

# JAZZ COMPOSITION

*(Here are some very basic points about composition, purely intended for anyone who wishes to make a start but is afraid of making the first step. So go ahead. Do it! )*

The amount of work involved in arranging an existing tune (possibly changing the harmonies, re-phrasing the melody-line, introducing new rhythms, adding an introduction, ending and fill-ins, writing ensemble passages or a backing to the tune, and deciding on a format) is tantamount to writing a completely new piece. In fact, it is often easier to write an original one than have to conform to the structure of someone else's, especially when there is something about it that grates with you. However it must be said that it is not always easy getting other people to play your music. Jazz musicians tend to be very conservative, narrow-minded and critical. Non-musicians are even worse. Don't let this put you off. Give it a try. There will be someone somewhere who likes you music. There may even be two people, or three, or four... So to help you, here are some simple guidelines.

## STYLE

Don't wait around expecting to be struck down by a blinding flash of inspiration. Say to yourself: I am going to write a...ballad / quickie / bossa / waltz, or what have you. Choose a key and time signature and think up some phrases in that key. There's nothing mysterious in that - you're doing it all the time when you improvise.

There's nothing wrong with using your instrument to help you, and if you can get to a piano and play around on it, so much the better. Some people find it easier to get going once they have a title in mind. *I love my little furry toad*, for example, would suggest a different piece of music than *Stockbroker's Balls* or *Existential Existence in Eb*. Words may also bring a particular musical phrase into mind.

## MELODY

There are a few *rules* in theory which you will probably follow instinctively.

- a) The climax, which is often the highest note in a passage, should come about three quarters of the way through the tune or nearer the end. In some instances it may be at the very end of the tune. The same applies to the climax in an arrangement. Don't get too excited too soon.
- b) Avoid the tonic note against the tonic chord at the end of a phrase unless it's the end of a section or the end of the tune. Otherwise, it sounds as if the tune is over when you've still got more of it to come. The end-note of phrases should create a feeling of suspense and make the listener want to hear more. This *rule* can be broken if you want to fool the listener or if you want to create interest by, say, repeating a phrase.

c) After a big melodic leap, change direction and fill in part of the interval, rather than continuing in the same direction, as in *Willow weep for me* or *Somewhere over the rainbow*.

### Options

You may wish to repeat the initial phrase once or twice, but if you do so more than that without any variation, it can get monotonous. Or you may wish to repeat the phrase starting on a different note (sequence). Thereagain, you may wish to complement the first phrase with an entirely different one, and then repeat those two phrases exactly or in sequence, eg. *Stella by starlight*. You may wish to develop only part of the phrase, eg. the first eight bars of *Django*. You may wish to change the first phrase on subsequent repeats by landing up on different notes at the end of each repeat or sequence, or by adding or taking away a few notes, as in *Straight no chaser*. (For a list of things you can do, see the file called *Motifs*.)

Alternatively, you may wish to write a free-flowing melody without any devices. These are quite rare. A couple of examples would be *When Sunny get blue* and *I'm in the mood for love*. But even here, the first eight bars is repeated immediately and then after the "middle eight". Bear in mind that to identify with a tune the listener wants some element of repetition, otherwise it could be an improvised solo.

## **HARMONY**

The chord progression is crucial for jazz, so if you want your tune to be noticed, you have to write a unique progression (unless it's a blues). You may find it easier to write a tune if you work out the changes first and then fit a melody over the top. Or you may prefer to do it by bits - a bit of melody with a few chord changes and then the next bit. Unexpected sequences, especially to distant keys, can be refreshing, but don't overdo it.

Be aware of how often the chords change. The style of music you're after will guide you in this. If they change too often, get rid of some of them and rehash things.

Make use of reiterated notes in adjacent chords. This can help link two very distant chords together. For example, the G is the fifth note of a C major chord and could become the flattened ninth of an F#7 chord.

Challenge all assumptions. There is no rule saying you must end up on the tonic chord, or on the tonic note, or that your phrases must conform to 4-bar patterns.

## **RHYTHM**

A piece can be ultra-rhythmic, eg. Afro-Cuban style or very simple. Often a simple tune from a rhythmic point of view can give a lot of scope for the rhythm section to get to

work on. You may wish to experiment with unusual time sequences or phrases with odd-numbers of beats, such as 3 against 4, or 5 against 4, etc.

## **FORM**

The most common forms are AABA and AA. Other choices could be ABCA, ABACA, AAB, etc. In compositions of more than one chorus, the range of choices is greater still. However you need to get a balance between variety and conformity.

## **ON GETTING YOUR MUSIC PLAYED**

What all music-writers dread is having their piece of music played by incompetent musicians. OK, if it's difficult, the first run-through even by good players can be a harrowing experience for the writer, so patience is required to let the players familiarise themselves with the piece. On subsequent playing it will shape up and any minor errors you have made (the odd notes which have been mis-copied, for instance) can be corrected and you might end up feeling quite satisfied.

What is gruelling though is when the band screws it up and continues to screw it up and things are not rehearsed (a fault amongst many British bands). You are left wondering if it's the music that's not right or the playing that's to blame, or both. The only consolation is to know that the great composers, such as Beethoven and Stravinsky, have had exactly the same experience, and they didn't give up, so neither should you.