



***Improvisation without secrets
with Frank Herzberg***

5 fatal Mistakes

while practicing

How do I organize my
improvisation exercises?



Frank Herzberg studied classical double bass at the Hanns Eisler School of Music in Berlin and jazz performance and composition at Berklee College of Music in Boston. His most defining teaching experience was with the legendary jazz educator Charlie Banacos, who had already taught musicians such as Mike Stern, Michael Brecker, Pat Metheny, and Danilo Perez. Since 1997, Frank has been living in São Paulo, Brazil.

The bassist's musical career ranges from working as an orchestral musician - playing in groups such as Banda Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo, Orquestra Jazz Sinfônica and Orquestra Mediterrânea, which gave him the opportunity to play with musical luminaries such as David Liebman, Hermeto Pascoal, Egberto Gismonti, Ginga and Airto Moreira - to his appointment as a teacher, to pass on his knowledge to the next generation of aspiring talents - both face to face and through online courses: "LEAKS-Improvisation without secrets".

Frank Herzberg has appeared on over 400 albums as a bassist, producer, or mix/mastering engineer. He has worked with a long list of notable personalities which include Airton Moreira, Alexandre Zamith, Anat Cohen, André Juarez, Antonio Sanchez, Bob Moses, Bocato, David Liebman, Don Sebeski, Egberto Gismonti, Filó Machado, Guilherme Franco, Hermeto Pascoal, Horace Silver, Hubert Laws, Hugo Fattoruso, Ithamara Koorax, Jacques Schwarz - Bart, Jair Rodrigues, John Stein, Laudir de Oliveira, Lelo Nazário, Marta Karassawa, Mauro Senesi, Mike Mainieri, Nailor Azevedo (Proveta), Raul de Souza, Steve Hass, Teco Cardoso, Torsten de Winkel, and Zé Eduardo Nazário.

Contents

- Introduction 4

HOW NOT!

- #1 - Practice without clear goals 7
- #2 - No exercise routine 8
- #3 - Too much at once 9
- #4 - No Focus 10
- #5 - Listening to music isn't practice? 11

WHAT TO DO?

- #1 - Practice with clear goals 13
- #2 - Exercise Routine! 14
- #3 - Less is more! 16
- #4 - With focus! 18
- #5 - Hear and Copy! 19

- Final thoughts 20

Introduction:

In this e-book I would like to incorporate **my personal experience** as a bass player and improvisation teacher. It will certainly not be a textbook full of concepts about improvisation technique or a collection of patterns and licks, but suggestions on **how you can develop an effective and meaningful study plan.**

When I finally started my professional life as a bass player after college in Berlin and Boston, I realized that I had collected **a lot of valuable information about improvisation** and playing the bass. I was also able to play one or two pieces, but I was **far away** from my desire **to convey feelings through my instrument!** Of course you grow with your tasks and challenges, but **I was completely lost in the flood of information.** (And in the 90s the Internet and Youtube were not even to be thought of!)

Although I had an **exercise routine**, I wasn't really clear about my path. Even the saying of a friend who had studied with me at Berklee College: "I know how to do it now, but I'm much too lazy to practice all this stuff!", didn't help...

During that time I made it through a few orchestra auditions, played in bands, but had **no clear idea of where I wanted to be as a musician.**

Improvise...Of course! Compose and hear better... Sure!

