes from Bird's various recordings of this chord progression.