

How to Improvise – Part 1

Scales & Chords, Using Your Ears

Improvise – To spontaneously create a melody or accompaniment using what you already know and following your ear

- What do you already know? → Scales, chords (arpeggios), and melodies of songs
- How do you follow your ear? → Find the melodies we hear in our heads on our instruments

Scales & Chords

Some songs will give you chord changes. Chord changes show you the form of the song and use chord symbols to show you what chords are being played and when they change.

Examples:

C or CM = “C major”	C E G
C- or Cm = “C minor”	C Eb G
C7 = “C dominant 7” or “C7”	C E G Bb
C6 or C6/9 = “C6” or “C major 6”	C E G A
C-7 or Cm7 = “C minor 7”	C Eb G Bb

When you see chord changes, you can improvise using only the chord tones. All of the chord tones will sound like *correct* notes when your rhythm section (bass, piano) are playing those chords.

Let's try an example together...

*First, please make sure your mic is on **mute**.*

Just using C6 (concert key), improvise using the chord tones.

[C6 track for improv](#)

C instruments (flute, piano, bass, mandolin, trombone): C E G A

Bb instruments (clarinet, bass clarinet, trumpet): D F# A B

Eb instruments (alto sax): A C# E F#

F instruments (horn): G B D E

Connection to scales... Scales are just chords with connecting notes added to connect the chord tones. Some connector notes sound better than others. Use your ears to figure out which connector notes you like. Or, experiment with scales you already know that incorporate these chord tones.

Let's try the same thing using the same chord and same chord tones, but this time, use your ear to find connector notes you like between the chord tones.

Questions so far?

Now, let's try the same thing, but with a minor chord.

*First, please make sure your mic is on **mute**.*

Just using Cm7 (concert key), improvise using the chord tones.
(Once you feel good about this, go ahead and use your ear to find
connector notes and melodies you like)

[Cm7 improv track](#)

C instruments (flute, piano, bass, mandolin, trombone): C Eb G Bb

Bb instruments (clarinet, bass clarinet, trumpet): D F A C

Eb instruments (alto sax): A C E G

F instruments (horn): G Bb D F

Questions??

What about when the chords CHANGE?

When the chords change, you change chords with them!

Let's see what that looks like...

Blues (in G):

Slow Blues in G

C instruments:

| G7 | C7 | G7 | ♯ |

G7: G B D F

| C7 | ♯ | G7 | ♯ |

C7: C E G Bb

| D7 | C7 | G7 | ♯ |

D7: D F# A C

Bb instruments:

| A7 | D7 | A7 | ♯ |

A7: A C# E G

| D7 | ♯ | A7 | ♯ |

D7: D F# A C

| E7 | D7 | A7 | ♯ |

E7: E G# B D

Eb instruments:

| E7 | A7 | E7 | ♯ |

E7: E G# B D

| A7 | ♯ | E7 | ♯ |

A7: A C# E G

| B7 | A7 | E7 | ♯ |

B7: B D# F# A

F instruments:

| D7 | G7 | D7 | ♯ |

D7: D F# A C

| G7 | ♯ | D7 | ♯ |

G7: G B D F

| A7 | G7 | D7 | ♯ |

A7: A C# E G

We will look at the Blues progression more in depth next week when we discuss approaches to playing over chord changes.

Ear-Training

The more you practice playing chords and scales and improvising, the more your ear will start to hear melodies, including melodies you already know and new melodies that you invent.

First, start trying to sing what you hear in your head.

Then try to find those melodies on your instrument.

When you're improvising and a familiar or new melody comes into your head, try to play that melody. If you miss a note, that's OK! Try to sing the note and find the note.

-Short Demonstration-

Questions?

Just for fun, for those of you that are hungry for more things to practice, here are some fun scales you can learn and practice over dominant 7 chords. (you'll need to transpose them yourself into different keys...)

The Dominant 7th Tree of Scale Choices (by Jamey Aebersold)

The altered tones are in **bold type**. Those tones usually resolve by *half-step* to a scale or chord tone. This amounts to **tension then release**. It's a natural occurrence in music. The 3rds's and 7th's are underlined.

Scales

1. **DOM.7th** = C7 = C D E F G A Bb C This is the basic dominant 7th sound. Be careful how you treat the 4th tone. Use it as a passing tone.
2. **BEBOP** = C7 = C D E F G A Bb **B** C Play B natural as a passing tone. It should always appear on an upbeat, never on the downbeat.
3. **LYDIAN DOM.** = C7#4 = C D E **F#** G A Bb C The #4 was/is a favorite note. It used to be called a b5.
4. **WHOLE-TONE** = C7+ = C D E **F#** **G#** Bb C This scale only has 6 tones. It is a symmetrical scale used often in cartoon music and by DeBussy and Ravel.
5. **DIMINISHED** = C7b9 = C **Db** **Eb** E **F#** G A Bb C This scale has 8 different tones. It is symmetrical and is also used in cartoon music. Michael Brecker is a master of this scale sound.
6. **DIM. WHOLE-TONE** = C7+9 = C **Db** **Eb** E **F#** **G#** Bb C This scale has four altered tones which help create tension.
7. **SPANISH or JEWISH SCALE** = C7 (b9) = C **Db** E F G **Ab** Bb C This scale is used often when playing in a minor key. It's the same as F harmonic minor.
8. **CHROMATIC SCALE** = C7 = C **Db** D **Eb** E F **F#** G **G#** A Bb **B** C
(the Musical Alphabet)

Experiment with these scales over the **Cycle of Dominant 7th Chords** track on the recording. The proper use of these various scales is part of what makes jazz so appealing. Endless variety in the hands of a master makes beautiful music. Don't be afraid to try these sounds. It may take some time for your ears to become accustomed to the sound **and** the fingerings. *Patterns for Jazz* lists jazz phrases based on many of the scales above.

*Notice that what Aebersold refers to as the “Spanish or Jewish Scale” above is actually our Freygish scale!

Tune in next week for How to Improvise – Part 2!