

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.

It is also good to know 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.

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 way later on.

Know the Chord Changes

While it is good to be able to play “by ear”, it is best not to rely on this 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 instrument in the rhythm section might drop out for a chorus, leaving just you and the bass and drums, just 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. Thirds and sevenths are particularly good choices. Below all notes are in the F chord.

F



Using chord tones

Use Color Tones

Often other tones can be added to the chord to make a larger chord. 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).



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



Descending arpeggio starting and ending on the major 7th.
The tonic F functions as an approach tone.

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.

Use Scale Fragments

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



Scale fragment

This example uses a fragment of the F major scale of an F major chord, and chord tones C and A are hit on the beat. Also, the Bb would be an avoid note, except that it is not sustained, but rather is just a passing tone, so this will sound ok.

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

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)

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. 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”

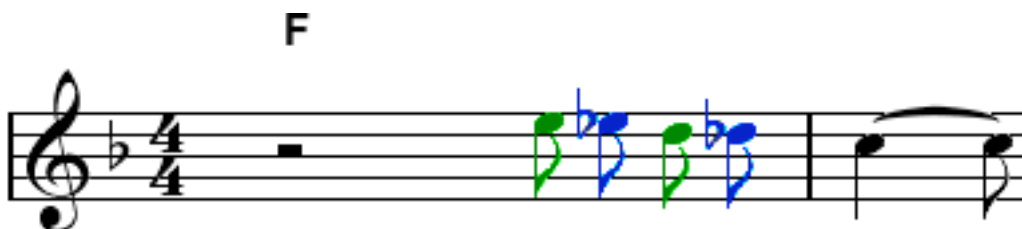
Convert Errors to Approach Tones

You will make mistakes, where your brain or your ears tell you to play one note and it is 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 holding 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 recursively: continue 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.

Multiple Approach Tones

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



Multiple approach tones

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.



An enclosure: Here the chromatic Bb and C 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, in a solo on “Along Came Betty”

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

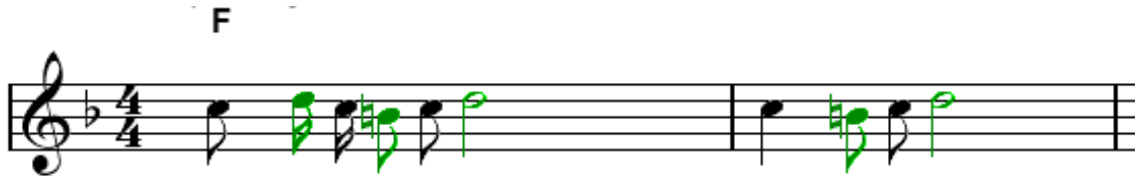
The same pitches played over notes of different durations can provide nuance.



Varying durations

Use Turns

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



Start Some Phrases Off The First 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 first 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.”

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 | CM7 = c e g b CM9 = c e g b d | c d e f g a b (avoid f and c) |
| Major seventh #11 Major ninth #11 | Lydian | CM7#11 = c e g b f# CM7#11 = c e g b d f# | c d e f# g a b (avoid c) |
| Minor triad Minor sixth Minor 69 Minor major seventh | Melodic minor | Cm = c eb g Cm6 = c eb g a Cm69 = c eb g a d CmM7 = c eb g b | c d eb f g a b |
| Minor seventh Minor ninth | Dorian | Cm7 = c eb g bb Cm7 = c eb g bb d | c d eb f g a bb |
| Seventh Ninth Seventh sus4 | Mixolydian | C7 = c e g bb C9 = c e g bb d C7sus4 = c f g bb | c d e f g a bb (avoid f) |
| 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 = 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 eb gb bb | eb f gb ab bb c d |
| Diminished seventh | Diminished | Co7 = c eb gb a | c d eb 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.