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Published by:  
JAMEY AEBERSOLD JAZZ, INC.  
1211 AEBERSOLD DRIVE  
NEW ALBANY, IN 47150  
[www.jazzbooks.com](http://www.jazzbooks.com)

Transcribed by BOB ELKJER using state-of-the-art  
MIDI/digital techniques

Music computer graphics by BILL GWYNNE

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# COMPING

By Hal Galper

## The Pianist's Role In A Jazz Group

The piano is classed as a percussion instrument. It also has a strong melodic and harmonic component. In a jazz group, duplication of roles is to be avoided. As soon as two instruments take the same role (duplication) the music suffers. As a jazz group already has a percussion instrument (the drums), a harmonic instrument (the bass), and a melodic instrument (the soloist), the tendency for the piano to duplicate the roles is always present.

Because of the preceding, I have always considered the piano as being a superfluous instrument in a jazz group. It is just not needed. The other instruments are already fulfilling the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic roles. Because of its ability to be so interruptive, the piano's role in a group is then very sensitive and must be used with restraint.

What then is the pianist's role in a jazz group? One must assume that all the members of the group know the chord changes, hence the piano is not needed to plunk down the chords for them. The bassist is already doing that. The group already has a drummer so the piano is not needed to keep time and the soloist is already playing melody as well.

The pianist's role is that of a rhythmic, melodic and harmonic colorist. As a matter of fact, all instruments are colorists. The pianist must strive to suppress the percussive aspects of the piano and make it, in a sense, "liquid." Chords that are attacked in a manner that is too percussive, too loud, or too active, will interrupt the rhythmic flow of the music and distract the soloist as well as the listener. Voicings with too many notes in them will confine the soloist's choice of melody.

The question of "when" to do something is as important as "what" to do. The attitude of a professional accompanist is that: **all comping ideas come from the soloist!** The pianist must not impose their ideas on the soloist. In a sense, the soloist is the leader of the group effort at that moment! The accompanists (including bass and drums) should strive to acquire the perception that every idea a soloist plays is a suggestion (a signal) to the accompanists as to what the soloist needs behind them to support the sound the soloist is trying to create. This means that all ideas of comping come from the soloist and are played after the soloist plays an idea. Only on a rare occasion does the comping lead the soloist or "feed" a soloist ideas. Not every idea a soloist plays needs a response from the comping. If every idea were responded to, the comping would be too active and would distract the soloist. If you run out of ideas while comping, it means that you are not listening to the soloist. If the soloist is playing interestingly enough and leaving space in the solo for you to respond, you should never run out of comping ideas. Be advised that all soloists, especially students, are not aware of a comping's perception of them. Quite often the student soloist is not aware of their responsibility to the rhythm section to play clear concise ideas and leave space in their solo for them to respond.



Hal Galper's piano comping to the chords of

# All The Things You Are

1  $A\flat\Delta$   $G\flat\Delta$   $(G\Delta)$   $A\flat\Delta$

5  $A\flat\Delta$   $G\flat\Delta$   $A\flat\Delta$

9  $F^-$   $B\flat$   $E\flat/A\flat$   $A\flat7$

13  $D\flat\Delta$   $C\Delta$

17  $B\flat7\flat9$   $E\flat7\flat4$

Hal Galper's piano comping to the chords of  
*Smoke Gets In Your Ey*

1 EbΔ F#° F- Bb7b9

AbΔ A° G- Bb7 (Ab7)

Dbb7+4 C7+ Eb7b9 EbΔ F#°

EbΔ A7+4 AbΔ A°