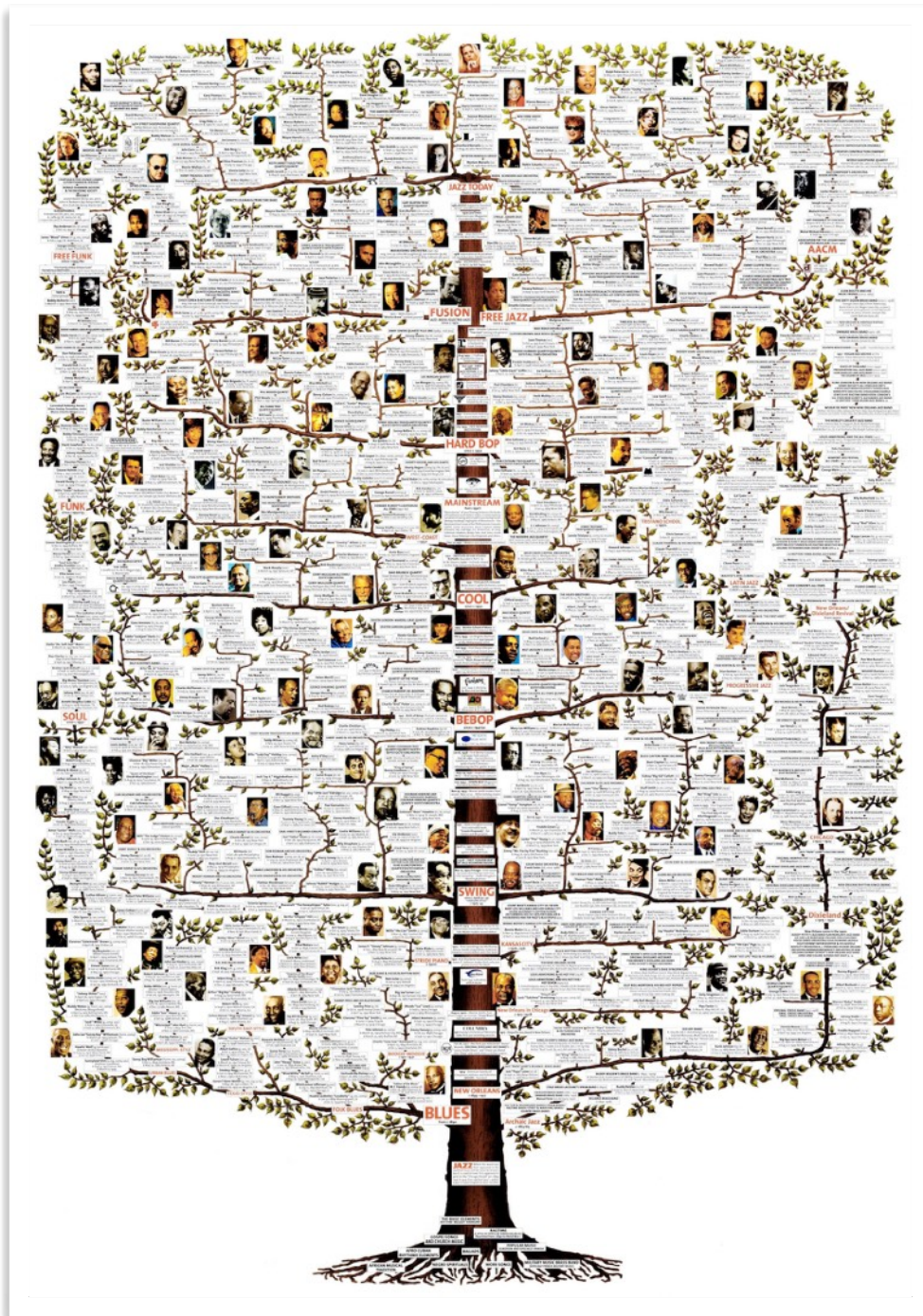
But how?

That was almost 30 years ago! During this time I started to teach improvisation, based on my courses at Berklee College and of course my **lessons with Charlie Banacos**, who was always able to inspire you with his good humored nature. However, I realized that a **higher education system only touches on many different concepts** in a short time without the student really being able to delve into them. That has to come later and as Bruce Gertz, my bass teacher in Boston, gave me as a dedication on one of his CDs:

"The limit are the stars!"

And then coincidence came to my aid: I received a gift that opened my eyes to my future (practice) path:

The jazz family tree!



What began as a spontaneous vision would become the **basis of my teaching philosophy**: an evolutionary teaching developed in terms of roots, trunk, branches, twigs and ever-widening ramifications. But more on that later.

So if you think **you can't learn to improvise** because:

- You have **no talent...**
- You don't have **time...**
- there is **too much information** and you don't know where to start...
- You are **too old...**
- You don't want to **embarrass yourself...**
- or, or, or...

