Three Essential Dimensions of Jazz Fluency

Follow these guidelines and start making sense of your soloing

by Javier Arau

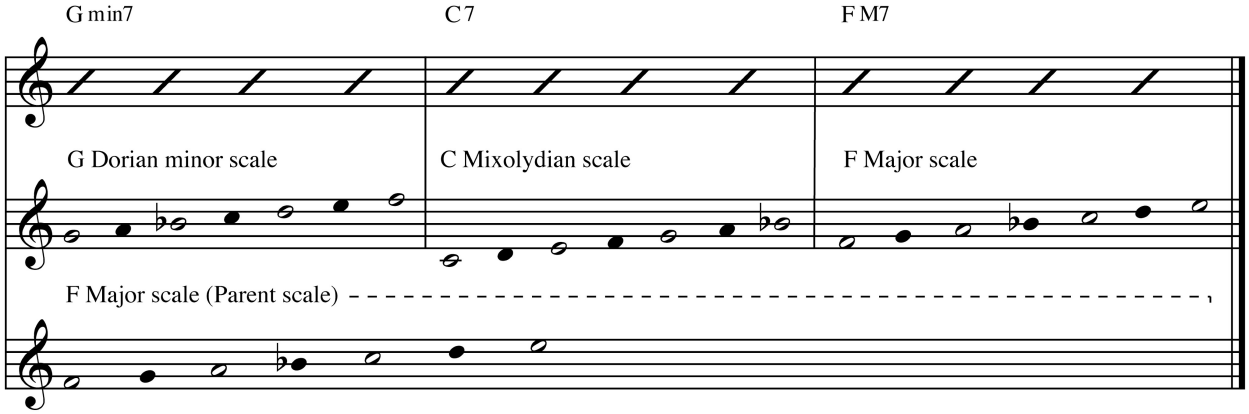
Introduction - "Carving your path"

Why do you play jazz? Do you dream of playing like a particular up-and-comer or a legend from decades past? Do you aspire to play through challenging pieces of repertoire, perhaps equating mastery with Coltrane's "Giant Steps"? Are you trying to develop your own concept and become a lick-free innovator? Regardless of your ultimate goal, you can reach it more easily by keeping in mind three dimensions of jazz fluency. Each is essential to developing a deeper and more meaningful improvisational concept.

Dimension 1 - "Coloring inside the lines"

Dimension 1, "Coloring inside the lines," should sound familiar. It is quite often the only technique that improvisers learn. It involves understanding your scales and chord tones so fluently that you can play a matching scale/chord within each measure of the composition. A basic approach to chord/scale matching looks something like this (Ex. 1):

Ex. 1: II-V-I chord progression in F Major, including chord/scale relationships



The chord progression here is a basic II-V-I in the key of F major. The first staff system indicates the chord symbol and beats per measure. The third staff system illustrates the parent scale of F major, which can be played across all three chords. Above that, the second staff system provides basic scale matches for each chord. Each scale here is a mode within the parent key of F major and includes only notes that are also in the F major scale.

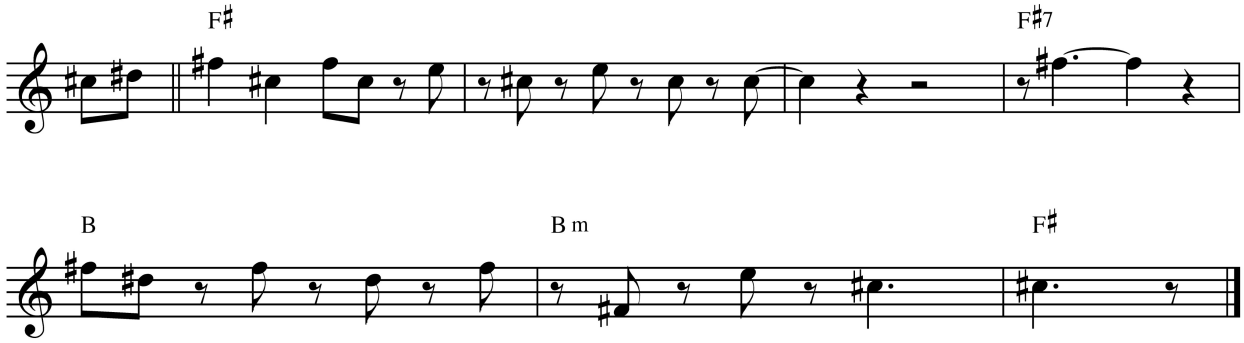
Audio examples at http://javierarau.com/three-dimensions-jazz/

When improvisers outline harmonies in common time, chord tones are quite often placed on the strong beats 1 and 3, and non-chord tones are placed on upbeats or weak beats 2 and 4. As each chord changes, the matching notes on strong beats tend to change, too. This is the epitome of coloring inside the lines. Chord/scale matching could be compared to the simple visual arts concept of "color by numbers," but in the hands of an accomplished and creative musician, what is created often can be a perfect melody.

