

Essential Strategies for Jazz Improvisation

Learning to speak the language of jazz

By Dr. Juan Alamo

When 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 1 is a musical score in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major (two flats). It consists of three staves of music. The first staff starts with a treble clef and a common time signature, then changes to 3/4. It features a melodic line with several chords: EbM7, Cm7b5, and G7b9. Annotations include 'CHROMATIC ORN.' and 'INV. ARP.'. The second staff continues the melody with chords Cm7, F7, Bbm7, and Eb7. It includes annotations for 'INV. ARP.' and 'CHROMATIC ORN.'. The third staff shows further melodic development with chords AbM7, Db7, EbM7, Cm7, and F7, and is annotated with '8VA DISPLACEMENT'. The score includes a speaker icon on the left and measure numbers 5 and 9.

Example 2

Example 2 consists of three staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). A speaker icon is on the left.

- Staff 1:**
 - Measures 1-4: **F7** chord, **BEBOP DOMINANT SCALE**
 - Measures 5-8: **Bb7** chord, **BEBOP DOMINANT SCALE**
 - Measures 9-12: **Ebm7** chord, **E FLAT IONIAN**
- Staff 2:**
 - Measures 13-16: **Dm7b5** chord, **D HARMONIC MINOR**
 - Measures 17-20: **G7b9** chord, **D HARMONIC MINOR**
 - Measures 21-24: **Cm7** chord, **C DORIAN**
- Staff 3:**
 - Measures 25-28: **F7** chord, **BEBOP DOMINANT SCALE**
 - Measures 29-32: **Bbm7** chord, **BEBOP DORIAN SCALE**
 - Measures 33-36: **Eb7** chord, **BEBOP DORIAN SCALE**
 - Measures 37-40: **Abm7** chord, **BEBOP DORIAN SCALE**

Example 3

Example 3 consists of two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). A speaker icon is on the left.

- Staff 1:**
 - Measures 1-4: **Dm7** chord, **7TH TO 3RD** interval
 - Measures 5-8: **G7** chord, **3RD TO 7TH** interval
 - Measures 9-12: **Cm7** chord, **3RD TO 7TH** interval
- Staff 2:**
 - Measures 13-16: **Dm** chord, **7TH TO 3RD** interval
 - Measures 17-20: **G7** chord, **7TH TO 3RD** interval
 - Measures 21-24: **C** chord, **7TH TO 3RD** interval

some ideas:

- Enclosures: A \flat , F \sharp to G (on E \flat). See Example 1, measure 1
- Passing Tone: G, G \flat to F (on F). See Example 2, measure 2
- Bebop “scale” lick: E \flat , D, D \flat , E \flat (on E \flat). 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.

the jazz vibes book *Milt Jackson—Transcribed Solos of the Master*. For contact information visit www.juanalamo.com. PN

Dr. Juan Alamo teaches at Howard Payne University and Tarrant County College in Arlington, Texas. He holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree and a Master of Music degree from the University of North Texas and a Bachelor of Music degree from the Music Conservatory of Puerto Rico. Dr. Alamo maintains an active schedule as clinician and solo artist, giving master classes and recitals through USA, Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico. Dr. Alamo recently released his marimba method, *Music for Four Mallets*, a collection of original etudes for beginners and intermediate marimba players. He has also collaborated with Arthur Lipner in the creation of

Example 4: ii-V-I Patterns

The image displays five staves of musical notation for Example 4: ii-V-I Patterns. Each staff represents a different melodic line over a ii-V-I chord progression. The chords are labeled above the notes: DM7, G7, and CM7. The first staff shows a simple melodic line. The second staff shows a line with a triplet. The third staff shows a line with a triplet and a chromatic approach. The fourth staff shows a line with a triplet and a chromatic approach. The fifth staff shows a line with a triplet and a chromatic approach.

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