

# ANATOMY of a MELODY

**The interactive guide** to jazz improvisation



# Javier Arau

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**Javier Arau**



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For all the thinkers, filled with a passionate curiosity, ever-searching  
for solutions to the greatest musical puzzles.

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# Preface

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## Challenges

The art of improvisation is shrouded in a certain gorgeous and inspired mystery. To the uninitiated, jazz music can sound as if it is being played by magicians who are conjuring up intricate sounds out of thin air. I am going to venture a guess that each of us has heard someone playing some engaging improvised solo and immediately thought, “How did they just play that?! How on Earth did that melody just appear?” I’ve asked this sort of question over and over for decades, ever since I first started learning jazz. It’s a question that begs to be answered through extensive research, diligent practice, and plenty of active listening. Yet, even after years of concerted effort, there is still a likelihood that a wide chasm persists between the question and any truly meaningful answer. That gulf presents the biggest puzzle and challenge of all.

This disconnect is an ugly beauty. A real problem. We are drawn to jazz music as fans of the great improvisers, the master melodists. The creativity and artistry of these giants qualifies them in my mind as “immortals.” But when we first begin to form and create melody, we are but mortal infants. Jazz study can lead to great joy and fulfillment; it can also lead to frustration, failure, and actual despair, in part because we cannot escape the fact that our end goal — making melodies along the immortal lines of Chet Baker or Dexter Gordon — often remains years and years away. Too many players end up swimming and then drowning fast, skipping many of the steps they should take before jumping into improvising on standard jazz repertoire.

There’s hope, though, so please don’t despair. After all, many musicians have delved into jazz as beginning improvisers and have become entirely successful as improvising artists. What we need foremost are tools that allow us to take small steps, digesting bits of music, one at a time, all while empowering us to fully realize our own artistry every step of the way.

## My Story

I wrote this book wishing that I had benefitted from a book like this while I was first learning how to improvise. I first heard saxophonist Charlie Parker when I was 11 years old and, from that moment onward, I approached every solo I heard as a code waiting to be cracked. While local pros were helping me develop my craft on the instrument, I was turning to recordings of classic masters — Parker, John Coltrane, Julian “Cannonball” Adderley, Sonny Rollins — yearning to gain insight into how they could play with such creativity. My route to developing as a jazz musician was composed nearly entirely of transcribing solos. Whenever I faced a chord progression and couldn’t understand how to play over it, I sought out a recorded solo and transcribed it. I likened this process, every single time, to getting a private lesson from a master.

There is a common approach to learning called *end-gaining*, a term used in the Alexander Technique. To end-gain means to reach for your goal by focusing on the end result. In music, I end-gained constantly. If I wanted to learn how to improvise on “Giant Steps,” I would transcribe “Giant Steps” from as many performances as I could and learn to play them all. The problem with end-gaining is that it tends to ignore process and process is what leads to productive and meaningful results. I may have wanted to learn “Giant Steps,” and the transcribing was certainly valuable, but I needed tools to help me with smaller steps along the way. “Giant Steps” itself was composed in the key of E-flat yet I had never even learned how to improvise on an E-flat major scale at a slow tempo. By ignoring process, I can’t help but think I slowed down my own development as a budding improviser.

What I continued to affirm as a music student over many decades was that transcribing was one step of many, all which contributed to a process that helped demystify jazz improvisation as an art form. Each small step — including scale and line manipulation, ear training, theory study, composition, deep listening — not only laid a broader musical foundation but also served as essential tools for advancing my artistic development.

I was mentored as a young student by many of the greatest improvisers in jazz history and, fortunately, most of them were both motivating and quite direct in their teaching. At age 15, I was trading fours with Dizzy Gillespie and, at age 18, my transcription of Joe Henderson’s solo on “Lush Life” was accepted for publication in *Jazz Educators Journal*, with Henderson himself taking an active interest in my development. Dave Brubeck personally contributed to financing my college education and, as a graduate student at New England Conservatory (NEC), my mentors — George Russell, Bob Brookmeyer, George Garzone, and Jerry Bergonzi — nurtured my musical welfare.

## Solutions

In my first few years living in New York City, I divided my teaching hours between private students and university classrooms and I began to further hone my craft and approach. Eventually, I started wanting to develop a wider platform for teaching and research, in part to try out many of my own pedagogical ideas.

I founded New York Jazz Academy® in 2009. The school quickly became a vibrant incubator for jazz teaching and learning throughout New York City, eventually reaching thousands of students in more than 70 countries worldwide. This book is the culmination of those decades of field research, presenting a method that is holistic and balanced, introducing hundreds of small steps for the musician while focusing on the ultimate goal of helping each learner realize their full artistic potential. Just as the teachings and topics here have been tried and tested by thousands of students since NYJA®’s inception, it is my goal that this book will resonate with every type of reader, regardless of their level of musicianship and prior musical experience.

Ultimately, this book is entirely about you and your own process, which is about to become quite creative (and mostly pain-free). Here’s hoping that you may unlock the great mysteries of jazz improvisation finding immense joy along your way.