Case study

Louis Armstrong's solo on "St. Louis Blues" (12-bar Blues in F-sharp)

Ex. 2: Louis Armstrong, "St. Louis Blues" (mm. 1-7)



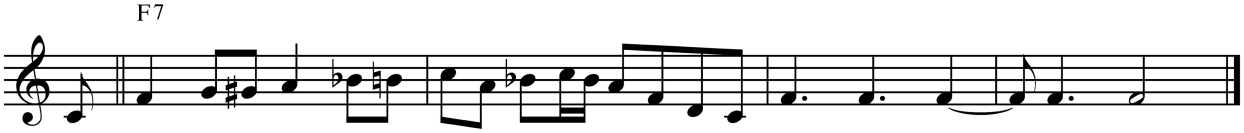
Louis Armstrong was a master of playing a simple melody that very clearly outlined the harmonies of the composition. In the above excerpt of his solo on "St. Louis Blues" (Ex. 2), nearly every pitch Armstrong plays is a chord tone.

Chord/scale matching extends far beyond simple chord/scale associations. It also can involve elements of chromaticism and other melodic devices. Below is an example of Charlie Parker playing over Now's The Time, the classic 12-bar blues in F (Ex. 3). Parker places chord tones on strong beats 1 and 3, diatonic non-chord tones on weak beats 2 and 4, and chromatic non-chord tones on some select upbeats.

Case study

Charlie Parker's solo on "Now's The Time" (12-bar Blues in F)

Ex. 3: Charlie Parker, "Now's The Time" (mm. 1-4)



Does chord/scale matching help attain successful results? Certainly. Perfecting the art of chord/scale matching is an involved process that requires a strong sense of tonic, an understanding of how to play a parent scale through multiple chord changes, and fluid application of suspensions, enclosures, sequences, and chromatic alterations to chords.

Ultimately, though, chord/scale matching can limit creative options. Neither Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, nor any other jazz master stuck strictly to it. While it is an essential musical technique, other approaches are also significant to achieving improvisational success.

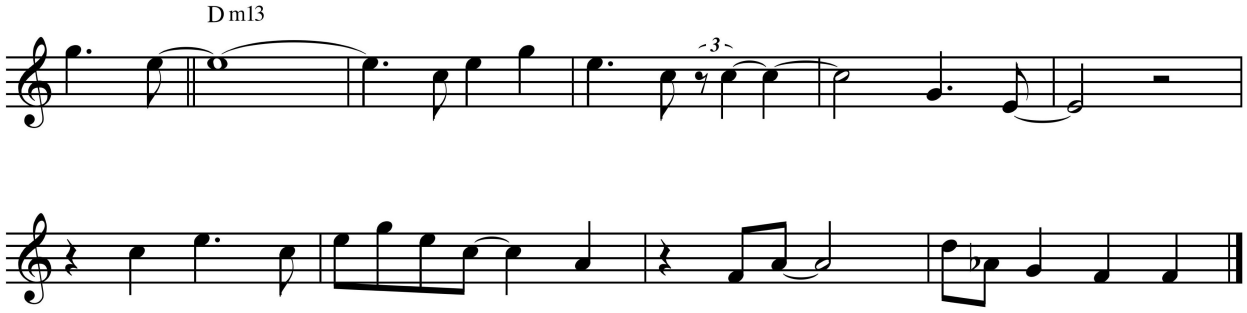
Dimension 2 - "Own your line"

Chord symbols should not dictate all your melodic options as a soloist. You are the improviser. You must own the chord progression. The chord progression should not own you. When you "own your line," you are in control of your melody. You are charting your own path through the composition in often unexpected ways. At times, you may be coloring inside the lines, matching the given chord tones and scales. At other times, though, you may be superimposing alternate chord progressions (a.k.a. implying *hidden changes*) or highlighting unforeseen points of tension and resolution. To begin to understand how to "own your line," take a closer look below at some classic examples of players implying hidden changes within a chord progression.

