

# My Harmonic Approach To Improvising Jazz

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## Introduction

I learned the generally accepted rules of jazz harmony mainly from attending Berklee College of Music. One of my teachers was Hal Crook, who wrote a book entitled "How to Improvise," published in 1991 by Advance Music. It is an excellent resource laying out the traditional rules of jazz harmony and other concepts. I highly recommend it.

From what I learned from Mr. Crook and others, I later derived my own system to solve certain issues that kept coming up in my improvising and comping. For a long time I limited myself to just playing chord tones. This helped me to learn how to play over changes and to hear the chord progressions in my improvisation. I eventually developed the approach outlined below:

- Eliminate “avoid notes” (i.e. non-harmonic tones) as an issue in my playing unless I went out of my way to insert them (for example, as a passing tone).
- Make the “best” notes available. Those are notes that define the function of the chord (3rds and 7ths) and supply tension and color (9ths, 11ths, and 13ths and their alterations).
- Limit the total number of scales I have to deal with. My palette turned out to be five in number, namely: the pentatonic scale, harmonic major scale (not to be confused with the harmonic minor scale), major scale, melodic minor scale, and diminished scale.
- Pre-determine the available notes for improvising over a given chord and chord sequence so that I could focus more on other musical aspects such as motivic development, phrasing, rhythm, dynamics, technique, and interaction with other players.
- Develop harmonic consistency and a unique style.

After tons of experimentation with different options, applying them in various ways, and listening to the results over many years, I have found that the following harmonic rules suit me best. They are all theoretically sound and respect tradition. They are not a radical departure to commonly used harmonic ideas, but they sound good to me. At least one

point of the rules, after all, is to guide the improviser to the ultimate (and subjective) goal of consistently sounding good.

### Chord Scales and Arpeggios

It is important to first analyze the key and function of the chord in the tune you are improvising over. The following chart shows many of the basic chords appearing in many jazz standards and my own original tunes, along with the chord scales that I play over them.

<u>Chord</u>	<u>Scale/Arpeggio To Use</u>	<u>Example</u>	<u>Explanation</u>
Imaj7	Play the pentatonic scale from 5th degree.	Cmaj7 chord in the key of C major – play G pentatonic.	G Pentatonic is made up of the notes G, A, B, D, E. These are the 5th, 13th, 7th, 9th, and 3rd in relation to the Cmaj7. The 3rd and 7th define the chord. The 9th and 13th add color. The note F, an "avoid note" (also known as a non-harmonic tone), is contained in the C major scale, but is not present here.
All non-tonic Maj7 chords	Play the lydian scale from root (same as major scale from 5th degree).	F Maj7 chord in the key of C major – play F lydian (same as C major.).	The F lydian scale is made up of the notes F, G, A, B, C, D, and E. These are Root, 9th, 3rd, #11th, 5th, 13th, and 7th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.
I7	Play the lydian b7 scale from the root. (Same as the melodic minor scale from the 5th degree.)	C7 chord in the key of C in a blues. Play G melodic minor.	The C lydian b7 scale is made up of the notes C, D, E, Gb, G, A, Bb. These are, respectively, the root, 9th, 3rd, #11 (a "blue" note), 5, 13, and b7 (another "blue" note, and a chord tone). The C blues scale, although it contains the b3 (Eb, another "blue" note), also contains an avoid note (F). The C Lydian b7 scale contains no avoid notes.

