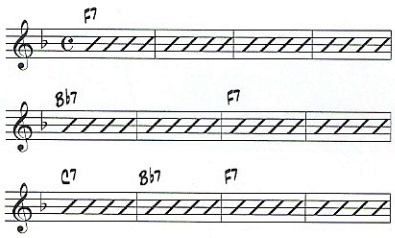
# From Chords and Melodies To Simple Jazz Solos

By Mark Nagy

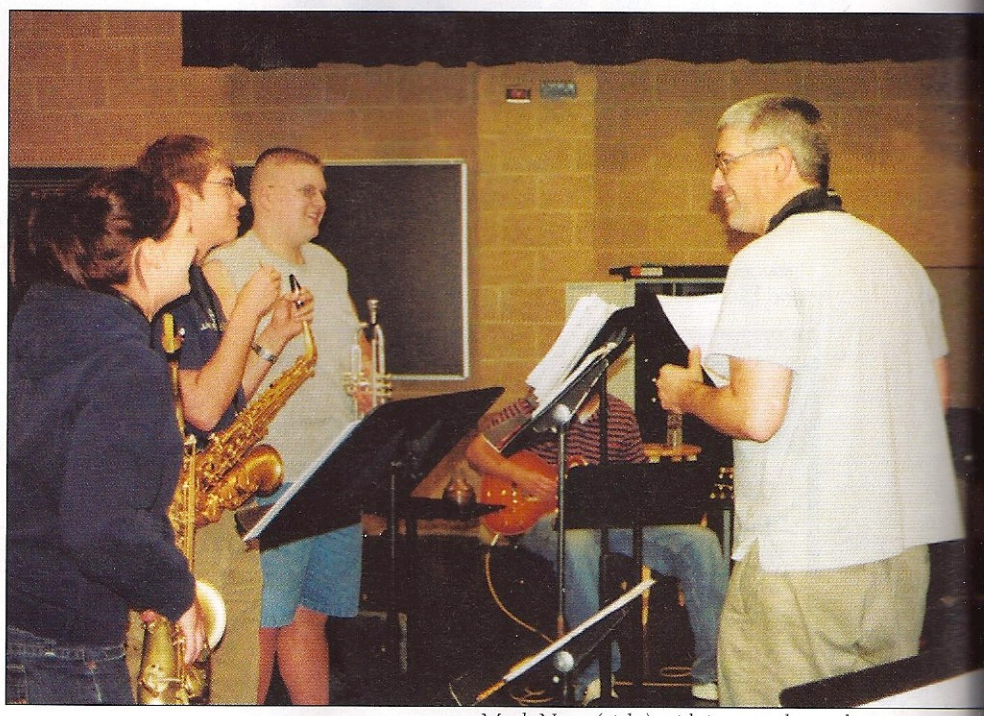
I begin by teaching jazz students to listen for chord changes in a recording of a blues standard called *Rock Me Baby*. It uses a 12-bar blues pattern and is played without harmonic embellishments. As students learn to identify chord changes, I chart the music on a chalkboard and point to the chords as the music plays.



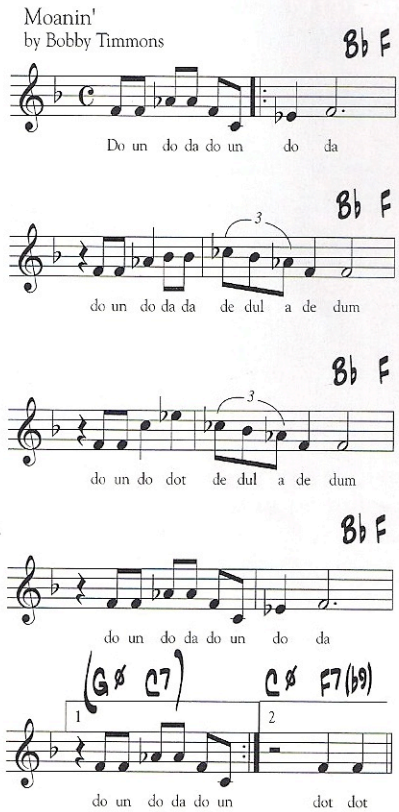

When students become proficient at identifying the chord changes in the music as the recording plays, I will try to distract them by talking over the music and asking a student to identify the next chord. It is important for students to concentrate on the chord progressions at all times. If they should be distracted by something, they have to become adept at finding their place on the basis of the chord changes.

