

# Jazz Improvisation Tips:

## Melodic Lines

When playing a melodic line, try thinking in terms of four-note groups.

Using various scales, try the following patterns: 1-2-3-1, 1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-5, 1-3-5-7, and 1-7-7b-1. For example, in the *E<sub>b</sub> harmonic minor scale*, 1-3-5-7 would be E<sub>b</sub>-G<sub>b</sub>-B<sub>b</sub>-D.

Practice these forward, backward, and upside-down.

Try them using different rhythms. See what works and what does not. Remember what Duke Ellington said, ... "If it sounds good, it is good."

Try combining groups that sound good.

## Playing Within the Scale

To maintain the harmony of a progression while improvising within the scale, try the following:

Hold chord tones longer.

Play chord tones on the first, last, high, & low notes.

Play chord tones on the downbeats (especially roots & thirds).

Accent chord tones.

Precede chord tones with an arpeggio.

Approach the chord tone with a series of chromatic tones.

Remember what Duke Ellington said, ... "If it sounds good, it is good."

## Functional Structure

When moving through a harmonic progression:

Focus on harmonizing with the root and fifth (and possibly the seventh).

Space the remaining notes in thirds or fourths for a resonant sound.

Space the remaining notes in seconds for a sharper sound.

In general, most chord progressions move around the *circle of fifths* (C-F-Bb-Eb-Ab-Db-Gb-B-E-A-D ...).

The progression can move upward in perfect fifths (clockwise) or downward in perfect fourths (counter-clockwise).

The chord *types* (M7, m7, 7, m9, b9, etc.) in the progression will vary.

Some chords may be added, deleted, or repeated but this general pattern is very common in jazz progressions.

The circle of fifths represents a good example of how many jazz chord progressions move from the *subdominant* to the *dominant* to the *tonic*.

The most common progression is IIm7 -- V7 -- IM7. Variations of these chords may also be substituted to keep the progression interesting (as shown below).

**SUBDOMINANT:** IIm7 (1-3b-5-7b), IIm9 (3b-5-7b-9).

**DOMINANT:** V7 (1-3-5-7b), V7b9 (3-5-7b-9b), V7b5b9 (3-5b-7b-9b), VM7b13 (7-9-11-b13).

**TONIC:** IM7 (1-3-5-7), IM6 (1-3-5-6), IM9 (3-5-7-9).

The next most common tendency is for the progression to move chromatically downward (usually using the same chord type).

Remember what Duke Ellington said, ... "If it sounds good, it is good."

## Miscellaneous Jazz Tips

The best thing is to make your own solo transcriptions. Tristano had his students start with Lester Young, then move on to Charlie Parker. Get it in your head, then onto your instrument, then notate it.

Run a lick through the cycle of fifths at a slow enough tempo to keep the beat. Comp with the lick.

Clap hands with a metronome -- put your whole body into it.

Listen to all sorts of music, all sorts of jazz. Keep your ears wide open.

## A Blues Progression

Listening is one of the biggest parts of improvisation. Listen until you can sing back the solo, the bassline, and even the piano voicing without even thinking about it. This will give you *phrasing*.

You must listen to jazz, not only to learn how to play, but also for pleasure. You will learn a lot by giving everything a chance.

Here is a typical blues progression in the key of F: F7-F7-F7-F7-Bb7-Bb7-F7-F7-C7-Bb7-F7-F7.

Here is the same blues progression in the style of Charlie Parker [each chord is one bar, except for those in ( ), which indicates two beats for each chord]: F6-(Bb7-Bdim)-F7-(Cm7-F7)-Bb7-Bdim-FM7-(Am-D7)-Gm-C7-(Am-D7)-(Gm-D7).

Although this may not be known to most novices, the second progression adds a lot more movement to the blues.

## A Solo With An Identity Crisis

Over a progression involving a single chord for a few measures (such as Miles Davis' "So What") play a mode per measure.

Start with Dorian, switch to Phrygian, then loop a sweet Aeolian, to a nice Melodic Minor, then a Harmonic Minor, etc...

Giving props to the root, let the 5th slide around.

Play games with the 6th.

Use ascending chromatic phrases involving the 2nd to the 4th, and the 6th to the root.

## Vocal Improvisation

The best way to learn to improvise is to practice singing "non-worded" songs through a chord progression. This is easiest for pianists, but if you play a wind instrument, do this singing while listening to your favorite music.

Once you become good at that, play what you sing. The singing helps you feel what you're about to improvise.

Improvisation comes from the heart, so you should learn from your heart -- not from someone else's.

## **The Importance of Scales**

Since I haven't updated the page in a while, here's another tip on scales:

The most important thing in jazz is knowing your scales.

Scales are the basic fundamentals of all music, but can benefit you most in jazz.

## **Jazz Piano: Impressions from Hollywood**

Here are some great words of wisdom from a jazz pianist, "Hollywood Hal". Having played commercially for over 20 years, he "could probably have walked to the moon and back a couple of times" during the time that he has devoted to jazz study.

### **Practicing and Warm-up**

How do I warm up? Scotch on the rocks. Actually, I read a long time ago that Johnny Hodges (the great alto player with Ellington) said that he didn't practice anymore -- he just played. Well, that's what I do now too. I find that after playing a couple of tunes, I'm usually as warmed up as I'm going to get.

