



BASS

transcr, Transcribe, Transcribe

by Tom Pieper

Rational:

Two things come to mind in the midst of winter: what can I do indoors, and how may I best take advantage of available practice time. I keep musing about the level of bass students I encounter. They are competent, serious, and move at an accelerated pace. My job as a studio teacher is to get out of their way, and help students acquire fluency on their instruments to improve their performance. From beginning to advanced students, I settle on transcription as the means to this end. Here I will try to share some helpful and useful insights gathered over time.

First, you must understand transcribing is training that helps you hear, write and read music more accurately. You can test hearing when you play along with the recording. Often when you transcribe, you will know when a phrase is correct and you are not guessing. It is like when your endpin clicks into place. Writing is a little harder, like proofreading an essay; sometimes you miss something from being too familiar with the material and too forgiving. As with writing, you can test your work by having someone else play back what you wrote while you listen to see if it is what you intended. You can also compare your transcription to other people's work, but only do this after you have put in the time and effort.

Second, you definitely improve with each transcription that you take on. This is true whether you complete the whole solo, song, or one interesting vocal part. Simply uncovering one phrase will help you learn to appreciate that moment at a deeper level. I believe most fluent improvisers feel transcription is a critical means to learning how to improvise successfully.

A personal story:

My main experience with transcription started with jazz recordings, and was followed by writing lead sheets for vocal songs, pop songs, and once even for an original dance collaboration. In 1975, at 13 years of age, and after minimal exposure to jazz, a

friend told me I needed to go to the library and borrow *Miles Davis Greatest Hits*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miles_Davis'_Greatest_Hits

Today, just Google the recording and find everything about it, in 1975. I took it home and played it on my beat up Panasonic turntable. I listened and even though I thought I had some experience and had started to play jazz from a "Real Book," it was too hard for me. I found it was difficult to follow, and certainly too hard to play along with. I wondered how anyone could come up with solos, how they seemed to be together, and yet, how extremely crazy this music sounded to my younger ears.

I began taking electric bass lessons and shortly after starting the teacher told to listen to Scott LaFaro. One of the first jazz records I purchased was a twofer of *Live at The Village Vanguard—Bill Evans* featuring Paul Motian and Scott LaFaro. (*The Village Vanguard Sessions—Bill Evans*, 1973, Milestone 47002 combines the 1961 Riverside albums *Sunday at the Village Vanguard* and *Waltz for Debby*.)

With this recording playing, I would attempt to play along with *Waltz for Debbie*. Someone told me that the Real Book was not accurate but I still did not know how and tried to find notes that fit along. My version of fit at the time would not possibly fit my current view, but this is how you start to learn to play. I had a lot to discover in these recordings; I mean this literally, as I was not even aware of the meter change or any of the harmonic progressions, as I would hear it today.

Throwing yourself into a mix with the recording and your instrument, especially the bass, where you can often play without interfering with the recording, is an important passage in the life of a beginning and continuing jazz player. The old adage, "There are no wrong notes," is true but matters little, unless you know what the notes are, and the notes you want. I often use the analogy of focusing a camera to learning to play a tune from a recording; you start with a very broad view and refine the detail as you continue to focus until the image is clear. The same is true with transcribing

a solo.

I continued to attempt to play and learn music from recordings, but time was always at a premium. For a while I felt playing with other musicians made more sense. This was good but later I discovered playing along with the masters on historical recordings allowed you to bring more to the table when you played live.

Only after my curiosity to play more music well and better understand what was on recordings was stimulated by having to play music 6 nights a week, was I able to start to understand and develop better habits for writing transcriptions. The drive to transcribe was also due to mental fatigue from trying to be creative every night, and boredom from what I repeatedly found myself playing.

Some Related History:

At one time musicians were worried about other musicians stealing their ideas, and their opportunities to work. Often they tried to hide their chord voicings, or not let you see their fingers while they played. This was possible because in the past, you might only hear a musician in a club when they came to town. You had to base your knowledge of their playing from your memory. Memory allowed for organic musical learning, but also made it difficult except for the best copiers. Today, with everything recorded, any solo is available to transcribe. I do not think this makes us less creative and more robotic. The act of transcribing is a necessary pathway to the freedom of exploring your own voice. Transcribing levels the playing field, and is the same for beginning or seasoned musicians. Like writing words of a novel on a blank page, we all work through the material at the rate we need, and then discern what is desirable to keep.

Many of the best musicians quote famous solos and often have the ability to play them note for note. I consider solos in jazz and other genres as the etudes of the day. The transcription teaches you to keep the musical goal in mind, and trains your fingers to develop the technique needed to

play the solo. Clearly, the best reason for transcribing solos is to listen to masters perform as you begin to absorb all of the nuance that they bring out in their performances. This is how you learn the history of a music: listening repeatedly to examples, broadening your taste to push your appreciation, and going down the rabbit hole to dig deeper into what was played before. Transcription saves you from time spent on less important elements for your musical development. I will say that last sentence makes me wince, as I know nothing you do on your instrument, or away from the instrument is useless; moreover everything you do has an impact on your playing, but you must prioritize.

It is cool to note that when you Google “Jazz transcribing” over 13,000 pages come up. If I change the search from jazz to rock, over 400,000 pages come up, and wow! Classical has over 900,000 pages. The basic idea is you learn something from listening, or you play something on an instrument other than intended by the composer originally. Beg, borrow, and everything as you discern what your tastes are by listening to

what has gone before you. Transcribe all genres, and learn what you value for your own enjoyment, development, and understanding of music. I believe a universal truth is: anything recorded can be written down.

A Basic Transcribing plan (use these guidelines to get started)

- Start with a medium tempo
- Choose something familiar
- Pick something you like and want to spend a lot of time with
- Start with the melody
- Horn players are often easier than singers or piano players

Some suggestions:

- Try a Miles Davis solo like *So What*, or *Freddie Freeloader* (1950s)
- Do 2 or 3 solos by the same artist as you will learn and identify similarities
- Try Hank Mobley or Sonny Stitt. Use a Miles recording to create a family tree of musicians to check out. I use this often as I try to find new players. (Do not try Coltrane just yet!)
- Transcribe Horace Silver, Tommy Fla-

nagan, Red Garland or Milt Jackson

- Finally try a bass solo—Paul Chambers, Percy Heath

Use the transcription as a way to build your improvisational skills

- Transpose parts of a solo to other keys, and do this by ear
- Alternate your solo with the soloist and change between 4 bar phrases, 8 bar, or phrase by phrase of uneven lengths
- Try the transcription at a different tempo(s)
- Quote part of the solo in another song or as a device to use while improvising
- Set the transcription aside if stuck, and return to it another day

Always remember your next transcription will be easier!

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