Harmonic Practices

By Ed Saindon

A comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of jazz harmony is indispensable to the improviser. Many improvisational concepts are based on harmonic principles that allow the improviser to deviate from the original underlying harmony of a composition's progression. Such players as saxophonist John Coltrane and pianists Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea have utilized advanced harmonic techniques in their lines. With Coltrane, we get his "sheets of sound" and advanced superimposed harmony. With players like Hancock and Corea, the harmony is altered, reharmonized, and superimposed, thereby creating lines that are intriguing as a result of the harmonic deviations.

The utilization of these harmonic techniques are not relegated to the players of today. Such sax players as Coleman Hawkins and Don Byas used reharmonization and substitution in their solos. Pianist Art Tatum was a master with harmony, substitutions, and reharmonization. Within the language of bebop, players like Charlie Parker and Sonny Stitt were using a variety of these harmonic devices on a consistent basis in their solos. Contemporary sax players such as Dave Liebman, Michael Brecker, and Bob Berg have incorporated many harmonic techniques that have resulted in unique and interesting chromatic lines that weave in and out of the underlying changes.

The improviser should experiment with creating lines based upon the harmonic concepts and devices as discussed in this article. In doing so, try to convey the new chord(s) as clearly as possible. It can be effective to simply outline the new chord(s) via chord-tone soloing, since the harmonic deviation is the important aspect of the line. Bringing out guide-tone lines can also be effective in sounding the new change(s).

II–7 V7 REHARMONIZATION

We'll begin by looking at a standard II–7 / V7 / I progression in the key of C and illustrate the various chord substitutions (via a Sub V7) possible.

D–7 / G7 / C Maj 7

Sub V7

A common device is to use a Substitute V7 (called a Sub V7 or Tritone Sub) for the G7.

D–7 / D♭7 / C Maj 7

We can also use the related II–7 of the Sub 7 along with the Sub V7 in place of the G7.

D–7 / A♭–7 D♭7 / C Maj 7

We can use the related II–7, replacing part of the D–7.

D–7 A♭-7 / D♭7 / C Maj 7

We can use the related II–7 to replace the D–7 altogether.

A♭–7 / D♭7 / C Maj 7

HARMONIC GENERALIZATION

This concept isolates the essence of the harmonic intent of a specific combination of chords and reduces the amount of chord structures while retaining the primary cadential intent. Certain chords—such as related II–7s, passing diatonic, and diminished chords—can be omitted with this process.

D–7 / G7 / C
G7 or G7 sus / G7 or G7 sus / C
C A–7 / D–7 G7 / C
C / G7 / C

V7♭9 Alternation

A chord can be alternated with its own V7♭9 (or Dim 7 a half-step below) in order to create the effect of tension resolution and a sense of harmonic movement over the underlying chord structure. The V7♭9 should be resolved to the target chord. Here is an example on a Min 7 (–7) chord.

D–7 / D–7 / D–7
D–7 A7♭9 (C♯ Dim 7) / D–7 A7♭9 / D–7

TURNAROUND VARIATIONS

There are many turnaround variations that an improviser can utilize. Different variations can be used from chorus to chorus on a standard tune progression. Here are some of the many turnaround variations possible in the key of C.

C Maj 7 A–7 / D–7 G7
C Maj 7 E♭7 / D7 D♭7
B♭7 A7 / A♭7 G7
C B♭ / A♭ G
C E♭ / A♭ D♭
C E♭ / G♭ A
G7 sus ♭9 / G7 sus ♭9
D/C / E/C
C Maj 7 B7 / E Maj G7♭9 sus
C Maj 7 E / A♭ G
C Maj 7 A♭7 / D♭ Maj G7♭9 sus
C Maj 7 A♭7alt / D♭ Min Maj7 G7♭9sus
C° Maj 7 E♭° Maj 7 /G♭° Maj 7 A° Maj7

There are many more possible turnaround variations. The improviser should explore other combinations as well as listen to recordings for ideas on turnarounds.

CHORD ALTERATION

Improvisers can alter a chord without necessarily changing the basic chord quality and harmonic function. Here are some possible alterations:

Maj 7 to Maj 7 ♯5 (can be resolved back to Maj 7 or Maj 6 if desired)

Maj 7 to Dim Maj 7 (can be resolved back to Maj 7 if desired)

Min 7 to Min 6, Min 7 ♭5, Min Maj 7, or Dim Maj 7

Min 7 ♭5 to Dim Maj 7

Dom 7 to Dom 7 sus, Dom 7 sus ♭9 13, or Dom 7 sus altered

HARMONIC DISPLACEMENT

This technique retains the original chords. However, the original chords can be anticipated or delayed. Here are several examples illustrating the use of this concept.