When I was a lot younger I used to play scales in whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, and 16th notes.

Play scales over three octaves, using both hands, in all 12 keys -- and then, of course, Hannon on top of that.

After you get that under your belt, you just play!

When I play, I always play with a metronome, and I tape record EVERYTHING I play. The metronome keeps me always playing in good time, and the tape immediately tells me if I'm playing garbage.

### **Getting Started**

I've tried just about everything connected to pop & jazz piano playing. A lot of the stuff was useless and was junked, but the stuff I kept has served me well.

It's amazing how some of the things you study and learn are not at all practical when it comes to the actual commercial side of playing.

I don't play "licks" - that is one of the things I discarded. Not that I didn't try that approach -- it just didn't work for me. Although, for a given chord progression (I'm quoting Nat Cole), out of the 88 keys I try to pick out the best or the prettiest notes.

A good teacher can save you years of frustration on trying to do it on your own. Believe me, I speak from experience!

### **Recommended Resources for Jazz Pianists**

I have subscribed to a magazine called "Piano Today" for several years. It used to be called "The Piano Stylist & Jazz Workshop." It usually has interesting articles and transcriptions or arrangements. (*P.O.Box 58838, Boulder, CO 80322*)

*The Jazz Theory Book* by Mark Levin is a must have for any piano player. Get it.

Marian McPartland has a weekly radio show called "[Piano Jazz](#)", and it is always fantastic. Marian is amazing - she can just play anything and she always has great guests. I usually tape her shows, and I'll bet I have one of the best representations of contemporary jazz pianists in the country.

### **Jazz Improvisation Techniques**

I have a few special techniques that I occasionally re-use in different ways (but not in all situations).

As an intro, I use the *bridge* or the *last 8 bars* of the tune I'm going to play. I've found this works great with either ballads or up-tempo tunes. Check it out!

Sometimes when ending a tune, I'll play the *tonic of the melody* harmonized with a *chord an augmented 5th above*. Then I move down to a *sharped I chord*, followed by the *tonic*. For example, in the *key of C* -- Play an *A flat maj 7* with *C on top*, followed by a *D flat maj 7* with *C on top* then the *tonic chord* (any *C maj* will do). Check it out! It works and sounds great.

I sometimes use a *left hand 10th figure* over a *II-V-I Progression*. A guy showed me this about 40 years ago and I still use it.

## Practicing Pentatonic Scales

A tip about melody from an Oklahoma City jazz saxophonist:

For beginning students of improvisation, the practice of pentatonic scales along with the major scales is very important for quickly developing more melodic sounding improvisations.

Based on a major scale, a pentatonic (meaning 5 note scale) is constructed 1-2-3-5-6-1-2-3-5-6-1-2-3-5-6-1 (etc.).

When you play this pattern from 1 to 1 you get a major pentatonic sound.

If you play it from 6 to 6 you get that major key relative minor pentatonic sound.

The student should practice pentatonics first *diatonically*, meaning play each of the 12 pentatonics from every scale step to every scale step.

Secondly, play the pentatonic scale in *four note groupings*. For example, 1235-2356-3561-5612-6123 (etc.)

## Piano Comping With Clusters

### Use of Clusters Based on a Superimposition of Fourths

I always wondered why the soloists I used to accompany sounded so corny. Well, they just have to be challenged a bit. Here's a tip to make your pals sound interesting.

In a tune that has few chord changes (i.e. "So What"), use *clusters*, not actual chords.

For instance, replace the *piling up of thirds* (1,3,5,7) by a "*pile*" of fourths (1,4,b7,b3).

You will be surprised to hear how your friend (the one you thought really could not play all that well) actually sounds great!

### Problems and Remedies Using this Approach

When accompanying an improviser with clusters based on a superimposition of fourths, you will find that this may feel uncomfortable (to a degree) for musicians not accustomed to non-tonal harmony.

There are at least two ways to help those confronted with this problem.

#### **Solution #1**

First, you can make them hear a voicing in thirds of the cluster based on fourths. This will help some musicians to relate the "awkward" quality of the fourths to something they are familiar with.

The fundamental structure of the cluster is: *1, 4, b7, b3, #5, b9*.

If you put all this within an octave and order the notes according to a progression based on successive thirds, you will have the following voicing: *1, b3, (4), #5, b7, b9*.

This is the familiar minor-seventh chord, with a fourth that is voiced, a raised fifth, and the first tension in its minor state.

In *C*, this gives: *C, Eb, F, Ab, Bb, Db*. That being the *C-7#5 (b9 and 4)*.

However rich this chord is, it is nonetheless a chord that must be somewhat familiar to those used to improvising within the boundaries of functional harmony.

#### **Solution #2**

Another way to help those who find it difficult to perceive the quality of the *cluster in fourth* is to make them hear (and possibly work on) the chordal scale related to the said cluster.

If you superimpose seven tones with a constant interval of fourth, you will end up with: *1, 4, b7, b3, #5, b9, b5*. In *C*, this gives: *C, F, Bb, Eb, Ab, Db, Gb*.

When squeezed into one octave, this reads: *1, b2, b3, 4, b5, #5, b7*. And it sounds, in *C*: *C, Db, Eb, F, Gb, Ab, Bb*.

And there is a scale that your friends can use instantly! This is because it is constructed on the tones of the cluster in fourth, and so renders the same quality, in melodic terms.

This scale I find very useful as a launch pad for purely chromatic and whole-tone based improvisation.

## Samples of the Cluster Approach to Accompaniment

Finally, listen to McCoy Tyner's chords, to John Scofield's melodies, to John Coltrane, and Steve Coleman to get the feel of it.

## Spontaneity

A saxophone and clarinet player (who is also very familiar with the Bb blues scale), adds:

Don't think when improvising, just blurt it out and see what kind of music comes out.

You'll be surprised what happens when you don't really try.

- Jason (Kansas City)

A jazz trumpeter from the Midwest echoes his comments:

As Charlie Parker once said, "Master your instrument. Master the music. Then forget all that s--- and just play."

To help your spontaneity, try a little *scat*:

Scat in your head or even out loud, for rhythm players, while you're soloing.

## Formal Instruction

Study classical music for 1 to 3 years (depending on how much you practice), then break away before you get too locked into that style.

You need a good classical foundation before you can really develop your jazz chops. A good teacher can make a huge difference. A good teacher can point out things that you may not realize you are doing wrong.

Start out with a good classical teacher and then switch to a different, jazz-oriented teacher later. Its common to switch teachers in order to get different perspectives, anyway.

## Patterns of Expression

Jazz artists create moods in part by the overall *movement* of the piece from one style to another. Here's an interesting explanation of that process:



## The Four Patterns

There are four patterns of expression that occur, more or less clearly shaped, in any artistic endeavor:

- a. From conventional to conventional
- b. From conventional to unconventional
- c. From unconventional to conventional
- d. From unconventional to unconventional

## Application of the Patterns

I prefer pattern b; it is also possible for me to find a lot of enjoyment in the pattern d.

In jazz, most masters are expressing themselves by utilizing pattern b.

Some artists (Ornette Coleman, Monk, sometimes Miles) achieve the other-worldly beauty by deploying pattern d.

I don't enjoy experiencing pattern a. A performer, starting with a bunch of conventional melodic and harmonic facilities, manages to bring us to a well known, conventional place (this is what most of the pop, country, heavy metal and similar predictable music is accomplishing). Isn't it a waste of precious time?

A word about pattern c: sometimes a performer can utilize outrageous, unheard-of means of expression only to convey a conventional sentiment (an example pops to mind - Frank Zappa). Can be amusing, but -- so what.

## Some Thoughts ...

Jazz is the art form that has marked the twentieth century. No other art (films, novels, paintings etc.) could reflect our era the way jazz can. Let us celebrate it and promote it everywhere.

The excitement of practicing jazz is that we can start with a worn-out sentimental melody, a cliché, and develop it into something sparkling new and utterly our own. It's not easy, but it is worth a try!

## Practicing Jazz

Some thoughts on practicing jazz from the Lone Star State:

Learn your fundamentals and know them like the back of your hand.

Practice intensely.

The most important part is to know how to play and communicate with others. Every chance you get, play with others -- don't be an introvert.

Get after it and don't be afraid!

The most productive practicing is done with your records. Listen intently (not passively) as much as possible.

## My Favorite Final Run

I find that all of the practicing I have ever done is plainly forgotten on stage.

The harmony or changes in a piece of music call for certain sounds which simply "come out" of your instrument.

The less you think, the less you have to worry about.

A noted Toronto sax player/University teacher Kirk MacDonald responded to the question, *What do you think about when you play?* with *Not a whole helluva lot!* I believe he is absolutely correct.

Fun note to end on - my favorite run for ending pieces on Maj7 chords goes like this (in the key of "C"):

I have indicated the scale position (i.e. 1, 3, 5, 7, etc.). This run can easily be transposed to other keys.

It was lifted from a couple of John Coltrane recordings, most noted, *Countdown* from *Giant Steps* and *Lush Life* from *Lush Life*.

## Choosing a Solo Approach

### Types of Songs

There are three kinds of songs: **VERTICAL**, **HORIZONTAL**, and **COMBINATION**.

The *vertical* tunes feature many chord changes.

The *horizontal* compositions have very few chord changes, or the chord changes move very slowly.

The *combination* tunes have the characteristics of both vertical and horizontal.

### Soloing Approaches

There are also three basic soloing approaches: **SCALAR**, **CHORD ARTICULATION**, and **PATTERNS**.

In the *scalar* method you are more concerned with presenting a scale that will sound the "key area" of the chord/chords in question. You are less concerned with outlining each chord individually.

In the *chord articulation* method you are spelling out the chord changes with arpeggios or chord-based digital patterns in a rhythm of your choosing.

In the *pattern* or *sequence* approach you are playing either predetermined or spontaneous patterns.

### Application of Soloing Approaches to Types of Songs

Now which soloing approach works best for each type of tune?

#### Vertical Songs

If the tune is *extremely vertical*, some combination of all three approaches works best.

