

ETUDE TO IMPROV

RANDY HUNTER

WHY ETUDE?

BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE JAZZ IMPROVISER REQUIRES DEVELOPING THE TECHNICAL SKILLS, WORKING KNOWLEDGE OF HARMONY, AND CREATIVE ABILITY NEEDED TO SIMULTANEOUSLY COMPOSE AND PERFORM. WRITING AN ETUDE, OR MUSICAL STUDY, AFFORDS THE STUDENT AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHAPE A SIMULATED IMPROVISATION USING HARMONIC AND TECHNICAL CONCEPTS THAT ARE BEING EXPLORED IN OTHER ASPECTS OF PRACTICE.

FIRST:

WHEN WRITING AN ETUDE, THE OBJECTIVE IS NOT NECESSARILY TO COMPOSE A WOULD-BE SOLO, BUT TO EXERCISE YOUR CREATIVITY IN THE USE OF SPECIFIC HARMONIC AND TECHNICAL DEVICES WITHIN A GIVEN CONTEXT. THEREFORE, THE FIRST STEP IS TO ESTABLISH A MUSICAL CANVASS AND PALETTE, OR IN OTHER WORDS, CHOOSE A CHORD PROGRESSION AND DETERMINE THE SCALES, RHYTHMS, AND ANY OTHER DEVICES YOU WISH TO IMPLEMENT.

WE WILL USE THE 32-BAR AABA CHORD PROGRESSION SHOWN BELOW, FROM A WELL-KNOWN STANDARD TUNE, AS A CANVASS FOR AN EXAMPLE ETUDE. FOR YOUR ETUDE, CHOOSE A BASIC SET OF CHORD CHANGES FROM A STANDARD TUNE. IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU HAVE A PLAY-ALONG TRACK TO USE FOR PRACTICE. BE CERTAIN TO CHOOSE A PROGRESSION THAT LENDS ITSELF TO THE IDEAS YOU WISH TO DEVELOP. A SUGGESTION FOR YOUR FIRST ETUDE WOULD BE TO LOOK FOR A 32-BAR SET OF CHANGES THAT CONTAIN A NUMBER OF BASIC II-V-I PROGRESSIONS.

A

D_{MAJ7} D_{M7} G⁷ C_{MAJ7} C_{M7} F⁷ B_bMAJ⁷ E_{M7}(^b9) A⁷(^b9) D_{MAJ7} B_{M7} E_{M7} A⁷

A

D_{MAJ7} D_{M7} G⁷ C_{MAJ7} C_{M7} F⁷ B_bMAJ⁷ E_{M7}(^b9) A⁷(^b9) D_{MAJ7}

B

E_{M7} A⁷ D_{MAJ7} B_M E_{M7} A⁷ E_bM⁷ A^b7 E_{M7} A⁷

A

D_{MAJ7} D_{M7} G⁷ C_{MAJ7} C_{M7} F⁷ B_bMAJ⁷ E_{M7}(^b9) A⁷(^b9) D

THE PALETTE FOR OUR EXAMPLE WILL INCLUDE THE BASIC SCALES USED TO CONSTRUCT THE CHORDS: M7=DORIAN, 7=MIXOLYDIAN, MAJ7=MAJOR, M7(^b9)=LOCRIAN, 7(^b9)=DIMINISHED SCALE. WE WILL ALSO INCORPORATE A NUMBER OF CHROMATIC BEBOP DEVICES IN OUR STUDY, INCLUDING PASSING TONES, AUXILIARY TONES, AND ENCLOSURES. THESE WILL BE IDENTIFIED AS WE PROCEED. YOUR TONAL PALETTE MAY INCORPORATE ANY HARMONIC COMPONENTS YOU DESIRE.

RHYTHMIC ELEMENTS IN OUR EXAMPLE WILL INCLUDE HALF, QUARTER, AND EIGHTH NOTES, AS WELL AS TRIPLETS. YOU MAY WISH TO INCLUDE ADDITIONAL RHYTHMIC COMPONENTS.

MOVING AHEAD:

GET TO KNOW THE TUNE AND CHORD CHANGES YOU ARE GOING TO BE WORKING WITH BY PLAYING THEM REPEATEDLY. MEMORIZE THE MELODY OF THE SONG, AND LEARN THE SCALES AND ARPEGGIOS THAT GO WITH EACH CHORD.

LEARN TONES THAT ARE COMMON TO ADJACENT CHORDS. LOOK FOR CHROMATIC LINES THAT DESCEND OR ASCEND THROUGH THE CHORD CHANGES IN LEADING TONE FASHION. THIS KNOWLEDGE IS VALUABLE IN CONSTRUCTING INTERESTING MELODIC LINES THAT DEMONSTRATE OR "OUTLINE" THE CHORD PROGRESSION.

THE EXCERPT BELOW FROM OUR EXAMPLE PROGRESSION SHOWS A LEADING TONE LINE WITH THE TONES NUMBERED ACCORDING TO THEIR SCALE/CHORD POSITION.

NOTE: LEADING TONE LINES LIKE THE ONE ABOVE ARE COMMONLY REFERRED TO AS A "GUIDE TONE" LINES, BECAUSE THIRDS AND SEVENTHS ARE OFTEN CENTRAL TO THE HARMONIC MOVEMENT. IN OTHER WORDS, THEY GUIDE THE HARMONY.

