

Transcribing 101

by
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This article is intended to take the mystery out of the transcribing process. Since the beginning of jazz, music was transferred from one generation to the next by way of the “aural tradition.” Aural tradition is another way of saying that players learned songs and improvisational techniques by means of transcribing. Transcribing, defined in jazz terms, is the process of picking out what is recorded or being played live. In jazz history, learning songs and patterns “by ear” was the only way that players without formal musical training could learn to play jazz.

Unfortunately, since the onset of the information age, transcribing has become de-emphasized in the American culture. A student who wants to learn to improvise like Charlie Parker can just buy a book with most of his solos already transcribed. If players want to learn songs, they don’t transcribe them — they buy them in fake books. My point is this: transcribing is a vital and necessary phase of learning to play jazz. If transcribing skills are not developed, then the player is facing a great disadvantage in the real world.

Having said that, I would like to describe my process for transcribing solos and songs. Contrary to popular belief, you do not have to have perfect pitch in order to transcribe. There is no trick, nor does this process require a special gift or genius. All you need is patience and practice!

The following tools will facilitate your transcribing.

- 1) A tape player with half-speed function and variable pitch control. Remember that half speed will slow down the recording by half, but it will also lower the pitch an octave. Marantz carries several models which feature both of these functions. There is no need to buy the most expensive player on the market. Another option is a CD player with a repeat or looping function. If you are transcribing something which is not issued on tape or CD, you will have to use a turntable to record the piece