Case study

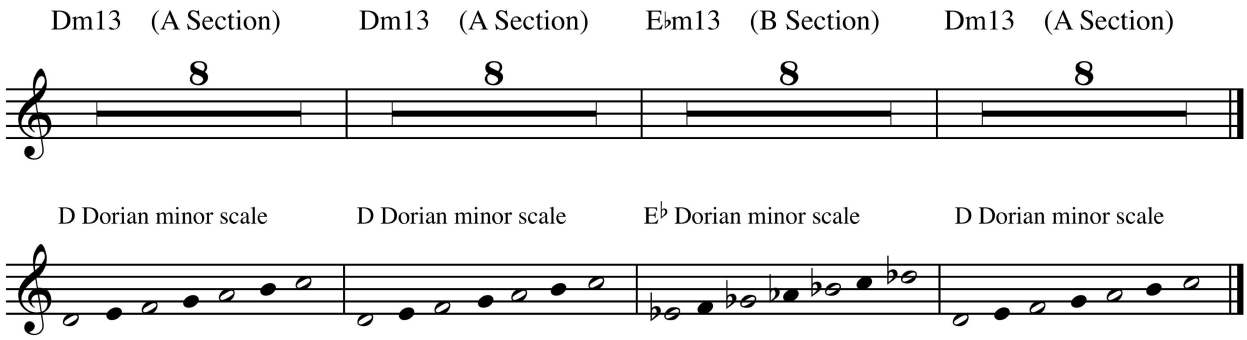
Miles Davis' solo on "So What"

Ex. 4: Miles Davis, "So What" (2nd chorus, mm. 1-9)



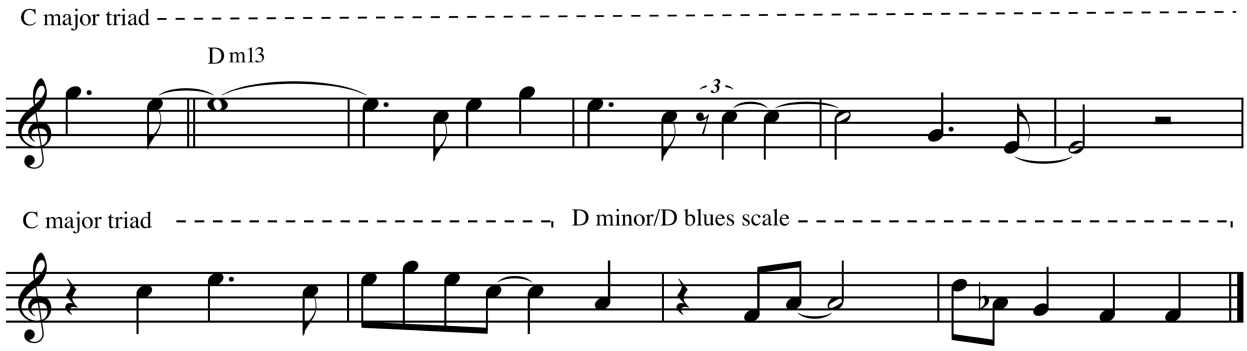
Miles Davis himself provides one of the clearest examples of how to "own your line" in his iconic "So What" solo (Ex. 4). Before examining his solo in detail, let's take a look at the composition as a whole. "So What" poses a significant challenge. The chord progression (Ex. 5) is so sparse and simple that the task of crafting a meaningful improvisation becomes quite daunting. This is a composition where milling across the form on two matching scales won't be very interesting.

Ex. 5: “So What” formal outline, chord progression, and basic chord/scale relationships

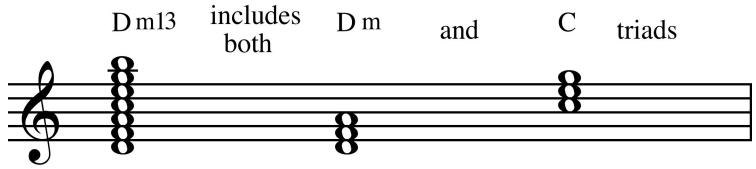


A careful analysis of Davis’ solo (Ex. 6) reveals that he uses notes that can be found in the D Dorian minor scale. While the chord progression of the composition dictates a single chord, Dm13, Davis implies a move through two harmonies—C major and D minor. He arpeggiates a C major triad for the first 6 measures of his phrase. Then he resolves his melody to the D minor chord tones A (m. 7), F (m. 8), and D (m. 9). This is an example of a soloist using *hidden changes* to enhance an improvisation. Both the C major triad and D minor triad are present in a Dmin13 chord (Ex. 7), but it takes a clever mind and confident ear to stare down that Dmin13 and play an entire opening phrase in C major.