...then I will show you that in **most cases** this is not the case, regardless of whether you are just getting familiar with improvisation or have been studying for years but are not achieving the desired results.

"Being successful requires two things: clear goals and a burning desire to achieve them."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

But first I want to talk about how **NOT** to learn to improvise.

NO!

Here are **5 basic mistakes** that will prevent you from making progress in your practice routine, discourage you and make it seem like there's no use.

1

PRACTICE WITHOUT CLEAR GOALS

Picking up the instrument and **playing away** is sure a way to find your tone, to discover a thing or two, but you **soon reach a saturation point** where you stop creating and just persistently **repeat what is easy, comfortable and enjoyable to play**. You can do this for 1.2...12 hours **without really starting a continuous process**.



#2

NO EXERCISE ROUTINE

Whether you are a **beginner**, a **student** or a **professional**, without a clear plan it will be **difficult to continuously improve**. Especially when you are **aimlessly looking for ideas from the internet** and are not working according to **clear criteria**, you are going in circles. You've often forgotten the next day what you practiced the day before.

#3

TOO MUCH AT ONCE

We humans are proven to be bad at **multi-tasking**. (Above all: men...;) Or can you read four books at the same time, follow three Netflix series, and still listen to music?

Working through many **different methodologies or techniques** at the same time often **doesn't give you the focus** you need to understand a topic in depth. **Too often we know little about many things.**

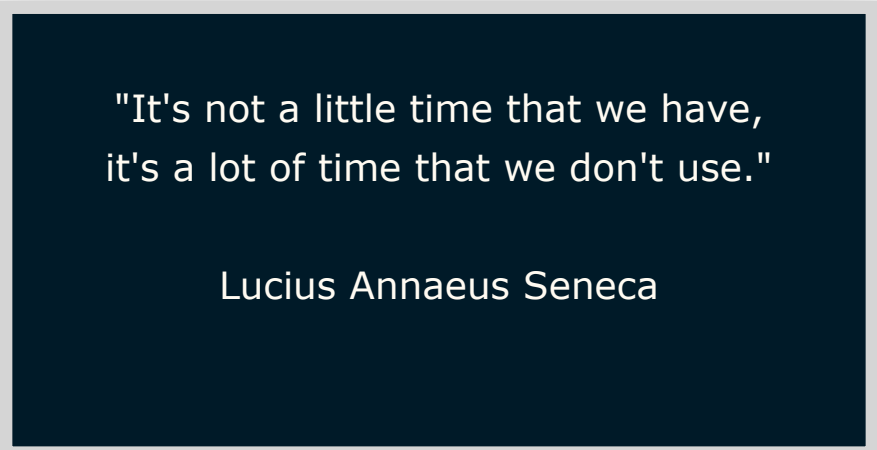


#4

NO FOCUS

Especially these days, it's really **hard to stay focused** on tasks, even for a short amount of time. The mobile phone, Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, the older ones maybe e-mail...

Not fertile ground to practice productively.



"It's not a little time that we have,
it's a lot of time that we don't use."

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

#5

Thinking: Listening to music is not PRACTICE...