D–7 / G7 / C Maj 7
D–7 G7 / / G7 C Maj 7

A♭7 / G7 / C–6
A♭7 / Ab7 G7 / G7 C–6

SUPERIMPOSITION

This technique involves the superimposition of other chords and progressions over the underlying chord(s). The outlining of the superimposed structures give the lines unity and a sense of direction while creating varying degrees of dissonance in conjunction with the underlying harmony. Here are some options with superimposition:

Extended Dominants

We can use extended dominants in place of the original harmony. Once a target chord is established, we can "backcycle" with extended dominants from the target chord. When creating lines with the extended dominants, consider bringing out the guide-tone lines of the dominant chords, and try to connect each dominant via stepwise motion. Here are a few examples:

D–7 / G7 / C Maj 7
E7 A7 / D7 G7 / C Maj 7

Blues (first 4 bars):
C7 / F7 / C7 / C7 Alt
Db7 Gb7 / B7 E7 /A7 D7 / G7 C7

Rhythm Changes (first 4 bars):
B♭6 G7 / C–7 F7 / B♭6 G7 / C–7 F7 / B♭
F♯7 B7 / E7 A7 / D7 G7 / C7 F7 / B♭

3 Tonic System

Coltrane's concept of playing in tonal centers major thirds apart has been used my many improvisers. Coltrane applied the concept to his compositions such as "Giant Steps" and "Countdown" (based on the changes of "Tune Up"). He also applied the concept to many standards, including the Gershwin classic "But Not For Me." Here is the concept as applied to a II–7 V7 I Maj 7 in the key of C:

D–7 / G7 / C Maj 7 /C Maj 7
D–7 E♭7 / A♭ Maj 7 B7 / E Maj 7 G7 / C Maj 7

Other variations:
D–7 / G7 / C Maj / C Maj 7
D–7 A♭ / E G7 / C Maj 7 / C Maj 7
D–7 B♭–7 E♭7 / A♭ F♯–7 B7 / E / C Maj 7

Parallel Tonal Substitution

The original progression can be replaced with chords of the same harmonic function transposed to another key. For example, a II–7 V7 I Maj 7 in C would be replaced with a II–7 V7 I Maj 7 in a new key.

D–7 / G7 / C Maj 7
F♯–7 / B7 / E Maj 7

V7 or II–7 V7 Superimposition

Saxophonist Dave Liebman uses this technique in his lines. The technique can create chromatic lines that have a strong sense of direction and can weave in and out of the changes. The concept involves creating lines based upon superimposed V7 or II–7 V7 chords over the underlying harmony.

Based upon the V7 or II–7 V7 chord structures, the lines have a sense of flow and direction and should resolve clearly and smoothly into the target chord. Outlining the superimposed chords along with diatonic and chromatic approach notes can create bebop-type lines with a contemporary flavor. The skillful use of this technique can be effective in increasing the degree of tension in one's overall playing. Here are some examples in the key of C:

The superimposed chord selection can include a series of V7 chords or II–7 V7s based upon a specific interval or pattern.

E–7 ♭5 / A7 / D–
C7 E♭7 / F7 A♭7 / D–
G–7 C7 / F–7 B♭7 / D–
D–7 / G7 / E–7 / A7 / D
E–7 A7 / F–7 B♭7 / F♯–7 B7 / G–7 C7 / D
A7 / B7 / Db 7 / E♭7 / D

Or the superimposed chord selection may utilize a random combination of V7s or II–7 V7s.

D–7 / G7 / C Maj 7
D–7 / F♯–7 B7 / C Maj 7
E7 / F7 / C Maj 7
E♭–7 A♭7 / E–7 A 7 / C Maj 7

Constant Structure

This concept utilizes a specific type of chord that moves in equidistant intervals over the underlying harmony. Here are several examples illustrating this concept. The lines should repeat the same structure from chord to chord.

D–7 / G7 /C–7 /F7 / B♭ Maj
G7 sus / A7 sus / B♭7 sus / C7 sus / B♭ Maj
C Maj 7 ♯5 / E♭ Maj 7 ♯5 / G♭ Maj7 ♯5 / A Maj 7 ♯5 / B♭ Maj
D Min Maj 7 / G Min Maj 7 / C Min Maj 7 / F Min Maj 7 / B♭ Maj

As evident by the preceding harmonic concepts, many harmonic devices and concepts can be applied for improvisation. These concepts should be explored with a variety of standards in order to assimilate the concepts naturally in the one's overall playing.

Ed Saindon has been on the faculty at Berklee College of Music since 1976 and is a clinician for Yamaha and Vic Firth. He recently created a Facebook page for vibists called All Things Vibraphone. Upcoming concerts/clinics, articles, YouTube videos, etc. can be seen on his website at www.edsaindon.com. PN