Ex. 6: Analysis, Miles Davis, “So What” (2nd chorus, mm. 1-9)



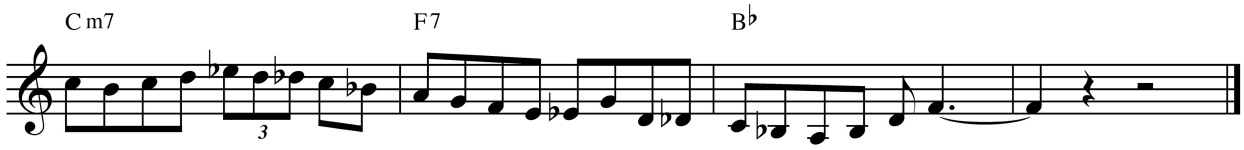
Ex. 7: Dmin13 includes both D minor and C major triads



Case study
Charlie Parker's solo on "Ko Ko" (a.k.a. "Cherokee")

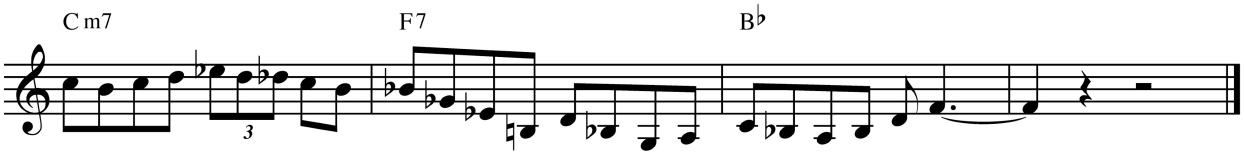
Take a look at the following "Parker-esque" line (Ex. 8):

Ex. 8: Bebop line over "Ko Ko" ("Cherokee") (mm. 47-50)



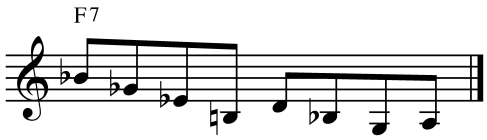
It's a pretty decent bebop line, following quite a few textbook twists and turns. These include the use of the leading tone over Cm7, the dominant bebop scale over F7, and a diatonic enclosure over the root of the B-flat chord toward the end of the phrase. (If you are not familiar with these techniques already, you'll learn about them in future studies.) While it may follow the "rules" of bebop, there's something you should know about this line: Charlie Parker never recorded it. Here's the version Parker played:

Ex. 9: Charlie Parker, "Ko Ko" ("Cherokee") (mm. 47-50)



Do you see the difference in the two versions (Ex. 8 & 9)? It's all in Parker's note choices in the middle measure, over the F7. Let's take a closer look:

Ex. 10: Charlie Parker, "Ko Ko" (m. 48)



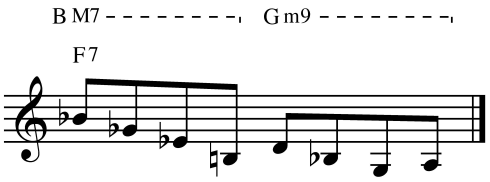
Try listening to these eight notes out of context (Ex. 10). They sound pretty "outside," don't they? Now notice how remarkably tonal and "inside" his line sounds in context (Ex. 9). This is largely because Parker chooses to govern his melody with tonal bookends. He demonstrates full creative control, beginning with a direct match to Cmin7 and ultimately returns to tonal consonance by resolving to Bbmaj7.

What is particularly fascinating here is that Parker appears to defy fundamentals of music theory with nearly every note he plays over the F7. Considering Charlie Parker

was a founding father of the bebop language, this example forces us all to take notice. What exactly was he envisioning here?