If you want to minimize the vertical aspects of the song, you could use a more scalar approach.

If you want to accentuate the "verticalness" of the tune, you could make the changes with seventh or ninth chord arpeggios.

If you choose to walk a middle ground, use all three approaches.

### Horizontal Songs

If a tune is *extremely horizontal*, the scalar approach is almost required.

When the harmony is static, there must be melodic or rhythmic motion.

Playing arpeggios does not give enough forward thrust. However, they should be used to spice up and add variety to the scale lines.

### Combination Songs

If a tune is a *combination*, you can use all three solo approaches.

You might, for example, use **II-V7** patterns on changes that last one or two measures.

You might use root-oriented arpeggios/patterns on changes that last two beats.

Try using a scale on changes that last two measures or more.

Many of the best players will use the predetermined/spontaneously pattern approach in some modified form.

## The Keys to Jazz Success

a few words of wisdom on how to get where you want to be in life and in jazz:

Something I rarely see among Jazz students is *patience*. Players who achieve mature jazz skills at an early age, such as Pat Metheny for instance, are very rare.

Becoming a mature improviser should be a pursuit of joy. Good jazz, (as opposed to bad jazz), is something that develops like a fine wine.

I practice quite faithfully but I do not push myself as I did in the beginning. I find that even when circumstances pull me away from my regular practice schedule, as long as I am thinking jazz and/or especially listening to jazz, my playing will improve.

I've taken as much as a month off at a time and found my playing to be better when I began playing again.

I realize that some players have put all their eggs in one basket, so they feel compelled to improve rapidly. Very few players that achieve "killer chops" fast sound good until those chops have had a chance to cook for a while.

I don't know who said this, but it changed my life when I heard it ... *"I spent half of my life learning what to play and the other half learning what not to play."*

Take it easy, listen to everything you can, play what you like to play, get on track with the God of all creation (Jesus), never give up, and one day you will be the best player you personally know.

## Chic Chick Tips

A budding jazz pianist who idolizes the music and playing of Chick Corea (both his older AND recent stuff), gives *Jenny's Jazz* a "handful" of ideas that invoke his sound and make for great starting points for your own experimentation. Horn players, you can "Chick" it out, too!

For starters, Chick makes a habit of juxtaposing short, singable ideas with highly complex chromatic stuff (mostly based on four-note groups off pentatonic scales). Try using this contrast in formulating your solos.

Try these pentatonic suggestions as a treatment of a **ii-V-I** (left hand voicings can be conventional, quartal, altered, etc.):

1. Over the **ii**, use the **minor pentatonic** off the **II scale degree** (in C: use D minor pentatonic over a Dm7 chord).
2. Over the **V**, use the **major pentatonic** off the **bII scale degree** (in C: use Db pentatonic over a G7 chord) ... what the heck, try the minor pentatonic, too - mess with their heads.
3. Over the **I**, use the **major pentatonic** off the **II scale degree** (in C: use D pentatonic over a CM7 chord).

When going from **V** to **I**, detour at the **I diminished** (in C: Dm7-G7alt-Cdim-CM7)! Herbie Hancock does this a lot, too -- it sounds quite cool, and will put the fear of God into bandmates who don't know what the !@#%& you're doing.

When playing a tune (especially a standard), and you're coming to the end of the chorus, and it ends on the **IM7**, get the band to play the **bIIM7** instead, and continue as if nothing strange has happened. It's hip, very hip.

A neat voicing that I gleaned by osmosis from my Akoustic Band albums is a great altered sound ... over your **altered dominant 7th chord**, play the **root and 7th** in your left hand (the Bud Powell "shell" voicing) and slap a straight-forward **maj7th spelling** over it, but build it off the **bII scale degree** (so if it's a Bb7, play **left hand: Bb, Ab; right hand: B, D#, F#, A#**).

PEDAL POINTS! This may or may not be particularly *Chick-ish*, but look for ways to voice tunes over single pedal points for a really great texture effect (e.g. Coltrane's "Body And Soul" over Ab pedal, and I've heard Kenny Barron play "Spring Is Here" over an Ab pedal on his Maybeck album).

**Pianists:** Want to fool your friends and scare your enemies by shredding up the keyboard like Chick Corea? And I quote the man himself:

*"All you have to do is take a seven- or eight- note per octave scale and subdivide it with three notes in one hand and four in the other. Get the hands to flow over one another up and down so that it sounds even, and you'll be able to play twice as fast as you can play with one hand. Two hands are better than one."* - **Keyboard Magazine, Feb. 1978**

And lastly, the most *Chick-ish* rule of all: Disregard anything anyone tells you is a steadfast rule; draw your own conclusions and just play what you feel.

## **Jam Sessions**

### **Observations**

As a pro player for over 20 years, I've been able to observe and participate in a lot of jazz jam sessions. What I've been seeing in the last few years is the dissolving of standards (no pun intended) regarding etiquette on the stage. A lot of younger players and some old enough to know better don't realize that there is a protocol involved.

This is partly the fault of session leaders who haven't themselves had enough experience, and also that social standards have changed due to the "PC factor" (i.e. no one wants to tell someone else that their behavior is uncool).

