

Expanding Your Freedom by Limiting Your Choices

Description

I'm mainly thinking of my fellow improvising vocalists as I write, but this can probably apply equally well to any improvising musician, or any vocalist, or any other instrumentalist, or any artist if you want to stretch it. If you've ever felt like "everything I do is pretty much the same..." (in some way that you're discerning) "...I wish I felt like I had some new/different/better ideas," here I speak to that.

You are Enough

And first of all—and this is very important—I need you to know that what you're already doing is wonderful and worthwhile, and that what you're going through is very common and normal.

That first part might seem like BS. How can I possibly know whether your improvisations are compelling, lovely, fun, good, bad, or confusing? Fair point. But I make the statement from experience and from faith. Experience has taught me that people likely to be reading this, people who've already taken their voice out for an improvisational spin, have something to express that's worthy to be said. When you sing, you express yourself in the unique way that *you* express yourself, and that's something I want to hear. And I've heard it from enough people now that I've developed the *faith* that this is in fact true for everybody. So. Keep singing.

And it's perfectly logical that this experience should be common. Early on in my attempts at improvising I must have done some little bit that got a positive reaction from a fellow musician, and I picked up on that. Wanting to "be good," I filed that away as something I could do. It wasn't long (relatively speaking) before I had a small core of things I felt I could count on; a safe home, if you will. My "go-to."

Doesn't this seem like a normal way for this experience to unfold? Of *course* you've got a safe place you sing from, and guess what: it's a fine place. It works. Don't try to forget it! It will always be there for you to return to when things get too wild. It's *good* that you have it.

Different Choices

But if you feel that it's a little too small, too limiting, too restrictive, don't lose hope. I've felt that way; I consider it a blessing that I continue to feel that way as I've learned and grown. There's plenty you can do to expand your expressive range, increase the things that are a part of your sonic palette.

Some may be able to suggest methods that inspire a quantum leap. I'm not going to be that magical. I've found a simple method that helps me explore sounds that are adjacent to my Safe Home and gradually adopt them into my regular, comfortable practice. And, as the title suggests, they mostly consist of artificially or arbitrarily setting one constraint for me to work around. Here are some examples.

Tempo: Do you have one or two go-to tempos that you tend to fall into? (Not sure? Ask a friend to

measure for you, or get a [tap tempo](#) app for your favorite device. No peeking while you tap!) Finding a tempo that's as alien to you as possible is the easiest way I've found to explore how you react musically to space that isn't your musical home. And don't just double or halve it. I suggest multiplying it by about 1.4. So if you always find yourself singing at 86 b.p.m., set a metronome for 122 (or 61) and see where your musical impulses lead you.

Feel: Subtler to describe, but I've found this to have almost as great an impact on helping me find new stuff to express. Do you fall back on straight eighth notes? Or do you swing them? Or maybe you're a 16-beat singer. Or you've heard a lot of groovy music and you swing those 16th, cut-funk style ([very superstitious!](#)). Do you frequently march? Or jig (Celtic-style)? Whichever one of these sounds unfamiliar to you, seek out examples and put the feel of them in your ear. Then pick one, stick to it for 10 minutes, and sing on it. Know what a [Montuno sounds like](#)? If not, the wide variety of Latin rhythms may open up whole new worlds for you. Another easy way to get this going is to find a friend whose Safe Home feel is very different than yours, and let them set down a groove for you to try to settle into.

Key/Tone Center: Your voice has a range, and part of that range is easier and more comfortable to sing in. So perhaps you find yourself frequently using the same note as the "home base" note when you make up a piece. (This also is awkward to describe if you don't have rudimentary music theory training.) So, things to try: start your piece in a part of your range that's... don't do anything physically uncomfortable, don't damage yourself, but use a part of your range that's less familiar. Similarly, start on a comfortable/familiar note, but try to make that note **not** the "home base" note of the piece you sing. Use it as the top note of a little five-note descending scale, for example. Whatever method you use to find your way to a less familiar tone center, your voice and its natural range will make different choices than you might if you were in your Safe Home key. Who knows what melodic potential this may unlock for you?

Mode/Scale: The two you're probably familiar with have names like Major and Minor. You may or may not be aware that there are other flavors—for instance, there are a couple that can be thought of as "in between" Major and Minor ("Mixolydian" and "Dorian" for those of you familiar with the terms). Or think of the stereotypical sound of the Blues guitarist—they tend to use slightly different collections of notes referred to as pentatonic, with some bent ("blue") notes in there. Check out [Flamenco mode](#) ([hear it](#)). Whatever your palette of scale types you're familiar with, if you find yourself using one all the time, try another. If you're concerned that there are juicy options here that you have no knowledge of, again: find examples, sink your ears into them, and try them out. Or again, get a friend who has already ventured into these territories to lay you down a groove in one of these modes, and see how your musical impulses respond.

Language/Articulation: You probably have some "nonsense" syllables that you're comfortable using. Doo be doo be doo, sha nah nah, doh-geh doh-geh, daaaaay-oh, ho-a-nock-a hey-a-nock-a, whatever is familiar in your mouth. In my small groups, we play a little game—be (by imitation) somebody else in the group. Or we use language—if someone says "oh I love Brazilian singing," we'll suggest that they improvise using the kinds of sounds and syllables they hear in that music. It typically has a dramatic effect. So listen to the way that other languages sound, and try them out! (I suggest you always do so in a respectful, non-mocking way.)

This will do for now. That these are the first five I thought of probably indicates some dimension along which I could be varying my practice that I have yet to think of deeply enough. If I've missed one that's

obvious to you, comment about it and let's grow!

You Don't Have to Be a Hero

Let me reiterate—you only need to pick one of these things to try at any given time. If that's where you're at, do that, and explore what just that one change, that once choice, that one limitation does for how you react improvisationally. Don't feel as if you need to adopt the attitude of the thrill-seeker, jumping off metaphorical cliffs into territory you've never seen before. Go exploring from the core of your Safe Home. Check out adjacent lands until they are familiar.

At the same time, balance in all things. Take risks when you feel like it. Surprise yourself. Give yourself permission to let noises come out that you might not have picked. Let them cause you to stumble a bit so that you can become familiar with finding your footing again and touching base with your Safe Home. Because you always can, remember. If you ever get just a little bit too wild, familiar ground is always there waiting for you.

Happy exploring!

Category

1. Uncategorized

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