



# In the Groove

## An Improvisation Game

Suggested Grades: 6-8 & High School

James Oshinky

### National Core Arts Standards

#1 – Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

#2– Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

### Objectives

To understand and perform the different roles while improvising within a group.

### Materials

Improvisation Idea Cards:

- Create four idea cards for each role, with suggestions on how to fulfill each roll. (Details Below)



### JAMES OSHINKY

James Oshinky, Ph.D. is a psychologist and musician. He teaches improvisation at Adelphi University. Jim is the author of *Return to Child*, a book detailing the improvisation pedagogy of the late cellist David Darling and the organization, *Music for People*. This approach is known for its emphasis on encouragement and its ability to blend players at all levels of musical experience in small ensemble improvisation activities. Dr. Oshinky is the creator of the *Music Doctor Improv Cards* and *Picture Prompts*, a tool for presenting the varied roles players can serve in improvised ensembles.

## Background:

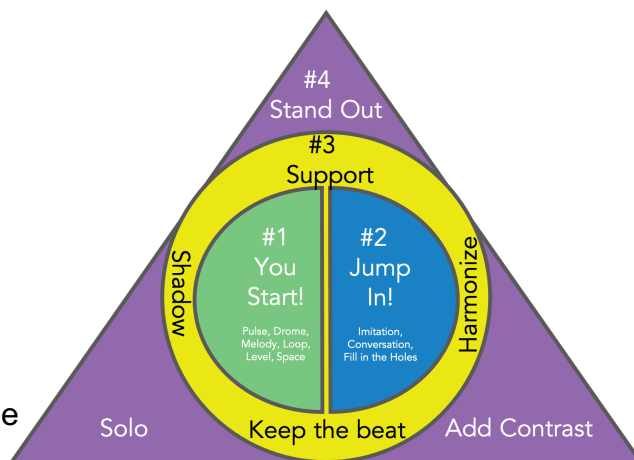
As adult musicians become adept at improvisation, they accumulate both skill and flexibility. They fulfill four prominent roles when they play with their peers. For starters, they can "lay down a groove" and provide a stable, predictable rhythmic and tonal motif for others to follow. They can also "blend in" and add new parts that complement their peers' contributions.

Once a piece of improvised music has taken shape with several players coordinating among each other, the next skill is to "listen and support what is going on." Additions can be exact imitation, doubling a part, or harmonizing the part, adding complexity while supporting the articulation and expression of the other players.

A skilled player can also simplify existing parts, emphasizing just the pulse of a rhythm or just the bass notes of a progression. Lastly, skilled improvisers know how to "stand out from the crowd" and take solos that command attention and tell relatable emotional stories. Besides contrasting with the ongoing layered groove, solos add drama and humor.

Most importantly, skilled improvisers shift readily between these roles, knowing when to be the driving motor, support the structure, stand out, or be attentively silent for its impact on the overall sound.

These four roles can be taught in basic and accessible forms, providing a scaffold of improvisation skills to build on as players gain experience and sophistication. Teachers can present these roles in sequence, building small ensemble experiences that feature each of the four roles.





## Suggested Teaching Process:

I prefer breaking the teaching process over several lessons when I teach improvisation. In this process, improvisations are built piece by piece, with players adding layers of complexity as they enter, making for orderly progression and development.

### Week One: Introduce the four Roles (Starter, Jump In, Support, and Stand Out)

1. Present the four roles using live examples.
2. Teach the "Starter" role using tonal and rhythmic examples
  - Imitation – play a long tone for others to imitate or harmonize with
  - Drone - one-note, regular and either sustained or repeated
  - Ostinato or Looped Melody - play a simple melody that you can repeat over and over
  - Pulse & Groove - play a steady pulse on your body or an instrument; play a steady rhythm for seven beats and leave one beat as a rest before repeating (leave a hole in the rhythm)
3. Allow students time to explore holding a drone, repeating an ostinato melody, holding a steady pulse, and repeating a steady rhythm.
4. While students are exploring, emphasize the importance of stability - the patterns do not change once established.
5. The starter roles are akin to the tick-tock of a steady, reliable, and unchanging clock.