After covering these basics, I give students another recording of a blues melody, which may not be a strict 12-bar blues work. Two of my favorites for this exercise are "Moanin'" by Bobby Timmons and "The Work Song" by Nat Adderley. The goal is for students to become comfortable singing the melody in the blues style. Later, when they start to improvise they will be able to concentrate on what they play because the rhythms and melody are familiar to them.

*Mark Nagy has been saxophone instructor and coordinator of the jazz combo program at Elgin (Illinois) Community College since 1990 and is an instructor for the Dos Claves Orchestra, a Latin-jazz big band for high school students at VanderCook. Nagy received bachelors and masters degrees from Northern Illinois University, where he studied with Steve Duke and Ron Carter.*



*Mark Nagy (right) with jazz combo students*

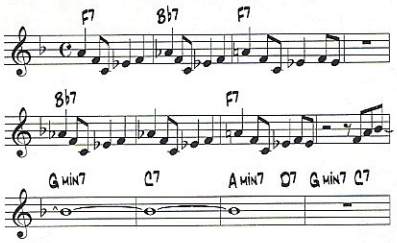



When students can sing the melody without the C.D., they are ready to learn to play it by ear. Even junior high students can do this, although on some passages it may be necessary to work through the notes one at a time. If some students struggle with this, it helps to place them near a piano and play pitches for them to match instead of telling them the note names.

At this point students are ready to improvise on the melody. I first will play a recording of a rhythm section, such as a Jamey Aebersold play-along recording to play with as they improvise. At this stage most improvised solos are close to the original melody but with a few different rhythms rather than an improvised melody. With students who are unsure of what to play it often helps to use the call and response approach to guide them along.

Another good chart for this is "Blues for Duane" by Freddie Hubbard. The chord changes shift between A♮ and A♭ in almost every measure.

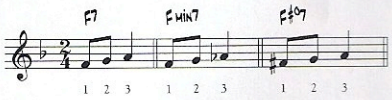
**Blues for Duane**



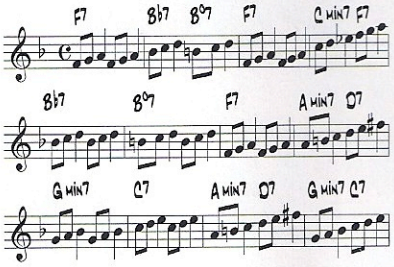

Although A♭ will sound acceptable on the F7 chords, experienced musicians will make a point of playing A♮ on the F7 chords and A♭ on the B♭7 chords when improvising and may feature these notes prominently in a solo. Charlie Parker's "Buzzy" and Sonny Rollins's "Tenor Madness" also use these shifting thirds and will make good practice material after "Blues for Duane" has been mastered. After students can play the melody from memory they should improvise and attempt to highlight the shift.

At this point I give a brief lesson in music theory to teach students about scale degrees. I write a scale on the board and write the number of the scale degree under it. Students play 1-3-5 in major, minor, and diminished in several keys, and then they play exercises with random numbers; after students understand 1-3-5 in F, it will be easy to figure out 3-5-7 in G. This theoretical understanding is crucial for improvisation.

After students are comfortable with naming chords after scale degrees I introduce a two-beat lick, in major, minor, and diminished form. I refer to this lick as a cell, using the analogy that just as cells are the building blocks of life, these short motives will become the building blocks of improvised phrases. The numbers under each note indicate scale degree.