I Min7	Play the Dorian scale.	Cmin7 in the key of C minor – play C Dorian.	The C Dorian scale is made up of the notes C, D, Eb, F, G, A, Bb. (C Dorian has the same notes as the Bb Major scale.) There are no avoid notes.
I Min6	Play the melodic minor scale from the root.	Cmin6 in the key of C minor – play C Melodic Minor.	C Melodic Minor is made up of the notes C, D, Eb, F, G, A, B. This is a scale traditionally used over this chord and contains no avoid notes.
bII7	Play the lydian b7 scale from the root. (Same as the melodic minor scale from fifth degree.)	Db7 in the key of C major – play Ab melodic minor.	The scale of Ab melodic minor is made up of the notes Ab, Bb, Cb, Db, Eb, F, G. When played over the Db7 chord in the key of C, these notes comprise the 5th, 13th, b7th, Root, 9th, 3rd, and #11th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.
II Min7 (Not in a II-V progression)	Play the dorian scale from the root.	Dmin7 in the key of C major – play D dorian (same as C major)	The D dorian scale is made up of the notes D, E, F, G, A, B, C. When played over the Dmin7 chord in the key of C, these notes comprise the root, 9th, b3rd, 11th, 5th, 13th, and b7th. There are no avoid notes, assuming that the Dmin7 does not precede the G7 chord.

II <sup>+</sup> Min7 (in a II-V progression)	Play the pentatonic scale from 3 <sup>rd</sup> degree.	D <sup>+</sup> min7 in the key of C major – play F pentatonic	F pentatonic is made up of the notes F, G, A, C, D. When played over the D <sup>+</sup> min7 chord in the key of C, these notes comprise 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 11 <sup>th</sup> , 5 <sup>th</sup> , b7 <sup>th</sup> , and Root, respectively. The avoid note (B, the 13 <sup>th</sup> ), which is contained in the dorian mode usually used in this context, is not present here.
II7	Play the lydian b7 scale from the root. (Same as the melodic minor scale from fifth degree.)	D7 in the key of C major – play A melodic minor.	The scale of A melodic minor is made up of the notes A, B, C, D, E, F#, G#. When played over the D7 chord in the key of C, these notes comprise the 5 <sup>th</sup> , 13 <sup>th</sup> , b7 <sup>th</sup> , Root, 9 <sup>th</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> , and #11 <sup>th</sup> , respectively. There are no avoid notes.
bIII7	Play the lydian b7 scale from the root. (Same as the melodic minor scale from fifth degree.)	E <sup>b</sup> 7 in the key of C major – play B <sup>b</sup> melodic minor.	The scale of B <sup>b</sup> melodic minor is made up of the notes B <sup>b</sup> , C, D <sup>b</sup> , E <sup>b</sup> , F, G, and A. When played over the E <sup>b</sup> 7 chord in the key of C, these notes comprise the 5 <sup>th</sup> , 13 <sup>th</sup> , b7 <sup>th</sup> , Root, 9 <sup>th</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> , and #11 <sup>th</sup> , respectively. There are no avoid notes.
bIII <sup>+</sup> Min7	Play the dorian scale from the root.	E <sup>b</sup> min7 in the key of C major – play E <sup>b</sup> dorian (same as D <sup>b</sup> major).	This is a scale traditionally used over this chord and contains no avoid notes.
III <sup>+</sup> Min7	Play the pentatonic scale from the 3 <sup>rd</sup> degree.	E <sup>+</sup> min7 in the key of C major – play G pentatonic.	G pentatonic is made up of the notes G, A, B, D, E. When played over E <sup>+</sup> min7 in the key of C, these notes comprise minor 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 11 <sup>th</sup> , 5 <sup>th</sup> , b7 <sup>th</sup> , and root. The avoid note – F – contained in the traditionally used phrygian mode, is not present.