# I

## ntroduction

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### Your Story

#### Why are you here?

When was the very first time that jazz music had a lasting impact on you? Where were you at the time? What helped you transition from being a listener to becoming an active performer? At some point, you caught the “jazz bug,” leaving you with a requisite and perennial hunger, an insatiable appetite for more. Close your eyes and try to remember the very first time you ever tried to improvise. Rather than first trying to recall your own efforts, what do you remember about your surroundings? What do you remember about your emotions? Were you excited? Happy? Anxious? Afraid? If you are fearful of improvising, know that you are not alone. Let’s confront this head on. Why the fear? It is in part because we have a fear of failure. In musical improvisation, we fear the “wrong” notes. We want to sound exactly like what we are hearing from others. That is usually unrealistic. We must manage expectations and come to a fuller understanding of process and progress. Familiarity and confidence helps quell fear. To gain confidence, you must experience success.

This book will guide you along a path where every step encourages exploration. While some failure is to be expected, the goal is for you to experience ample success along the way. Consider *Anatomy of a Melody: The interactive guide to jazz improvisation* to be a roadmap assisting you on a very personal journey. The book has been crafted to offer an approach to jazz improvisation that helps solidify the musical foundations upon which all great artistry can develop, keeping a steady focus on musical detail and process. At the same time, your interaction with the book is meant to inspire and awaken your passion and interests as a musician.

#### What do you want to learn?

Take a look at the following gorgeous melodic line improvised by the great saxophonist, Sonny Stitt, on the jazz classic “Avalon.” It’s pretty safe to assume that you would love to be able to improvise a melodic line as elegant as Stitt’s. How do you get to the point where you can play a line like this though?



Sonny Stitt tenor sax solo  
“Avalon” (key of C major)



If you want to play like Sonny Stitt, first try backing up a bit. Long before learning how to improvise at this advanced level, you must absorb many small steps along the way, handling each with detailed care. Regardless of how disparate some melodies may be, they are often composed of the same basic elements.

## Roll up your sleeves and really dig in!

This book is meant not only to be read but also to be applied on a musical instrument so that the musician can work through the ideas presented. Some of the biggest obstacles the musician faces are in application, where sometimes even seemingly basic concepts can be quite a challenge. Perhaps you can play some major scales but are not able to play certain minor scale fragments from memory. Maybe you can play “Twinkle, twinkle, little star” in the key of C but you struggle with the same simple melody in the key of A-flat. You might be entrenched with playing a traditional 12-bar blues at a medium tempo in the key of F but you struggle with playing at a slow tempo with added chromatic chord changes.

Think small and think big. On the road to fluency, map it all out, articulating your own artistic goals:

1. Know what you like and what you dream of achieving.
2. Consider what fundamentals are and how to internalize and apply them.
3. Stay curious and observe what components great music comprises. What are the essential building blocks you need to learn to develop as an improvising artist?

## Book Format

### Scaffolding

This book delves into musical concepts as they relate to melody, rhythm, harmony, and form. Scaffolding is abundant, giving each student an opportunity to develop well in one area before proceeding to the next area. The topics covered here are presented in a historical context and in the form of a how-to guide for creating your own improvisations through careful practice of exercises and other concrete elements. Learning the *Anatomy of a Melody* will focus your attention on three parts in a progressive and iterative approach.

- UNIT ONE addresses fundamental concepts in melodic and rhythmic construction, examining a single chord at a time.
- UNIT TWO introduces harmony and simple chord progressions, limited to two chords at a time, all relating to a single tonic key.
- UNIT THREE explores fundamentals in a broader context, introducing 3- and 4-chord groupings, including the “Holy Trinity” — the ii-V-I progression — and chromatic applications in bebop jazz and beyond.

By design, the material for each unit seldom moves beyond the key of C, which leaves the transposition to the musician, with this movement to new keys posed as a central challenge throughout the book.

Nearly every topic is presented as a mini-lesson of only 1-2 pages for maximum ease of cross-referencing hundreds of topics, most of which are also easily accessible in the Index. Material may be used in private lessons or in a classroom setting. The book serves as a comprehensive text for teaching improvisation and jazz styles, a text for teaching theory and harmony, and as an all-purpose reference guide to jazz music. Chapters allow for plenty of teacher/student interaction and each topic is introduced to enhance immediate success and understanding. Assignments and goals for each chapter are also clarified, enabling you to review and reinforce ideas.

## Symbols and sections

Each page of this book is crafted to engage the musician, both visually and musically. Below are symbols and sections that will help keep you focused while giving you structure and guidance throughout.



**Zen Jazz Master Says**

Zen Jazz Master is quite a guide. When he speaks, everyone listens.



**Historical Example**

Masterful examples from throughout history are prevalent in each chapter.



**Tip**

Want to better apply the material? Tip shares quick and effective advice.



**Challenge**

Rise to the challenges, which include healthy doses of transposition!



**Improvise**

Now's your chance to go for it! From 1-chord vamps to full repertoire.



**Compose**

Cross-train and develop your voice with composition assignments.



**Ear Training**

It all starts with developing your ear via many creative exercises.



**Inquiry Box**

Added insight into specific topics, presented in a bite-sized format.



**Listening Guide**

Not sure what to listen to? Let these suggestions serve as your guide.



Explore the melody of a specific improvised solo.

**Topic**

Topics are meant to cover only 1-3 pages at a time so you can focus without distractions.

