Anyone Can Improvise

by Fred Hughes, Jazz Pianist and Conductor

To some, improvisation is standing up and playing what you feel. To others, improvisation is a maze of modes, chords, patterns and riffs. Though the previous two statements are accurate in the truest sense of improvisation, both the student and teacher alike are often times frustrated by the end result … what comes out of the horn.

Improvisation is a meditative science. To be a master improviser requires an extensive vocabulary while playing to the depths of ones emotions; creating a melody based on a harmonic structure which is notated by chord symbols.

However, anyone can improvise. The basics can be easily taught to beginning students. Elementary and middle school jazz ensembles can have improvisers. And guess what? It can be fun and simple, too!

The scope of this article will be based on elementary, middle school and beginning high school improvisation. The focus will be basic chords and the sounds associated with each chord as well as practical application of this knowledge.

Let's start with the basics. Ninety-nine percent of improvisation is based on chord symbols. Most students are unsure of the basic rules for chord notation and there in lies the first problem. How can a melody be created if a student cannot distinguish between a major or minor third? This differentiation sure makes a big difference in the scale or "sound" that accompanies a major or minor triad!

The Major and Minor Triads

A chord is a group of three or more notes played simultaneously. At the core of each chord is a three-note grouping called a triad. Each triad has a unique sound or color that forms the foundation for every chord in the jazz vocabulary no matter how many notes are added to the chord. Example 1 below shows the two triads we will be discussing. Each triad is based on the notes of the major scale. The major triad consists of the first, third and fifth notes of the major scale. The minor triad contains the first, flat third and fifth notes of the major scale. By adding notes to these triads we construct six, seven, nine, eleven and thirteenth chords. But, remember, at the core of every chord is a triad.

Example 1

NOTE: It has been my experience that the beginning student has a much easier time relating to every chord and scale based on alterations to the major scale. Explanations based on the minor scales, modes, etc can be taught later as the student studies more advanced theory.

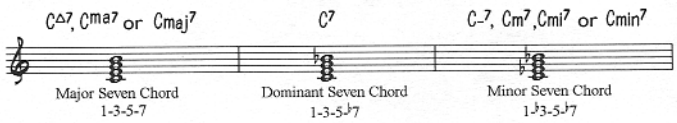
The Six Chords

As you see in example 2 below, adding the sixth note of the major scale to the major and minor triads creates the following six chords. A major six chord consists of the first, third, fifth and sixth notes of the major scale. A minor sixth chord contains the first, flat third, fifth and sixth notes of the major scale.

Example 2

The Seven Chords

As you see in example 3 below, adding the seventh note of the major scale to any of the triads creates the following seven chords. A major seven chord consists of the first, third, fifth and seventh notes of the major scale. A dominant seven chord contains the first, third, fifth and flatted seventh notes of the major scale. A minor seven chord consists of the first, flat third, fifth and flatted seventh notes of the major scale.



Example 3

Chord Abbreviations

There are some simple rules that are essential to understanding every chord notation. Remembering these rules will enable you to understand and play even the most complex chord notation.

Minor: The abbreviation -, m, mi or min requires that the triad contain the lowered third note of the major scale. This notation pertains to the third note of the scale in the chord only.

Dominant Seven: If a "7" is written as in C^7 or C-7, then add the lowered (flatted) seventh note of the major scale to the chord.

Major Seven: If the abbreviation Δ^7, ma^7 or maj^7 is written as in $Cmaj^7$or $C\Delta^7$, then add the seventh note of the major scale to the chord.

Now Let's Put It Together

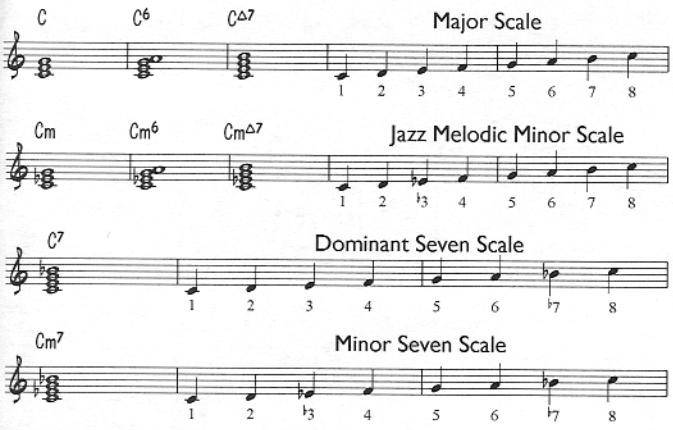
Now that you understand chords and chord nomenclature, what do you play when you see these chords? Just as understanding that a chord was based on alterations to the major scale, the improviser utilizes the chords to associate what alterations are made to the major scale to create the sound that best fits each chord. Simply put, the alterations to the major scale create the chord and thus the sound or scale that relates with the chord. In other words, a C

