

Vocal phrasing and interplay in jazz improvisation – a comparison between principles of improvising on Swing and Bossa Nova

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Abstract: *While improvising follows the same rules for singers, as well as instrumentalists, there are a few aspects that are to be taken into consideration when improvising in different genres as a jazz singer. The uniqueness of the instrument itself, with no comparison with any other instrument or voice, requires a personalized approach in accompanying a singer as well, while a deep understanding of the importance of balancing the lead melody with the chords and the rhythms in the accompaniment is paramount. To accompany a vocal improvisation, means to support the melody created right above and just underneath the fingers of the accompanist. To improvise with an accompanist on swing is the opposite approach of improvising on bossa-nova, while respecting the origin of the latter, which is jazz itself. The mastery of this undertake is to be discussed herein.*

Key-words: *Jazz singing, Swing, Bossa-nova, Interplay, Accompanying, Improvising*

1. Introduction

Vocal improvisation is a captivating aspect of music that allows singers to express their creativity and individuality. It involves spontaneous composition and the ability to adapt to different musical contexts. This paper aims to explore and compare the vocal improvisation techniques in two distinct genres of music: bossa nova and swing. By analyzing the characteristics and historical contexts of these genres, we can gain a deeper understanding of how vocal improvisation is approached and executed in each style.

While both bossa nova and swing incorporate scat singing as a form of vocal improvisation, there are notable differences in their execution and style, differences that this paper will reveal.

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2. Swing – a Golden Era of Jazz

Swing music emerged in the United States during the late 1920s and early 1930's. It was a popular genre during the "Golden-Age era," known for its lively rhythm, syncopated melodies, and energetic improvisation. Swing music became the soundtrack of the dance halls and clubs, capturing the spirit of the time, with exponents like Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller, Count Basie, Lionel Hampton as conductors of larger groups and Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Nat "King" Cole as lead singers.

Swing vocal improvisation is a captivating art form that allows vocalists to push the boundaries of traditional melodies and engage in spontaneous musical dialogues. By employing techniques such as scat singing, call and response, and embellishments, vocalists can express their creativity and add a unique touch to their performances.

Vocal improvisation in swing music is characterized by its fast-paced and virtuosic nature. The improvisation is creating an interactive and dynamic musical conversation between the vocalist and the instrumentalists, modeling the style and articulation of the instrumental counterparts. Iconic swing vocalists, such as Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Jon Hendricks, Betty Carter, showcased their improvisational skills, inspiring generations of singers to follow, not only using intricate melodic lines, but also adding words to the improvised melody, thus using the vocal apparatus in its entirety.

2.1. Vocal phrasing in Swing

The term "swing" has its origins in the rhythmic pattern of the style, with an emphasis on the weaker beat, or the "off-beat", which creates a moving, swinging feel. In sung improvisation on swing, the melody uses syllables instead of lyrics, syllables that can be borrowed from the standard vocabulary of a jazz singer. Here is an example of the rhythmic pattern in swing and the vocal syllable normally used in a vocal improvisation:



Fig.1. Example: four bars of a Swing pattern

One of the most prominent voice improvisers of the Swing era, Ella Fitzgerald, created intricate spontaneous intricate solos, whose rhythm, syllables and articulation are as closest to the sound of an instrument as there can be. One of her most acclaimed solos is the improvisation on „Oh, Lady Be Good”, as recorded with Bob Haggart and his orchestra in New York, March, 1947, a solo that contains quotes from her own composition „A Tisket, A Tasket” (1938) and that she continued to sing without changing one note or even one syllable throughout her career.

Oh, Lady Be Good – 1946 - solo transcript (0:35 – 1:05)

Fig. 2. „Oh, Lady Be Good” – 1946 – Ella Fitzgerald –First 16 bars of vocal scat

bee ih dih dih dl oo dee oo dl oo bee oo bihp bee ih dih doo dl oo dee oo dl oo bee oo bihp boy

— doo dl ee lah dl ah loh dley(tuh) bah bee oo dn lah dee oo duh leh doh duh dey duh duh duh duh

rihp ah oon doht leyt doh dey doh deh duh doo dee lih dee doo dn lah dey lah dl ah dl

oh dee dee dl ah dl oh beyl yihp bah boh beh doom boh behm

Fig.3. – *Oh, Lady Be Good* – 1946 – Ella Fitzgerald – bars 17-32 of vocal scat

The solo is five choruses long, 160 measures of improvised singing on swing and is paramount for the vocabulary of any aspiring improvising jazz singer.

Even though the pace of the song is very fast (up-tempo swing), we can easily notice the rhythmic changes in the bars 8 through 10, corresponding to the second A of the chorus, a more relaxed pattern, which releases the tension and prepares the listener for the B section. The laid-back feel can be traced in each phrase, with the melody placing the accents on the off-beat.