**Masterclass**

Break up your flow with an added masterclass on a special topic.

**Smackdown!**

Compare two approaches in a head-to-head matchup.

**Investigate**

Delve deeply into one particular area of study and come out refreshed.

**Song Study**

Learn from a masterwork, including lead sheets, chord charts, and more.

**Improvise**

Finally, a chance to improvise on a tune. Time to spread your wings!

## Beginning Conclusions

### What's the expectation?

It's a winding and adventurous road ahead. Manage your expectations carefully and take extra care to ensure that you celebrate the small steps in the present moment. Assuming you put in the practice and the work, you are exactly where you should be. If you need some cheering on, make sure to come on back and read this introduction again. Learning a jazz composition is a bit different than learning an entry-level classical piece on an instrument. While the chord progression for "Autumn Leaves" may be more forgiving than, say, the progression for Wayne Shorter's "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum," what you choose to play over "Autumn Leaves" will change throughout your life. Each piece in the repertoire is a lifelong pursuit and, for this reason, no jazz composition is only for "beginner level" musicians.

### Artistry need not wait for mastery

While this book addresses the craft involved in becoming a fluent improviser, great jazz musicians are not simply plugging in scales that change with each chord. There are exceptions to the rules of jazz theory in great solos, which makes improvisation and artistic success all the more fascinating. The bottom line? You have to know the rules to break the rules.

Artistry really knows no boundaries and demands no clear set of prerequisites. You already possess a singular musical voice whether you are fully aware of this or not. You can always play something meaningful and intentional, right now. Artistry need not wait for mastery. The decisions a soloist makes can always be artistic ones. When given the right tools, you can start making artistic choices even after learning only a handful of notes.

### How to supplement the book?

So many elements of jazz style need to be studied beyond a book. If you really want to develop, you must also supplement your studies. Here are a few strong suggestions:

1. Get a teacher.
2. Learn with others.
3. Reread and re-apply. The book is meant to be tackled with different layers in mind. Your first pass through the book will feel much different than your second pass.

### Final words

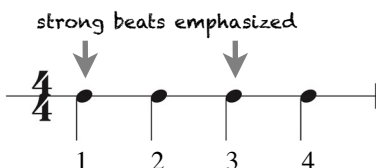
Will you be a fluent improviser after finishing this book? Possibly! Will you be able to improvise at all? Definitely! How quickly and well you progress depends in part on you and how hard you work for it. Improvisation takes practice, discipline, thought, and, most importantly, imagination. My hope is that, by the time you finish this book, you will understand, deeply, how to approach music and craft a solo with wings. I'll be with you every step of the way and I'm definitely looking forward to taking this journey with you.

## Syncopation

Consider the many simple songs that use downbeat rhythms. *Syncopation* is the antithesis of straight rhythm, as it places accents on weak beats that may pull the ear away from the downbeat pulse. The first set of examples below contrast straight quarter notes with an accented and syncopated beat 2 (and the displacement of a typically strong beat 3). Other examples address straight and syncopated eighth notes, where upbeat accents add an element of interest.

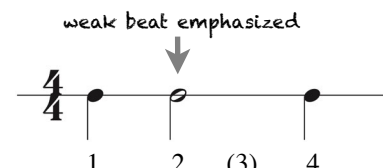
### EX. 1.10

Straight quarter note rhythm, strong beats 1 and 3 emphasized



### EX. 1.11

Syncopated quarter note rhythm, emphasis on beat 2 instead of beat 3



Label the syncopated rhythms on "I want to be happy" below.



### EX. 1.12

"I want to be happy"  
(Youmans/Caesar)



"Jingle Bells" is a perfect song to **review strong beats 1 and 3**. Notice how only the strong beats emphasized in each measure, thus there is no syncopation.



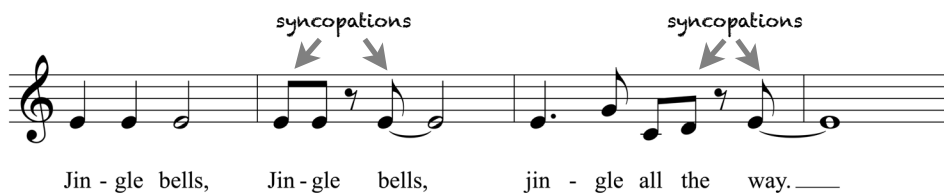
### EX. 1.13

"Jingle Bells"  
(Traditional)  
original (no syncopation)



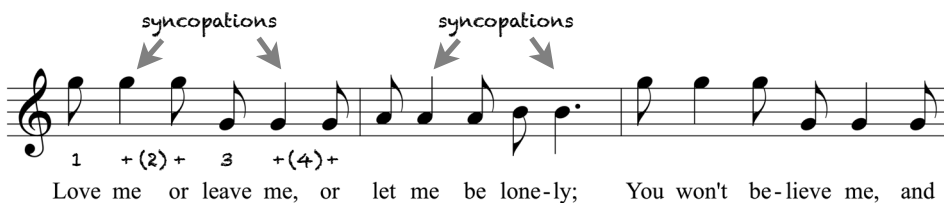
### EX. 1.14

"Jingle Bells"  
with added  
8th note syncopations



### EX. 1.15

"Love me or leave me"  
(Donaldson/Kahn)



Write in the counting for every rhythm on this page. Every measure will use some or all of the following numbers and their upbeats, each notated with a plus (+): 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + . Use parentheses for rests and any tied notes.