### Week Two: Jump In

1. Review the "Starter" roles.
2. Introduce the "Jump In" role.
  - Imitate what the "Starter" has done.
  - Find the hole in the rhythm and fill the hole with something new each time.
  - Play a rhythm that goes with the starter's rhythm.
  - Play a melody that creates a conversation with the "starter" rhythm.
3. Play a game to introduce musical conversations.
4. The teacher "Plays a short melody and holds the last note" or "Play a short melody and repeat the last phrase." These games are described in detail in the book [Return to Child](#).
5. To introduce rhythmic compliments, play the game of "find the hole in the rhythm and fill it with something different each time."
6. This game works as a four-beat game (1,2,3 rest), an eight beat game (1,2,3,4,5,6,7, rest), or a six beat game (oom-pah-pah-rest-rest-rest) (in 2,4,and 3 meter time).
7. To introduce the idea of building a groove from loops, begin with one rhythm, and add repeatable patterns until the Groove is so dense there are no more holes to fill.

### Week Three: Support the Energy

1. Introduce the "Support the Energy" role.
  - Imitate a part.
  - Double a part - play exactly what the starter or jumper is playing (shadow).
  - Harmonize a part, keeping the rhythm steady
  - Simplify a part - hold a steady pulse or play just the bass notes.
2. Teach the concept of shadowing – exact imitation in real-time.
3. Pair students. Each student listens to the other and imitates what the other partner plays.
4. Students alternate between who leads and who follows.



5. Encourage students to play slowly to ensure their partner can successfully follow.
6. For more advanced groups, add shadowing in harmony.
7. Group three students together, assigning each a role
  - One person creates a vocal phrase and repeats it.
  - The other two students sing the same rhythm and articulation but stack their notes in harmony to create a three-part pattern.
  - I recommend using a "shoop-shoop" or "oooh-la-la-la" vocal phrase commonly used by backup singers in pop music.

### **Week Four: Combining Three Roles**

1. Practice layering the three roles together.
  - A Starter
  - Someone who Jumps In
  - Someone who Imitates, Shadows, or Harmonizes.

### **Week Five: Adding a Solo**

1. First, to help your students develop soloing skills, practice soloing over a drone note.
2. Next, practice soloing over a repeated bass line.
3. Finally, practice soloing over a repeated chord progression.
4. Add depth by inviting students to tell an emotional story in their solo – The Blues

### **Week Six: Ensemble Work**

1. Create improvised ensembles using all four roles.
  - You Start!
  - You jump in!
  - You support the energy!
  - You stand out!
2. Use the colored cards to add an element of surprise to the game.
3. Students pick cards and fill the role suggested on the card.
4. Over time, using the cards ensures that students try their hand at various roles.

### **Extension:**

In the model above, improvisations are built piece by piece, with players adding layers of complexity as they enter. This method ensures orderly progression and development. It is also possible to start improvisations in ways that court chaos—for example, the "Splash" of sound.

In the Splash, the whole ensemble breathes together, and each person comes out with their unique note when they exhale. This process creates a sound cluster that might be harmonious or dissonant. The act of breathing and exhaling a new note is repeated, with the group migrating towards coherence as they listen to each result.

A similar activity involves unique rhythmic phrases in place of the held notes. In this version, each group member will slowly morph their rhythms and gradually coordinate into a rhythm of group consensus.

Courting Chaos generates dynamic excitement but risks "train wrecks" if the group does not succeed and quickly find common ground and coherence.



## Resources:

See the [Music Doctor Improv Cards](#) and Picture Prompts for more varied small-group improvisation suggestions. This deck of 54 cards is divided into four "suits" that have basic improvisation ideas, suggestions for the support role, ways to integrate a variety of musical styles from modern and historical genres, and activities that emphasize the strategic uses of silence and contrast.

### Improv Cards: *Suggestions for Creating Cards*

You Start! cards are green. Jump In cards are blue. Support cards are yellow. Stand Out cards are purple. When the skills have been taught over a period of a few weeks, play the game with students picking random cards, one from each color.

#### 1. You Start!

- play a long tone for others to imitate or harmonize with
- play a steady pulse on your body or on an instrument - one note, regular and repeated
- play a simple melody that you can repeat over and over
- play a steady rhythm for 7 beats and leave one beat as a rest before repeating (leave a hole in the rhythm)

#### 2. You jump in!

- imitate what the starter has done
- find the hole in the rhythm and fill the hole with something new each time
- play a rhythm that goes with the starter's rhythm
- play a melody that creates a conversation with the starter

#### 3. You support the energy!

- imitate a part
- double a part - play exactly what the starter or jumper is playing (shadow)
- harmonize a part
- simplify a part - hold a steady pulse or play the bass notes

#### 4. You stand out!

- tell a story in sound with your solo
- add drama
- add humor
- add contrast