COMPOSING:

AT THIS POINT, BEGIN SEARCHING FOR A MELODIC STATEMENT TO USE AS AN OPENING THEME. THIS STATEMENT SHOULD BE A SHORT AND PREFERABLY SINGABLE PHRASE. MAKE IT SOMEWHAT CONCISE, SO THAT IT CAN BE DEVELOPED IN THE COMING PHRASES, AND POSSIBLY RETURNED TO FOR LATER DEVELOPMENT IN THE ETUDE.

IN THE EXAMPLE TO THE RIGHT, THE OPENING PHRASE BEGINS ON THE 3RD OF THE D MAJOR CHORD AND CONCLUDES ON THE THIRD OF THE D MINOR CHORD. NOTICE HOW THIS PHRASE EMPHASIZES GUIDE TONES MENTIONED IN THE PREVIOUS EXAMPLE.

THE NEXT STEP WILL BE TO CREATE A PHRASE OR "LICK" THAT EITHER DEVELOPS THE OPENING STATEMENT, OR CONTINUES THE MUSICAL JOURNEY IN A LOGICAL MANNER.

ONE MANNER OF DEVELOPING AN IDEA IS BY SEQUENCING, OR REPEATING, A HARMONIC OR RHYTHMIC IDEA THREE OR MORE TIMES. THE SEQUENCE MAY BE REPEATED IN WHOLE OR IN PART, AND MAY INCORPORATE VARIATIONS.

THE EXAMPLE BELOW INCORPORATES A THREE NOTE SEQUENCE BEGINNING WITH THE TONES D-E-F. THE SEQUENCE IS CONTINUED LEADING INTO THE DM7 CHORD, AND FINALLY THE CMAT7 CHORD.

FOLLOWING THE SEQUENCE, A CHROMATIC PASSING TONE* (D^b) FACILITATES THE TRANSITION FROM CM⁷ TO F⁷. THIS IS FOLLOWED BY A TRIPLET THAT ANTICIPATES THE B^bMA⁷ CHORD AND THE CONCLUSION OF THE OPENING STATEMENT.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO KEEP PHRASING IN MIND. TAKE CARE TO LET YOUR STATEMENTS BREATHE, AVOIDING RUN-ON MUSICAL SENTENCES. IN THE EXAMPLE ABOVE, NOTICE THE LENGTHY REST SEPARATING THE OPENING STATEMENT AND THE PHRASE THAT ANTICIPATES THE SECOND "A" SECTION (BELOW).

AT THIS POINT, CONTINUE DEVELOPING THE ETUDE BY CREATING LINES THAT EXPRESS THE DESIRED CONCEPTS. EACH PHRASE NEED NOT INCLUDE EVERY ELEMENT CONTAINED IN YOUR HARMONIC AND RHYTHMIC PALETTES. THE MAJOR COMPONENTS, HOWEVER, SHOULD BE INCORPORATED WITH A BALANCED FREQUENCY.

NOTICE BY LOOKING AT THE LINES FROM THE EXAMPLE ABOVE, AND AS IT CONTINUES ON THE NEXT PAGE, THAT THE SCALES, CHROMATIC COMPONENTS, AND RHYTHMS CONTAINED ON THE EXAMPLE PALETTE FROM PAGE 1 ARE INCORPORATED WITH CONSISTENCY.

*CHROMATIC PASSING TONES ARE IDENTIFIED WITH THE MARKING "CH." CHROMATIC ENCLOSURES ARE IDENTIFIED WITH THE MARKING "ENC." AUXILIARY TONES (CHROMATIC NOTES PLACED EITHER A HALF-STEP ABOVE OR BELOW CHORD/SCALE TONES THAT DO NOT SERVE AS PASSING TONES OR COMPONENTS OF ENCLOSURES) ARE MARKED WITH "A."

NOTICE IN THE LINE ABOVE THAT THE LOCRIAN SCALE ANTICIPATES THE $E_m7(b5)$ CHORD, EVOLVES INTO A DIMINISHED SCALE ON THE $A7(b9)$, THEN AS IT APPROACHES IT'S DESTINATION, THE $DMA7$, IT RESOLVES AS A MAJOR SCALE. AS YOU CREATE LINES, LOOK FOR WAYS TO CONNECT CHORDS/SCALES THAT MIGHT NOT COME TO YOU IN NORMAL PRACTICE SITUATIONS.

CONTINUE TO THINK ABOUT PHRASING AS YOU COMPOSE. PLAY YOUR ETUDE FROM THE START EACH TIME YOU WRITE A NEW PHRASE, MAKING SURE THE LINES WORK TOGETHER IN A LOGICAL FASHION.

IF YOUR CHANGES HAVE A BRIDGE, ONE TRICK THAT CAN HELP TIE YOUR IDEAS TOGETHER, IS TO RECAP YOUR OPENING THEME, WITH A VARIATION, AT THE ONSET OF THE LAST "A" SECTION. REPETITION CAN HELP BUILD STRUCTURE IN A COMPOSITION OR IMPROVISED SOLO, GIVING THE LISTENER SOMETHING TO GRASP.

ENDING:

ALLOW YOUR ETUDE TO REACH SOME FORM OF CONCLUSION. THIS DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN ENDING ON THE ROOT OR IN A PREDICTABLE MANNER. YOUR STUDY MAY END ON THE LAST MEASURE OF THE FORM, OR THE FIRST MEASURE OF A HYPOTHETICAL SUBSEQUENT CHORUS. REMEMBER, THIS STUDY IS WRITTEN IN AN IMPROVISED STYLE, AND IMPROVISATIONS DON'T ALWAYS END ON BEAT FOUR WITH A SHORT NOTE.