

# Free Improvisation

## A Practical Guide

by Tom Hall





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## FOUR

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# Beginning Exercises



The exercises in this chapter are designed to be an introduction to both free improvisation and working with improvisational exercises. They provide a solid foundation for further exploration, no matter what the specific interests or experience of your group.



**Tip:** Set up the group in a circle, so everyone can see each other clearly. In exercises where players come in sequentially you can simply go around the circle.

In some of the multi-step exercises, it may be useful to take turns having one person give instruction to the group as they are playing, so everyone can move at once and the flow of the exercise isn't interrupted.

### Exercise 1: One Sound

Spontaneously creating an expressive sound is the first step to freely improvising, and doing it in a group is a great way to experience improvising with others. This is an excellent first exercise for those that have not improvised before, and a good warm-up for more experienced improvisers.

**Step 1:** Everyone in the group plays one sound, in sequence, focusing on playing a sound that expresses the feeling of the moment.

Sit or stand in a relaxed manner, and in a "ready to play" position. Focus your attention inward. Be aware of how you're feeling in this moment. Don't make any judgments, just watch and see how you feel. Wait for a sound or an impulse to movement to come into your awareness. Allow it to come through your body and create a sound. You don't have to "do" anything. The sound will create itself if you make space to let it happen. Take all the time needed to feel, hear, and express each sound.

If this seems difficult, bring your attention back to how you're feeling. It's not important what you are feeling, only that you are aware of it. Now play that feeling! Any sound that is a truly spontaneous expression (no matter what it is) is a valued and appropriate response to this exercise.

**Step 2:** Play all the sounds at the same time. That's the group sound of that moment!

## **Exercise 2: One Sound at a Time**

This exercise series can be done with or without a pulse (a series of beats of equal duration). When doing it with a pulse, count off a tempo (the speed of the pulse). Every person has one beat to play their sound. If someone misses their beat, skip them and go on to the next person. If the pulse breaks down, just stop, and start again. If playing without a pulse, simply play the sounds in sequence.

**Step 1:** Everyone in the group plays one sound, in sequence, focusing on playing a sound that expresses the feeling of the moment. Once everyone has played one sound keep going around the circle, each person playing a sound of their choice. You can change your sound each time around or keep it the same. Once the group is comfortable doing this, follow the suggestions in Steps 2-5. Give ample time for everyone to experience each step before going on to the next.

**Step 2:** Direct your attention equally to your sounds and to the sounds the others are making.

**Step 3:** Don't think at all about the sound you are going to make. Give all your attention to everyone else's sounds. When it's your turn, just do something. (Anything!) Don't think about it. (Just do it!)

**Step 4:** As you listen to everyone's sounds notice how they come together to make a phrase. The more you focus your attention on this phrase, the more interesting and coherent it will become. You are now improvising a "group phrase" together!

**Step 5:** Relax your concern about stopping right away when the next person's sound starts. Consider that all the sounds being made belong to all of you, so there are no boundaries between the various sounds.

### **Basic Group Groove Exercises**

When freely improvising, any player can choose to be a part of the rhythm section. The commonly accepted roles and boundaries that define a rhythm section in more traditional styles of music do not necessarily apply. Any player can be responsible for improvising a background, creating a groove, or otherwise providing accompaniment. Although this accompaniment does not have to conform to any traditional standard, being an accompanist requires a kind of skill and understanding that many lead instrumentalists have never learned. Players of traditional rhythm section instruments have experience being accompanists, but may want to experiment with different ways to improvise accompaniment outside of their traditional roles.

The exercises in this workbook provide an opportunity to practice many different kinds of accompaniment, beginning with this initial exploration of improvising group grooves. Use these beginning groove exercises to slow down the decision making process, allowing each player to take as much time as needed to find the choices they want to make. Use them to explore basic questions about groove creation: How do different kinds of lines interact with each other? What adds or detracts from a groove? How can a group of people spontaneously create a groove? What are the different parts and roles in a groove and how can I function in them?

### Exercise 9: Ostinato Groove

**Step 1:** One person plays a repeating pattern, in time (an ostinato). This pattern can be *anything*, but it has to stay the same. Take as much time as needed to find the desired phrase and to let it settle into a groove.

**Step 2:** The second player adds a second ostinato part to the groove, taking as much time as needed to find what they want to play in response to the first players offering. Once the second part is chosen, allow time to feel how the two phrases fit together into a groove before moving on.

**Step 3:** One at a time, the other players enter in the same way, until all the players are playing their repeated patterns at the same time. You have now improvised a groove! Keep playing this groove until every part seems locked into the pulse in a satisfying way, then stop.

### Exercise 10: Mutating Groove

**Step 1:** One person plays an ostinato pattern, in time. This pattern can be anything, but it has to stay the same. Take as much time as needed to find the desired phrase and to let it settle into a groove.

**Step 2:** The second player adds a second part to the groove, taking as much time as needed to find what they want to play in response to the first players offering, and to fit the two phrases together.

**Step 3:** One at a time, the other players enter in the same way, until all the players are playing their repeated patterns at the same time. Keep playing this groove, allowing every part to fit together in a satisfying way.

**Step 4:** The first person drops out, listens to the groove, then comes in with a new part. Do this in sequence until everyone has changed, and the original groove is transformed into a new groove. Keep playing this new groove until all the parts are locked in. You can stop here or keep going, changing the groove as many times as you like.



**Tip:** Stay active as you repeat your part. Each repetition is an opportunity to deepen your groove, and to connect more fully with the parts others are playing.

As different parts come in, allow yourself to make small adjustments to what you are playing, as long as it contributes to the greater groove.