

BEBOP EXERCISES

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INTRODUCTION

Bebop is all about being able to play any chromatic tone on any chord. Obviously, if we just play chromatically with free abandon, the harmony goes out the window. Theory dictates that we place strong tones on strong beats to best convey the harmony. The principle is simple – these exercises are designed to help you get that theory into your hands and ears.

The exercises should be taken round the keys – but don't write them out and learn them by rote. What we're after is mindful, rather than mindless repetition.

Take the following figure as an example:

C7



Our mental process when practising this figure is something like this: “Okay, starting on the downbeat with the dominant 7th, we play a scale tone down to the 6th (or 13th) and then approach the 5th – our target destination – by playing a semitone above and below it.” It can actually be very helpful to speak this kind of analysis aloud while practising (the first sign of madness). At any point you should be able to name the chord tone being played and the beat it falls on.

Once we've got these figures into our bloodstream by learning them with this kind of mental process, they (or bits of them) will become easily available to us when we're up there soloing for real.

Take them through all the keys. This will help you to learn the “geography” of each key.

i. Bebop scales (down and up)

The bebop scales add a chromatic passing tone to the basic scales so that strong chord tones occur on the strong beats. The strong chord tones are root, 3rd, 5th and 7th on the dominant chord and root, 3rd, 5th and 6th (not 7th) on tonic major and minor chords.

C7 bebop scale (natural 7th added)



C tonic major bebop scale (sharp 5th added)



C tonic minor bebop scale (sharp 5th added)



ii. Bebop scales (with direction changes)

This exercise develops flexibility in changing the direction of a bebop scale line.

C7



CM



Cm



iii. Diminished scale descending

The use of a half-step whole-step diminished scale over the dominant chord is very common in bebop. Note that the top four notes of this scale are the same as the straight dominant scale – the bit you have to work on is the bottom four notes. Think of it like this: root, split the 2nd (more commonly described as the 9th) in half – raise it and lower it, 3rd, raise the 4th (more commonly described as the 11th). This exercise will work over either a II-V-I or a V-I.



It's good to play the whole diminished scale like this to get the whole picture, but as long as you're totally solid on your dominant scales, you could condense this exercise by just playing the bottom half of the scale (descending from the sharp 4th).

iv. Diminished arpeggio-scale figures

This exercise features ascending arpeggios and descending scales on the V diminished followed by the nearest possible chord tone of the following I chord.



v. Upper extension arpeggio-scale figure

The same sort of “up the arpeggio, down the scale” figure is also commonly used from the 7th of the V chord (or the 3rd of the II). This exercise will work over either a II-V-I or a V-I.



vi. Chord tones enclosures

This exercise uses the pattern of scale tone above then semitone below the target chord tone.

C7



CM



Cm



Other possibilities are: scale tone above then scale tone below, semitone above then scale tone below and semitones above and below. These enclosures can also be inverted, approaching the target tone from below then above.

It's also possible to use this kind of enclosure with non-chord tones, but if you play them on the downbeat, the line will resume with the chord tones out of sync. When this occurs you add another chromatic tone, skip a scale tone or syncopate the line to get things back on track.

vii. Chromatic dithering between chord tones

This exercise is all about taking four, rather than two notes to get between chord tones. The pattern is: descend by scale tone, then approach the target tone by upper and lower chromatic neighbour – with two exceptions. When descending from the 5th to the major 3rd, we have to play down chromatically first in order to leave room for the chromatic enclosure of the target tone. When descending from the 6th to the 5th there's even less room to manoeuvre, so we have to first descend chromatically then ascend to the target tone. In this context it's useful to include the descent from the 9th to the 7th on the dominant and minor 7th chords.

C7



CM



Cm



Cm7



A common variation on this pattern is to switch the penultimate chromatic into second place, like this:



There are many other possible permutations – listen out for them, dig them out from transcriptions or just figure them out for yourself (the best option by far). Remember, though, that whatever you come up with has to sound good to you. It has to have the bebop ring to it.

viii. Short II-V-I (V-I) pattern

This exercise is a classic bebop lick that fits over either a V chord or the whole of a short II-V, rounded off by a resolving figure using chromatic enclosure of the root of the I chord.