2. Bossa Nova – the dawn of the new wave of Brazilian music

Bossa Nova appeared in the late 1950's Brazil, as a reaction to the samba schools, the word "bossa" meaning "wave, natural flair, charm", widely accepted as "the new thing" and was invented by the composers Antonio Carlos Jobim and Joao Gilberto, the first ever-recorded bossa-nova being the 1958 all-time hit "Garota de Ipanema" ("The Girl from Ipanema"), on the lyrics written by Vinicius de Moraes.

It is in fact no more than a slowed samba, as we can notice from the rhythmic pattern of the bossa-nova:

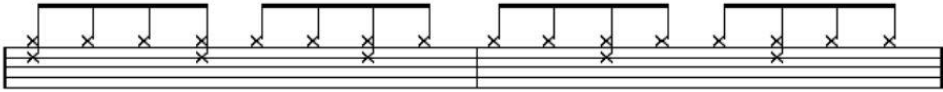


Fig. 4 Bossa-nova rhythmic pattern example

Samba's emphasis on the first beat carries through to Bossa Nova (to the degree that it is often notated in 2/4 time). Two-measure patterns usually contain a syncopation into the second measure. Overall, the rhythm has a swaying rather than swinging (as in jazz) feel. As bossa nova composer Carlos Lyra describes it in his song "Influência do Jazz", the samba rhythm moves "side to side" while jazz moves "front to back". In terms of harmonic structure, Bossa Nova has a great deal in common with jazz, in its sophisticated use of seventh and extended chords. The first Bossa Nova songs borrowed some structural elements from choro; however, later compositions rarely followed this form. Antonio Carlos Jobim often used challenging, almost dissonant melody lines, on the same altered chords that were used in jazz music, with the beats used in samba.

2.1. Bossa nova singing style and vocal improvisation

Bossa nova implies a quiet, almost spoken, tranquil voice over a bouncy yet languid melody. Stripping the samba rhythm of its velocity and percussion, meant bringing forward the melody and the lyrics of the musical text.

The relationship between the text and the melody constantly provoke the "groove" of the song, creating the sway feel, while the soft voice with no vibrato creates a temporal suspension with the phrases moving forward, ahead of the rhythm.

Here is an example of the moving forward of the melody, as revealed by the syncopated melody of the "Desafinado" song, written by Antonio Carlos Jobim in 1959, the first 16 bars (or the first two A sections):

The image shows a musical score for the melody of 'Desafinado' (1959) in staff notation. The score is in G major, 4/4 time, and consists of 16 bars. The melody is characterized by syncopation and forward phrasing. Chord symbols and Roman numerals are provided for each bar. The chords are: F Maj7 (I), G7 (V7/V), Gm7 (IIm), C7 (V7), Am7 (IIIm), D7 (V7/II), Gm7 (IIm7), DMaj7 (VI), D7 (V7/II), G7 (V7/V) (subV7/bII), and G Maj7 (bII).

Fig. 5. *Desafinado*, 1959, melody, bars 1-16

The syncopated melody, along with the smaller value of the first note, indicate the forward phrasing of the melody. The prolonged notes at the end of bars 2, 6, 8, 10, 11, are a structural part of the chord that follows, which means that the chord follows the note, not vice-versa.

The opposite from the Swing feel, the Bossa Nova's forward phrasing creates a sway feel, an opposite contrast between the melody and the rhythm.

3. A comparison between vocal improvisation on Swing and Bossa Nova

While singing with swing is the opposed of singing with sway, improvising in Bossa Nova implies a different language of the improvised text, as well as a different approach to the vocal technique, using almost no vibrato, a nasal voice and a phrasing which is lacking emotion, focusing on rhythm, rather than on melody.

Swing improvisation requires the singer to lean backwards, giving them time to adjust to the harmonic pattern of the song, while Bossa Nova singing requires leaning forward, with the ending notes of each bar introducing the harmonic changes, which means that the Bossa Nova singer has to be fully aware of the harmonic display of the song.

Improvising on the swing can be less challenging for a singer than it is improvising on the Bossa Nova, when considering the harmony of the song.

In Swing, the improvisation can be a dialogue between the singer and the other instrumentalists, but in Bossa Nova, due to the leading aspect of the melody, the instrumentalists can use quotes from the melody to complete the improvisational

text, while the singer has to have a very clear image of the melody about to be improvised, which is why the improvised chorus is not always spontaneous.

4. Conclusion

While singing the Swing means a laid-back, relaxed, behind-the-rhythm way of singing the melody in jazz music of the Swing Era, singing the Bossa Nova is quite the opposite technique, which implies improvising differently, too. This difference is noticeable in the vocalized improvisations in both styles, using a different vocabulary, a different rhythmic pattern and a different layout of the melody itself.

The intention on the improvisation created spontaneously in Swing can use the ideas offered by the accompanying musicians, while in Bossa Nova, the singer is the leader of the melody and has complete control of the harmonic structure of the song.

While Swing emerged as a musical expression of the Golden Era, Bossa Nova aimed to give the Brazilian cultural heritage a finer expression of intricate emotions, which is why it was the first genre known as Latin Jazz.

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