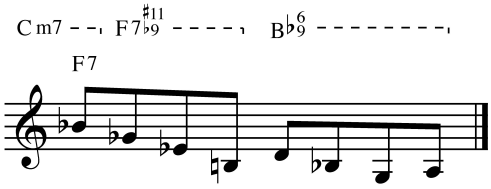
Was he thinking this? (Ex.11a):

Ex. 11a: Analysis 1, Charlie Parker, "Ko Ko" (m. 48)



Or maybe he was thinking this (Ex. 11b):

Ex. 11b: Analysis 2, Charlie Parker, "Ko Ko" (m. 48)



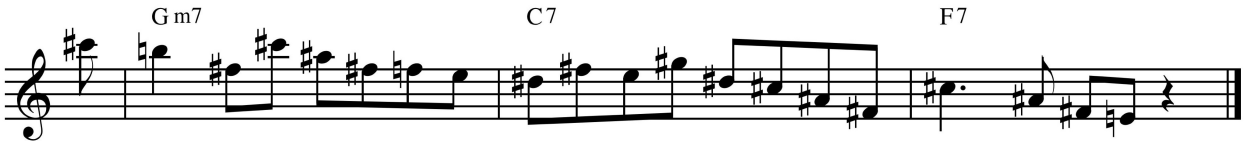
We'll never know what Parker was really thinking when he played that particular measure. But we do know that he was considering his melodic line first and foremost. He faced a world of creative possibilities when constructing his melody. He was not limited by the chord movement; he was owning his line. The end result is a phrase that is inspired, unpredictable, and perhaps also a bit dangerous!

Charlie Parker explained his approach: "I realized by using the high notes of the chords as a melodic line, and by the right harmonic progression, I could play what I heard inside me." (1991, *Masters of Jazz*). There is certainly evidence for his claim of using the "high notes of the chords", but this may not encapsulate Parker's method entirely. After all, at times, Parker navigated harmonies by staying quite tonally grounded (see his solo entrance on "Now's The Time", Ex. 3). However, as the "Ko Ko" example illustrates, he did not shy away from the adventure of implying other harmonies, many of which derive from upper extensions of chords.

Case study

John Coltrane's solo on "Chasin' The Trane" (12-bar Blues in F)

Ex. 12: John Coltrane, "Chasin' The Trane" (mm. 9-11)

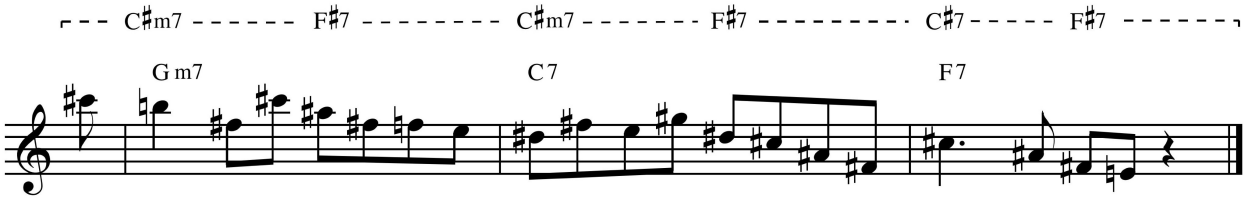


John Coltrane also used *hidden changes*. Many of these lines took the music to places that sounded much more “outside” than Parker’s “Ko Ko” line. Check out the line Coltrane played on “Chasin’ The Trane,” a 12-bar blues in F (Ex. 12). This line covers measures 9-11 of the 12-bar form, moving through a II-V-I progression. The harmonies implied in each measure remain outside of the governing II-V-I harmony.

One analysis of superimposed harmonies reveals the use of a tritone substitution (C#min7 resolving to F#7) (Ex. 13a). With no tonal bookends present, as there were in Charlie Parker’s “Ko Ko” line, the line maintains an “outside” sound until the end. Coltrane made the artistic choice to direct his line in such a manner, ending his phrase at a point of tension.

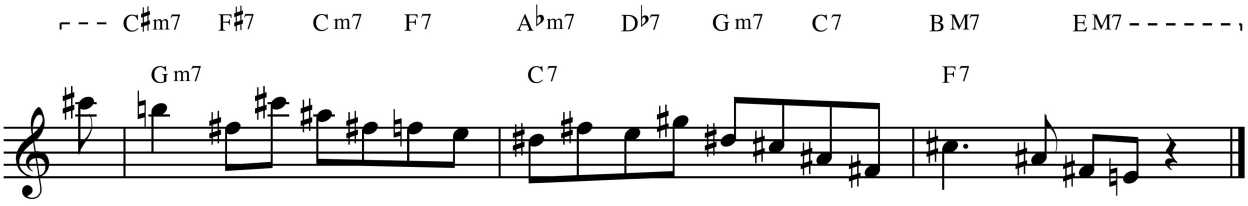
So, why does Coltrane’s line still sound “good”? It may be because he is so deliberate in defining his hidden changes. For example, he ends this phrase exactly on an F#7 arpeggio. This occurs unambiguously in measure 11, at the end of the blues chorus, a point in the form where tension often mounts naturally. He also continues his thought with his next chorus (not excerpted here), offering some closure with a clear return to the F tonic.