III7	Play the harmonic major scale from b6 degree.	E7 chord in the key of C major – play C harmonic major.	C harmonic major scale consists of C, D, E, F, G, Ab, B. When played over the E7 chord in the key of C major, these notes comprise the b13th, b7th, root, b9, #9, 3rd, and 5th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.
IVMaj7	Play the lydian scale from root (same as major scale from 5 <sup>th</sup> degree).	F Maj7 chord in the key of C major – play F lydian (same as C major).	This is a scale traditionally used over this chord and contains no avoid notes.
IVMin7	Play the dorian scale from the root.	Fmin7 in the key of C major – play F dorian (same as Eb major).	This is a scale traditionally used over this chord and contains no avoid notes.
IV7	Play the lydian b7 scale. (Same as the melodic minor scale from 5 <sup>th</sup> degree.)	F7 chord in the key of C major (also found in the blues) - Play C melodic minor.	The scale of C melodic minor is made up of the notes C, D, Eb, F, G, A, B. When played over the F7 chord in the key of C, these notes comprise the 5th, 13th, b7th, Root, 9th, 3rd, and #11th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.
bV7	Play the lydian b7 scale. (Same as the melodic minor scale from 5 <sup>th</sup> degree.)	Gb7 in the key of C major – play Db melodic minor.	The scale of Db melodic minor is made up of the notes Db, Eb, Fb, Gb, Ab, Bb, C. When played over the Gb7 chord in the key of C, these notes comprise the 5th, 13th, b7th, Root, 9th, 3rd, and #11th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.

V7 in major	Play the lydian b7 scale from the root. (Same as the melodic minor scale from the 5th degree.)	G7 chord in the key of C major - play D melodic minor.	The G lydian b7 scale is made up of the notes G, A, B, C#, D, E, F. Relative to the G7 chord, these notes are, respectively, the root, 9th, 3rd, #11 (a "blue" note), 5th, 13th, and b7 (another "blue" note, and a chord tone). The C Lydian b7 scale contains no avoid notes.
V7 in minor	Play the altered scale from the root (same as melodic minor scale up a half step from the root).	G7 chord in the key of C minor - play Ab melodic minor.	This is a scale traditionally used over this chord and contains no avoid notes.
Vmin7	Play the dorian scale from the root.	Gmin7 in the key of C major – play G dorian (same as F major).	This is a scale traditionally used over this chord and contains no avoid notes.
bVI7	Play the lydian b7 scale. (Same as the melodic minor scale from fifth degree.)	Ab7 in the key of C major – play Eb melodic minor.	The scale of Eb melodic minor is made up of the notes Eb, F, Gb, Ab, Bb, C, D. When played over the Ab7 chord in the key of C, these notes comprise the 5th, 13th, b7th, Root, 9th, 3rd, and #11th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.

VIMin7	Play the pentatonic scale from the minor 3 <sup>rd</sup> degree.	Amin7 chord in the key of C major - play C pentatonic.	C pentatonic is made up of the notes C, D, E, G, A. Relative to Amin7, these notes comprise the minor 3rd, 11th, 5th, b7th, and root. The avoid note F, contained in the commonly used Aeolian scale, is not present.
VI7	Play the diminished (1/2, w) scale from the root.	A7 in the key of C major - play A 1/2, w.	A 1/2, w contains the notes A, Bb, C, Db, Eb, E, Gb, G. When played over an A7 chord in the key of C major, these notes comprise the Root, b9th, #9th, 3rd, #11th, 5th, b13th, and b7th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.
bVII	Play the lydian b7 scale from the root. (Same as the melodic minor scale from fifth degree.)	Bb7 in the key of C major – play F melodic minor.	The scale of F melodic minor is made up of the notes F, G, Ab, Bb, C, D, E. When played over the Bb7 chord in the key of C, these notes comprise the 5th, 13th, b7th, Root, 9th, 3rd, and #11th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.
All Min7b5 chords.	Play locrian (natural 9) from the root (same as melodic minor from the b3 degree.)	Bmin7b5 in the key of C major - play D melodic minor.	B locrian (natural 9) contains the notes B, C#, D, E, F, G, A. When played over Bmin7b5, these notes comprise the root, natural 9th, 3rd, 11th, b13th, 7th. There are no avoid notes. <u>Exception:</u> IIMin7b5 in pure minor, just play chord tones, because the b9 is an avoid note.
VII7	Play harmonic major from b6 degree.	B7 in the key of C major. Play G harmonic major.	G harmonic major contains the notes G, A, B, C, D, Eb, F#. When played over B7, these notes comprise the b13th, b7th, root, b9th, #9th, 3rd, and 5th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.

