

PRACTISING SOLOING BACKWARDS

INTRODUCTION

I've noticed that an awful lot of people learning jazz have a specific weakness when soloing – their lines don't really seem to go anywhere, the phrases never really conclude. They're usually aware of this problem but don't seem able to fix it.

Very often what happens is that a soloist will rip through a nice sounding line around a II-V only to dribble off inconclusively over the I chord. This is a weakness that arises because of a deficiency of practice – most people seem to spend a lot of time working on patterns, licks and scales to get them round the II-Vs and never spend enough (or even any) time dealing with the resolution on the I chord. In a sense, they have nice firm II-V muscles but their I muscles are wimpy and underdeveloped. This article suggests a practice approach to give you a way of redressing the balance.

It helps to consider what's going on harmonically. It's natural that people should be drawn to II-Vs – this is the point in the harmonic progression that contains the most activity and tension, the most appeal to the imagination. By comparison, the I chord is at rest and seems to provide the imagination with much less scope for melodic construction. The result is often a sense of unresolved tension – rather like a well-told joke with a fumbled punchline (or no punchline at all!). We need to develop as much melodic interest in the I chord as we've already found in the II-V.

It needs to be said at the outset that phrases do not and should not always resolve on the I chord – this can lead to a boxy kind of playing. Nevertheless, it's true to say that they often do, and practising resolving phrases at this point is essential to train your sensibilities to handle tension and release in a more varied manner.

So what we're going to do is practise our punchlines – in isolation at first, without the rest of the joke... By doing this, we're building up our I muscles and, by shifting our focus onto the end of our phrases, we're training our imagination to hear towards a conclusion. This will help change the way we conceive phrases – we're learning to think backwards from the conclusion.

WHAT PRACTICE REALLY MEANS

So you may well ask, how on earth am I expected to think backwards in time like this? I've got two bars of Fm7 Bb7b9 in front of me, right here, right now, and surely if I start by thinking what I'm going to play in three bars' time over EbΔ, it's just going to paralyse me and stuff up the whole thing.

Well, initially yes, maybe that's going to happen. But remember what is involved in the process of practising. We practise a line, a scale, more valuably a *concept*, on our own at home and we do so consciously and deliberately. This is indeed awkward, confusing and frustrating to begin with. But what we're doing on a more profound level is training our subconscious to operate in this different way, so that when we're on the stand our deeper mind can use the new approach for us and we can access it without conscious effort. Don't worry about trying to force this shift to happen – just practise consciously and carefully and your subconscious will take care of the rest.

We'll start by taking a look at the notion of melodic cells.

MELODIC CELL PLAYING

The concept of cells is a universal feature in tonal music, applying as much to Bach, Mozart, Brahms or Wagner as to jazz improvisation.

The key to the concept is that the strongest melodic gestures are built from four-note groups containing three defining chord tones plus one other. As with so many other profound musical concepts, this seems more bloody obvious the more you consider it. The sound of the chord will be strongly represented (favoured by a ratio of 3:1), and adding another non-chord tone to the group gives extra motion and depth, implying a scale and taking us away from the rather pedestrian sound of a pure triad or chord tone group.

There are a large number of cells to choose from, some common examples being:

1(2)35	35(6)7	(2)356
13(4)5	3(4)57	3(4)56
135(6)	(2)357	356(7)

I've given the non-chord tone in parentheses. Note that we can choose our chord tones from one of two sets: 1357 or 1356. Both imply a tonic sound. These work equally well in major and minor, and don't forget you can use them in any inversion. You could argue that the ones where the non-chord tone forms a connector between two chord tones sound stronger than the others. Sometimes you have to play the cell in inversion to make the tones connect more smoothly (sometimes that isn't what you want).

These gestures are just as effective over other chord types (where, of course, the chord tones may be different), particularly when playing upper structure triads. They're also very useful at opening up the sound of the half-tone whole-tone diminished scale. What's more, because of the strength with which they imply the harmony, they can also be a very effective device for getting outside the changes. Outside playing is all about using strong structures and sequences against the underlying harmony – if you don't, it'll just sound like a series of wrong notes. It may be more accurate, in fact, to call outside playing *bitonal* or *polytonal* playing instead.

Rather than trying to exhaust all the possibilities, it's best to construct these cells as you go along by thinking "three chord tones plus another candidate". That way, you're training yourself to see the possibilities as they come up in real life.