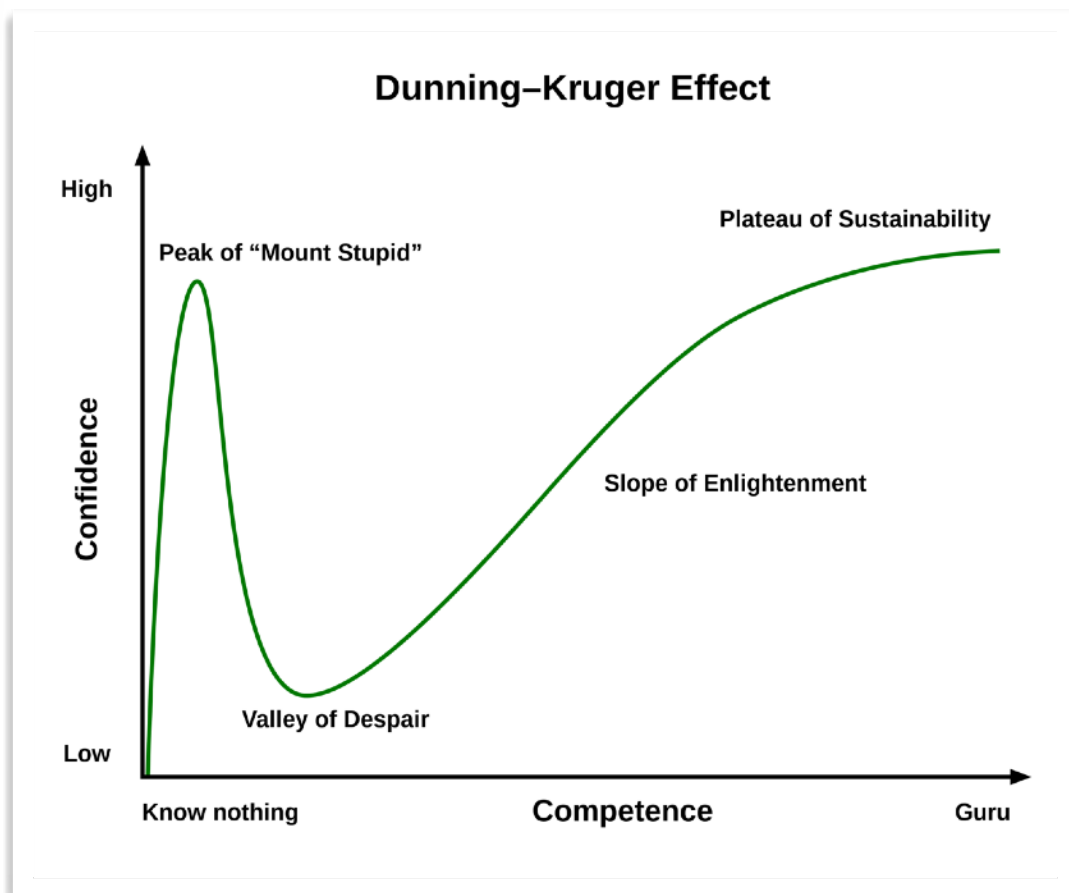
If you only practice technique, scales, arpeggios, etc., without having a clear idea of how they should sound later, you are like a **poet** who strings together beautiful words that **don't make any sense**. (Without offending Dadaists...;)

The process of learning to improvise is certainly similar to learning a new language, **first listening, then understanding, then speaking**.

Did you find yourself in these problems? I recognize myself, even now while writing this text... I'm always very sad when I see friends or students who, despite great talent and potential, can't organize themselves and don't implement their ideas. **Gradually, they lose motivation and become discouraged.** Often the energy and self-confidence is great at the beginning, but after a short time the realization comes:

Climbing this mountain will take time!

Acquiring **knowledge** takes work in any field, and a psychological study found that **ignorance often breeds more confidence** than knowledge. Socrates already knew: **I know that I know nothing...**



So let's talk about it now:

What to do?

Here are 5 points on how to make your studies more effective:

1

PRACTICE WITH CLEAR GOALS

Setting goals and **following plans** sounds like **office and entrepreneurs** and initially goes very **against our idea of art** and free spirit.

Right?

To stick with improvisation; I recently heard from my student Steve: "I've been trying to improvise on the **blues for 20 years**, but I'm still losing the form and often **I don't know where I am.**"

Here, for example, **we have one goal**: to **understand the blues form** in such a way that **one is sure at any moment** what harmony one hears and can **keep even the wildest ideas on track**. Especially at the beginning it is **difficult to name these goals** and sometimes you need **help** to point you in the right direction.

#2

PRACTISE ROUTINE!

In my practice routine and then in the improvisation course, I thought about how I could approach the various techniques **step by step**.

