

# LESSON 2. THE PROCESS OF IMPROVISATION & MOVING PATTERNS PRACTICE.

## 2.1 Harmony

### *Motion towards a cadence.*

The vast majority of jazz is played in major keys. However, within the major key tonality, minor chords are common. This is not a contradiction because we will see that the three minor chords covered in this lesson contain only notes which are part of the major scale.

Ex.1. shows the chords built on the major scale by adding thirds to the 'root' note and containing only notes from that scale.

We see that the C, F & G chords are the major triads we discussed in the last lesson, but the D, E & A chords are minor triads. The B chord is one we will not meet for some time; a diminished chord, but don't worry about this at the moment. Again, if you are new to chords, find a piano and listen to the sound of this 'major scale' of chords, and also make sure you understand why three of the chords are minor?

See Ex.2. for a complete list of all the minor triads. Don't forget these triads can be spaced out and inverted in exactly the same way as the major triads in 1.2.

The minor chord on the supertonic (the 2nd degree of the scale), is by far the most important of these minor chords that are used in the major key (IIm or Dm in the key of C).

In harmonic progressions the supertonic minor chord almost always appears before the dominant. This produces the sequence IIm V I, (Dm G C in C), which sounds a smooth and logical way to return to the tonic.

With this additional chord, new progressions emerge, for example –

I IV IIm V I	I IV I IIm V I	I IIm V I
C F Dm G C	C F C Dm G C	C Dm G C

See Ex.3.

Note that the introduction of the Dm chord before the dominant is simply an extension of the principle from lesson 1 - the tendency of chords to move up a 4th or gravitate down a 5th. G is the 4th above D!

The chords of VIIm (Am) and IIIIm (Em) are also quite common because they are closely related to the tonic chord, having only one note of difference. The A in the Em chord and the A in the Am.

Chord	C	Em	Am
Notes	CEG	EGA	ACE

Because of this similarity the VIIm and the IIIIm are often used as substitutes for the tonic, introducing a little variety but retaining the basic tonality.

Our resource now permits us to assemble further progressions which sound right –

I IIIIm IV V I	I IIIIm IV IIm V I	I VIIm IV IIIIm V I
C Em F G C	C Em F Dm G C	C Am F Em G C

See Ex.4. for these and other combinations.

Note the principles from lesson 1 - the sequences move away from the tonic and then back to it, they will sound best when a minimum number of notes change as the chord moves on, and the chords are voiced as in 1.5.

Let's recap; it is when we move away from the tonic that we can encounter the minor chords as well as the dominant and sub dominant chords covered in lesson 1. The sound is still very much the major key sound; all the notes from these chords are from the C major scale.

We now want to introduce you to another way of thinking about harmonic progressions which is useful for the improviser. Chord sequences can be seen as a motion towards a cadence.

See Ex.5. for the common cadences.

The cadence is COMPLETE when it resolves back to the tonic, as in the 'perfect' cadence, or INCOMPLETE if it remains hanging on the fifth. Notice the 'unsettling' sound of the cadence, the forward momentum is still there, you find yourself still waiting for the final resolution back to the tonic. Invariably jazz standards will end on the tonic, with the imperfect cadence appearing after the first section thus 'leading' the song on into the next section. The final resolution back to the tonic is usually from the dominant. When the dominant does not lead to the tonic the cadence is described as INTERRUPTED, and is a musical 'comma' not a 'full stop', the music is still moving on. The resolution back to the tonic from the subdominant is also common, most frequently heard, perhaps, at the end of hymns as an A - MEN! But in jazz it is a characteristic of the blues, occurring after the ubiquitous move to the subdominant. Watch out for these cadences in your songs, they will eventually begin to make sense as the progression 'leads' to these benchmarks. Experiment with different voicings and try to memorise the sound of these cadences as they are found repeatedly in the songs you will be playing . They are summarised as follows –

- imperfect = tonic or supertonic to dominant
- plagal = sub dominant to tonic
- interrupted = dominant to sub mediant

The more you listen the more you will realise that -

HARMONIC PROGRESSIONS MAKE SENSE BECAUSE THEY ARE GOING SOMEWHERE. They are not isolated sequences of 'nice' static sounds. They are moving to a CADENCE. Chord sequences are best 'heard' on a multi note instrument like a piano or a guitar, but the brass and reed players must also 'know" the sequences because the 'big' notes they play must be –

#### CHORD NOTES FROM THE UNDERLYING SONG SEQUENCES.

This concept is easy to understand once we realise that the original melody notes were 'harmonised' by adding underlying chords which CONTAIN THE MELODY NOTE. The chord sequence moves with the melody and any new or embellished melody that is improvised must follow the same principle and contain notes from the chords.

