

# How to Navigate Chord Changes

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# Overview

- What are chord changes?
- Chord basics: Construction, types/qualities
- Chords & Scales and how they work together
- Learning your chords
- Approaches to improvising over chords
  - Arpeggios, scales, chord tones, guide tones, connecting notes, resolutions
- Thinking outside the box: techniques and exercises to enhance and “spice up” your improvisation over chords

# What are “chord changes?”

- The series of musical chords that make up the harmony to support the melody of a song or part of a song (solo section).
- The word “changes” refers to the chord “progression,” the original term. In the jazz world, we call them changes because they typically change chord quality from one chord to the next as the song is played. (We will discuss what I mean by “quality” later.)
- Most chord progressions in songs tend to repeat the series over and over for improvisors to play solos and melodies.
- Chord changes in jazz can be any length. Most tunes we solo over have a form with a certain number of measures (8, 12, 16, 24, 32, etc.).

# What makes up a chord?

- A “chord” is defined as three or more musical pitches (notes) sounding at the same time.
- The sonority of a chord depends on how these pitches are specifically arranged or “stacked.”
  - Consonant chords - chords that sound “pleasing” to the ear
  - Dissonant chords - chords that do not sound “pleasing” to the ear

# Basic Common Chord Types

- Triad - 3 note chord arranged in thirds
  - Lowest note - Root, middle note - 3rd, highest note - 5th. (C-E-G, D-F-A, etc.)
- 6th chord - A triad with a 6th interval above the root
  - R, 3rd, 5th, 6th. (C-E-G-A, D-F-A-B, etc.)
- 7th chord - 4 note chord arranged in thirds
  - R, 3rd, 5th, \*7th (C-E-G-B, D-F-A-C, etc.)
- Chords with extensions - extensions are 9th, 11th, and 13th above the root of the chord. \*Also arranged in thirds, though sometimes these can appear in different combinations, altered, or omitted. (Discussed in chord qualities section)
  - 9th chord - C-E-G-B-D, 11th chord - C-E-G-B-D-F, 13th chord - C-E-G-B-D-F-A

# Other Chord Types

- Cluster chord - Chords of 3 or more notes arranged closely together in intervals of less than a 3rd
  - Some of these can be interpreted as other chord types with the extensions (9,11,13/6) just closely voiced.
- Suspended chord - Chord (major/minor triads, 7th chords) that omits the 3rd and replaces it with a 4th or a 2nd (9th).
  - Csus4 - C-F-G (R, 4th, 5th)
  - Csus2 - C-D-G (R, 2nd, 5th)
  - C9sus4 - C-G-Bb-D-F (R, 5th, 7th, 9th, 4th/11th\*) \*Can be voiced either way

# Other Chord Types

- Slash chords - Chord where the bass note is indicated with a “/.” These can be inversions of chords that use chord tones, the bass note can be a non-chord tone or extension for more dissonance. Used a lot in modern sounding jazz tunes.
  - Cmaj7/E - E-C-G-B (3rd, Root, 5th, 7th)
  - C/F# - F#-C-E-G (#4, Root, 3rd, 5th)
- Polychords - Two chords (typically triads) sounding at the same time. These are usually written as a fraction using a horizontal line as opposed to a forward slash line. Used in more advanced or modern sounding tunes.
  - C | D - Dmaj triad on bottom, Cmaj triad on top. D-F#-A | C-E-G

# Chord Qualities

- Quality refers to the specific intervals between the notes of a given chord. \*If you're not familiar with intervals, qualities, or some of these terms, visit [www.musictheory.net](http://www.musictheory.net) for a crash course.\*
  - Triad qualities - Major, minor, augmented, diminished
  - 7th chord qualities - Major7, minor7, dominant7, half-diminished7, diminished7
  - Advanced qualities - Min/Maj7, Aug/Maj7, Dom7/Aug, Altered Dom7



# Chords & Scales: How they work together

- Chords typically come from extracting notes from scales
- THEY ARE NOT THE SAME THING!
- Chords IMPLY scales - Cmaj7 implies the use of the C major scale.
- It's useful to be able to think of the scale that is implied by a chord, but be careful not to fall into the trap of equating the two.
- Just because I see a Cmaj7 does not mean that I can only play the tones of the C major scale...(Aebersold syndrome)

# Learning Your Chords

- To me, if you want to REALLY understand chord changes, it is essential that you learn to play and memorize as many chords as possible, starting with the basic types of chords
  - Beginner - Triads and all qualities, 7th chords and the 5 basic qualities
  - Intermediate - Chords with extensions, altered extensions (flat or sharp)
  - Advanced - Specialty and modern chord sounds

# Learning Your Chords

- Start by learning chords on your instrument by arpeggiating them. (Chordal instruments can just play the chord and arpeggiate)
- If you play a non-chordal instrument, also learn these chords on the piano.
- Practice these chords on the full range of your instrument.
- MEMORIZE them as quickly as possible.