## 1-Measure Rhythms

Small rhythmic cells, even when only one measure long, are memorable, purposeful, and highly engaging. Get to know 1-measure rhythms by ear, by sight, and by feel. Practice them in multiple tempos and feels, from swing to straight eighths. Notice the details, particularly how some of these rhythms are syncopated and others are not. These rhythms may be used with any combination of pitches.

### EX. 1.49

1-measure rhythms

Loop each 1-measure rhythm below, playing through each one repeatedly, in tempo. Also write in the counts for each.



Eight 1-measure rhythms are shown on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). Each rhythm is numbered 1 through 8 in a circle above it. Rhythm 5 is circled and has an arrow pointing to it from the left.

### EX. 1.50

Major scale *étude* using rhythm (5)

A major scale étude in 4/4 time, using rhythm (5). The melody is written on a single treble staff. It consists of eight measures, each containing a quarter note followed by a quarter rest. The notes are: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, and C5. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

### EX. 1.51

Rhythm (3) with added pitches

Repeat the *étude* above, using a different 1-measure rhythm each time.



Two staves of music for Exercise 1.51. Each staff contains four measures. The first and third measures of each staff contain a quarter note followed by a quarter rest, while the second and fourth measures contain a whole rest. The notes for the quarter notes are: C4, D4, E4, F4 on the first staff, and G4, A4, B4, C5 on the second staff.

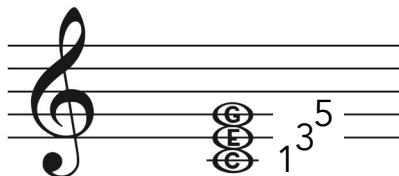


## Chord Tones

When two or more pitches are heard simultaneously, a harmony is created. Chords, commonly comprising three or more simultaneous pitches, are central to harmony. The notes within a chord — *chord tones* — may be played together simultaneously or played one at a time. The chord below, a C major triad, uses the first, third, and fifth (1-3-5) scale degrees of the C major scale. The following musical examples illustrate its use in famous melodies.

### EX. 2.1

C major chord triad  
composed of C major  
scale degrees (1-3-5).



### Chords in any octave

Chord tones may be placed in any octave. A C major triad is always labeled with scale degrees 1-3-5, whether played high or low.



1. Sit at a piano and **play** the C major chord triad above.
2. Stop playing the chord and **audiate**, hearing the chord tones in your mind.
3. **Play** the chord again, and **sing** each chord tone. If you don't have access to a piano, only audiate and sing.

ter·ti·ar·y /'tərSHē,erē/

adjective: **tertiary**

tertiary harmony uses chords  
based on thirds (intervals)



### EX. 2.2

"The Star-Spangled Banner"  
(Key/Smith)



A chord **arpeggio** is created when all chord tones are played consecutively, as in "The Star-Spangled Banner."



### EX. 2.3

"Taps"  
(Traditional)



Finish writing in the scale degrees for "Taps" below.

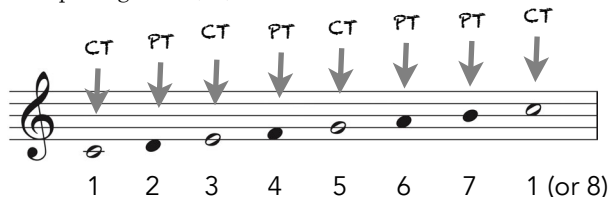


### Passing tones

*Passing tones* are notes in a scale that sit between chord tones. Within any major scale, scale degrees 2-4-6-7 are passing tones that lead to the major triad chord tones 1-3-5. Melodies may be composed of any combination of chord tones and passing tones.

### EX. 2.4

C major scale,  
including chord tones (CT)  
and passing tones (PT)



### EX. 2.5

"Joy to the World/Antioch"  
(George Frideric Handel)

Circle the chord tones in  
"Joy to the World" below.



# Improvise

## Key Center Workout

To gain fluency in all 12 major keys, become familiar with key signatures while practicing with simple melodies, like familiar folk songs, nursery rhymes, and other compositions. Each key center takes significant care and study. The first example below presents the classic jazz composition “When the Saints Go Marching in” in the key of C major. First finish writing in all the scale degrees then transpose it to a new key of your choice. For the remaining examples, use the given scale degree numbers to help aid in transposing from one key to another, following the steps outlined below.

### EX 2.76

“When the Saints Go Marching in”  
(Traditional)

Make sure you understand a song's **scale degrees in the key of C major** before you transpose.



Step 1

Write in the key signature for the new key.

Step 2

Under the staff, write in the song's scale degrees.

Finish writing out the scale degrees for the C major version above, then finish transposing “When the Saints” to the key of D major below.



Step 3

Use the scale degrees (and your ear) to write out the melody in the new key.

Write in the pitches for the three songs below, each in a different major key. Scale degrees are given. Start by first writing in the key signature at the beginning of each staff system.



