Teaching Jazz Improvisation

By Bryan Castro

A few thoughts...

The concepts used in jazz improvisation are not hard. Successful execution however requires a lot of work.

Sounds are more meaningful than scales.

You can not expect students to really spontaneously improvise in the beginning stages. It takes many years of work to get to that point in their playing.

Everything is about tension and release.

Playing in a Swing Feel is most important. Simple ideas played with a good swing feel are better than complex finger running that is not!!!!!!!!!!!!

Strategies for teaching improvisation to beginners

Begin with rhythmic improvisation on a single note. Strive for complete ideas or *complete sentences*. Play this over a vamp.

Introduce a second note. The flat 7 of the first note (key) you chose. Now you have a tension note. Use those two notes to form complete ideas. Really stress to the students how these notes feel over the chord. The resolution and tension from both notes. They can begin organizing in their mind and understand how these two notes are used.

Introduce the 3rd - another resolution (happy) note. Now students have three notes to choose from and form complete ideas.

Introduce the 5th - another resolution note. More choices.

I call the root, 3rd, and 7th “Home Base” notes. This makes it easy for students to know instantly how to construct musical sentences in other keys and other chord types.

Introduce the 9 (2nd). I call this a wandering note. It does not have as much tension as the b7 but it doesn’t quite resolve. It wants to move somewhere. Usually down. Yet another choice to use in their sentences.

Repeat the above process with the 4th and the 6th. They are wandering notes also. You have now covered every note in the scale. (Dominant Scale/Mixolydian Mode)

Again it is really important that the students *feel* how each of these notes work over the chord. They choose how they want their sentences to sound based on note/word choice. They learn to end ideas on chord tones.

I don’t introduce scales first because students have the tendency to just run notes and not think about how they apply over the given chord. They will end on non chord tones and their ideas will just sound like random notes.

Harmonic Rhythm

One of the hardest tasks that beginning improvisers face is keeping up with the harmonic rhythm- Playing the right set of notes at a specific time over a set of chord changes.

I begin with a two chord vamp. The I7 and the IV7 chords, four measures each respectively and repeat. For example Bb7 and Eb7.

First repeat all of the previous exercises on the new chord. Students need to be just as familiar with this second chord and notes as they are on the first one you introduce. This also begins to teach thinking about ideas as scale degrees and the idea of transposition. If the 9th sounds like a wandering note in the key of Bb it will also sound like a wandering note in the key of Eb. They learn how those scale degrees relate to a chord. They can begin to copy an idea or sound to other keys.

Now have the students play over the vamp. The goal is that they change to the correct set of notes over measures 5-8 and back again when the 8 bars repeat back to the beginning.

Harmonic Rhythm Exercises

Using the two chord progression:

Have students play whole notes through the entire chord progression. All root one time. Then the third etc. Stress how each note feels over the chord.

Have the students play the 7th of one chord resolving to the 3rd of the next chord over the barline. Reverse the order of the above.

Have the students play whatever they want over each chord but still play the above note changes at the specific times as above.

* You can have the students not soloing continue to play the 1st exercise while individual students improvise. This keeps them engaged, ingrains harmonic rhythm, and serves as an auditory que to the improviser that they are in sync with the chord progression.

Harmonic Rhythm Exercises over chord progressions

First explore the *homebase* and *wandering notes* on the individual chords you will need on the tune you are working on.

In this example I will use a very basic Bb Blues Progression.

Bb7	Eb7	Bb7	Bb7
Eb7	Eb7	Bb7	Bb7
F7	Eb7	Bb7	Bb7

Harmonic Rhythm Exercises over chord progressions continued...

Have students start simply. Begin by playing whole notes with the root through the progression. Then repeat with the 7th. Then the 3rd. This will help them memorize the chord tones as well. They will quickly start to hear where the chords change when holding whole notes.

Next have students use only the root of each chord and use single note soloing through the progression. Now they have to think about coming up with something rhythmic (improvising) and keep up with where they are in a progression.

Harmonic Rhythm Exercises over chord progressions continued...

Have students play 7th to Root as two eighth notes on beat 1 of each measure. Changing to the proper pitches as each chord changes continuing this idea through the progression.

Repeat the same exercise on beat two of each measure. Then beat three. Then beat four. All of the up beat variations as well.

On other progressions the root to 3rd might be better choices to use through the progression.

Connecting Chord Changes

The next task is logically connecting chord changes. This is nothing more than good voice leading.

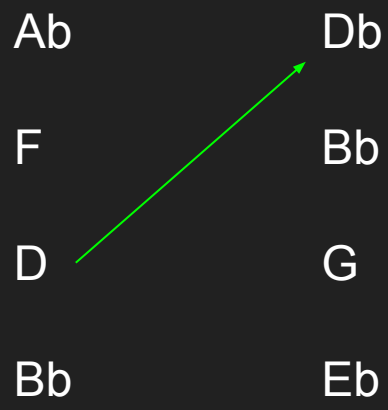
The first rule is connect two chords by half step if possible. Let’s look at our previous two chord vamp with the chords spelled out vertically.

Ab	Db
F	Bb
D	G
Bb	Eb

Where can we connect by half step?

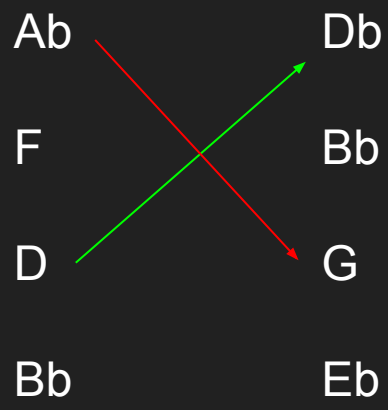
Ab	Db
F	Bb
D	G
Bb	Eb

Where can we connect by half step?



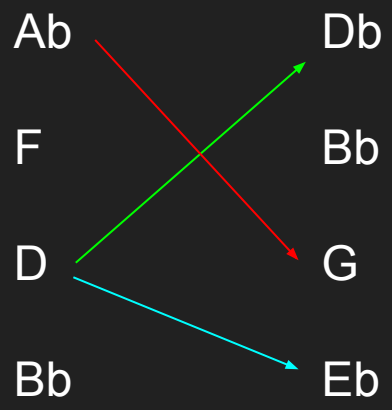
3rd to 7th

Where can we connect by half step?



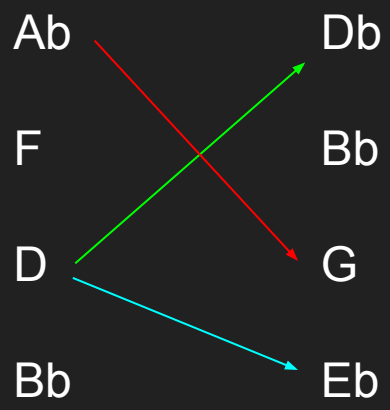
3rd to 7th
7th to 3rd

Where can we connect by half step?



3rd to 7th
7th to 3rd
3rd to Root

We now have three choices when connecting these chords. To apply this you want the last note you play in the first chord change to be one of these choices and resolve it by half step into the second chord change.



Now apply the half step concept to the entire Blues progression. Have students take time to properly work this out and memorize it.

This is the basic principle of "*playing the changes".* