

How to Improvise Jazz Melodies

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There are different forms of jazz improvisation. For example, in “free improvisation”, the player is under absolutely no constraints. The listener is also under no obligation to remain a listener, and may tend to leave the scene if what she is hearing seems too close to random noise. Here we concentrate on “constrained improvisation”, meaning that we are playing over the chord changes of a tune.

Know the Tune

It is a good idea to have some familiarity with the way the tune sounds with its original melody. Seasoned players can sometimes skip this, because the tune is similar to some other tune. There are fewer chord-change ideas than there are tunes, and there is a lot of reuse over the universal songbook. Coming up with new chord changes is not that easy for composers.

It is also good to be able to sense roughly where you are in the tune just by hearing the chord changes without the melody. This is achieved mostly by listening to the tune enough times, but an experienced player can hear it by reading the chord changes as well.

Finally, if the tune has words, it is helpful to know some of them and the story they are telling. Of course this is mandatory for the vocalist, but the instrumentalist can benefit by knowing the spirit of the tune.

Play off the Melody

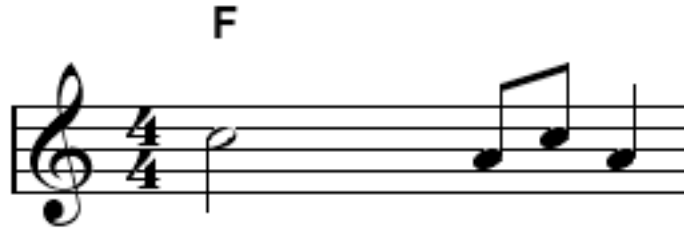
The most time-honored form of improvisation is to make small modifications to the melody, some times called “ad-libbing” (from latin “ad libitum” meaning *freely*). This is a good place to start, and also use in an occasional fashion later on.

Know the Chord Changes

While it is good to be able to play “by ear”, it is best not to rely on having the chords sounded as your only method. For example, the chord might not always be sounded before you want the next note of your melody. Also, the *comping* (accompanying, or compensating) instrument in the rhythm section might drop out for a chorus, leaving just you and the bass and drums, just you and the drums, or just you in some cases. Unless you can hear the chords in your head, you might be stuck at this point.

Use Chord Tones

Melody notes that are in the chord are very stable and resonate with the chord. Third and sevenths are particularly good choices. Below all notes in the melody are in the F chord.



Using chord tones

Use Color Tones

Often other tones are added to the chord to make a larger chord. Often this is done on the fly by the comping instrument. Sometimes these are implied by the original melody, and sometimes they are just known from experience. For example, over F major, it is reasonable safe to add (D the 6th, G the 9th, and E the major 7th). An awareness of the theory will help you know what tones sound good.



Using color tones (shown in green)

Use Arpeggios

An arpeggio consists of adjacent chord tones (or color tones, which are tones of an implied chord). They can go up or down, as in the following examples:



Arpeggio on chord tones (starting on the 3rd)

Use Approach Tones

In the preceding example, the Bb is also ok because it *approaches* the chord tone a half-step away. This idea is often used to get a “jazzy” sound, even with notes that are not in the scale. Here is an extension of the previous example. Note that the F# is not remotely consistent with the F major chord, but it “works” because it approaches the G, which is a color tone over the F major.



Approach tones (shown in blue)

Below, the first E, which is a color tone, also functions as an approach tone.



Arpeggio on chord tones (starting on the major 7th, also an approach tone)

The next example shows the tonic of the chord functioning as an approach tone, to the E.



*Descending arpeggio starting and ending on the major 7th.
The tonic F functions as an approach tone (discussed on page 4) in this case.*

Use Multiple Approach Tones

Instead of just one approach tone, use a chromatic run of two, three, or more, as shown below.



Multiple approach tones

Know Scales that go with the Chords

This is not always as difficult as it might seem at first, because the same scale will often work over multiple chords in succession. Here we treat “scale” as “set of notes” rather than “sequence of notes”. Typical scales that go with chords are given in the appendix. For example, the same scale, F major, can be used over all three chords in the II-V-I progression below, although different tones are normally emphasized over each one.



Using one scale, F major, over three chords

Use Scale Sequential Fragments

Sequences of a few notes of a companion scale can form a part of your improvisation.



Using scale sequential fragments

In playing with scale fragments, it is best if chord tones are hit *on the beat* rather than off, unless an appoggiatura (from the Italian word *appoggiare*, "to lean upon") effect is desired. Below is the line from above staggered so that the chord tones are off the beat. While the Bb could be regarded as an appoggiatura, it is not really held long enough to have that effect.



