

My Harmonic Approach To Improvising Jazz

Tom Stewart

www.stewartjazz.com

(revised 2/16)

Introduction

The goals of my harmonic approach to improvising are to:

- 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. I use four scales: major, melodic minor, pentatonic, and diminished.
- 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.

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 ó 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"

<u>Chord</u>	<u>Scale/Arpeggio To Use</u>	<u>Example</u>	<u>Explanation</u>
			(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 ó 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.	C min7 in the key of C minor ó 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.	C min6 in the key of C minor ó 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 ó 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	Play the dorian scale from the root.	D min7 in the key of C major ó 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 D min7 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 D min7 does not precede the G7 chord.

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 ó 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 5th, 13th, b7th, Root, 9th, 3rd, and #11th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.
bIII7	Play the lydian b7 scale from the root. (Same as the melodic minor scale from fifth degree.)	Eb7 in the key of C major ó play Bb melodic minor.	The scale of Bb melodic minor is made up of the notes Bb, C, Db, Eb, F, G, and A. When played over the Eb7 chord in the key of C, these notes comprise the 5th, 13th, b7th, Root, 9th, 3rd, and #11th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.
bIIIMin7	Play the dorian scale from the root.	Ebmin7 in the key of C major ó play Eb dorian (same as Db major).	This is a scale traditionally used over this chord and contains no avoid notes.
IIIMin7	Play the pentatonic scale from the 3 rd degree.	Emin7 in the key of C major ó play G pentatonic.	G pentatonic is made up of the notes G, A, B, D, E. When played over Emin7 in the key of C, these notes comprise minor 3rd, 11th, 5th, b7th, and root. The avoid note ó F ó contained in the traditionally used phrygian mode, is not present.

III7	Play the altered scale.	E7 chord in the key of C major ó play E altered (same as F melodic minor)	The E altered scale consists of F, G, Ab, Bb, C, D, E. When played over the E7 chord in the key of C major, these notes comprise the B9, #9, 3 rd , b5th, b13th, b7th, respectively. There are no avoid notes.
IVMaj7	Play the lydian scale from root (same as major scale from 5 th degree).	F Maj7 chord in the key of C major ó 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 ó 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 th 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 th degree.)	Gb7 in the key of C major ó 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 ó 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 ó 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 rd 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 ó 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 the altered scale.	B7 in the key of C major. Play B altered (same as C melodic minor).	C melodic minor contains the notes C, D, Eb, F, G, A, B. When played over B7, these notes comprise the b9, #9, 3 rd , b5th, b13th, b7th, and root. 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.

Conclusion

The foregoing helps to simplify my approach and helps train my ear to hear notes that I otherwise might not play.