NOTES ON HOW TO IMPROVISE

1. Jan 1988 LESSON

Techniques for improvising 'ragas':

- ♦ okay 'blind'
- ❖ inner game 'see' note/phrase before I play it
- ❖ move/dance to images as I play bow in reverence to note - sway, swing and sculpt.
- use pedal to create space
- ❖ listen to chords die away
- ❖ uneven phrases in R.H. explore rhythms in R.H. (not between L.H. and R.H.)
- ❖ I and IV before V
- ❖ LOTS of repetition play what you feel at the moment, not what you think you should feel
- 2. INSIGHT on 'How To Improvise'
 - ★ Like a Quaker meeting, don't 'say' anything unless you have something to say.
 - ❖ Get Right Hand and Left Hand 'talking' to each other
 - ❖ R. H. statement of something it wants / needs to say
 - ❖ L.H. listens
 - ❖ L.H. considers response while R.H. repeats statement
 - ❖ L.H., when ready, gives response (e.g. could just be 1 note, i.e. 'I heard you', or it could be refection or elaboration of R.H. statement, i.e. 'is this what you said?')
 - \bullet R.H. listens \rightarrow responds
 - ❖ etc. in an upward spiral
- 2. INSIGHT: Key to right-brain improvising

and then you play with

- ❖ DON'T THINK
- ❖ JUST LISTEN

To create feedback loop:

Let the act of
listening be the guide
to what and how you
play
LISTEN

You listen to what
you've just played

PLAY NOTE

LISTEN

PLAY NOTE

 $\label{eq:what you've just heard - a feedback circle that becomes a spiral$

- 4. <u>INSIGHT</u>: Key to right-brain improvising (continued) I lost the knack of:
 - ❖ LISTENING before moving on
 - ❖ REPETITION of melodic and rhythmic fragments

5. SECRET TO ENTRAINMENT & KEEPING THE BEAT

- ❖ You MUST get left or right foot keeping time (heel-soul rocking or just sole tapping)
- ❖ You DON'T have to translate the beat into L.H. running bass or R.H. business
 Let the foot do the work

1. More keys to improving

- ❖ You have to HEAR the RHYTHM before (a) melody (b) harmony
- ❖ At first ALL pentatonic, major and minor
- ❖ REPEATED MELODIC fragments
 Call and response in R.H. e.g.
 F
 Eb
- Variables within melodic fragments
 - (a) note duration
 - (b) tempo
 - (c) dynamics (loud / soft)
 - (d) repetition
 - (e) space / gaps
 - (f) vocals
 - (g) call and response between vocal and instrumental riffs
 - (h) vocal dynamics: high / low; loud / soft; rough /
 smooth; hard / soft
 - (i) idiom / genre ... e.g. slowly move from classical to rock to country to blues to caribbean to jazz
- ❖ Sustain or no sustain
- $\ ^{\bullet}$ Interplay between no-meaning fragment e.g. C (note) \rightarrow G (note) and recognizable fragment, e.g. CCC \rightarrow GG (i.e. beginning to 'La Marseilles')
- 6. Understanding Coltrane: 3-6-06

 Just watched Ben's John Coltrane video. Started getting drawn deeper into the music and the interviews. Started realizing that the music was not only wonderful and haunting but comprehensible. And then as I listened I started being able to analyze what he was doing. At least 4 numbers seemed to be based in a minor key. Coltrane kept repeating and emphasizing the key tonal notes of 1, 3, 5 and 7b. His forays into harmonic flights of fancy (modal scales) come on very quick flurries of notes and then, once

again, he returns to the very simple tonal stuff. And then Elvin Jones talks about Coltrane being an 'angel', and tears come to his eyes, and he says "sometimes you know you have met .. (pause)... someone greater than life." And the documentary ends.

So ...

I am drawn instinctively to the keyboard and for the very first time in a long time, I do an improvisation that is based in C minor (the key that Coltrane had played the last track

'Alabama' in), and I repeat the 1, 3b, 5 and 7b notes, and I put in quick flurries, e.g. an Ab scale ... AND I AM NOT PLAYING FROM THE LEFT ANALYTICAL BRAIN that is caught in the mangrove swamp of new harmonic ideas ... instead it is like those improvisations in London and Montreal ... I play and play and, like Coltrane, I could keep playing because I am being guides by the spirit of the music ... there is no possibility for anything other than the 'right' notes, the right feel, and a beauty and strength of creative expression.