

# The Improvisation style of Michael Brecker

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## Table of Contents

Biography.....	2
Influences.....	3
Early Style.....	4
Melodic Substitutions.....	5
Modal playing.....	6
Playing Simply.....	8
Patterns.....	9
Special Effects.....	10
Structure and Phrasing.....	11
Discography.....	12

## Illustration Index

Illustration 1: Bar 16 of Straphangin'.....	3
Illustration 2: Bars 7-8 of New York.....	4
Illustration 3: Bar 28 of New York.....	4
Illustration 4: Bars 15-16 of New York.....	4
Illustration 5: Bar 28 of Straphangin'.....	5
Illustration 6: Bar 46 of The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines.....	5
Illustration 7: Bars 33-34 of The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines.....	5
Illustration 8: Bar 9 of Night Jessamine.....	6
Illustration 9: Bar 42 of Straphangin'.....	6
Illustration 10: Bars 14-16 of Night Jessamine.....	7
Illustration 11: Bars 41-44 of Night Jessamine.....	8
Illustration 12: Bars 27-28 of The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines.....	8
Illustration 13: Bars 29-30 of Night Jessamine.....	9
Illustration 14: Bar 45 of The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines.....	9
Illustration 15: Bar 40 of The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines.....	9
Illustration 16: Bars 31-34 of New York.....	10
Illustration 17: Bar 38 of Straphangin'.....	10
Illustration 18: Bars 11-12 of Night Jessamine.....	11

## **Biography**

Michael Brecker is one of the most influential saxophonists of the past 30 years. He is probably best described as a jazz-funk saxophonist but he has played on recordings covering a wide range of styles. Throughout his career he has played with many musicians that would be considered the top of the profession. Appearing on approximately 700 big releases it is clear that he has an incredible versatility, probably largely as a result of his early influences. As well as most major Jazz artists he has also appeared on releases by Aerosmith, Average White Band, James Brown, Cameo, Eric Clapton, Dire Straits, Chaka Khan, John Lennon, Donny Osmond and many others. He was also a member of the Saturday Night Live band in 1984/85.

Throughout the 70s and 80s he was part of the Brecker Brothers with his brother Randy Brecker. They were one of the most influential fusion bands of the 70s.

His style is one of the most imitated by saxophonists. It has almost become a cliché within Jazz and is frowned upon by some artists.

## Influences

John Coltrane was a huge influence on Michael and this influence can be most easily heard by comparing their modal playing. They use a lot of the same techniques. Coltrane's playing is the foundation of Michael's approach of playing modally over each chord. His style is a development of that. Throughout his career he has consistently tried to push the boundaries, leading to a somewhat experimental attitude to his playing that has involved playing the e-WI (electronic wind instrument), as featured on the track 'Inside Out'.

As a fusion artist Michael has taken some inspiration from rock guitar as well as Jazz. He plays licks that you would normally associate with the guitar.

His approach to soloing is highly lick based. Michael was almost embarrassed by this fact in his early career. Whilst performing with Hal Galper's quintet, he is reported to have said, 'Oh man, you're going to have to listen to my twelve licks again'.



*Illustration 1: Bar 16 of Straphangin'*

There is an element of bebop within his solos. The lick in Illustration 1 is quite typical of a bebop lick. This makes up a small but significant part of his soloing.

## Early Style

There is a development in Michael's soloing approach that reflects what was happening in general within music. In the early 70's there is a much bluesier edge to his playing and his note choice is relatively safe. Throughout the 70's his style got more outside and more aggressive, with some blisteringly fast passages in his soloing. His more recent recordings are less aggressive but his note choice has moved even further out, sometimes with almost no obvious reference to the underlying harmony.



*Illustration 2: Bars 7-8 of New York*

Illustration 2 is typical of the approach he took in one of his first recorded solos. Over a C vamp he largely plays C dorian. This is the typical first choice scale for this situation. He does add some chromaticism to the solo.



*Illustration 3: Bar 28 of New York*

Illustration 3 shows how he uses C diminished arpeggios over the Cm7 chord.



*Illustration 4: Bars 15-16 of New York*

Illustration 4 is the only F altered lick within the solo. The altered scale is a favourite scale of Michael and he consistently uses it in every solo. This lick is a hint towards his later style within a predominantly diatonic solo.