The result of this is that the music suffers from disorganization, and the young folks coming up aren't learning many of the things they need to know to get gigs as sidemen or women and leaders.

## Jam Session Rules of Etiquette

**Learn some tunes.** Don't go onstage relying only on a fakebook or your ear to get you through. Memorize at least a few standards, and preferably *at least twenty*.

**Respect authority.** Always find out who is running the session and ASK if it's all right to play. Don't get an attitude if you think are being overlooked; session leaders usually have a lot of people asking to play, and they are more likely to let players they know and trust play first. Your turn will come. If you are replacing one of the house musicians, such as a drummer or piano player, it's a good idea to ask their permission also. Don't ever change someone's setup (i.e. cymbals, amp settings, etc.) unless they volunteer that it is all right.

**Respect the rhythm section!** *Keep your solos to a reasonable length.* On a slow tune, *one chorus* is probably enough, on faster tunes keep it to *three or four choruses* at most. I've been at sessions where players took twenty or thirty choruses, and even if you are playing well you are likely to wear out your welcome. On this same subject, if there are a lot of players there waiting to play, don't stay up for more than a few tunes unless you are asked.

**Yield to other players.** If someone shows up to the session who is obviously a heavy player and is well known, consider stepping down to give them a chance to play with just the rhythm section. Jam sessions suffer from the *too much* syndrome, and showcasing a great player is both a refreshing change and a learning experience.

**Yield the solo.** If you are a horn player, give the first solo every so often to the pianist or guitarist. By the time these players usually get a solo they have been comping for ten or fifteen minutes and the audience's attention is strained. It is a way of acknowledging them and thanking them -- and believe me, we *do* work hard.

I realize a lot of this sounds negative, but it has been my observation, as well as that of many of my more experienced peers, that this is a big part of what is lacking in less seasoned players. There is a lot more to jazz than scales and Aebersold records, and it makes it more fun and a better learning environment when there is a little order. Thanks for listening.

## Practice Routines

Clay contributes his second installment on advice from a seasoned jazz guitarist:

### Slow and Relaxed Practice

The main advice I have for jazz students is to build their practice routine around a very relaxed base. Physical and mental relaxation are critical to developing the ease and confidence needed to play well.

Unfortunately, many technique books and the influence of sports training have made music study resemble an Olympic event - more scales, faster chops, with long and physically grueling practice sessions.

I think the **opposite** is the most effective. If you practice anything *extremely slowly* on a somewhat regular basis, you will notice your chops growing at a pretty awesome rate!

Pay particular attention to keeping your muscles relaxed and your breathing deep, steady, and through the nose.

Another equally important benefit is that you will be able to *hear* everything much more clearly, which will enable you to use what you are practicing with much greater confidence.

Singing in unison will help all of the above.

### Imitating the Jazz Masters

Aside from that, I practice the usual things. I spend most of my time soloing through tunes using "BAND IN A BOX", or playing along to records.

I use regular recordings for this, not Aebersold records, because I like to mimic lines and phrasing off the cuff. This is something that I didn't used to do that much of, and I believe it has helped a lot toward loosening my playing.

Playing scales and arpeggios is an important facet of practice, but the real-life application is probably more important in the long run.

Mimicking stuff from records more closely resembles what transpires on a



gig, where you are feeding off of the other players and learning from their experience.

I explain this sometimes as similar to the sharing of verbal expressions, inflections, and gestures that people do when they spend much time together.

While you don't get the visual and intangible aspects from records, you do get the sound examples in a very concentrated way.

As you do this more, you will find lines and such creeping into your playing that weren't there before, without having to have practiced them extensively.

While you are doing this, remember it is perfectly okay to blunder and screw up; the objective isn't to play it perfectly the first time, rather just to get the 'feel' of how something is being played. The notes will be right behind.

## Communication and Transcriptions

A jazz pianist from Ohio lends a few pointers on the role of communication in improvisation, while another jazz musician provides some tips on how to use technology to your advantage:

### **Communication and Improvisation**

In my brief study of the jazz world I have learned that the greatest goal is to communicate. Too many of the young players don't have this in mind when improvising.

They use Parker lick after lick and improve their chops constantly, but they fail to express who they are.

My goal is to say that it's okay to stray from the scale if it continues to fit the mood of the piece, of the club, or of the gig that particular night.

Players who quote constantly tend to quickly run out of original "ideas."

And so, after you learn the basics at home, go out and jam and **be yourself!**

## **Your Computer As a Tool For Transcribing**

A quick tip on easy transcribing: If you have a CD-ROM player hooked up to

a computer and a simple WAV editor, you can load the solo/passage/lick into memory, and replay it, or any fragment of it at 1/2 speed.

This has helped me with my own transcriptions of John Coltrane solos (Blue Trane, Someday My Prince Will Come, etc.), where the obvious solo line can be very difficult to hear initially.

## Jazz Improvisation Soloing

### Soloing Over Cycles

Anyone who has played over **Rhythm Changes** knows that they can be fast ("*Oleo*" for example).

One of the main portions of the chorus (the "B" section) contains what is called a *fifths cycle*.

Although typically not difficult to solo over, I want to show you some ways to get some interesting sounds.