Playing any other notes can clash and sound out of tune or dissonant. NOTE SELECTION is of fundamental importance for the improviser. More about this in the next lesson.

As we suggested in 1.3. all the progressions we have discussed should be memorised and TRANSPOSED INTO OTHER KEYS.

For example –	I	IV	IIm	V	I	
Key C	C	F	Dm	G	C	
Key F	F	Bb	Gm	C	F	
Key G	G	C	Am	D	G	
	I	IIIIm	IV	IIm	V	I
Key C	C	Em	F	Dm	G	C
Key F	F	Am	Bb	Gm	C	F
Key G	G	Bm	C	Am	D	G

## 2.2 Melody.

### *Harmonic rhythm & time keeping.*

Exercises 6 to17 provide material for practice. The point to note is that an interesting melodic line is being played against a changing sequence of chords. The melody notes are notes from the chords. Analyse these examples to confirm that the melody line follows the chords. But remember also that in jazz the 'interest' in the melody comes from the rhythmic interpretation

not from the 'harmony'.

Note also that chords can continue for any length of time. They can change every bar or every 2 bars or even at the half bar. This introduces the idea of HARMONIC RHYTHM. You will find that chord changes have certain definite rhythms --

Examples –	When the Saints	C ///	C / G7 /	C C7 F Fm	C G7 C /
	12 bar blues	C // C7	F / C /	G7 / C /	

We should note that the harmonic sequence, together with the rhythm of the changes, are vital aspects of the process of improvisation. It is the feeling for the chord changes associated with the melody and the speed of the song which determines the improviser's whereabouts in the song. We will return to this in the next lesson and later in lesson 5.2.

Again we should repeat that, at this stage, you will probably have some difficulty with the rhythm of these exercises. We recommend you analyse them first and then play them SLOWLY with a METRONOME. By playing slowly at first you will find that you are not preoccupied 'finding the notes' and can concentrate on the timings. You will find it easy to increase speed later when the sound of the exercise becomes familiar and your fingers 'know' where to go!

The metronome is an important discipline. CONSTANT time keeping is essential for good rhythm but it is probably one of the most difficult things to get right initially. There is always a tendency to slow down over the 'difficult' parts and then speed up over the familiar parts. Most students also find themselves 'speeding up' in a desperate attempt to 'get the rhythm going'! Both these failings will DESTROY THE ESSENTIAL RHYTHM of the song. The metronome will provide the discipline of a basic constant pulse over which you are constructing your complementary contribution.

You should realise that initially when learning to keep time you will lose the EFFORTLESS CONTINUITY which is so essential to jazz. The music will seem to bristle with unfamiliar difficulties, you will become tense and stilted, and this anxious determination will completely destroy your ability to relax and your muscles will become rigid and useless. HOWEVER, when you have put in a few hours and the 'technical' difficulties have been overcome you will find your instinctive rhythmic sense returns, your fingers and body will RELAX and keeping time will become as EASY and NATURAL as BREATHING!

We can't say how many hours will be needed to reach this 'effortless' stage, for some it will be more than others, but what we can say with confidence, is that EVERYONE will succeed in the end if they put in the hours!

### **2.3 Rhythm.**

#### ***Four bar phrases, dancing, lyrics & breathing.***

The aim of the rhythm exercises in the course is to establish the process of thinking in terms of BAR PATTERNS, all rhythm has to be heard, or conceived, in bar patterns or phrases. A rhythmic PHRASE is a pattern associated with the musical 'measure' or bar, it can be a one, two, three, four or maybe an eight bar continuity. However, it is usual, although by no means invariable for jazz phrases to be conceived in the context of a FOUR BAR section.

