



Basic Improvisation 101

Improvisation can be scary, but the fun part is you can never be wrong! There are many different styles of improvisation in jazz and you shouldn't feel pressure to sound a certain way. Here is a break down of some different styles and some practice suggestions. There is no one way to learn how to improvise and you can create your own style as you continue to play. As always, listening is your best friend and will help train your ear.

Theory

The purpose of theory is to build up your vocabulary. Similar to playing music that is written out, you have learned how to look at a piece of music and translate it to your instrument. When playing jazz, a lot of music is not completely written out or is learned by ear, so the more theory you can learn the easier it will be for you to develop a jazz vocabulary to play. The following information is just to get you started. If you have any questions, concerns, or comments don't hesitate to reach out epjazzgirls@gmail.com

Chord Construction:

Triads are the most basic chord construction. Triads consist of three notes stacked on top of each other. In classical Western music, most of the harmony is created using triads. Think Bach chorales, *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, and *Mary Had a Little Lamb*.

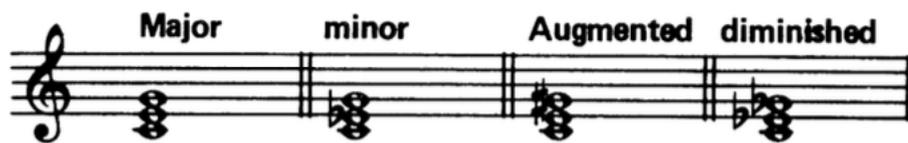
There are four basic types of triads: major, minor, augmented and diminished.

Major is constructed by a major 3rd, then minor 3rd

Minor is constructed by a minor 3rd, then a major 3rd

Augmented is constructed by a major 3rd, then a major 3rd

Diminished is constructed by a minor 3rd, then a minor 3rd



In jazz, most harmony is created using seventh chords. Seventh chords are four notes stacked on top of each other, usually a triad with an added seventh, hence seventh chord. The added seventh means the 7th scale degree. Example, in a C major scale, B is the 7th. A C major triad would be C, E, G. To make it a seventh you would add B - C, E, G, B.

There are five types of 7th chords: major, dominant, minor, half-diminished, and diminished.

Major 7th is constructed by a major 3rd, minor 3rd, major 3rd

Dominant 7th is constructed by a major 3rd, minor 3rd, minor 3rd

Minor 7th is constructed by a minor 3rd, major 3rd, minor 3rd

Half-Diminished is constructed by a minor 3rd, minor 3rd, major 3rd

Diminished is constructed by a minor 3rd, minor 3rd, minor 3rd



In order to identify chords, there are certain symbols in jazz music. Unfortunately, there is no universal symbol for each chord type, but here are some of the more common ones.

Major 7 th	C Maj7	CM7, Cma7, CΔ, C7
Dominant 7 th	C7	C ^b 7
Minor 7 th	C min7	Cm7, Cmi7, C-7
Half Diminished	C min7 ^b 5	C ^ø
Diminished 7 th	C dim 7	C ^o 7, Cd7

Scales to Learn

Scales, boring I know. But in jazz if you learn a certain set of scales you can better understand how to improvise more smoothly, and recognize how the melody relates to the chords quicker.

Your typical major scale can actually be turned into 7 different scales, just by changing where you start.

A C major scale starting on C is called Ionian – C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C

A C major scale starting on D is called Dorian – D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D

These weird Ionian, Dorian scales are called Modes. There are seven total Modes, because there are 7 notes in a scale. The order of the Modes is: Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian, Locrian.

The image shows seven musical staves, each representing a mode of the C major scale. The notes are written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The modes are: C Ionian (C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C), C Dorian (D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D), C Phrygian (D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D), C Lydian (E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E), C Mixolydian (F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F), C Aeolian (G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G), and C Locrian (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A).

You can build a seventh chord on each Mode as well. Check out what that looks like below:

The image shows seven musical staves, each representing a seventh chord built on a scale degree. The chords are: C Maj7, D min7, E min7, F Maj7, G7, A min7, and B min7^b5.

As you can see, by building a seventh chord on each scale degree, you get a different seventh chord. For example, on C you get a major seventh and on D a minor seventh. Here's a chart to help you out.