Incidentally, a lot of jazz players have done extensive work on using cells in their playing. The classic example was Coltrane, who used this approach to handle the stern (self-imposed) test of *Giant Steps* changes (interesting how, when he was faced with very unorthodox harmony, his musical instincts guided him into using a strong yet simple form of phrase construction).

Arguably, some players have arrived at the sound of cells by sheer intuition, simply because of how strong they sound.

HOW TO PRACTISE BACKWARDS

Pick a standard tune that contains a number of clear II-V-I progressions (helps if it's a tune you like). Make sure you're clear on the harmony – don't get fooled, for instance, by the $\text{Db}\Delta$ and $\text{Ab}\Delta$ chords in bars 5 and 13 of *All the Things You Are* – these are substitutions, not true I chords.

Let's look at *What Is This Thing Called Love*, which contains seven clean and clear turnarounds to Fm, C Δ and Bb Δ :

	G \emptyset	C7b9		Fm		%	
	D \emptyset	G7+9		C Δ		%	
	G \emptyset	C7b9		Fm		%	
	D \emptyset	G7+9		F Δ		%	
	Cm7	F7		Bb Δ		%	
	Ab7	%		Dm7		G7	
	G \emptyset	C7b9		Fm		%	
	D \emptyset	G7+9		C Δ		%	

Note that the Fm chords are tonic minor chords (ie minor Is). While you could play them as Dorian (chord tones 1 b3 5 b7), the sound of tonic minor will be better reflected if you choose minor 6th (chord tones 1 b3 5 6) or major-minor (chord tones 1 b3 5 7).

What we're going to do is go around this chord cycle (using a playalong helps), but only playing at the point where the resolution to a I chord happens – playing *nothing else*. Just the punchlines – a cell-based figure to define resolution at the I chords. For instance:

The image shows two staves of handwritten musical notation. The top staff is in treble clef and contains three measures. The first measure has a whole rest with the chord symbol G \emptyset above it. The second measure has a whole rest with the chord symbol C7b9 above it. The third measure contains a melodic line starting with a half note Eb, followed by quarter notes Bb, Ab, and G, ending with a whole rest. Above this measure is the chord symbol Fm. The bottom staff is in bass clef and also contains three measures. The first measure has a whole rest with the chord symbol D \emptyset above it. The second measure has a whole rest with the chord symbol G7+9 above it. The third measure contains a melodic line starting with a half note C, followed by quarter notes B, Ab, and G, ending with a whole rest. Above this measure is the chord symbol C Δ .

Both very recognisable bebop gestures, in fact. I chose them deliberately to illustrate that cell figures are actually used in the real world.

A couple of pointers. Rhythmic variety is very important in creating good lines, particularly since we're using very simple harmonic tools. Also, try not to think of playing *in those two bars*, think more in terms of there being a general *area* in time where the resolution occurs. This will help you use anticipation or delay to achieve more fluid phrasing:

The image shows a single staff of handwritten musical notation in treble clef. It contains three measures. The first measure has a whole rest with the chord symbol G \emptyset above it. The second measure has a whole rest with the chord symbol C7b9 above it. The third measure contains a melodic line starting with a half note Eb, followed by quarter notes Bb, Ab, and G, ending with a whole rest. Above this measure is the chord symbol Fm.

THE NEXT STAGE

As we noted to begin with, you don't always want to resolve on the I chords in a tune. Once you've gained some facility in using cells for phrase endings, you can extend the process.

Let's take the same tune and decide in advance on the chords where we want to end phrases. Take some chances and look to avoid the obvious. For example, try landing on and resolving to the starred chords here:

	GØ		C7b9		Fm		%		
	DØ*		G7+9		CΔ		%		
	GØ		C7b9*		Fm		%		
	DØ*		G7+9		FΔ		%		
	Cm7*		F7		BbΔ		%		
	Ab7		%		Dm7*		G7		
	GØ		C7b9*		Fm		%		
	DØ		G7+9*		CΔ		%		

We begin the process again by devising cell figures from the chords we've chosen and going round the whole form just playing the phrase endings.

Using cells can help you find strong resolving gestures even on such active chords as altered dominants – one good way of doing this is to focus on the upper structure triads and build cells based on them. For instance, the G7+9 chord has upper structure triads on Db and Eb. Combining notes from these two major triads gives you cells very similar to the ones we looked at for a major chord.

Then we can practise reaching further and further back into the chords that precede our chosen resolution points.

Miles once said that everything in music is a pickup. This kind of exercise is no more or less than that philosophy put into practice.

Best of luck, and feel free to e-mail me with any queries or comments at jlyon@opus28.co.uk.

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