Certainly the four bar structure dominates the blues. The 12 bar blues consists of three groups of four bars, the AAB form.

Ragtime, another major influence on early jazz, is structured around 16 bar sections. But rags were derived from marches and the left / right 2 / 4 meter needed symmetrical bar groupings to keep the discipline of the body movements. The ragtime patterns were 2 + 2 = 4, 4 + 4 = 8 and 8 + 8 = 16 bar strains. Jazz inherited these symmetrical patterns which are consistent with the four bar phrase, and, of course, also admirably suited for DANCING.

In the 32 bar AABA 'theatre' song form, the structure is 4 times 8 bar sections and within the 8 bar sections phrases are usually grouped into four bar continuities. Maybe with a 2 bar statement and a 2 bar answer or a 2 bar repeat, but nearly always you will find these regular multiples or divisions of the four bar section.

Analyse the songs from your repertoire, and discover for yourself that they are --

## ALMOST INVARIABLY CONSTRUCTED FROM FOUR BAR SECTIONS

Typical 2, 4, 8 or 16 bar phrases can all be analysed as four bar entities.

It is significant that practising jazzmen organise their 'breaks' as two or four bar sections and often 'trade fours', that is, they alternately improvise four bar phrases. Furthermore accomplished performers, and particularly 'time keeping' drummers, will count or 'feel' the progress of a song in terms of four bar sections. You should be clear now that your initial efforts at improvisation should concentrate on 2 then 4 bar phrases.

We will return to this topic of thinking and 'feeling' four bar sections again in lesson 4.4.

In Ex.18 more rhythms are presented for study and memorising, this time we have introduced eighth notes.

The EIGHTH NOTE is, perhaps, the most important and most frequently used note in jazz improvisation, and with it comes a vast increase in the number of rhythmic permutations. Spend some time practising eighth notes, if you practice any scales or chords play them as eighth notes. When you play songs introduce eighth notes wherever possible, playing two for every quarter note and four for the half note. This doubling up of notes is the first step to giving a melody a 'swing'. A particular characteristic of jazz is the **IDIOMATIC WAY THE EIGHTH NOTES ARE PLAYED**, we will discuss 'swing eighths' and triplet feel in later lessons.

It will emerge that phrases can start in the middle of a bar, cross a bar line and finish anywhere in the bar. However, the phrase, with perhaps, appropriate rests, has to fit the bar structure of the song. In the end we all have to collectively finish at the same time! Until the advent of modern jazz it was most unusual for phrases to 'cross' the 8 or 4 bar sections of a song, As we have mentioned phrases were played 'four square' for dancing and the expression 'square' was applied by the modern jazz practitioners, as a derogatory term, to describe those older inhibited players who kept strictly to the bar lines! So remember when you play jazz it all started as **DANCE MUSIC** where the beat and the four square structure assists the co-ordination of the dance. To help your playing to sound like jazz and to help you to relax –

**IMAGINE DANCING TO THE RHYTHM OF THE SONG.**

You can't dance to stiff jerky sounds.

Another way of approaching four bar phrases is to –

**THINK LYRICS.**

Within the song structures most phrases can be moulded around the original lyrics. Most of the traditional jazz standards and blues were written as songs with words. Students often find it useful to hear the words of the song as they play. You can try to 'sing' the words on your instrument. Think of phrases as completed thoughts. This keeps the phrases to a 'natural' length and also helps you to avoid getting lost !

Phrases are **NOT** a series of isolated impulses. It is the **SOUND** of the **COMPLETE RHYTHMIC UNIT** which matters and **NOT** the individual crochets or quavers.

Another good way for brass and reed players to conceive phrases is to think in terms of **BREATHING**. The appropriate time to take a breath is between phrases. Continuities must be split up into manageable phrases if players are going to breathe! You must learn to –

**BREATHE TO THE RHYTHM OF THE MUSIC.**

Ex.19. and Ex.20. may make the concept clearer. Ex.19. shows the rhythmic pattern, while Ex.20. shows the same rhythm put into a melodic continuity. The continuity could reasonably be split into 2 two bar phrases by breathing after two bars.