“Twinkle twinkle, little star” (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart)

“Three Blind Mice” (Traditional)

“Skip to my Lou” (Traditional)

### IMPROVISE

First improvise in the key of C major then transpose to other keys. Consider which scale degree numbers match your notes.

## Investigate Two Views: Natural Minor Scale

The *natural minor scale* is termed “natural” because it is derived directly from the major scale using two types of construction. The first, called *parallel minor*, keeps the same root as the major scale but lowers the 3rd, 6th, and 7th scale degrees. The second, called *relative minor*, uses the notes of the major scale but starts on the 6th scale degree of major.

### View #1 Parallel minor

To construct a parallel minor scale, start with the major scale, keeping the same root (scale degree 1), *lowering the 3rd, 6th, and 7th scale degrees by a half step.*

#### EX. 3.13

C major scale



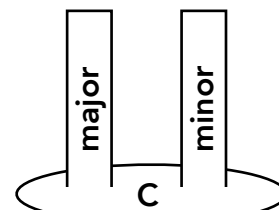
Start with major,  
lowering the 3rd,  
6th, and 7th.

#### EX. 3.14

C natural minor scale



### Envisioning parallel



Imagine parallel trees in nature, each sprouting from the same level ground. The ground is the key or tonic pitch of the scale (C). The tree is the type of scale (major or minor) stemming from their shared root.

### View #2 Relative minor

To construct a relative minor scale, use the same diatonic notes as the major scale (keeping the same key signature) but *start on the 6th scale degree*, which is three half steps lower than the root of the relative major.

#### EX. 3.15

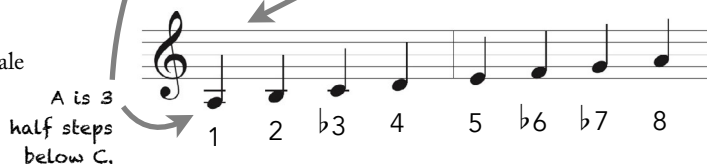
C major scale



Relative minor of  
C major is A natural minor  
(same notes but starts on the 6th).

#### EX. 3.16

A natural minor scale



A is 3  
half steps  
below C.

Relative major and natural minor scales are considered to have a **mediant relationship**. Mediants are harmonies or scales separated by major or minor third intervals.



### di·a·ton·ic

/ˌdīəˈtänik/

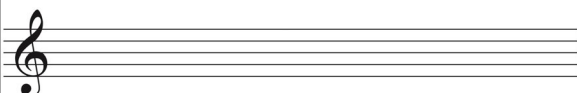
adjective: **diatonic**

(of a scale, interval, etc.) involving only notes proper to the prevailing key without chromatic alteration.

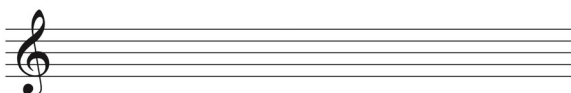
Now try this process starting from the bottom! Starting with C natural minor in view #1 above, move to its relative major (E-flat major). Then start with A natural minor in view #2 above and move to its parallel major (A major).



E-flat major scale  
(relative major of C minor)



A major scale  
(parallel major of A minor)



## Harmonic Rhythm

*Harmonic rhythm* is defined by the placement and frequency of each new chord in a progression. Some compositions involve multiple chords per measure while other compositions stay on one chord for multiple measures. The musical examples below demonstrate various possible harmonic rhythms.



### EX. 4.17

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star" (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart)

C F C F C G7 C

Fine

C F C G7 C F C G7

"Da Capo (D.C.) al Fine" = go back to the beginning and play until the "Fine" sign. **D.C. al Fine**

Finish notating the harmonic rhythm of "Twinkle, twinkle" below, including the chord symbols, chord roots, and their rhythms.

C F C

Fine

**D.C. al Fine**



### EX. 4.18

"My heart stood still" (Rogers/Hart)

C6 Am7 Dm7 G7 C6 C7 F6 Fm6 Em7 A7 Dm7 G7 C6

My feet could step and walk, My lips could move and talk, And yet my heart stood still. —



### EX. 4.19

"So What" (Davis/Chambers)

Dm7 Ebm7 Dm7

16 bars Dm7 8 bars Ebm7 8 bars Dm7



### EX. 4.20

"Sea Shantey (What shall we do with the drunken sailor?)" (Traditional)

The melody in this "Sea Shantey" implies and outlines certain harmonies. Write in the chord symbols below.

## V<sub>7</sub>-I Scale Fragments

Melody can be developed easily by applying focus and limits. Rather than using both dominant and tonic scales all at once, limit the pitch options to two small scale fragments, chosen from among many. Both of the dominant V<sub>7</sub> scale fragments below help move the melody from chord tones on V<sub>7</sub> to chord tones on I. One dominant G<sub>7</sub> fragment, using notes D-E-F, resolves to tonic C major fragment C-D-E from above. The other G<sub>7</sub> fragment, B-C-D, resolves to C-D-E from below.