triad or C major seven chord was created by playing the 1-3-5 and 1-3-5-7 notes of the C major scale and therefore the major scale is the sound that is used when seeing this chord. A Cmin7 chord was created by combining the 1-♭3-5-♭7 notes of the major scale and therefore the sound that would be used for this chord is the minor seven scale; 1-2-♭3-4-5-6-♭7.

As suggested earlier, it is easier to teach beginners by associating every chord with alterations to the major scale and the sound or scale that accompanies each chord should be approached from the same standpoint. Modes and other advanced scales and their nomenclature can come later. By calling the scale/sound that is associated with each chord by the chords name, you reinforce that chord thus eliminating any further confusion with concepts such as modes. In other words, the Cmin7 chord gets a minor seven scale, not the Dorian mode. The dominant seven chord gets the dominant seven scale, not the Mixolydian mode. Again, as the student matures, it is much easier to tell them this is what you've been playing and this is its theoretical explanation.

The Chords and Scales

Here, in example 4, are the chords that we have discussed along with their respective scales:

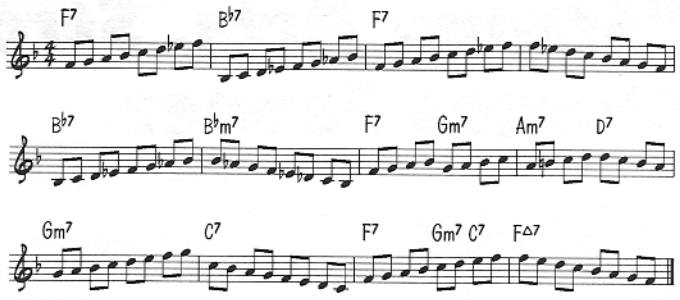


Example 4

NOTE: To avoid any confusion with traditional minor scale nomenclature, Jazz Melodic Minor has been widely recognized as the name of the scale played for the Cm, Cm6 and CmΔ7.

Practical Application

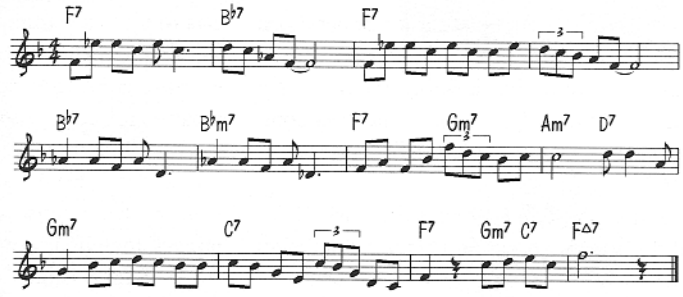
Let's use a blues progression as our example. As you see in example 5, all of the chords have a sound or scale associated with them. Variations on playing the sound or scale that corresponds with each chord could include: reversing the directions of the scales, four notes up – four notes down, chord arpeggio for one measure – scale for the next and the possibilities go on and on. The idea is to get the student associating a sound/scale with each chord he or she sees written.



Example 5

And Finally

Playing a melody based on proficiency in the sound/scale that is associated with each chord.



Example 6

Through constant emersion in the jazz sound by listening to recordings, practicing the scales associated with each chord and ample opportunity for practical application and experimentation, your students will play more informed solos while gaining proficiency on their respective instrument. Moreover, because knowledge breeds confidence, your students will be less fearful of performing in front of others while experiencing the joy of creating their own music!

Fred Hughes is a pianist, composer, author and educator residing in suburban Baltimore, Maryland, USA. His book, "The Jazz Pianist: Left Hand Voicings and Chord Theory" is published by Warner Bros Publications. He welcomes your questions and comments to Fred@FredHughes.Com.