# Ways to Practice Chords

- Ideally we want to learn all of our chords in all keys. This will take TIME, PATIENCE, PERSISTENCE, and CONSISTENCY
  - Chromatically - Up and Down in half steps
  - Up and down in whole steps - 6 at a time
  - \*Cycle of 4ths
    - \*Most common chord movement in jazz tunes
  - Any other ways you can think of them! (Maj 3rds, min 3rds, etc. Learn about intervals so you know how to do this.)

# Now that you know your chords, what now?!

- Time to start working on improvising over chords!
- Find friends to jam with or purchase a chord app. My favorite is iReal Pro (\$10-\$12). Available on mobile devices in desktop computers.
- Brief demo of iReal pro app

# Approaches to Improvising Over Chord Changes

- 1) Practice ONE CHORD TYPE/QUALITY for a long time...
  - Really HEAR the notes in the chord. You can really challenge yourself to see if you can “sing” the chord tone. Singing can reinforce your ear on what that chord tone sounds like.
  - I like to play one note with a varying rhythm so I can get that sound of that note in my head while hearing the chord you are working with.
  - Practice playing JUST THE CHORD TONES. (R, 3, 5, 7) Improvise simple rhythms with chord tones only (arpeggios). For beginners, start with triads. More intermediate/advanced players can go right to 7th chords or extensions.
  - Try not to be too concerned about what you are playing. Focus on the sound of the notes against the chord.

# Approaches to Improvising Over Chord Changes

- 2) Find the scale associated with the chord
  - Play the scale up and down with the one chord you're working on
  - Start on different scale degrees
  - Arpeggiate the scale (diatonic chords)
  - Experiment with holding tones of the associated scale. Get to know which sound "good" and which sound not so good. Example: On major 7th chords, the 4th degree of the major scale is not ideal because it clashes with the 3rd, the tone that indicates the quality of major.
  - Don't get too hung up on scales here. There is a hidden trap that if you always play implied scales over chords, that's all you begin to hear. There are more interesting ways to improvise and conceptualize. :)

# Approaches to Improvising Over Chord Changes

- 3) Begin practicing on moving from one chord to another
  - Pull up a simple song that has easy chord changes or changes that don't vary a lot. "So What," "Midnight Voyage," "Little Sunflower," etc.
  - Practice moving from one chord tone to another chord tone **RIGHT WHEN THE CHORD CHANGES**. Doing this slowly and repeatedly will help you internalize the chord changes.
  - Use the chord tones of each chord to guide you. Smooth note movement between chords promotes good "voice leading" (this makes you sound like you know what you're doing :))



# Approaches to Improvising Over Chord Changes

- 4) Guide Tones - Most jazz tunes have a LOT of “functional harmony.” Understanding how guide tones work will help you create more smooth and pleasant sounding lines.
  - YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE A THEORY GENIUS TO IMPROVISE! (But some theory knowledge helps...)
  - Check out [www.musictheory.com](http://www.musictheory.com) for a great overview of basic functional harmony. You can practice your theory chops too! It's free!
  - Another good source is [www.learnjazzstandards.com](http://www.learnjazzstandards.com)

# Approaches to Improvising Over Chord Changes

- Crash course in guide tones
  - In a typical ii-V-I progression, 3rds and 7ths are your guide tones. They “guide” you to the smoothest way to move from chord to chord.
  - 3rd of the ii chord - 7th of the V chord - 3rd of the I chord (Dm7 - G7 - Cmaj7: F - F - E)
  - 7th of the ii chord - 3rd of the V chord - 7th of the I chord (Same progression: C - B - B)

# Approaches to Improvising Over Chord Changes

- 5) Connecting notes from chord to chord
  - Practice creating lines where you connect the last part of the chord you're in to the chord you're moving to.
  - Begin by trying to connect to a chord tone: R, 3, 5, or 7. As you get better at this, you can connect to extensions and other "colorful" tones.
  - Experiment: Play anything that comes to your head for one chord but when you are about to change to the next chord, practice landing on a chord tone of the next chord.
  - When starting, use the KISS method: Keep It Simple, Silly! Start slowly! We crawl before we walk, we walk before we run.

