

# Heart, Body, Mind: The Art of Melodic Construction

By Stefon Harris

**S**tart with expression: what's on your heart? Can you just speak that? Just emote? Then add music to it — put a pitch to that emotion, then put chords to that emotion. This way, what's centered in the music-making process is always the human experience, not just an intellectual understanding of the science of music, nor a theoretically led approach. Usually, people learn chords then create melodies off of those; I teach people to start with melody, because melody is fundamentally the heart and soul of music.

We often overlook this fundamental role of melody, instead paying attention to technical gymnastics, or the idea that the more you know, the better. I'm an advocate of deeply understanding the fundamentals.

Part of my ambition is to create a safe space for people to be vulnerable enough to create in this direction. Rather than looking at the relationships between the notes of a melody and the notes of a chord, you have to truly learn to feel those frequencies in your heart and *skin*, connecting with your innate ability to express emotion.

Using *Solfège*, I teach how each individual note feels, without any harmony moving around that. To facilitate harmony, I've developed an app, *Harmony Cloud*, which will create amazing progressions around

those melodies, reversing that theoretically led harmony-first approach which is the hegemon. Before my PASIC session, we will have released an updated version of *Harmony Cloud* that covers probably 90% of all the chords in Western Harmony, including 13ths, sharp 11ths, and 9ths, while the previous version primarily covered triads. This enriched version allows for a more lush musical experience and one that is more indicative of the styles people would be playing in real-life contexts.

I approach teaching music and learning music not as a quantitative science, not about how much you know, but as a qual-

itative science, something felt and experienced.

First, we get people beyond the mind: we just sing together, closing our eyes, learning to listen and feel how we fit with one another. I will start by getting people up, vibrating together on a single pitch. We will learn how to feel the first note, then the second, then the third. We'll learn to make a melody with those notes, and we will improvise melodies together. It doesn't matter if someone has a background in musical improvisation or not. If you can sing a pitch with a group, I'll show you how to be liberated with just a few notes.



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Then I will gradually introduce the concept of harmony around that, using Harmony Cloud as a tool to support it. This will be equally great for percussionists because the concept and format have nothing to do with genre. It's not for jazz musicians or classical musicians or marching enthusiasts; it's for anyone exploring melody, regardless of genre. I hope that attendees will feel liberated and confident to pick up their instrument and just make music.

My aim, irrespective of who I'm presenting for, musicians or not, is to demonstrate the science of empathy, how to listen to one another, and how to empower one another. I'm hoping to inspire the type of courage and vulnerability needed to have a sense of ownership over this beautiful science.

Regarding the importance of improvisation, I'm particularly interested in the fundamental requirement for empathy when you're improvising. Particularly with another person, the first thing you have to do is quiet the ego. Understand that it's not about your ideas, which only take shape relative to how other people react to them. When we start improvising, we need to learn to put an idea out in the world, and learn to wait and see how other people react to it. When they react to it, they infuse your original idea with new ideas that you couldn't have even imagined yourself.

So that idea comes back to you completely anew. Then you contribute to it again; it's a beautiful lesson about humanity inherent in the science of improvisation. I can confidently say I'm a better father and husband as a result of having spent years improvising.

Looking at jazz specifically, the impetus for the birth of jazz was a need people had to sing the truth about themselves. In the United States, people who didn't speak the same languages nor practice the same religions were brought here involuntarily from Africa. When they arrived, they were not allowed to speak the truth about who they were. The only time they were allowed to speak this truth about what

was on their heart, and show their intelligence, would have been in church on Sundays when they were left alone.

In that church setting, one person stands up and has a short chance – a window of opportunity – to sing from the bottom of their heart what is most meaningful for them. Everyone else sits and listens then says “Amen” to chime in and support them. Then they sit down, and the next person has an opportunity. Then everyone participates. This incredible sense of community gave birth to the need for jazz in this world. It's definitely not about the individual genius; it's about projecting something that is authentic from your heart. In that process, you are actually helping other people to be and feel seen; none of us are as unique as we'd like to think.

If you are authentic and singing from your heart, you're singing the narratives of your ancestors whether you realize it or not. You're singing their dreams. When you're improvising, that is what's coming through you: the common experiences of the people in the neighborhoods where you grew up. They may have simply not cultivated the skillset or talent related to music to express that.

As musicians, as improvisers, we have the privilege and responsibility to be true to ourselves so that we can in turn be true to our communities. This is why jazz was born, and at the center of it all is empathy.

**Stefon Harris** is a four-time Grammy-nominated jazz vibraphonist, educator, app developer, and thought leader. He has been heralded as “one of the most important artists in jazz” (*Los Angeles Times*) and is a recipient of the prestigious Doris Duke Artist Award and the Martin E. Segal Award from Lincoln Center. Along with performing, Harris has taught at universities throughout the world, led curriculum development at the Brubeck Institute, served as a part of the jazz faculty at New York University, and formerly served as the Associate Dean and Director of Jazz Arts at Manhattan School of Music. He is currently Artistic Advisor

of Jazz Education at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC), a tenured Associate Professor of Music at Rutgers University – Newark, Director of the Harmony Lab, and Co-Director of Express Newark. In 2013, he founded The Melodic Progression Institute (MPI) and created a revolutionary ear training app called Harmony Cloud, which is widely used by musicians across multiple genres. His 2012 TED Talk, “There Are No Mistakes on the Bandstand,” has gained nearly 900,000 views. [PN](#)

## PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE

### Portland Percussion Group

Daytime Showcase Concert

#### **Patterns & Form by Alejandro Viñao**

Beginning in 2022, the Portland Percussion Group led a commissioning consortium for the creation of a new multi-movement work by composer Alejandro Viñao for percussion octet and piano. The consortium includes a group of 25 institutions, organizations, and individuals from throughout the United States, Canada, Japan, and Sweden. “Patterns & Form” was completed in November 2024, in three movements, with a length of 25 minutes. The instrumentation is two xylophones, two vibraphones, two marimbas, glockenspiel, chimes, crotales, bongos, congas, guiro, bass drum, suspended cymbal, and piano. The Portland Percussion Group gave the world premiere on January 22, 2025 in Portland, Oregon.

The Portland Percussion Group is an Oregon-based percussion collective including Garrett Arney, Jonathan Brown, Brian Gardiner, Terry Longshore, Paul Owen, Brett Paschal, Christopher Whyte, and Mari Yoshinaga. The group formed in 2011 to invigorate new music in the city and the greater Northwest, and since then has become a mainstay in the contemporary music space in Portland. To date, the PPG has worked with composers to create over 60 new works for percussion quartet and continues to look for ways to develop new sounds, explore new spaces, and engage new audiences. The ensemble has worked closely with Tapspace Publications to release new works by emerging composers.