Ex. 13a: Analysis 1, John Coltrane, “Chasin’ The Trane” (mm 9-11)



The above analysis is only conjecture. Labeling hidden changes has its pitfalls, since we can really only guess what the performer was intending. Could it be that Coltrane was really implying this chord progression (Ex. 13b)?:

Ex. 13b: Analysis 2, John Coltrane, “Chasin’ The Trane” (mm 9-11)

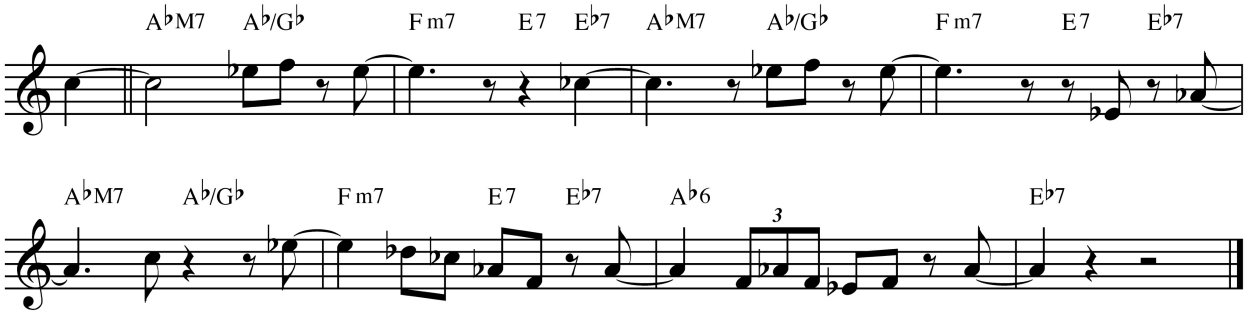


Again, we may never know, but just like Parker, Coltrane manipulated the composition to serve his improvisational line, allowing his creative impulse to shine.

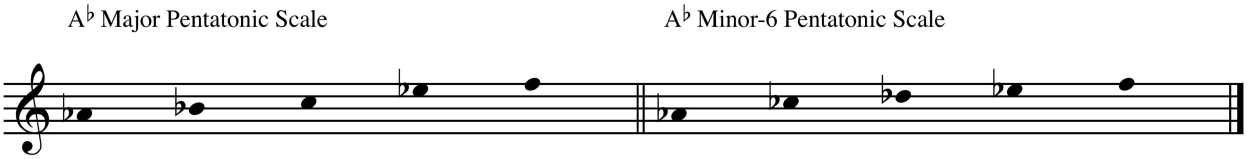
Case study
Illinois Jacquet's solo on "Flying Home"

Illinois Jacquet's solo on "Flying Home" (Ex. 14) takes the concept of chord superimposition in a radically different direction. "Flying Home" favors quick harmonic movement, with chords usually moving every 2 beats. Rather than making an effort to outline the chord progression in minute detail, Jacquet simplifies his melodic role over "Flying Home." Jacquet keeps to a general key center, using notes that stem only from parent tonic major and minor pentatonic scales (Ex. 15). In this case study, the hidden changes are AbM6 and Abm6 chords (Ex. 16).

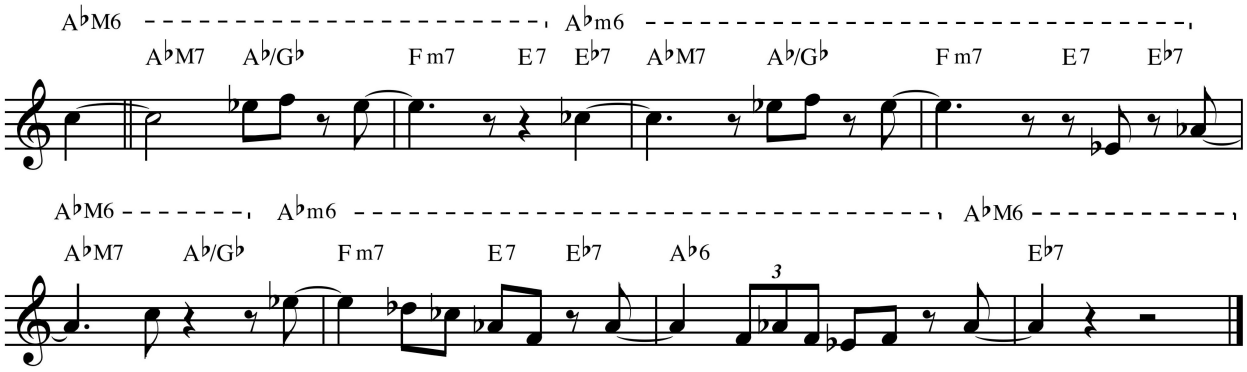
Ex. 14: Illinois Jacquet, "Flying Home" (mm. 1-8)