The natural **MOTION** and **REPOSE** of melodic rhythm will indicate where to breathe, most obviously after a cadence. For example, the early 12 bar blues often involved two bar plus phrases which resolved on the first beat of bars 3, 7 and 11. The traditional blues also involve characteristic 'fill in' phrases (played by a second instrument) occupying 1 to 2 bars at bars 3 & 4, 7 & 8, and 11 & 12. See Ex. 21. and 'feel' the flow of the song, 'feel' the natural place to end the phrase and take a breath. But more of the blues later.

Phrases involve 'interpretation'; or choices about accents, volume, timbre and the precision of the timing. These are part and parcel of an individual style and they are always 'tailored' to the all important rhythm of the song. As we have said there is a natural motion and repose to all songs, a natural 'dance'.

Remember, within the four bar section, dancing movements, lyrics, breathing and therefore phrasing does not necessarily coincide with the bar lines. We play phrases not bars! But although phrases flow across bar lines the overall four bar units are still preserved.

We must emphasise that the phrases in these rhythm exercises are relatively simple 'on the beat' phrases, the jazz 'feel' won't emerge until we introduce more complex OFF THE BEAT rhythms. We have already met some of these in the melodic exercises but in the next lesson we will more formally analyse some of these 'syncopated' jazz rhythms.

## **2.4 Improvisation Processes** *Conscious practice & subconscious performance.*

We now want to introduce a very important principle. It is drawn from COGNITIVE SCIENCE and PSYCHOLOGY and it will help you to understand the creative mechanisms at work when you improvise.

The brain works by RECOGNISING PATTERNS. It does not routinely 'work out', or 'calculate' what to do but it responds instinctively to patterns previously experienced.

Thus, the main mental mechanism connected with intuition, or inspiration, or creativity is SUBCONSCIOUS organisation of material previously absorbed CONSCIOUSLY by the brain. The word subconscious simply means being UNAWARE of the processes that are at work.

This mental mechanism that we employ during improvisation applies to all skills and accomplishments and is analogous to the process involved when dreaming. When we dream the mind makes use of experiences and images absorbed previously when we are awake, but they reappear in a different order, or with different emphasis, or in a different context.

One of the main aims of this course is to make you AWARE of what is happening when you improvise. If you understand what is happening you then possess a powerful tool for the construction of improvised material.

We suggest that four processes are involved in good improvisation –

- understanding; the intellectual aspect, what we might call 'know how'; the theoretical knowledge of structure, chords, scales and rhythms. This provides you with a framework of understanding which underpins confidence and gives meaning to your efforts. It speeds up the learning process.
- listening; absorbing the sounds of the idiom. Without the sounds in your head you cannot hope to reproduce any jazz on your instrument.
- practice; conscious work on instrument playing technique, learning, memorising and hearing the notes, sequences and sounds. This provides the technical facility.
- and the subconscious process of projection during performance. This is dependant on PREVIOUSLY PRACTISED MATERIAL and ABSORBED SOUNDS OF THE JAZZ IDIOM having a 'tendency to project themselves into actuality'.

The assimilation of understanding, listening and practice, is essential as a preliminary to the subconscious projection of the sound patterns during actual performance.

Listening without playing does not concern us. Practice without understanding is tortuous and time consuming and practice without listening won't produce jazz. No amount of intellectual study of principles will do either because –

- the 'FINGER SHAPES' and positions on the instrument need to be associated with the SOUND if any subconscious projection is to take place. More about this in lesson 3.
- and the rhythmic 'TIME FEEL' needs to be acquired to ensure the improviser feels the end of a four bar section. More about this in lesson 4.

In summary improvisation is about –

- CONSCIOUS ABSORPTION of material during listening and practice followed by
- SUBCONSCIOUS PROJECTION during performance.

And always remember this –

A THING MUST EXIST IN SOME FORM BEFORE IT CAN BE IMPROVED UPON  
... try improvising now!

## **2.5 Practice.**                      *And practice.*

We know of no alternative way of becoming a proficient improviser other than by practice.

I suppose we should be honest and say that practice isn't always fun. By definition you have to work hard on things that you can't do!