### EX. 5.6

Scale fragments moving from dominant (V) to tonic (I)

**Scale fragments**  
**G<sub>7</sub> → C<sub>Maj7</sub>**  
 DEF → CDE or EFG  
 BCD → CDE or GAB  
 GAB → CDE or GAB  
 FG → EFG or CDE

### EX. 5.7

Scale fragment exercise

G<sub>7</sub> C<sub>Maj7</sub> G<sub>7</sub> C<sub>Maj7</sub>

Write in scale degrees below, relating them to each chord. Over the V<sub>7</sub>, the 7th can be labeled simply as "7", instead of "♭7", since it rarely, if ever, is a major 7th.



### IMPROVISE

Improvise using the target notes and their approach notes as a suggested melodic guide.

G<sub>7</sub> C<sub>Maj7</sub>

G<sub>7</sub> C<sub>Maj7</sub>



### The ii and V<sub>7</sub> chord share two chord tones

Chord tones 1 and ♭3 on ii<sub>7</sub> are also common to V<sub>7</sub>, becoming chord tones 5 and ♭7. Common tones are circled below.

### EX. 5.8

ii<sub>7</sub> vs. V<sub>7</sub>

ii<sub>7</sub> D<sub>m7</sub> 1 ♭3 5 ♭7

V<sub>7</sub> G<sub>7</sub> 5 ♭7 1 3

## Song Study

### "Limbo Jazz"

page 2 of 2

"Limbo Jazz" can be played at any speed, from slow to very fast, so establish a tempo before beginning to improvise. Use the exercises below to help learn the chord progression. If choosing to improvise in a key other than C major, take time to internalize the melody and harmony in the new key.

#### EX. 5.71

"Limbo Jazz" harmony exercise, first eight bars, using 2 chord tones per chord + motivic rhythms

Alter this exercise by playing just **one chord tone per chord**. This will develop focus, and each note will matter immensely.



"down down up up"

#### EX. 5.72

"Limbo Jazz" harmony exercise, last eight bars, using chord tone arpeggios

The example above uses what is called a **"down-down, up-up" rhythm**, describing the combination of downbeats and upbeat syncopations.



#### EX. 5.73

"Limbo Jazz" harmony exercise, last eight bars, using select chord tones to create a melodic line

Try **keeping the notes while changing the rhythm**. Alternatively, keep the rhythm but change the notes.



An iconic recording of "Limbo Jazz" appears on the album *Duke Ellington Meets Coleman Hawkins*. Check out drummer Sam Woodyard, in particular, singing gleefully for much of the performance.

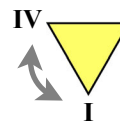
The original recording of "Limbo Jazz" is in the **key of A-flat major**. Another common key for this song is E-flat major, which sits a bit more easily for many instrument ranges.





## Targeted Thirds (and when to avoid the major third)

The minor third of the I chord (the *flatted 3rd*) is a quintessential *blue note* and it can be targeted on both the I and IV chord. The major 3rd of the I chord, however, must be avoided over the IV chord (at all costs!). That's a dissonance attempted only by the most advanced of improvisers. Who knew there were rules when playing the blues?!



### EX. 6.71

Targeted thirds

**Right!**

Minor 3rd is a *blue note*, rubbing against the major 3rd in the I<sub>7</sub> chord.

C<sub>7</sub>

I<sub>7</sub>

**Right!**

Same minor 3rd of the I<sub>7</sub> chord is a chord tone (flat-7) of IV<sub>7</sub>.

F<sub>7</sub>

IV<sub>7</sub>

**Right!**

Major 3rd is a chord tone of the I<sub>7</sub> chord.

C<sub>7</sub>

I<sub>7</sub>

**Avoid!**

Major 3rd of I<sub>7</sub> tends to sound too dissonant when played over IV<sub>7</sub>.

F<sub>7</sub>

IV<sub>7</sub>

### EX. 6.72

Minor 3rd "blue note" over both chords I and IV

C<sub>7</sub>

F<sub>7</sub>

### EX. 6.73

Major 3rd over I, minor 3rd over IV

C<sub>7</sub>

F<sub>7</sub>

### "Mercy" exercise

1. Learn to improvise on "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" in the key of C.
2. Transpose the melody of "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" into the keys of B-flat and G.
3. Write in each key's I and IV chord symbols above each measure.
4. Write in the minor 3rd blue note for each key in the blank spaces provided.



### EX. 6.74

"Mercy, Mercy, Mercy"  
(Joe Zawinul)



### IMPROVISE

"Mercy, Mercy, Mercy"

I<sub>7</sub>

IV<sub>7</sub>

I<sub>7</sub>

IV<sub>7</sub>

6 5      3 1    2 1 1 6 1    2      6 5      3 1    2 1 1 6 1    6

key of B-flat: \_\_\_\_\_

key of G: \_\_\_\_\_

## ii-V-I Improvisation Workouts

page 1 of 2

The following improvisation workouts just might be the most valuable in this entire study of the ii-V-I. Get creative with applying different ideas and parameters to your improvisations. Below are some specific ideas to be taken one at a time:

- Consider oppositions at all times (loud-soft, short-long, play-rest, step-leap, etc.)
- Rest in the middle of each measure, focusing on the transitions connecting to beat 1 of each new bar.
- Delay your entrance, resting on beat 1 before playing the first note of the phrase.
- Syncopate your arrival, targeting the upbeat "and" of beat 4, instead of beat 1.
- Play simply, adding only one or two new notes to each measure.
- Play more complexly but still try to land on your target note, whether it's the "and" of beat 4 or beat 1.