Ex. 15: A-flat Major and Minor-6 Pentatonic Scales



Ex. 16: Analysis, Illinois Jacquet, "Flying Home" (mm. 1-8)



The above examples only present the tip of the iceberg. Like “coloring inside the lines,” the study and application of hidden changes is complex and deep. It requires a firm understanding of voice-leading and chord extensions, along with developing greater insight into music composition and structural architecture.

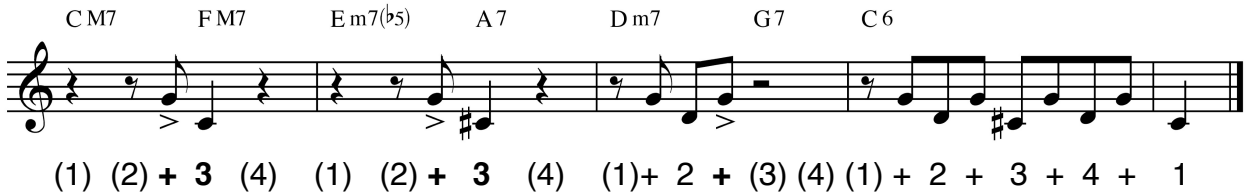
Dimension 3 - “Communicate and elevate”

The art of jazz stems from communication with others. With dimension 3, in which you “communicate and elevate,” you are now making artistic choices that impact the collective performance of the ensemble. By listening and interacting deeply with your bandmates, you can elevate your performance to new heights. This notion can be summarized by that classic line, where the bandleader stops the band and says, “OK, that was alright, but now *do it once more with feeling*!” Sonny Rollins and Max Roach communicated masterfully with each other, as is seen in this next case study.

Case study

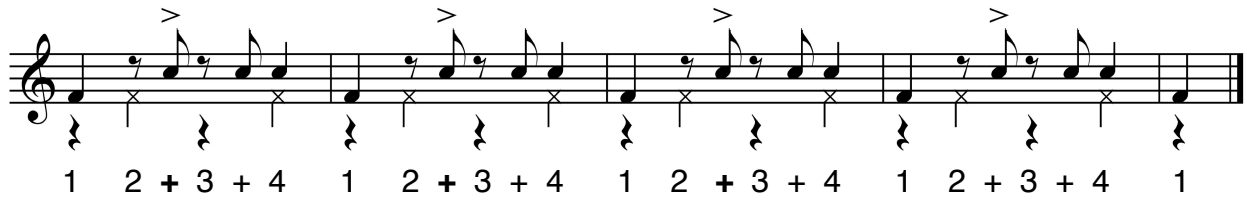
Sonny Rollins’ solo on “St. Thomas”

Ex. 17: Sonny Rollins, “St. Thomas” (mm. 1-5)



Sonny Rollins, in the opening line of his tenor sax solo on “St. Thomas” (Ex. 17), repeatedly accents the upbeat (the “and”) of beat 2 in each measure. Now check out the context of this performance: The whole piece opens with a solo groove established by the drummer Max Roach, who plays a tom-tom pattern emphasizing the same upbeat (Ex. 18).

Ex. 18: Max Roach, “St. Thomas” (mm. 1-5, drum intro)



By the time Rollins begins his solo, it sounds as if he has picked the tom-tom pattern up from Roach—in the fashion of a relay runner grabbing a baton—just as the pattern has

faded away from the actual drum kit. Would Rollins have played this rhythm if he weren't entirely engaged with Roach's drumming? Ultimately, the music that improvisers make can be greatly influenced by what is played in the moment throughout an ensemble. Without this level of communication, a performance might rarely elevate into anything meaningful and memorable. Can you think of other great performances where you can hear and feel this involved dialogue?