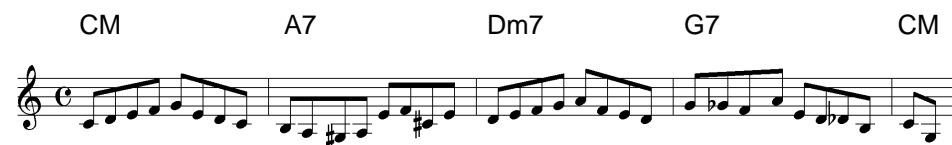
ix. Long II-V-I pattern

We play the previous exercise over the V chord and precede it by a simple cell figure (1 2 3 4 5 3 2 1) clearly outlining the triad of the II chord.



x. Long I-VI-II-V pattern

We take the previous exercise and precede it with a phrase to cover the I and VI chords. The pattern over the I chord is the same cell figure as we’ve used over the II chord (1 2 3 4 5 4 3 1). The pattern used over the VI chord can be thought of in the following way: “second, root, chromatic under root, root, fifth, chromatic above fifth, third, fifth”. Note that the final two notes of this phrase form an enclosure of the root of the II chord that follows. This exercise is a very good way of assimilating the “geography” of each key.



xi. Descending dominant pattern

This exercise combines a variation on the downward “dither” from 7th to 5th with a descending triadic cell (5 3 2 1) and finally a descending diminished scale line. As this example demonstrates, there are all sorts of great sounding combinations of these exercises and principles.



xii. Ascending dominant pattern

This exercise begins with an ascending scale pattern then uses an ascending chromatic enclosure of the 5th. We then play a four-note arpeggio up from the 5th, descend three notes of the diminished scale and approach the target tone (the root) by lower chromatic neighbour.



xiii. Resolution patterns

This exercise gives two common figures for resolving on the tonic chord. The first figure can be thought of as a descending pentatonic, but with the target tone (the 6th) enclosed by upper and lower scale tones. The second figure is a descending scale with chromatic approach to the 3rd (in major) or chromatic enclosure to the 3rd (in minor).



Then there's this figure, which is very typical of Parker. It's commonly used in major, but can be adapted to minor. Think of it like this: 5th, scale tone/chromatic up to root, scale tone/chromatic down to 3rd, then down the major pentatonic (note how it exploits the point in the major scale where scale tones are the same as chromatic approaches). One option then has the line returning to the root (still within the pentatonic scale), as shown:



WHY PRACTISE THIS STUFF?

Don't want to learn patterns? Want to be a genuine original? Learning patterns would be pointless anyway, because you'd never remember them when you're soloing for real?

Sure, we practise these patterns and fragments so that they'll be available to us when we're up there, in action, in the spotlight. But as long as we're mindful while we practise – as long as we have the right attentive attitude, we're also training ourselves to apply sound musical principles, and that's far more important than the lick we happen to be working on at the time. The process is the thing, the lick or pattern is merely the raw material.

The journey really is more important than the destination. And the journey never ends. Michael Brecker never stopped practising, so why should you?

I'd advise against trying to regurgitate great chunks of memorised bebop lines when you're performing, for two reasons. First, however well you've practised it, a "trotted out" line will tend to sound false if you force it. Second, you'll screw it up anyway. Your expectations will get in the way. But, and here's the point, DO practise great chunks.

To paraphrase Charlie Parker, explore the possibilities at home then go out and just play.

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

Be aware that when you put in place a programme of practice in order to change the way you play, it's going to disrupt your playing for a while. It's just like the way your body builds muscle – tear, build, heal, tear, build, heal.

So the initial impact of this kind of practice will be to make your playing worse. Don't panic – stick with it. What you work on now will start to appear in your playing after a few months. If you genuinely want to learn and improve, accept the fact that you have to "break" the way you play now. Have faith that what you're working on now will eventually sink into your subconscious and then it will appear in your playing. In fact, you'll find this stuff will start to inform your playing in all kinds of interesting ways that you couldn't consciously dictate.

Best of luck, and feel free to get in touch with me at:

jlyon@opus28.co.uk

Jason Lyon
London
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