### Workout #1

#### Use pre-determined notes for voice-leading

Adhere to the voice-leading targets below or write out your own set of notes per measure.

Notice how the pre-determined notes below are all chord tones but even that parameter can change if you choose.



#### IMPROVISE

Use the voice-leading notes below as your targets, approaching your targets any way you choose. Targets may be placed on beats other than beat 1.

Transpose the ii-V-I exercise below to a new key of your choice.



Four musical staves showing voice-leading targets for the ii-V-I progression (Dm7, G7, CMaj7, Am7). Each staff contains a sequence of notes that serve as targets for improvisation.

Staff 1: Dm7 (F, C, G), G7 (F, C, G), CMaj7 (F, C, G), Am7 (F, C, G)

Staff 2: Dm7 (F, C, G), G7 (F, C, G), CMaj7 (F, C, G), Am7 (F, C, G)

Staff 3: Dm7 (F, C, G), G7 (F, C, G), CMaj7 (F, C, G), Am7 (F, C, G)

Staff 4: Dm7 (F, C, G), G7 (F, C, G), CMaj7 (F, C, G), Am7 (F, C, G)

### Workout #2

#### Change the focus to linear improvisation

Your linear improvisation might be based on a parent scale, a rhythmic motif, interval, or other device. Develop your line, prioritizing this over specific chord tone targets.



#### IMPROVISE

Linear or motivic improvisation

Four musical staves showing linear improvisation targets for the ii-V-I progression (Dm7, G7, CMaj7, Am7). Each staff contains a sequence of notes that serve as targets for improvisation.

Staff 1: Dm7 (F, C, G), G7 (F, C, G), CMaj7 (F, C, G), Am7 (F, C, G)

Staff 2: Dm7 (F, C, G), G7 (F, C, G), CMaj7 (F, C, G), Am7 (F, C, G)

Staff 3: Dm7 (F, C, G), G7 (F, C, G), CMaj7 (F, C, G), Am7 (F, C, G)

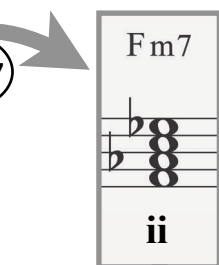
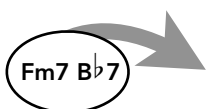
Staff 4: Dm7 (F, C, G), G7 (F, C, G), CMaj7 (F, C, G), Am7 (F, C, G)

## Minor Third Substitutions

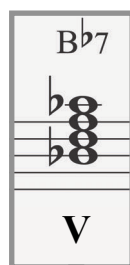
The *minor third substitution*, sometimes called a *back door substitution*, is a common chord substitution that implies a major ii-V a minor third higher than the original minor ii-V. For example, a ii-V in the key of E-flat major — Fm7 B $\flat$ 7 — may be played in place of a ii-V in the key of C minor — Dm7(b5) G7(b9). It directs focus to G7(b9) chord extensions, including the flat-9 (A-flat) and sharp-9 (B-flat).

### EX. 8.54

Implied major ii-V-I  
(key of E-flat major)

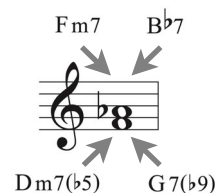


Dm7(b5)



G7(b9)

All four chords are unified by including the **same two notes** (F-A $\flat$ ):



### EX. 8.55

Original minor ii-V (key of C minor)



Minor 3rd ii-V substitutions can **resolve to major or minor tonics**. All the examples below keep the resolution to C minor. For major resolution, change Cm7 to tonic C major and remove any flats in the last measure.



### EX. 8.56

Original minor ii-V,  
arpeggio up-down



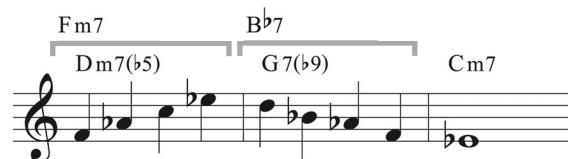
### EX. 8.58

Original minor ii-V,  
arpeggio down-up



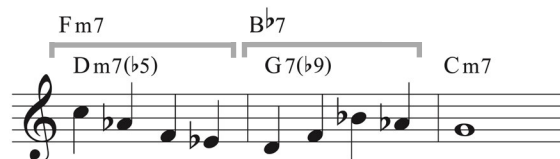
### EX. 8.57

Minor third substitution,  
arpeggio up-down



### EX. 8.59

Minor third substitution,  
arpeggio down-up



### EX. 8.60

Minor third substitution melodic line  
example



### IMPROVISE

Use minor third substitutions  
over the following minor ii-V-i.

## Chromatic Target Note Exercises

Learn how to use the exact number of chromatic notes between chord tones with the following chromatic target note exercises. Each example moves between two chord tones over a ii-V-I in C major but note that each set of chromatics can also be used over other chords.