Conclusion - "Awareness and adaptation"

These three dimensions address a big and rich picture. Each can involve more than a lifetime of study and practice. The pursuance of all three will lead to lasting success in jazz improvisation. Coloring inside the lines (dimension 1) will help with precision and fluency. Owning your line (dimension 2) will help you break free of the constraints of the written chord progression. Perhaps most significantly, neither of these two will matter much if you fail to communicate and thusly elevate (dimension 3).

The historical examples presented have helped illustrate how performers have approached each step, but significant questions remain:

- Can a player begin to color outside the lines (dimension 2) before learning to color inside the lines (dimension 1)?
- Is it really possible to learn three approaches simultaneously, or is this really meant to be a sequential process?

A player first should get familiar with a single chord and scale (dimension 1). However, even in the beginning stages, the player can imply hidden changes (dimension 2) and play it all with feeling while listening and reacting to his bandmates (dimension 3).

Can a beginner take the Dmin13 chord on "So What" and immediately learn to imply over it a C major triad? Yes. That approach is not only feasible, it is also necessary to understanding how to solo over a chord progression like "So What." On the other hand, can a beginner solo in Coltrane's manner over "Chasin' The Train," implying chromatic hidden harmonies at a quick tempo? Most likely not. And that's OK. Even the more advanced player would not be able to carve a solo line like Coltrane's until he has explored more of his options while coloring inside the lines on an up-tempo 12-bar blues.

Fortunately, there is evermore room for growth within each of these three dimensions. It is wise to build a step-by-step road map, either on your own or preferably with a trusted mentor, but to set an entirely dogmatic path would be short-sighted. Along the way, questions will arise and the map may change a bit, depending on a person's aptitude and specific interests. That's an expected and valuable part of the process, and wonderment will abound along the way. The jazz path might be elusive, but the journey itself can be spectacular.

DISCOGRAPHY

Louis Armstrong, "St. Louis Blues"
Various Artists. The Best Of Ken Burns Jazz (Columbia/Legacy, ASIN B000050HVJ).

Charlie Parker, "Now's The Time"
Charlie Parker. 1945-1953 (Giants of Jazz, ASIN B0000060Q4).

Miles Davis, "So What"
Miles Davis. Kind Of Blue [Original Recording Remastered] (Sony, ASIN B000002ADT).

Charlie Parker, "Ko Ko"
Charlie Parker. The Complete Savoy & Dial Master Takes (Savoy, ASIN B00006H6A6).

John Coltrane, "Chasin' The Trane"
John Coltrane. The Best of John Coltrane (Pablo, ASIN B000000XMN).

Illinois Jacquet, "Flying Home"
Various Artists. Priceless Jazz: Sampler 5 (Verve, ASIN B00000IGUF).

Sonny Rollins, "St. Thomas"
Sonny Rollins. Saxophone Colossus (Prestige, ASIN B000EGDAI4).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arnaud, Gérald, and Jacques Chesnel. *Masters of Jazz*. Chambers Encyclopedic Guides. Translated by Louis Marcellin-Rice. Edinburgh: Chambers, 1991. 248 pp.

About the Author: Javier Arau is the founder and director of New York Jazz Academy, a widely recognized NYC music school. He also leads the Javier Arau Jazz Orchestra, is an active multimedia composer, an author of works on music theory and improvisation, and an artist-endorser of Virtuoso Saxophones. Arau has performed as saxophone soloist at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, and has been featured in The New York Times, DownBeat Magazine, and Saxophone Journal. His compositions have received awards from ASCAP, BMI, DownBeat Magazine, and IAJE and are published by UNC Jazz Press and Dorn Publications. He earned degrees from New England Conservatory and Lawrence University. Personal mentors have included Dizzy Gillespie, Dave Brubeck, Joe Henderson, George Garzone, George Russell, Jerry Bergonzi, and Bob Brookmeyer.

About Anatomy of a Melody: A Jazz Improv Primer: With his forth-coming book, Anatomy of a Melody: A Jazz Improv Primer, Javier Arau sets out to unlock the mystery of jazz improvisation by addressing creative elements of melody, harmony, rhythm, and form. Supportive historical examples are used throughout the volume, and material covers both fundamentals and more advanced concepts in jazz styles. Intended to be a "how-to" primer in improv, the reader can apply the insights gained from this study to further the pursuit of jazz mastery.