*Illustration 10: Bars 14-16 of Night Jessamine*

starts this passage with D phrygian dominant. The second bar of the phrase is chromatic around D dorian. The phrase ends with a bar of D phrygian.

## Playing Simply

A lot of Michael's own material has very complex harmony. This is particularly evident in his compositions during his period with the Brecker Brothers. Over more complex chord sequences he takes a different approach than over a blues or a modal tune. He will use the more obvious scale choices in order to emphasise the changes a bit more. In Straphangin' the furthest he gets from the expected scale choices is F altered over a Dm7.

The illustration shows two staves of music in treble clef. The first staff contains four measures with chords D, F, Db, and Eb. The second staff contains five measures with chords D, Db, C, Bm<sup>11</sup>, and D<sup>sus2</sup>. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with some triplets and slurs. A '3' is written below the first measure of the second staff, indicating a triplet.

Illustration 11: Bars 41-44 of *Night Jessamine*

Illustration 11 shows how in *Night Jessamine* Michael simplifies the scale choice and highlights chord tones, which has the effect of relieving some the tension of the very outside first Dm7 section.

The illustration shows a single staff of music in treble clef. The key signature has two flats (Bb). The chord is Bb<sup>7</sup>. The melody is a Bb blues scale: Bb, B, C, D, Eb, E, F. A '3' is written above the first measure, indicating a triplet. A dashed line spans the first two measures, and a '3' is written below the first measure of the second staff, indicating a triplet.

Illustration 12: Bars 27-28 of *The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines*

As well as using a wide range of scale choices over the changes in *The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines* Michael still takes it down to Bb blues scale over the Bb chord in Illustration 12. This allows the listener some relief.

## Patterns



*Illustration 13: Bars 29-30 of Night Jessamine*

There are several examples within the solos taking a pattern and moving it chromatically. In Illustration 13 he takes a minor 3<sup>rd</sup> interval and ascends chromatically with it. Normally you would expect a pattern like this to resolve to a chord tone at the end. In this lick he plays a C minor arpeggio which continues the outside sound.



*Illustration 14: Bar 45 of The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines*



*Illustration 15: Bar 40 of The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines*

Illustration 14 and Illustration 15 have a similar moving pattern effect used in a more discreet way, briefly descending chromatically in major thirds. This shape of movement occurs frequently within his solos although the moving interval may be different and the duration of the pattern varies.

## Special Effects

Michael frequently uses harmonics and sub tones for effect within his solos. This gives him a range on the saxophone that is very similar to the guitar and allows him to do much longer runs. There are some lines that are close to 3 octaves.



*Illustration 16: Bars 31-34 of New York*

Licks like Illustration 16 are quite guitaristic and reflect the era in which it was recorded, with Hendrix and Clapton being at the top their careers. The bends are a feature that aren't used in as obvious a way towards the end of his career. The lick also ends with a harmonic.



*Illustration 17: Bar 38 of Straphangin'*

The low E notes in Illustration 17 are sub tones. Harmonics and sub tones are both prominent features of Michael's playing. His ease at achieving means that he has a very wide range of notes to choose from and this allows for some very long scalar runs. Rather than just using them as an effect they make up a fundamental part of some licks.

## Structure and Phrasing

A lot of his solos have a very recognisable structure. If there is quite an aggressive melody line then the solo is likely to drop right down for the start of it. This is most evident in Straphangin'. Over the course of the solo the intensity will increase. Particularly earlier on in his career he played the slower starts more inside, saving much of the chromaticism for the fiery passages later in the solo. However, as his playing has become much more out throughout the length of his career the slow, largely diatonic intros have started to disappear. The solos now tend to start outside.

Michael almost never starts his licks on the first beat of a bar, which is a result of his large bebop influence. He also has strong command of rhythm. He plays a lot of syncopated licks. Most of the time he keeps strict time with his rhythms, even when he plays 32 notes within a bar.



*Illustration 18: Bars 11-12 of Night Jessamine*

To counteract the regimented feel of this very fast approach he will sometimes play completely across the beat. Illustration 18 represents this approach.

## **Discography**

Dreams (1970), "New York", Dreams, Columbia

Joni Mitchell, "The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines", Shadows and Light, Elektra

The Brecker Brothers, "Straphangin'", East River, Camden

Michael Brecker Quintet, "Night Jessamine", Wide Angles, Verve