# Approaches to Improvising Over Chord Changes

- Filler material
  - Use prepared lines or “licks” that fit the chord.
  - Pentatonic scales make excellent filler material and they sound great in almost any case! Be careful about over using pentatonic scales; you want to create interest and variety and sound like you are spontaneously creating a melody that makes sense, rather than “guessing.”

# Approaches to Improvising Over Chord Changes

- Filler Material
  - Experiment with chromatic movements within chords.
    - Example: Major7 chord - I like to play with ideas like moving chromatically from the 7th to the 6th, 6th-5th, 3rd-2nd, 4th-5th, and 2nd-Root
    - The point is to find interesting ways to approach and leave chord tones and chords, while focusing on landing on chord tones on strong beats (number counts). Practicing this will solidify these tones in your ear.

# Approaches to Improvising Over Chord Changes

- 6) Resolutions
  - You “can” play “anything” as long as you resolve it!
  - Resolving your lines and notes gives context to what you immediately just played.
  - All the things we talked about previously assist in this: arpeggios, scales, chord tones, guide tones, connecting notes

# Thinking Outside the Box: Exercises and Techniques for Further Development

- 1) LISTEN TO THE MUSIC YOU WANT TO PERFORM! You won't know how to do it if you don't listen to it! Get into it!
- 2) Transcribe solos (by ear first, then write it down as best you can) Pay attention to how these improvisors connect and resolve their notes from chord to chord. You will pick up a TON of things by doing this extra step of study.
- 3) Learn how to copy sound, inflection, and extended techniques: growls, "doits," altissimo, etc.

# Thinking Outside the Box: Exercises and Techniques for Further Development

- 4) The “Magic Game” - Coined by Brad Goode from Univ. Of Cincinnati
  - Take any chord progression (start simple)
  - Only play chord tones on downbeats (R, 3, 5, 7. Advanced can use extensions associated with the specific chords)
  - Play this at a slow, slow tempo
  - Use 8th notes and try to connect the upbeats with the chord tones on the downbeats
  - You can approach any chord tone any way you want, as long as the downbeat is a chord tone



# Thinking Outside the Box: Exercises and Techniques for Further Development

- 5) Memorize melodies - Good melodies use excellent voice leading and smooth transitions from chord to chord in songs. Often they will contain a note that is a chord tone or an extension that defines the type of chord being used in the moment.
- 6) Play with “shapes” of a chord
  - I like to take a chord and just dig into how many ways I can arrange the notes that sound good with the chord as filler material. \*Demo in video
  - This allows me to really learn the chord inside and out.

# Thinking Outside the Box: Exercises and Techniques for Further Development

- 7) Playing “outside” the chord changes
  - This is a very fun and popular thing to do, but it can be over used or used in a way where it just sounds like you are not paying attention to the chords.
  - Side Stepping - Playing a half step above or below or expressing a chord other than the one sounding.
  - Superimposing other chords over existing chords. (Coltrane did a lot of this) Experiment on your own or go seek out modern and contemporary artists.
  - Pentatonics - The same pentatonic scale or idea can be played over multiple chord qualities. If the main chords of the pentatonic line up with the chord, it will sound “in.” Experiment with pentatonic scales that are further away from the chord center.

# Thinking Outside the Box: Exercises and Techniques for Further Development

- 8) Compose your own solo to a chord progression.
  - Create your own solo by using guide tones, chord tones, arpeggios, scales, etc.
  - This is especially helpful for fast tempo tunes where you need to just kind of be in “auto pilot mode” (Rhythm Changes, Cherokee, Impressions, etc.)
  - This helps you create your own filler material you can use on similar tunes and allows you to get to know the song or chord progression you are working on.

# Conclusion and Final Thoughts

- Things to keep in mind as you work through this journey
  - Patience, Persistence, Consistency. Learning to do this at a high or professional level takes time. Don't give up and learn from your mistakes. Always ask questions and keep seeking out answers.
  - Always strive for good tone, articulation, and internal sense of time.
  - Rhythm can be a challenge. Most of these exercises focus on long tones or 8th note lines. Think of different rhythms to try out while your improvising. Good time and rhythm will beat out notes any day.
  - Record yourself! It may be unpleasant to listen to, but recordings don't lie. Ask yourself: Does what I play sound good? Does it fit the style I'm playing? How can I get better at \_\_\_\_\_ ?

Go forth and navigate  
those changes!

More questions? Want Lessons? Contact me!  
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