Scale fragment with chord tones off the beat

Avoid “Avoid Notes”

“Avoid note” is the jazz player’s term for a note that is in a common scale for a chord, but which shouldn’t be sustained (say longer than an eighth-note) over that chord because it is very dissonant, to the point of sounding harsh. In a way, it is saying that the scale should actually be reduced to a *smaller* scale in this particular intended use, by dropping the avoid notes. An example of an “avoid note” is the fourth of a major scale over a major chord. If played in the octave above the chord itself, this note creates a minor-ninth over the third of the chord, which sounds discordant. Short notes of the same pitch are not generally a problem and can be used in passing.



An “avoid note”

Convert Errors to Approach and Passing Tones

You will make mistakes, where your brain or your ears tell you to play a note that ends up being discordant with the harmony. Even professionals make such mistakes. When your ears tell you that you have played a note that doesn’t sound good, minimize the damage by not continuing to hold that note but rather treating it as a chromatic approach to another note. Usually, the note on either side of the note you played will sound ok, if not great. Apply this technique iteratively: keep extending your line until you get to a safe place, on a chord you know, then regroup and consider your next line. It is best if you can avoid holding the bad note longer than an eighth note. Conversely, choose notes that you plan to hold for a longer time carefully.

Change Direction

In using both scales and arpeggios, direction changes during the figure can provide variety and increase interest. Here are a few examples.



Changing direction in a scale



Changing direction (twice) in an arpeggio

Skip Notes or Zig-Zag

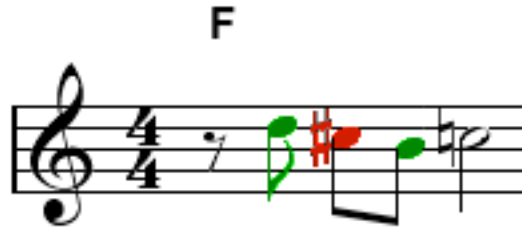
In a scale or arpeggio, skipping notes can create more nuance, especially if combined with direction change. The limiting case would be a “zig-zag” effect.



Skipping notes and zig-zagging in an arpeggio (major 9th chord implied)

Use Enclosures

To “enclose” means to approach a note from both sides alternatively. Enclosures are most effective when the tone enclosed is a chord tone. Below, the red coloring indicates that the note in question would be considered discordant. However, because this note is short and part of the enclosure idiom, the result sounds fine.



*An enclosure: Here the chromatic Db and B enclose the C.
The D acts as an approach to the enclosure.*

Use Repetition and Sequencing

A good-sounding melodic idea can be repeated immediately, or later in the solo. When the repeated melody shape is transposed to go with a different chord or scale, this is called “sequencing”. Repetition need not recur on the same part of the beat, as the first example below shows. For good examples, refer to some Thelonious Monk compositions, such as “Straight, No Chaser” or “Rhythm-ning”.



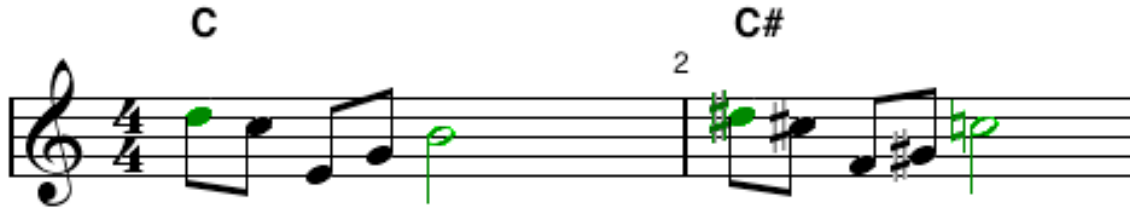
Repetition



Sequencing: The repeated figure is sequenced a half-step higher

Quote Freely

It is common to play fragments of other standard tunes or well-known solos within ones own solo. This usually produces a surprising effect and is considered a form of humor.



Quoting “Honeysuckle Rose”, with sequencing

Repeat Intervals

Below the entire melodic segment is constructed from intervals of a fourth. The fourth in particular tends to give the melody an expansive sound, perhaps because the overtones represented span a larger part of the spectrum than do, say, thirds and fifths.



Quartal melody

Vary Durations

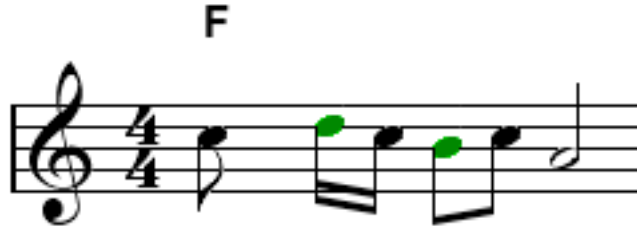
The same pitches played over notes of different durations can provide nuance.



Varying durations

Use Turns

Consider playing the first figure below instead of the second. The sixteenth notes comprise a “turn” ornament.



