# THE CONTEMPORARY JAZZ SOUND

## INTRODUCTION

This article is intended to briefly cover some of the materials and concepts that jazz soloists use to achieve what we will loosely call a 'contemporary' sound. This sound is heard in the playing of people such as Coltrane, Shorter, Woody Shaw, McCoy Tyner and Chick Corea, and those who have followed them. It sounds angular and sinuous, often ambiguous although one always gets a strong sense of structure coming through, even if that structure is more oblique than what we are used to hearing in classic bebop.

## BEYOND BEBOP

You need to be aware that this material builds on bebop, it isn't a substitute for it. You have to be familiar with scales, modes, chord tones, rhythmic concepts, bebop scales, arpeggios and encircling techniques – all the traditional stuff first. In a sense, the contemporary sound stands against mainstream jazz in the same way 20th century modernism stands against what went before in visual art. It is simultaneously a reaction to it and an extension of it. In practical terms, as has been said ad nauseam about Picasso, in order to paint an abstract you first need to be a solid draughtsman.

In fact, keen application of jazz rhythm is the key to making these materials really work, since they are ultimately quite simple sounding structures.

I'm going to assume that you are familiar with jazz basics, can read simple lines and know enough theory to understand chords. You should be able to construct a credible solo in the traditional bebop/hard bop/mainstream style.

Be aware that although these materials may appear as a more or less influential part of any given player's style, nobody solos on this stuff exclusively. However, when you're practising these materials be precise. I will often practise solidly on these materials before a gig and then go out and just play what comes to me – the influence can then make itself felt when I want it.

## GAPPED SCALES

At the heart of the contemporary jazz sound are pentatonic (five-note scales) and hexatonic (six-note scales). I will also examine two extremely useful shorthand chordal fragments from melodic minor that form four-note scale-type structures.

A couple of introductory remarks. These constructions are sometimes referred to as 'gapped scales' – which is a convenient practical description in a jazz context, where they are used to substitute for full modes or scales. Historically however, these sounds have had an identity all of their own in various folk traditions the world over, in which context they are not regarded as gapped or incomplete. The modal ambiguity they invoke is an integral part of the sound of these traditions. For now, though, I'll use the term 'gapped scales'.

Two points flow from this. First, you need to overcome the illusion that the scales appear to come with gaps built in. You would no more run indiscriminately up and down them than you would do so with full modes or scales. One of the reasons for employing gapped scales is that they add a lot of structure to your soloing, and a lot of that structure exists across the gaps.

Second, the fact that these scales are incomplete renderings of any given mode or scale has important consequences. Any given gapped scale will fit over more than one mode or scale. It follows that you can use different gapped scales to express any given mode or scale.

## CHROMATIC MOTION

Furthermore, these scales are predominantly anti-chromatic. If we are going to use just four, five or six notes to span the octave, it makes sense to make the spread as even as possible – large gaps would generally negate the sense of the construction as a scale. Conversely, this means that semitones are kept to a minimum.

In part, these scales are attractive for their anti-chromatic nature – they thereby provide a welcome relief from the highly chromatic nature of bebop. The problem then arises: how do we reintroduce chromatic interest into such structures?

The solution is to take the whole gapped scale structure and shift it chromatically up or down within the context of the same chord. The structure is thus maintained, but chromatic motion introduced to add interest to the line. This practice is referred to as 'planing' or 'side-slipping'. There are many different approaches to planing, but it's best to begin with a semitone shift. Whenever you are working on a gapped scale, learn the scale a semitone up from it at the same time and devote some time to practising moving away from and back into the home sound by shifting up and down a gear.

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A brief disclaimer. What follows represents a breakdown of some of the most commonly used materials, and those materials that form the basis of my own style in this idiom. It is not intended to be an exhaustive or complete exploration of what is a vast and fascinating subject. I hope, once you have grasped what is presented here, that you will go on to investigate other types of gapped scale structures as you wish and see fit.

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

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