### EX. 9.6

Chromatics from F to A  
(major 3rd interval used over Dm7)



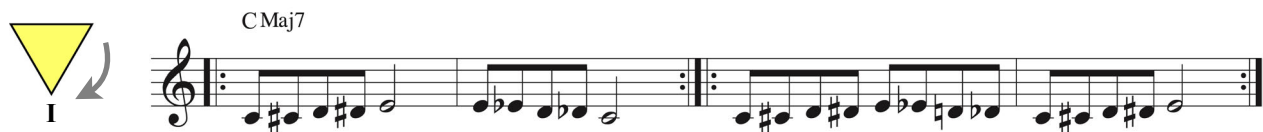
### EX. 9.7

Chromatics from G to B  
(major 3rd interval used over G7)



### EX. 9.8

Chromatics from C to E  
(major 3rd interval used over CMaj7)



Each chromatic target example below **functions over many chords**. For example, C to E can be played over FMaj7 or Dm9 or Am. G to B can also be played over CMaj7, Em, Dm13, or Am9.



### EX. 9.9

Chromatic target permutations

Transpose the ii-V-I chromatics above to three new keys, with the eventual goal of playing them in all 12 keys.

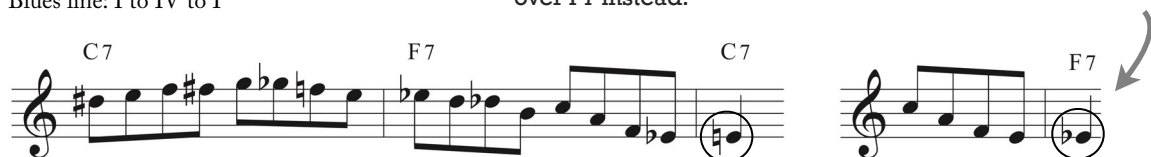


### Why chromatic details matter

#### EX. 9.10

Blues line: I to IV to I

Consider a blues in C, with F7 as the IV chord. The following example moves from C7 to F7 before resolving back to C7. Switch the order of the last two notes to continue the line over F7 instead.



# G

## eneral Index

---

### A

Accidental  
    sharp, 31, 48-55  
    flat, 31, 48-55  
    natural, 31, 48-55  
Altered dominant (see Modal mixture)  
Altered scale (see Scale)  
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# A

## bout the Author

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Javier Arau, born in 1975, is an American saxophonist, composer, theorist and entrepreneur. The founder of New York Jazz Academy®, a prominent New York City-based music school now serving students in over 70 countries, his work as an educator and theorist has impacted musicians of all levels. A two-time quarterfinalist for Grammy® Educator of the Year and touted as “pioneering” by *DownBeat* magazine, Arau has been featured in *The New York Times*, as a cover artist for *Saxophone Journal*, and as an expert guest on PRI’s *Science Friday*. A prolific composer, he scores the music for a nationally televised PBS series, leads the Javier Arau Jazz Orchestra, and has received awards from ASCAP, BMI, and *DownBeat*. Arau’s jazz theory work has been cited in Cambridge University Press and discussed in *Music Theory Spectrum* (Oxford University Press), where he was described as a “rogue music theorist.” He is an artist-endorser of Virtuoso Saxophones and has performed as a saxophonist at venues around the world, including the Montreux and Monterey Jazz Festivals, Carnegie Hall, and Lincoln Center.



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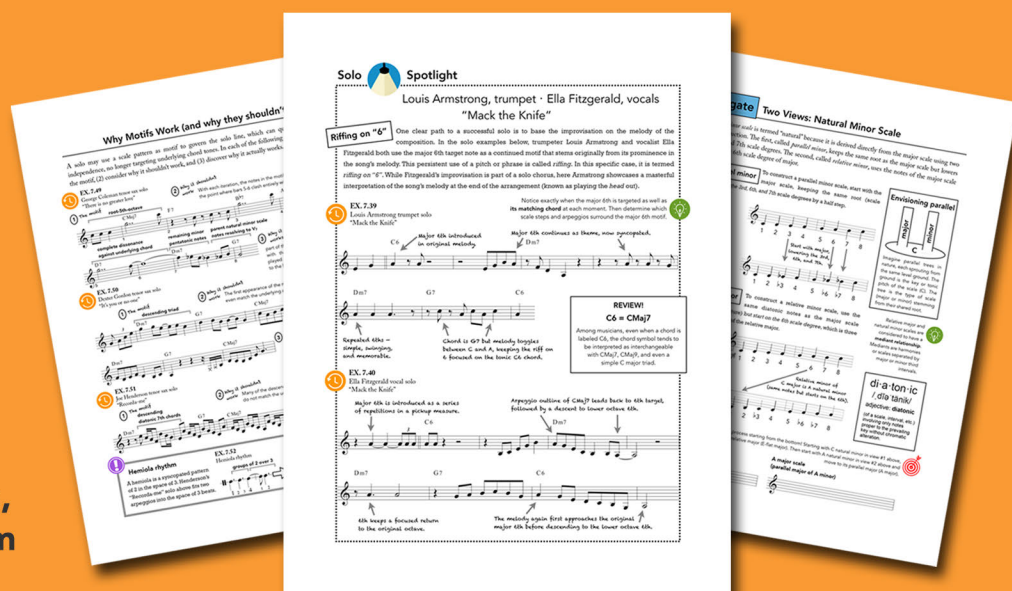
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