Scale Degree	Name of Mode	Quality of 7 th Chord
1	Ionian	Major
2	Dorian	Minor
3	Phrygian	Minor
4	Lydian	Major
5	Mixolydian	Dominant
6	Aeolian	Minor
7	Locrian	Diminished

The other popular scale in jazz is the Harmonic Minor scale. This is one of the regular old traditional minor scales with a flat 3, flat 6, and natural 7. The harmonic minor scale also has Modes. These don't have weird names and instead are just numbered. Yay!

You can also build seventh chords on each Harmonic Minor Mode. These are more common when playing in a minor key.

Scale Degree	Name of Mode	Quality of 7 th Chord
1	Harmonic Minor	Minor, natural 7 th
2	2 nd Mode of Harmonic Minor	Half-diminished
3	3 rd Mode of Harmonic Minor	Major, #5
4	4 th Mode of Harmonic Minor	Minor
5	5 th Mode of Harmonic Minor	Dominant (b9, b13)
6	6 th Mode Harmonic Minor	Major (#11)
7	7 th Mode Harmonic Minor	Diminished

Voice Leading

Voice leading in jazz mostly refers to improvisation. When you voice lead, you are connecting notes as the harmony changes. Good voice leading generally means that your note lines are smooth.

In order to see how the harmony moves, write out the 3rd and 7th for each chord change. The 3rd and 7th refers to the 3rd and 7th note in the scale or the second and fourth note in a seventh chord. These notes are called Guide Tones. Example: in a C major 7th chord, the 3rd is E and the 7th is B. Guide Tones will allow you to see smooth lines, meaning the least amount of movement to go from chord to chord. By soloing using Guide Tone lines you can create a strong framework that will outline the harmony well.

Voice leading can create forward motion depending on what lines you choose. If you choose to play a line that ascends, it will build intensity in your solo. If you play one note, a common tone between chords, the whole time it creates tension and leaves the listener wondering what you play next!

Suggested Transcriptions

Transcribing means, writing out what another person plays. Transcribing solos is a great way to get patterns and motives under your fingers and to figure out what your favorite players are doing! When transcribing, slow the solo down. There are many online apps like the Amazing Slower Downer that will slow down the speed of a song so that you can better hear. Notate everything on blank sheet paper so you can visually see what's happening as well.

Practice along with your transcription and the recording. By playing with the recording you will be able to match feel and style that can't always be notated. Transcribing can be a daunting task if it's your first time. Here are some suggested solos to get you started. You can also transcribe pop songs, your favorite metal tune or anything that you want to learn how to play. Try to transcribe a variety of instruments and voices too! Your ears will open up to different sounds and you'll learn different patterns. The goal is to train your ears to hear melodies and be able to play them on your instrument.

Miles Davis, *Bye Bye Blackbird* on Round About Midnight album

Bud Powell, *Celia* on Jazz Giant album

Carmen McRae, *Sunday* on Live at Sugar Hill album

Vertical Improvisation

Vertical improvisation refers to soloing that is based off of the chords. Think Charlie Parker playing *Confirmation*. You outline each chord change as it happens. There are generally more notes in vertical improvisation because you have to make sure that you highlight each chord change. Bebop is a specific style that utilizes vertical improvisation.

Check out these players:

Charlie Parker

Melissa Aldana

Horizontal Improvisation

Horizontal improvisation is the opposite of vertical. Instead of making every chord change, the solo spans a longer time, and creates a melody over many chord changes. Think Carla Bley playing her composition *Lawns*. You build a melody over several measures and maybe don't hit every chord change along the way. The goal is to build a melody with usually less notes that flows with the harmony. Basically like every John Mayer guitar solo ever.