For our purposes, the cycle will go **D7-G7-C7-F7**.

We will start off with the most "**in**" way to approach soloing over this and gradually move more and more "**out**." I am assuming you are familiar with *modes*, *arpeggios*, *whole-tone*, and the *melodic minor scale (ascending)*.

This is supposed to show how to solo over these types of changes without getting worried about what to do. Some of it may sound weird at first, but as your phrasing develops it will sound great.

This lesson is particularly useful to guitarists, since moving down in half-steps using patterns is very easy.

### Patterns Using Arpeggios

#### IN Patterns

The most obvious approaches are to play the respective arpeggios and *mixolydian mode*.

Since this is so obvious, this part has been explained.

*{Editor's note: The mixolydian mode is the 5th mode of the major scale, and*

*is usually used over 7th and sus 7th chords. The 4th of the mixolydian mode is generally considered an avoid note.}*

### IN-OUT Patterns

One of my favorites strictly uses *arpeggios*.

Over D7, play the **D7 arpeggio**.

Over G7, play the **Db7 arpeggio** (just a half-step down).

Over C7, play the **C7 arpeggio**.

Over F7, play the **Cb (B)7 arpeggio**.

This utilizes the *tritone substitution*.

This sounds really good when using short phrases. Just be careful not to over-use it.

The same theory applies to *mixolydian*, moving a **half-step down** each chord change.

### OUT-IN Patterns

You can also do the exact opposite.

Play the **Ab7 arpeggio** over **D7**, move down a half-step to **G7** and play that arpeggio, etc.

### OUT-OUT Patterns

You could just tritone substitute to death the whole thing for a really "out" sound.

Just play the following arpeggios: **Ab7-Db7-Gb7-Cb7**

## Patterns Using Scales

### IN Patterns

The most obvious choice is using the *mixolydian mode*, which was addressed earlier.

This example is going to use the *lydian-dominant mode*, which is the same as the mixolydian except for a *raised fourth*. The lydian-dominant mode is the fourth mode of the melodic minor scale.

*{Editor's note: The Lydian-dominant mode is usually used over 7th and 7#11th chords. Since the 4th is raised, it is often used in place of the Mixolydian mode since there are no avoid notes.}*

Over D7, play the **D mixolydian scale**.

Over G7, play the **D melodic minor scale**.

Over C7, play the **C mixolydian scale**.

Over F7, play the **C melodic minor scale**.

### Sorta-IN Patterns

Another approach is heard using the *whole-tone scale*. There are only two whole-tone scales, so this is really easy.

You will get an *augmented* sound due to the use of the **#5**, but when used correctly it sounds *ethereal*.

Remember that in any of the two whole tone scales, any note can be the *tonic*.

Over D7, play the **D whole tone scale**.

Over G7, play the **Db whole-tone scale** (which is the same as the *G whole-tone scale*).

From there, you can either move up or down a half-step for the other two chords. Just make sure you move when the chord changes!

### OUT-IN Patterns

We will use the *melodic minor scale* to achieve some altered sounds.

The seventh mode of the melodic minor scale is called the *Altered Scale*, because it contains the **#9**, **b9**, **#5**, and **b5** (these are all of the possible alterations of a dominant chord).

Over D7, play the **Eb melodic minor scale**.

Over G7, play the **D melodic minor scale**.

Over C7, play the **Db melodic minor scale**.

Over F7, play the **C melodic minor scale**.

## Look Ma -- No Sheet Music!

Have you ever seen jazz musicians who can just sit down and play solo, ... all day long, ... with no sheet music or lead sheets whatsoever, ... and everything that they play sounds fresh, accomplished, and VERY JAZZY?!!! I know a couple such musicians (one of whom has appeared on a prominent late night talk show). Here are a few of the tidbits that I have gathered from our conversations:

### Imitate, Imitate, Imitate

Every one of these techniques is based on the concept of **imitation**.

Buy (or borrow) lots of CDs of your favorite jazz artists, and listen to them every chance that you get.

Listen to the CDs near your piano or keyboard (or whatever instrument you play).

Keep a pad of paper nearby, and document everything that you discover, ... but don't forget to practice and experiment with the things that you discover, or they won't stick.

Listen intently for the following things: **Chords**, **Solo Patterns**, and **Chord Progressions**.

Also, figure out the **key** that the tune is being played in, and *remember that sound*.

Every time someone in the jazz world says *imitate*, there are inevitably dozens of goofs who come out of the woodwork trying to tell you that jazz is about *making up new stuff* and that true jazz does not imitate.

To put it simply, that's a **boldface lie**. Whether they know it or not, every jazz musician's playing is a product of their experience. Jazz is a language, and you learn languages by imitating. Sure, you can make up new words (just like English) -- but when jazz is played, most people say, "*Hey, that's some cool jazz.*"

The *language* of jazz has specific qualities that make it recognizable: melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic. You can think of the different types of jazz (cool jazz, bebop, new age, etc.) as *dialects* of the same language. The best way to learn this language is through imitation.

Once you can see how the masters do it, you will find yourself combining what they have done in new and interesting ways. Pretty soon, you won't even remember *where* you learned it, *who* you learned it from, or *if* you learned it at all.