The jazz family tree was the initial orientation:

Blues - Swing - Bebop - Cool - Hardbop - Fusion

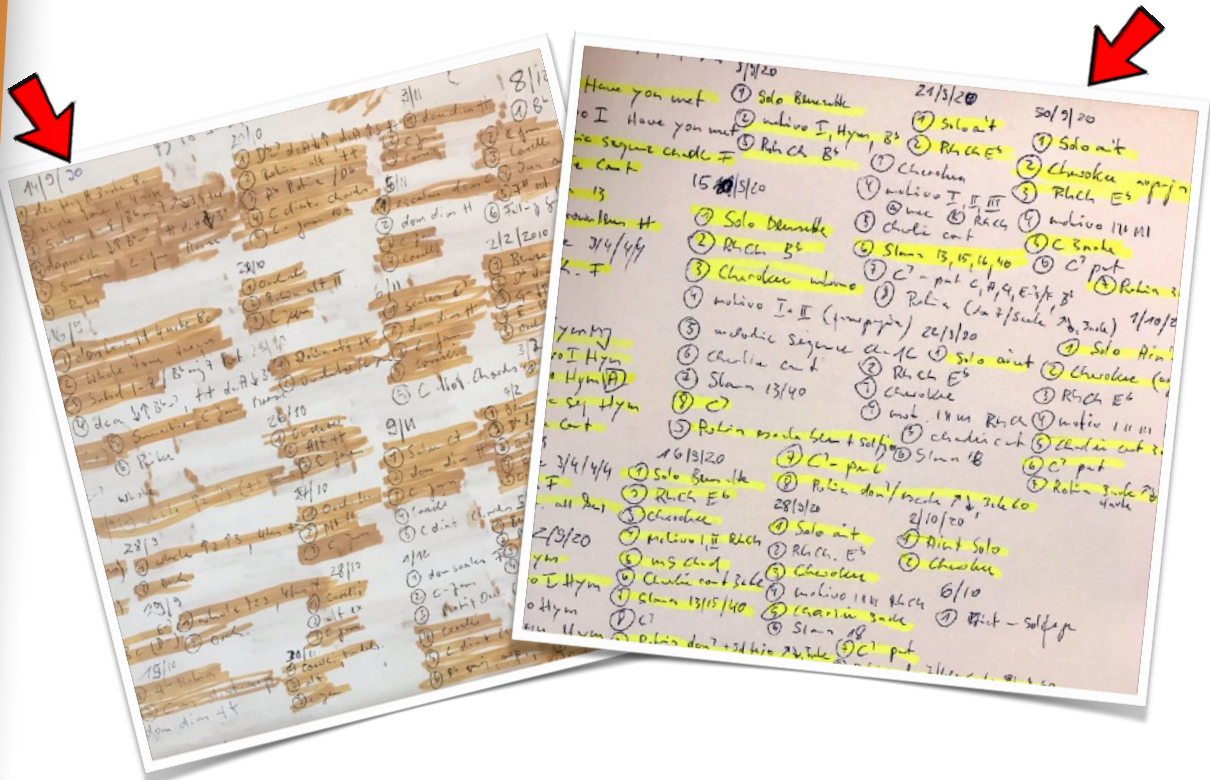
What has **changed** in each of these styles of improvisation? What stayed? And the more questions I asked myself—whether it was about the **improvisational language** of King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, and Sidney Bechet, the **change in style** during the swing era, or **game changers** like Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis—the **answers became clearer**. Five pillars of improvisation emerged:

- Blues Dominant chords, blues scales
- Swing Diatonic Scales, Maj7
- Bebop Chromatic approach technique
- Cool modal concepts
- Hardbop Octave divisions (Coltrane changes and inside-outside)
- Fusion Mostly amalgamation of the previous ideas

So my first practise plan looked something like this:

- 1) C Blues scale in the instrument range 10x mechanical
- 2) Improvising with the C blues scale with metronome on 2 & 4
- 3) Arpeggios C7 & F7, instrument range 10x mechanical
- 4) Improvising with C7 & F7 (individually and 2 bars each chord)
- 5) Blues form arpeggios (10x mechanical with metronome)
- 6) Improvising with the arpeggios of the blues form
- 7) Repertoire - song routine

Another good idea is to **list this exercise plan every day and cross out** what you could practice. This gives you a good overview of where you stopped, what you have not yet worked on and after the holidays it saves you having to figure out what you have been working before. I've had these plans since 1990 and I always like to look back...



This is my practise plan. I use an A3 drawing pad and meanwhile it spans 30 years... time flies...