Check out these players:

Carla Bley

Dexter Gordon

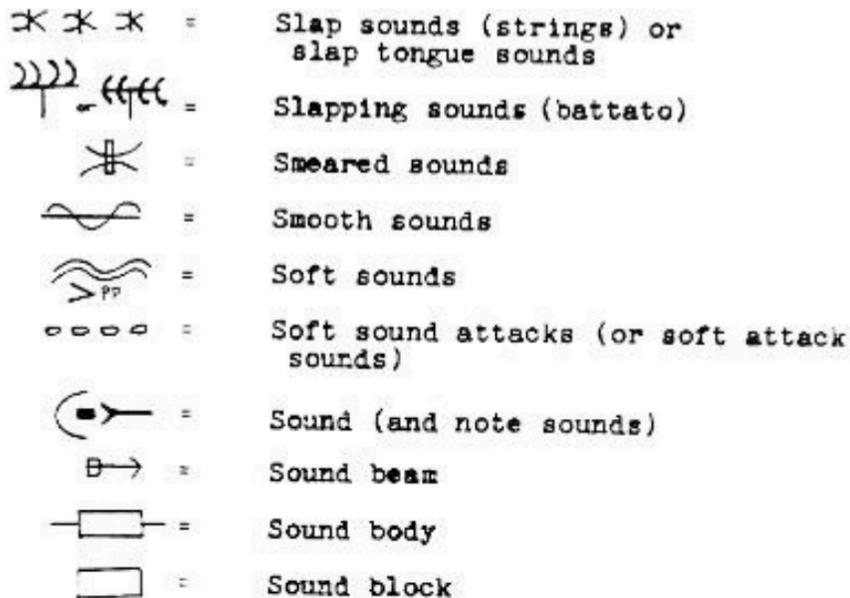
Free Improvisation

Free improvisation is another form of jazz improvisation and has several different ways to approach it. In free improvisation the key is to listen to the people you're playing with and react. Here is a brief overview of a few methodologies (aka ways to improvise freely).

Harmolodics – means harmony doesn't matter! Woohoo, but time still happens. You don't have to make the changes but you do have to try and create a solo that is representative of the melody. For example, if the melody is upbeat and heavily accented, you will want to improvise upbeat and accented lines (the notes just don't have to fit a harmony). Ornette Coleman created this methodology, check him out.

Unit Structures – no harmony or time. Unit structures is built off of a single phrase or idea. This idea then becomes the basis of your solo. It's like if a friend comes up to tell you about something they saw at lunch. What they saw at lunch becomes the center of the rest of your conversation. If you start to solo and play a three-note riff, you then have the freedom to develop that three-note riff any way you choose. Cecil Taylor created this methodology, check him out.

Tri-Axiom Theory – uses visual figures to tell improvisers what to play. The visuals are really ambiguous, so players have a lot of freedom in how they interpret the sounds. Anthony Braxton created this methodology, check out an example of his visuals below.



Practice Tips

How are you supposed to practice all this?? I know, this is a lot of information and the more you put it into practice the more sense it'll make. Here are some tips to get you practicing.

1. Sing your solo. Your voice and ear will often know what you want your solo to sound like. If you can sing it, you can play it. Start by singing what you want to play and then transcribe it to your instrument.

2. Write down your solo! Compose your solo out. Who says you can't write yourself an amazing solo and play it for the all-region auditions?? No one and you totally should if you feel nervous about improvising. All improvisation is, is composing in real time. So why not compose something out while you are honing your skills.

3. Practice playing scales, motives, and patterns over the chord changes. Make it not so boring by composing your own motives and patterns (aka licks). If you compose your own licks, and practice them over various chord changes, you will be practicing your own unique style!

4. Practice using the entire range of your instrument. The more you can improvise using your whole range, the easier it will be to access that range when you want it. Think of it this way. If you sat in a couch all day and never used your legs, if and when you wanted to run it would be pretty hard.

5. Invest in a practice application like iReal Pro or Jamey Aebersold play-a-longs. These applications will be your own rhythm section for any song, at any tempo you choose. You can solo with a whole band in the comfort of your own home! You can also find play-a-long tracks on YouTube to help you practice. These applications will help you practice soloing in real time and help you hear how your improvisation fits with chord changes.

6. Listen listen listen! Find what you like! You cannot like any of my suggestions at all, but find players that you enjoy hearing, figure out what they're playing, and practice it.

7. Get together with your friends and play. It is way to build confidence in an informal setting and hang out with your friends! Get some ice cream or some snacks and jam.

8. Solo with recordings. If you hear a song on the radio that you really love, play it at home and solo along with it. You could provide some sweet background horn parts to Ariana Grande or Drake.

Recommended Books

The Jazz Language, by Dan Haerle

The Jazz Piano Book, by Mark Levine