




Fighting the Fear of Improvising

Wendy Hargreaves

12 Bar Blues

The image displays a 12-bar blues progression in 4/4 time, organized into three staves. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The first staff starts with a C7 chord and contains three measures of a repeat sign (double slash with a dot). The second staff starts with an F7 chord, followed by a repeat sign, then a C7 chord, and another repeat sign. The third staff starts with a G7 chord, followed by an F7 chord, then a C7 chord, and finally a G7 chord with a double bar line and repeat sign (:||).

	$\frac{4}{4}$	C ⁷		∕.		∕.		∕.	
		F ⁷		∕.		C ⁷		∕.	
		G ⁷		F ⁷		C ⁷		G ⁷	:

Rate your anxiety on a scale of 1 – 5

- 
- 1 Not anxious**
 - 2 A little anxious**
 - 3 Moderately anxious**
 - 4 Very anxious**
 - 5 Utter dread**

What are the thoughts that are going through your mind that are making you feel anxious?

I am feeling anxious because I.....

An apology

Rate your anxiety on a scale of 1 – 5

- 
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1. Sense of self

2. Content

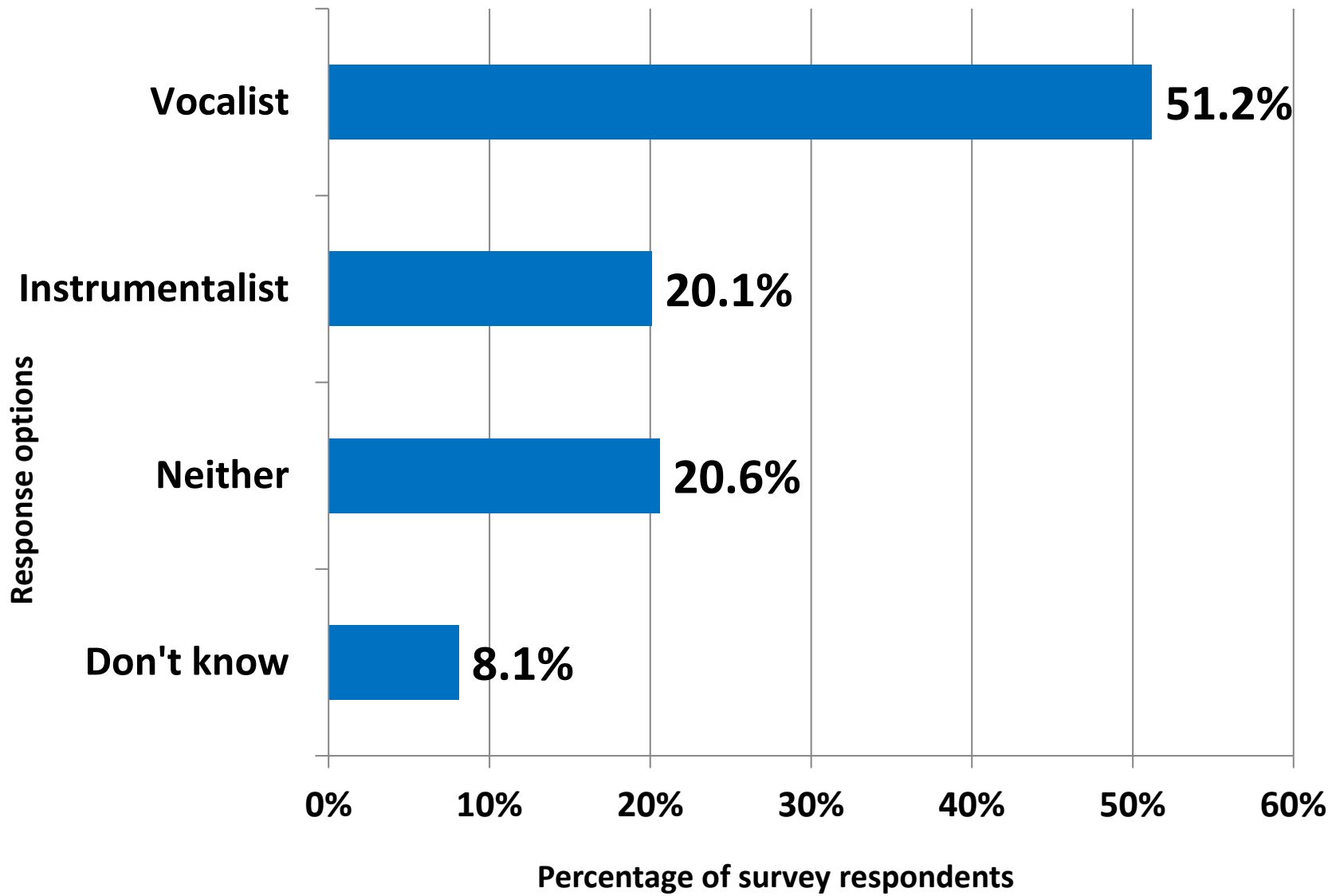
Data Sources from PhD

*Anonymous, online survey of 209,
currently performing, Australian, adult
jazz instrumentalists and vocalists*