Just don't forget how you got there -- through imitation. (*In other words, you just didn't sit down at your keyboard on day #1 and start playing like Art Tatum*).

## Develop a Vocabulary of Chords

Although jazz is based primarily on the **M7**, **7**, **m7**, **m7b5**, and **dim7** chords, there are endless other possibilities.

Most good jazz musicians also utilize **9th**, **11th**, and **13th** chords.

For efficiency (and to evoke a different sound), chords are often played in their first and second *inversions*.

Chords are often *superimposed* over other chords.

Look for **WHAT** chords are being played (including which notes in the chord have been excluded), identify whether the chord is being played in **ROOT POSITION**, **1st INVERSION**, or **2nd INVERSION**, and check for any **SUPERIMPOSED CHORDS** (i.e. is another note or chord being played above or below the chord in question).

Sometimes you will need to look at the baseline to figure out what chord is being played. The baseline usually outlines the chord.

This exercise will teach you how chords sound, and how different chords sound when played together.

Once you discover the character of these chords, you can use them in your improvisations.

## Develop a Vocabulary of Patterns

PLEASE NOTE: This exercise is probably the most important for developing good improvisational skills!!!

Jazz musicians (especially *New Age*) tend to re-use patterns over and over. They will take the same pattern, and use it over different chords, using

different rhythms. Once you find the trademark patterns being used, you will see how they really define the character of the tune. Jerry Coker even wrote a book on this principle called *Patterns for Jazz*.

You can relate these patterns to the *key* of the song, the *chord* that is being played, or the associated *scale*.

The patterns are sometimes as simple as *arpeggios* or *chromatic runs*. Others are more complex.

Let's say you hear the following pattern in the key of Eb: **G**, (down to) **F**, (down to) **B**, (down to) **Bb**. You could call this a **3-2-#5-5** pattern (based on the Eb major scale).

Alternatively, you could relate it to the chord: In this case, the chord of the measure was a **Bb7-9**. Therefore, you might prefer to label this a **6-5-b2-1** pattern (based on either the Bb major scale or the Eb Mixolydian scale).

When you find a pattern you like, try it out on different chords, scales, and keys.

Once you discover the character of these patterns, you can use them in your improvisations.

### **Develop a Vocabulary of Runs**

Art Tatum used runs about every three or four measures (he was the definitive master of the run).

Using the same technique as above, identify the runs being used, and relate them to the key of the song.

Once you discover the character of these runs, you can use them in your improvisations.

### **Develop a Vocabulary of Chord Progressions**

Any chord played by itself, with no context in which to compare it to other chords, has very little character.

I have found that distinctive sounds in jazz come mostly from how you *move from one chord to another*.

Listen for **RECURRING CHORD PROGRESSIONS** in the music.

Common chord progressions, such as **II-V-I**, are used repeatedly in many different songs.

Once you discover the character of these chord progressions, you can use them in your improvisations.

### **Develop a Vocabulary of Rhythms**

Rhythms can radically change the character of a piece.

Listen for the **RHYTHMS** used in the pattern or chord progression.

Determine how playing the same thing with a different rhythm changes the mood.

Once you discover the character of these rhythms, you can use them in your improvisations.

### **Develop a Vocabulary of Keys**

In short, *develop your ear*.

A tune's quality changes as the **key** changes. You should be able to identify what **key** a song is being played in by the sound.

Once you discover the character of each key, you can change the character of your improvisation by transposing to a different key.

This type of improvisation is seen most often in New Age Jazz (from artists such as Keith Jarrett, Chick Corea, and Herbie Hancock). The techniques, however, extend to all forms of jazz.

One last tip, ... don't look at the keyboard when you play. You need to build a relationship between your fingers and your ear, and your eyes are clearly an impediment. At most, use only your peripheral vision to help you move over long distances on the keyboard.

Good luck, and keep the jazz fever!

### **The Balanced Approach**

For years I have tried about every practice method I could find: always practice softly, play scales exclusively, always play long tones, etc.

I tried to find a fixed routine that would always work (for example, just play



these ten pages of exercises every day and you will be great). Well, it never worked.

I finally came to the conclusion that having a fixed practice routine is exactly what you do **NOT** want. For me, *variety* works best.

Some days **play soft**, other days **play loud**, other days **play soft and loud**.

Mix that with speed: practice **fast**, **slow**.

**Read exercises** sometimes and other times practice jazz **by ear**.

Play **ballads**, **concertos**, and **jazz tunes**.

Play **alone**, play **with the stereo**, play with **small combos** and **big bands**.

Play along with **music minus one** tapes, and play with **established recordings**.

If you feel a particular area has become a weakness, spend a little more time at it, but *never* spend all of your time in one area.

## **Jazzy Scale Alternatives**

### **Pentatonic Scales**

In jazz, **pentatonic scales** are extremely useful, and the scale (1-2-3-5-6) can be practiced a lot of ways.

In addition to the **4-note run** (1-2-3-5, 2-3-5-6, etc.), go *up the scale in one key and down the scale in another key*.

