

HOW TO HANDLE A SUS CHORD

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It's a common problem among people learning how to improvise that they freeze when faced with a sus chord. I've often found that the reason people don't know what to play over this chord type is that they don't really understand it.

Here are a few ways of tackling this mysterious chord type that should give you a few ideas. Try to think *melodically*, and use repetition and variation, rather than looking for patterns.

MIXOLYDIAN (NO AVOID NOTE)

You can think of a sus chord as a dominant chord voiced so that the 4th is promoted from an "avoid" note to a preferred chord tone.

The scale that goes with C7 (with the strong chord tones marked) is:

x x x x
C D E F G A Bb

The scale that goes with C7sus (with the strong chord tones marked) is:

x x x x
C D E F G A Bb

FOURTHS

Extending the same thinking, an important figure defining the sus sound is a stack of diatonic fourths up from the root. You can also start the sequence a fourth lower than the root.. Over C7sus, these defining tones are:

(G) C F Bb

Hanging a phrase around these fourths can be very effective.

DORIAN OF THE RELATED II CHORD

You can think of a sus chord as a II-V wrapped up in one chord. For instance C7sus = Gm7–C7. So you can just play over the C7sus chord as if it were Gm7 – ie, play G Dorian (emphasising G, Bb, D and F):

x x x x
G A Bb C D E F

SUS PENTATONIC

There is a useful pentatonic scale that works over a sus chord, comprising the root, 3rd, 4th, 5th and 7th. C7sus pentatonic is:

C E F G Bb

Some people maintain that that in a sus chord, the 4th replaces the 3rd. This needn't be the case – it certainly isn't the case in the practice of the great players.

PENTATONICS ON THE II CHORD

You can also play the pentatonic scales that fit Gm7 over C7sus. So on C7sus, play:

Gm7 pentatonic Dm7 pentatonic
G Bb C D F D F G A C

Am7 pentatonic Gm6 pentatonic
A C D E G G Bb C D E

E half-dim pentatonic
E G A Bb D

A quick way of remembering these is to note that the roots of the first four form a II-V-I to the G. Of course, all of these fit the scale, but some don't describe the sus chord very accurately. The trick is to play these pentatonic scales as a set, flowing through one pentatonic into another. This approach preserves the "gapped" sound, while allowing a more thorough exploration of the chord scale.

HEXATONIC SCALE

There is a hexatonic scale that goes very well over a sus chord. It is formed by combining the tones of two triads, built on the root and b7th. So over C7sus you play C/Bb hexatonic scale:

C E G Bb D F combined as a scale: C D E F G Bb

TRITONIC FRAGMENTS

There are minimal figures called tritronics (three-note figures) that are often played over sus chords. They are formed from 1-4-5 shapes built on the root and 4th. So over C7sus, you play:

C F G and F Bb C

MELODIC CELL PATTERNS

The simple yet beautiful logic behind cell playing is the demonstrable fact that the most melodic four-note figures over any chord type comprise three strong chord tones with one non-chord tone. This is universal in music. As we've seen, there aren't really any non-chord tones on a sus chord, but we can still apply the principle by combining some permutation of root, 4th, 5th and 7th with any other chord tone. There are lots of possibilities, but two cell structures seem very well suited to the sus chord – over C7sus try playing:

C E F G and Bb C D F

These make great raw material for building melodic phrases. Play around with reordering the notes and using different rhythms.

THE REAL MCCOY

Probably the textbook solo using these materials is McCoy Tyner over his tune *Passion Dance* (on the superlative 1960s album *The Real McCoy*). What follows is a series of extracts from this solo.

The solos on this tune are played over one chord – F7sus. Notice how McCoy uses the melodic materials and creates variety and interest by “planing” up and down to different keys. Because the patterns he uses are gapped structures they are necessarily ambiguous – but I've given logical best guesses as to the tonality he's using at these planing points.

The image shows five staves of handwritten musical notation in treble clef, 4/4 time, over an F7sus chord. The notation is as follows:

- Staff 1: Labeled 'F7sus'. Contains a melodic phrase starting with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, and a quarter rest.
- Staff 2: Continues the melodic phrase with eighth notes G5, F5, E5, D5, C5, Bb4, A4, G4, and a quarter rest.
- Staff 3: Features a triplet of eighth notes G4, A4, Bb4, followed by a quarter rest, then a triplet of eighth notes C5, D5, E5, and a quarter rest.
- Staff 4: Labeled 'F7sus' and '(Gb-----)'. Starts with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, and a quarter rest.
- Staff 5: Continues the melodic phrase with eighth notes G5, F5, E5, D5, C5, Bb4, A4, G4, and a quarter rest.

3 F7sus

(A7 - - - -)

3 (F#7sus) (F# - - - -) (Eb7sus)

(G - - -) (F#7sus - - - -) (A - - - -) (Gb - - -)

F7sus

3 F7sus (Gb - - - -)

(Gb - - - -) (G - - -) (A - - - -) (B - - -)

3 F7sus (Gb - - - -) (A7sus - - - -) (Bb7sus - -)

F7sus

3 F7sus

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

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