We suggest some guidelines, practice should involve –

- REGULAR periods, everyday, a little often being much more rewarding than a lot infrequently
- ALL the aspects we cover in the course; harmony, melody, rhythm, dynamics, co-ordination and listening
- DISCIPLINING your timetable; concentrating, not wasting time, and using a metronome
- setting yourself targets which are achievable but progressive, above all start SLOWLY and don't try to run before you can walk
- using a VARIETY of practice material; exercises from the course, songs from your repertoire, excerpts from your records, phrases from your head....anything that is interesting and FUN. Remember what we said in 1.4. jazz songs will be far more fun than exercises!
- RELAXING; don't get tired or frustrated
- playing with OTHER MUSICIANS; you learn from each other, jazz is a collective music, and, in any case, you have more fun if you're in a gang!

Don't forget your homework! Plenty of written work should be done as this will test and develop your understanding.

It is PRACTICE which develops the components which make up a piece of music. The music is a synchronisation of elements, with rhythm the priority, followed by melody and harmony and others such as volume, timbre and articulation in support.

There is no secret involved in learning to improvise, it is just HARD WORK!

## **2.6 Advice.**                      *Confidence & patience.*

When you've done a reasonable amount of preliminary work obstacles are likely to appear which you should anticipate.

Your initial attempts at improvisation will never reach the standards you hoped for and you will become FRUSTRATED and INHIBITED.

This will result in a LACK OF CONFIDENCE which YOU must overcome. Everybody plays 'bum notes' and everyone has 'cloth ears' ..... at the start .... but in time you will realise that the positive side of your frustration is to push you on to greater things!

Another problem is IMPATIENCE. Once you have made a decision to study any subject, there is always a tendency to want to hurry and get results quickly this can lead to --

- skipping over or ignoring certain points which seem to be too simple and obvious
- trying alternative approaches in the hope of finding a quick solution.

In reality there are NO QUICK FIXES, we repeat, the prime requisite for any accomplishment is PRACTICE. You have to put in the hours, the jazzmen call it 'paying their dues', or 'wood-shedding', which refers to banishment to a remote place for practice!

There is only one way to progress, you have to 'stick with it', you will add to your skill gradually, 'two steps forward and one step back'. Only after long and frustrating experience will you realise that later progress is due to the solidity of your early practice schedules and to the amount of thinking you do about the material you are studying. It is not about how many different approaches, or tricks, or shortcuts, you have exposed yourself to.

However, sticking to the lessons does not mean that you should not attempt FREE IMPROVISATION. You will only progress by playing your instrument, and, furthermore playing jazz on your instrument not scales or exercises. The lessons in this course are designed to introduce you to sounds for memorising and recall. As you put in the hours you will find yourself 'hearing' minor thirds and chord inversions, the music will emerge following familiarisation with the sound of the material. Sticking to the course will mean the sounds you hear and, hopefully, play, will be the 'right' sounds and UNDERSTANDING WHY they are 'right' will give you the essential CONFIDENCE for performance. Confidence is vital when attempting to improvise, there should be no feeling of inadequacy in relation to the results produced, no matter how bad they may be. Powers will only develop through practice and if the activity of improvising is postponed until some 'ideal' time no work will be done at all!

How often do you hear the remark, 'I can hear things in my head but I cannot find them on the instrument or I just get lost'!? With understanding, listening and practice you WILL be able to find the sounds on your instrument and you WILL be able to 'feel' those four bar sections.

Don't worry about the sheer quantity of material and the practice recommendations presented in these first two lessons, it will be absorbed quite easily as your studies continue, all you have to do is put in the HOURS!!!

## 2.7 Written work

Prepare an exercise on the following specifications –

Harmony –	I III <sup>b</sup> m IV III <sup>b</sup> m V I	I VI <sup>b</sup> m IV II <sup>b</sup> m V I
No. of bars –	2 1 1 2 1 1	2 1 1 2 1 2
Key –	Eb major	
Rhythm –	Freely chosen from material already presented or more advanced material if such is known.	

NB. Distance learning is always difficult because your tutor is not readily available to answer your questions. But don't let this stop you from asking questions, there is always someone somewhere, who can help you. IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND ASK! And after two long lessons you must have a host of questions!

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