Turn

Start Most Phrases *Off The Beat*

Syncopation is an important ingredient in jazz. It acts to keep the melody moving forward. Consider starting phrases a half-beat before or after, or maybe two beats after, the start of the measure. Below we have replaced ordinary phrases in the first measure with similar syncopated ones in the second.



Starting phrases off the beat

Use Your Imagination

We have provided a small set of melodic improvisation ideas here. You should experiment with variations on these ideas for yourself and try to invent new ones. You can bring in ideas from other genres as well.

Remember Duke Ellington's famous words: "If it sounds good, it *is* good."

An Extended Example

Below, I have constructed a solo for the first half of “Here’s that Rainy Day”, by Jimmy van Heusen. How many of the techniques mentioned here can you spot?

Style: latin

CM7 Eb7 AbM7 DbM7

Dm7 G7 CM7 Gm7 C7

Fm7 Bb7 EbM7 AbM7

Dm7 G7 Em7 A7 Dm7 G7

A solo over a standard tune

Technical note: The musical figures in this paper were produced as screen shots of Impro-Visor (Jazz Improvisation Advisor):

<http://www.cs.hmc.edu/~keller/jazz/improvisor>

Appendix A: Common Scale Choices for Common Chords

Chords	Scales	Example Chord	Example Scales
Major triad Major sixth Major 69	Major	C = c e g C6 = c e g a C69 = c e g a d	c d e f g a b (avoid f)
Major seventh Major ninth Major thirteenth	Major	CM7 = c e g b CM9 = c e g b d CM13 = c e g b d a	c d e f g a b (avoid f and c)
Major seventh #11 Major ninth #11 Major thirteenth #11	Lydian	CM7#11 = c e g b f# CM7#11 = c e g b d f# CM7#11 = c e g b d f# a	c d e f# g a b (avoid c)
Minor triad Minor sixth Minor 69 Minor major seventh	Melodic minor	Cm = c e b g Cm6 = c e b g a Cm69 = c e b g a d CmM7 = c e b g b	c d e b f g a b
Minor seventh Minor ninth	Dorian	Cm7 = c e b g bb Cm7 = c e b g bb d	c d e b f g a bb
Seventh Ninth Thirteenth	Mixolydian (dominant)	C7 = c e g bb C9 = c e g bb d C13 = c e g bb d a	c d e f g a bb c (avoid f)
Seventh #11 Ninth #11 Thirteenth #11	Lydian dominant	C7#11 = c e g bb f# C9#11 = c e g bb d f# C13#11 = c e g bb d f# a	c d e f# g a bb c
Seventh sus4 (aka Eleventh)	Mixolydian	C7sus4 = c f g bb	c d e f g a bb c
Seventh flat 9 Seventh sharp 9	Diminished, up half-step	C7b9 = c e g bb db C7#9 = c e g bb d#	db eb e f# g a bb c
Seventh #5 #9 (aka Seventh alt)	Melodic minor, up half-step	C7#5#9 = c e g# bb d#	c# d# e f# g# bb c
Minor seventh flat 5	Melodic minor, up minor third	Cm7b5 = c e b gb bb	eb f gb ab bb c d eb
Diminished seventh	Diminished	Co7 = c e b gb a	c d e b f gb ab a b c

Appendix B: Spellings of common chords in all jazz keys

key	major	minor	dim	add 6	add 7	add maj 7	add b9	add 9	add #9	add #11
C	c e g	c eb g	c eb gb	a	bb	b	db	d	eb	f#
F	f a c	f ab c	f ab cb	d	eb	e	gb	g	ab	b
Bb	bb d f	bb db f	bb db fb	g	ab	a	cb	c	db	e
Eb	eb g bb	eb gb bb	eb gb a	c	db	d	fb	f	gb	a
Ab	ab c eb	ab cb eb	ab cb d	f	gb	g	a	bb	b	d
Db	db f ab	db fb ab	db fb g	bb	cb	c	d	eb	e	g
C#	c# e# g#	c# e g#	c# e g	a#	b	b#	d	d#	e	g
Gb	gb bb db	gb a db	gb a c	eb	fb	f	g	ab	a	c
F#	f# a# c#	f# a c#	f# a c	d#	e	e#	g	g#	a	c
B	b d# f#	b d f#	b d f	g#	a	a#	c	c#	d	f
E	e g# b	e g b	e g bb	c#	d	d#	f	f#	g	c#
A	a c# e	a c e	a c eb	f#	g	g#	bb	b	a	d#
D	d f# a	d f a	d f ab	b	d	c#	eb	e	f	g#
G	g b d	g bb d	g bb db	e	f	f#	ab	a	bb	c#

Notes: We avoid all double flats and double sharps.

For dim7, add 6 not 7.