All dominant7b9 and Dominant7#9 chords	Play the diminished 1/2, W scale.	G7b9 in the key of C major. Play G1/2, w.	G 1/2, W is made up of the notes G, Ab, Bb, B, Db, D, E, F. Played over a G7 chord, these notes comprise root, b9th, #9th, 3rd, #11th, 5th, 13th, and b7th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.
All altered chords	Play the altered scale (melodic minor scale raised a half-step).	C altered takes Db melodic minor.	Db melodic minor is made up of Db, Eb, Fb, Gb, Ab, Bb, C. When played over C altered, these notes comprise b9th, #9th, 3rd, #11th, b13th, b7th, and root. This is a scale traditionally used over this chord and contains no avoid notes.
All diminished chords	Play the diminished w, 1/2 scale.	C dim7 takes C diminished w, 1/2.	C diminished (w, 1/2) is made up of C, D, Eb, F, Gb, Ab, A, B. This is a scale traditionally used over this chord and contains no avoid notes.
Dom7sus4	Play the mixolydian scale from root (same as major scale from 4th degree).	D7sus4 takes D mixolydian (same as G major).	This is a scale traditionally used over this chord and contains no avoid notes.
All "sub V" chords (i.e. dominant 7 chords which resolve down a half step)	Play the lydian b7 scale from the root. (Same as melodic minor from 5th degree).	Ab7 chord which resolves to G7 takes Eb melodic minor scale.	This is a scale traditionally used over this chord and contains no avoid notes.

### Polychords

Polychords are extremely useful in composing interesting, modern jazz progressions. I define polychords as follows: a triad, with a note, other than a chord tone from that triad, in the bass. For example, C/D denotes a polychord consisting of a C triad with a D in the bass. On the other hand, a triad with a chord tone in the bass,

for example, C/G or C/E, is just an inversion, not a polychord. Normal harmonic rules apply to inversions.

The following are the polychords I use along with their corresponding chord scales. The list shows a C triad with each of the possible bass notes comprising a polychord. Of course, the polychords and chord scales can be transposed to any key.

<u>Polychord</u>	<u>Chord Scale</u>
C/B	G major
C/Bb	F major
C/A	G major
C/Ab	F melodic minor
C/Gb	G major
C/F	C major
C/Eb	C 1/2, W
C/D	G major
C/Db	C 1/2, W

### Comping

Comping is a type of improvising. I comp using the same notes I solo with. More specifically, I use 2, 3 and 4-note clusters derived from the scales and arpeggios as outlined above. For example, when the lead sheet says the chord to be played is Cmaj7 in the key of C, I comp using a 2, 3, or 4-note cluster from the G pentatonic scale. (Similarly, if I were soloing, I would use notes from the G pentatonic scale.)

Because both the soloing and the comping are based on the exact same scale or arpeggio, as outlined above, there tends to be a certain unity.

The clusters used in comping come from whatever sounds good based on trial and error. Some intervals are more dissonant than others. I try to generally stay away from minor 9th intervals. Outside of a duo situation, I utilize only the B, G, D, and high E strings in order to keep out of the way of most soloing instruments. Notes on the high E string must be played judiciously to avoid conflict with the soloist. Issues with lower interval limits are mostly avoided using this technique.

### Conclusion

The foregoing shows how **I** improvise, NOT how **to** improvise. The foregoing rules, while having a foundation in widely accepted harmonic theory, are not necessarily the “best” approach for every player. That’s one of the great things about jazz: different

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players can come up with very different – though equally valid – approaches to solving the myriad harmonic problems that present themselves. The foregoing summarizes my harmonic foundation, helping me to improvise in a manner that sounds good to my ear right now - a subjective standard indeed!

Feel free to contact me with constructive criticism or questions.

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