## Essential Strategies for Jazz Improvisation Learning to speak the language of jazz

#### By Dr. Juan Alamo

hen studying solos of the great jazz improvisers, one will find a series of strategies commonly used by these players in their solos. Some of these strategies are chord arpeggiation, scales, chromatic ornamentation, color tones, guide tones, and ii–V–I patterns. Hence, it's extremely important for jazz students to learn these concepts and incorporate them as part of their melodic jazz vocabulary in order to learn how to speak the language of jazz correctly.

1. **Chord Arpeggiation** is one of the most overlooked approaches to improvisation. Many young jazz students concentrate on mode/ scale-oriented improvisation and pay little or no attention to the importance of learning how to arpeggiate all of the chords of a given tune. Learning to play the arpeggios of the tune will help the student to become more acquainted with the harmonic structure of the piece. Also, as you will see in Examples 1 and 2, arpeggios are a valuable source for melodic material that can be used for improvisation. Here are some ideas:

• Arpeggiate from any note other than the root (3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th)

- Invert the notes of the arpeggio
- Displacement of the notes by an octave
- Add chromatic ornamentation

2. Use of **Scales** is an essential concept for any jazz musician. However, in order to avoid playing a solo that just sounds like the playing of random scales (with no melodic/musical cohesiveness), one must learn how to use scales in a manner that is typical of the jazz style. Here are some suggestions:

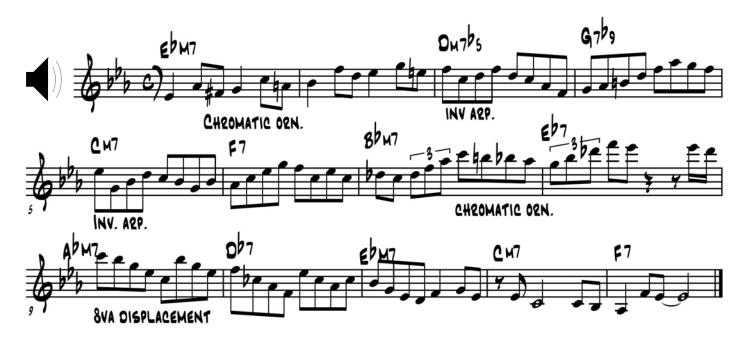
• Avoid running the *entire* scale up and down

Avoid stressing the root of the chord
Add chromatic ornamentation to basic

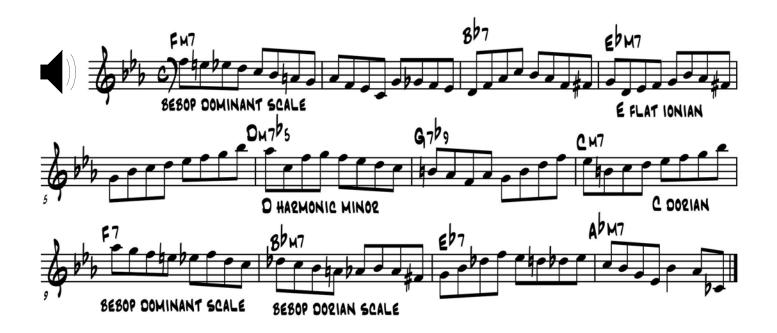
scales

3. Chromatic Ornamentation is another crucial element that gives jazz its unique sound. Without it, the music would sound stiff, dry, and monotonous. Chromatic notes are, in a way, "wrong" notes that are used to create harmonic tension. These "wrong" notes will often resolve to a target note or "good" note. Here are

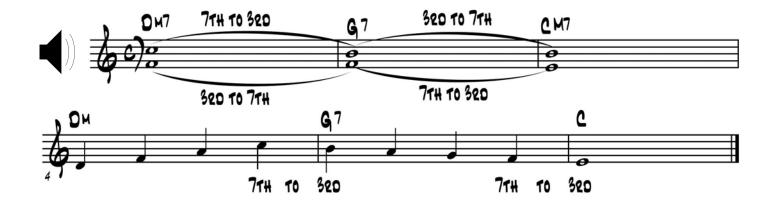
#### Example 1



Example 2



Example 3



Web Extra

some ideas:

• Enclosures: Ab, F# to G (on Eb). See Example 1, measure 1

• Passing Tone: G, G<sup>b</sup> to F (on F). See Example 2, measure 2

• Bebop "scale" lick: Eb, D, Db, Eb (on Eb). See Example 2, measure 11

• Approach Tone: B natural to C (on C minor). See example 2, measure 8

4. Guide Tones are typically considered to be the 3rd and 7th scale degree of a chord since those notes determine whether a chord is major, minor, or dominant. In a chord progression where the root motion follows a cycle of fourths like a ii–V–I, guide tones create subtle movement from one chord to another in a recurring manner. The third of each chord resolves to (or becomes) the seventh of the following chord, while the seventh of each chord resolves to the third of the following chord (see Example 3). Go back to Example 1 and see how this concept is used in measures 4 through 8. 5. **ii–V–I Patterns:** This is perhaps the most common/important progression in jazz. Consequently, jazz musicians learn many melodic clichés that work over this progression. It would be good to memorize each of the patterns in Example 4 in all keys. Once memorized, then try to create your own patterns by changing the rhythms or the notes.

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#### Example 4: ii-V-I Patterns



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