*22 X 90-minute interviews of Australian
jazz vocal performers and/or jazz
educators in Australian tertiary
institutions*

1. Protecting the person

“In your experience, which musician takes the greater personal risk by improvising?”



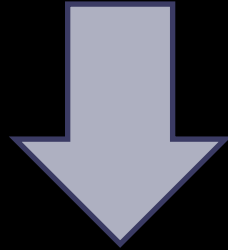
Voice appears to be more closely associated with our identity than instrumental performance.

“...[W]hen you’re creating the sound on your instrument, that’s the ‘voice’, that’s the sound. But when you take [that instrument] away, the instrument is you and the sound that you’re making is you...I find that a lot more exposing...”

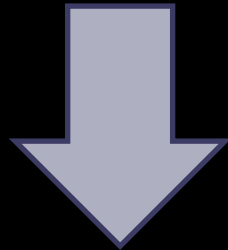
(Andrew)

Mistakes are part of improvising .

(Berliner, 1994, pp. 379 – 383)



For vocalists, our musical sound is more closely associated with who we are.



If our vocal improvising is flawed,
then we are flawed.

“Somehow people find it hard to divorce any judgment that may be made of that [vocal] sound from a judgment of themselves. That’s probably the case too with instrumentalists but it’s just such more obviously. It’s integrated into your being so it’s much harder to make that clear divide between what’s being judged.”

(Melissa)

A TEACHING RESPONSE

- Safe zones where everything is acceptable, do not correct
- Permission to sound awful
- Valuing the 'mistakes' as medals of risk
- Create a cognitive divide, separating self from product

MANTRAS

- I am making music, not making me
- I am a work in progress

YOUR MANTRAS

YOU HAVE PERMISSION TO
SOUND OUT OF TUNE.

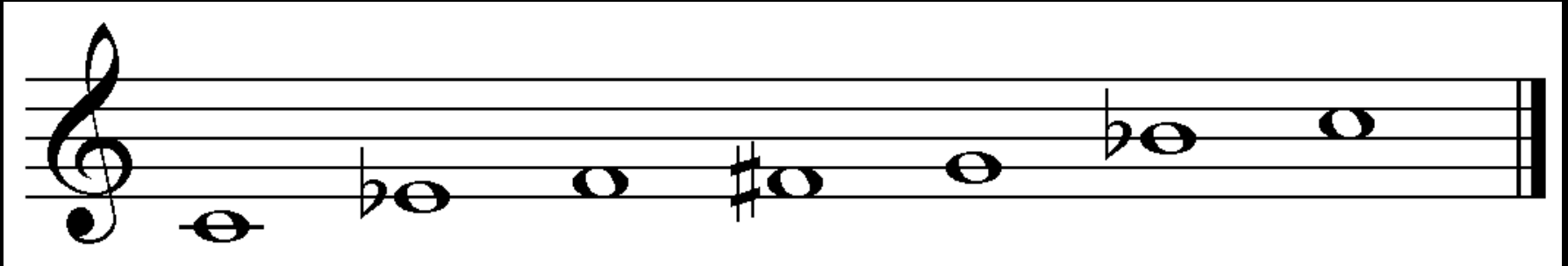
IN FACT, IT IS HIGHLY LIKELY
THAT AT TIMES YOU WILL!

“As soon as [vocalists] start to improvise, even though their pitch might be generally quite good, they are searching for notes and they are halfway getting them and it kind of turns out to be like an intonation problem or a pitch problem...

It's not that they can't sing in tune. It's that they're not hearing sufficiently yet. They're not hearing the line clearly enough to be able to sing it in tune.”

(Bruce)

Blues Scale



Don't sing if...

- perfect pitch
- very familiar with the scale
- Sing on 'do'
- One note per beat (med. tempo)

“...the popular conception of improvisation as ‘performance without previous preparation’ is fundamentally misleading. There is, in fact, a lifetime of preparation and knowledge behind every idea that an improviser performs.”