For example, *C-up & Db-down*: **C-D-E-G-A-C-D-E**, **F-Eb-Db-Bb-Ab-F-Eb-Db**.

Then move up a half step (go up in Db & down in D) and work through all 12 keys this way; it **REALLY** boosts your vocabulary.

A partial use of the same approach is good too, such as: **E-G-A-C**, **Db-Bb-Ab-F**, etc.

Other pentatricks: **triplets** (C-D-E, D-E-G, E-G-A, G-A-C) or **skip-one-tone** (C-E-D-G-E-A-G-C, etc).

## Diminished Scales

Haven't seen much written about **diminished scales** lately, but they're very colorful.

There are only 3 (since there are essentially only 3 diminished 7th chords).

The scale is built of alternate whole-tone & half-tone intervals... W-H-W-H-W-H-W-H.

For example, in **F** it would be **F-G-Ab-Bb-B-Db-D-E-F**.

The best use of this scale (that I'm aware of) is to be *played over a dominant 7th chord*.

The trick is to play a diminished scale that *starts a half step up from V*.

So if the tune is in **D**, where **V7** is **A7**, you'd play a **Bb diminished scale** against the **A7 chord** (that is, play the scale: **Bb-C-Db-Eb-E-Gb-G-A-Bb** against the chord: **A-Db-E-G**).

The reason it works so well is that the scale contains so many tasty notes relative to the V7.

## Tools for Practice

Someone mentioned **BAND IN A BOX**; I do pretty much the same thing with my synth/sequencer.

I've recorded piano/bass/drum parts for more than 50 standards, so with the touch of a button I can practice any of the tunes at ANY tempo in ANY key.

## Closing Note

Too many soloists put out a non-stop wall of sound.

A well-placed rest for a beat or more is a very good thing; it should be part of your palette to make a solo more interesting and dynamic.

## Buddy Up

If you dabble in any arranging or jazz composition, or if you just want to

expand your rhythmical and harmonic vocabulary, a good practice would be to take some time every two weeks or so to **play free**.

Find another player, preferably one who plays your same instrument, and go into a room with a tape recorder and *just begin playing*.

Respond to each other, but don't talk about any kind of form, tempo, or style beforehand.

You may find that, as you play on, a tempo will develop -- it may quite possibly be some basic type of form (ABA, AABA, etc.).

Be sure to *always record these sessions*, so that you can go back later and analyze the sections, licks, patterns that you liked the most.

I think you will find this practice very beneficial in finding ideas for compositions, horn arrangements, and even licks for your solos.

## Walking Bass

### Introduction

The ability to play left-hand bass is a must have for contemporary keyboardists.

Many pianists attempting bass lines tend to play too *arpeggio-like*, rather than the way a bassist would actually play. I'd like to share some basics of how to play good walking bass.

Each note will be a **quarter-note** (this keeps the groove "walking").

### A Short Walking Bass Lesson

For learning purposes, let's assume that we are dealing with a chord that lasts **4 beats**. We can break down what kind of note to play for each beat ...

**BEAT ONE** -- Play the **root** of the chord.

**BEATS TWO AND THREE** -- Play other **nearby chord-tones** (this could be the 3rd, 5th, 7th, or 6th depending on the chord symbol).

**BEAT FOUR** -- Play a note that *approaches the next chord* from either a **half-step above** or a **half-step below**. All by itself, this note can sound dissonant, but all will be forgiven once you resolve to the next chord. I call

this a "*set-up*" note, because it leads you to whatever the root of the next chord is. That's all there is to it.

For chords that last 2 or 3 beats, just be sure that the first bass note you play is the root and the last note "sets up" the next chord.

### **A Walking Bass Example**

I've provided an example of a walking bass line over a **II, V, I** progression, followed by a *turnaround with only two beats per chord*.

I've used set-up notes that are both above and below their target. They both work equally well.

### **Major Pentatonic**

Where I come from, I see a lot of people using the minor pentatonic scale for jazz improvisation.

Another good (yet simple) method is the **major pentatonic scale**.

This is just the **1,2,3,5,6, and 8** of the scale that the piece is in.

Most of the fingerings are simple (at least for sax) and it's a good option for beginners in jazz improv -- other than the popular minor pentatonic scales.

### **Improvisation Workout**

#### **Background**

I thought I would send in a tip. I am a low brass player who is trying to learn, as a thirty year old, to turn the licks in my head into the licks on my horn.

I have been playing section trombone for many years, but lately I am finding more opportunities to take some rides. Last week I was away for vacation and only had my bone and "Real" books, but no Aebersolds or a handy rhythm section.

#### **Technique**

Instead of just keeping the changes going in my head while I blew mindlessly, changing keys and feels, I stringently **played the head once** and then **appoggiated each change** -- no extra fluff, just *chord tones*.

For piano players this may sound utterly boring, but for me it has become a very effective routine. Start with just the **triad**, then add **extensions**, then start playing some **substitutions**.

Once this is getting comfortable (or is driving your neighbors crazy), start **inverting arpeggios** to create "*lead tones*" to each change.

Don't forget to end each session with some "mindless" playing. Not only is that a great release after hard and diligent practice, but you might also notice that your playing is getting less "mindless" and more controlled.