#3

Less is more!

Deciding **what to practice** is often a difficult task; listening to a solo, comping techniques, pentatonic scales, arpeggios with chromatic approach, melodic cells, giant steps, plus learning 10 standards by heart...

With this workload you will certainly not see a **steep learning curve**. Try to find or **develop a guide** that takes you step by step to the **next learning plateau**.

If your **time feel is bad** and practicing with the **metronome** is a nightmare, you should look for exercises for this focus and **continuously include** them in your plan.

If you **can't hear the progressions** and you keep **getting out of the song form**, or you have **no melodic ideas**, find exercises on this topic.

It's often **more comfortable** to play with a playalong or repeat the songs that suit you, but your **skills will grow very slowly** or not at all. Decide on **3 - 6 focal points** and work on them with different exercises.

Look again at my example exercise plan:

- 1) C Blues scale in the instrument range 10x mechanical
- 2) Improvising with the C blues scale with metronome on 2 & 4
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- 4) Improvising with C7 & F7 (individually and 2 bars each chord)
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What are the **main areas of focus**:

Only 3!

1. C Blues scale
2. Dominant arpeggios
3. Repertoire

There is a **technical part** where I play the scales and arpeggios with the metronome across the instrument range in different rhythms and a **creative part** where I improvise with the same material.

The **song routine** is a method in which I practice the individual parts of a song one after the other:

- Theme - Melody
- Accompaniment - Walkbass or Chords
- Arpeggios - mechanical and improvisation
- Scales - mechanical and improvisation
- Other exercises I'm working on (e.g. motifs, sequences...)
- Theme with the ending

In addition, the song routine is **practiced in the form**, i.e. without stopping between each technique, so that the harmonic progression is internalized.

#4

With concentration!

Indeed, today our **concentration span** has become quite small, too much information seems to jostle for our attention.

If you have **little contiguous time** to practice, try **blocks of 20-40** minutes. With the exercise plan you have the blocks in mind and usually we **don't need more time** for each exercise. No question: Put the phone on silent and don't even look at it during this time...

To create a **sense of accomplishment**, you can also write the blocks on post-it notes and create a **TO DO and DONE** list. In 1 - 2 week cycles, the completed exercises then go into the DONE list.

#5

Hear, understand, copy, create!

The process of **learning improvisation** was always **listening** and **copying**. Louis Armstrong listened to **King Oliver**, Charlie Parker - **Buster Smith** and Coltrane listened to **Parker**. If you want to learn to improvise, look for **role models** to steer your tone and phrasing in the right direction. Especially today, in the **age of YOUTUBE**, it is so much easier to find **good recordings**.

Transcribing

In your practice plan, you can include **solos** that particularly appeal to you. It's not important to write down whole solos, but short phrases or lines that you like. I use a method:

Listen - sing along - sing - play - internalize

Try listening phrase by phrase and then singing along, then sing the phrase without the recording, with the **metronome on 2 and 4**. The most important thing is to know **what beat the phrases start on**.

Only then go to the instrument and look for the notes. In the process of memorizing the melodies, I use **solfeggio**, which is surprisingly good at helping me retain the phrases in **long-term memory**.

PLAY ALONG with TUNES

Another exercise my students love is playing along with a recording **without hearing it first**. For example, we're working on "Have You Met Miss Jones" and I'll send the recordings of Chet Baker, or Kenny Garrett. Now play along - comping without knowing what will happen. This roughly corresponds to the situation of a **jam session**: sometimes there is an ending that you don't know, or the drum solo isn't in the right form, etc. **You have to get through it somehow!** You also play with the best musicians, Elvin Jones, Jimmy Cobb, Wynton Kelly, Oscar Peterson... it can't get any better!

Final thoughts:

I hope I could give you some suggestions. Improvising is not only a technique but also **a way of conveying your point of view and feelings**. The deeper you delve into this world, the more you begin to **understand and discover other improvisers**.

One last tip:

Always try to play with the **best musicians around you**, that will motivate you!

The limit is the stars! I wish you success!



For more information, also see my website.

<https://frankherzberg.com>