(Berliner, 1994, p. 17)

2. *Anxiety over content*

Familiarity with referents:

- melodic/ harmonic
- rhythmic
- syllables (starting place)

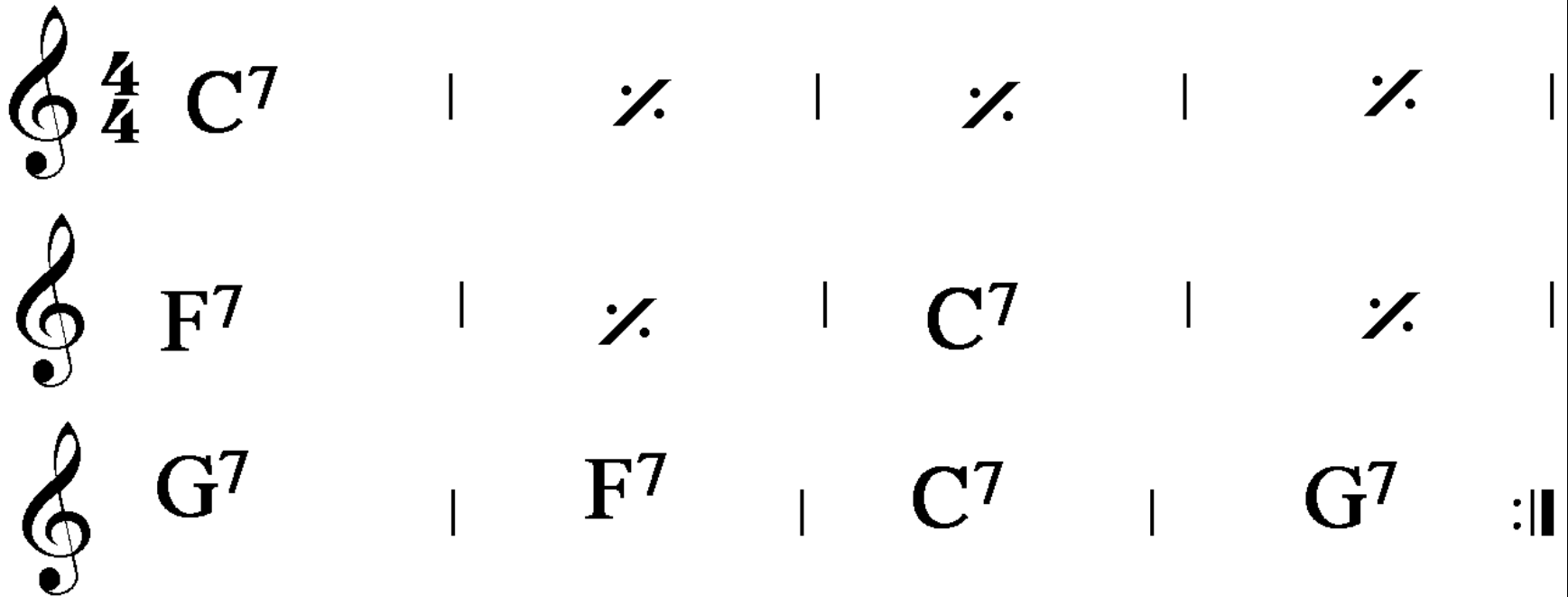
3. Do it.

The act of improvising is a crucial to the learning process itself. You have to do it to learn it, and doing it increases confidence.

Beginner activities for low anxiety improvising

- Recording improvising at home (no audience)
- Trading fours - It's collaborative, challenges the hierarchy, short bursts, standing beside less confrontational
- Simultaneous improvising - emphasis on playing and exploring, not performing

12 Bar Blues



A diagram of a 12-bar blues progression in 4/4 time. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a C7 chord. The second staff starts with a treble clef and an F7 chord. The third staff starts with a treble clef and a G7 chord. The progression is as follows:

Staff	Bar 1	Bar 2	Bar 3	Bar 4
1	C7	/	/	/
2	F7	/	C7	/
3	G7	F7	C7	G7 :

A starting place in fighting the fear of improvising is to:

- 1) Protect the person
- 2) Familiarise the student with the referents *before* application
- 3) Do it

References

- Berliner, P. F. (1994). *Thinking in jazz*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
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- Hargreaves, W. (2012). Generating ideas in jazz improvisation: Where theory meets practice. *International Journal of Music Education: Practice*. 30 (4), 354-367.