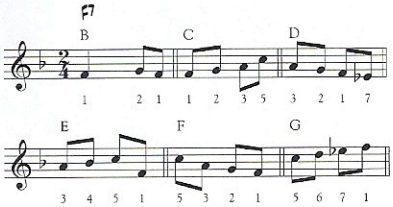



I have students play the cell over an embellished blues progression, repeating the pattern on measures with only one chord.




The scale degrees are written under the notes so students can transpose cells quickly; students can think of 1-2-3 in B♭ easier than to transpose on the fly.

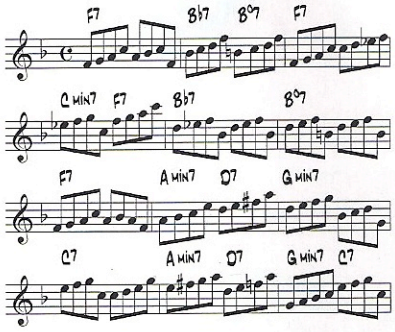
Some students will be able to play this with only the cell written once and the chord changes; others may need to write out the entire 12 measures. After students are familiar with this cell they learn several more patterns.



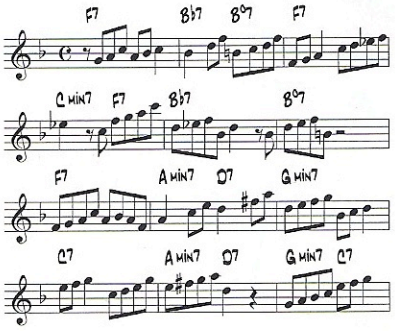

I introduce one cell at a time; after students play the chord progression with only cell A they learn it with only cell C. The next step is to alternate with only two cells; each measure consists of cell A for the first two beats and cell C for the last two. It will take students longer to get used to cells D-G because they start on a note other than the first scale degree.

Photos courtesy of Katie Haney-Rizvi

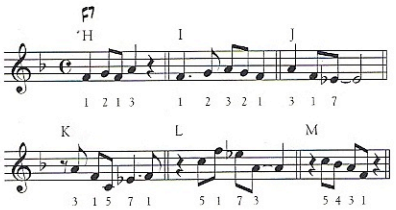
After students can play all these cells over the chord progression I give them the freedom to pick any three and mix them up over the chord progression, determining which cell comes next based on what might sound good. This is a difficult exercise for students to do, and it may be best for students to write out the entire 12-measure solo. Students who play this exercise without something written out tend to fall into a fixed pattern. This solo mixes cells C, E, and G:



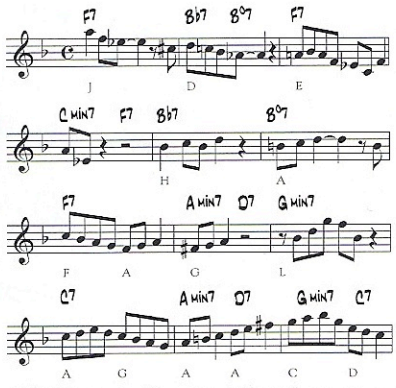

The next step is for students to edit the written solo by dropping one or more notes wherever the soloist thinks it is appropriate. The above line might be changed to this:




After students have mastered two-beat cells they learn four-beat cells. These cells include syncopated rhythms and rests, which make them more difficult than the two-beat ones. It is important that students understand that few phrases in any kind of music start with the first scale degree on beat one.




From this point the procedure with the four-beat cells is the same as it was with the two-beat cells, and the end result is for students to be able to combine all the cells into a melodic improvised solo.




Getting students to develop appropriate melodies is the aim when teaching improvisation. Saxophonist Sonny Rollins, pianist Thelonious Monk, and trumpet player Thad Jones were strong thematic improvisers, and their recordings make excellent listening material. □