

APPENDIX IV - MICHAEL BRECKER'S PRACTICE METHOD

PART I - Michael Brecker Clinic, William Paterson University, 1995

Michael Brecker:

“I’m not a real expert at practicing, I’ve spent many hours doing it...I don’t know what the correct way is, but I have a kind of method that I do that, for better or for worse, works for me. And it does involve repetition. I’m a slow learner. So, for me to get new ideas and really get them in my subconscious takes a while. I know other musicians that are much faster than me. My favorite example is always Joey Calderazzo, who can learn something and it’ll come out in his playing that night – that’s unique, very rare.

“When I’m into practicing, I try to divide it into segments. The beginning of it is purely technical stuff, once I’ve got a reed...long tones, overtone stuff, *a la* Joe Allard. Then I have this series of interval stuff that I do, which I could demonstrate briefly.

“Improvising for me is kind of a misnomer; I love to improvise, but a lot of it comes from making up sentences, out of words. I spend time sort of learning words, and creating sentences out of them.

“The way I do this – this is purely just for me, take what you can from this and leave the rest if it doesn’t apply: Say one morning I wake up, and I hear, like recently, these four notes:

Transcription 1



“Those four notes, they just ‘impress me,’ they speak to me. I would then practice them chromatically.

Transcription 2 ♩ = 140

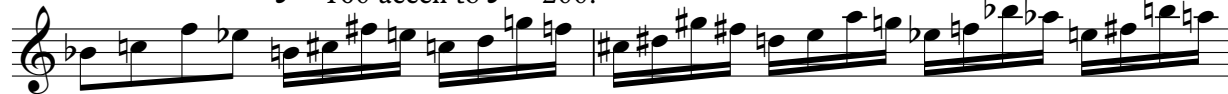


“Actually, I would do it slower, I’m trying to rush through it...

Transcription 3 ♩ = 76



♩ = 160 accel to ♩ = 200!



“If I don’t do it faster, we’ll be here all day. I would practice them up chromatically. And then, the same thing generally going down, the same way I came up, so it would be:

Transcription 4 ♩ = 145



rit.....

“I emphasize not to do it fast, because you really accomplish nothing by doing that, I’m just trying to get through it. The idea in doing it slowly is to be able to think of the notes as well as hear them. And you can think of them in various ways; sometimes I envision a keyboard, sometimes I see a staff, sometimes I just see fingerings. Most of the time, I’m kind of a cross between all of them.

“Next, I would practice the same four notes, and I would go up in whole tones, in whole steps:

Transcription 5 ♩ = 180



“It sounds kind of nice in whole steps, actually sounds like something that could be used. I think of it as like ‘food fodder.’ I certainly would not get onstage [and do this note for note], but I could take elements of that, maybe:

Transcription 6 ♩ = 195



(continued on following pages)

“Now there’s little elements of that in there, just creeping in.

“When I learn a pattern – these really are basically patterns – after I sort of learn it, I try and forget it. I write it down, I always keep a journal...always, always keep a journal. And I date it, I date the days I practice. I write down the ideas that I worked on, and I also write the potential uses for it. After I have it under my fingers and in my psyche, I usually try and forget it, and hope that it’ll come out in some distorted way subconsciously. Sometimes it takes a couple of months...but all of a sudden I’ll be onstage one night, and, you know:

Transcription 7 ♩ = 300

“That’s kind of the idea, just trying to throw it in there right now. What I would do next with the four notes is practice them in minor thirds:

Transcription 8 ♩ = 150

“There’s one more of those to do...what I’m doing is dividing the octave into four equal parts. Then, once I did that, do it in major thirds:

Transcription 9 ♩ = 175

“And then do that in every key. That one sounded pretty good. A lot of the major third things are highly useful because they don’t sound quite as parallel. (I usually skip fourths, because they always sound way too parallel to me.) I also practice the same thing in tritones:



“It’s kind of mundane when you do it this way – the exercise is mundane, but the result sometimes is quite striking, particularly when you play more interesting combinations.

That’s an intervallic thing that I do; it’s very repetitive. Again, I would mention that it’s not, for everyone, ultimately useful. For me, it’s been useful for the way I play. A lot of the sentences that I put together come out of these things.”

(Transcription of text and music by David Demsey, curator of the Michael Brecker Archive at William Paterson University.)

PART II - Michael Brecker’s Teacher, Gary Campbell, on His “Basic Routine”

In the first paragraph of the Bret Primack 1996 Interview (page vii in this book), Mike describes how he approaches daily practicing of musical ideas – “bits of language” - in the form of linear, and intervallic patterns that could work their way into his improvisation and composition.

Many years ago I introduced Mike to a Method, or Basic Routine for daily practice which delivers an in-depth view (understanding) into these “bits of language.”

Years later I wrote “Expansions,” a book that lays out these Basic Routines and illustrates how this material can potentially be developed musically.

Chapter 1 shows the basic patterns that deal first with intervallic and directional combinations within the diatonic scales (major, minor, etc.).

Chapters 5 and 6 explore Interval Sets and voicings practiced at different interval sequences – half steps, through tritone.

After these two concepts are internalized the next step is to combine the two. i.e. practice triads, chords, and interval sets at all intervals, half steps through tritone (Chapters 5 and 6), in all directional combinations (Chapter 1). For example, major triads in half steps in all four directions, ascending and descending, then repeat the process but in whole steps, minor 3rds, major 3rds, fourths and then tritones.

Looking through Mike’s Practice Notes one can recognize these principal concepts from “Expansions” throughout.

(“Expansions – a method for developing new material for improvisation,” by Gary Campbell, available from Houston Publishing/Hal Leonard Corp.)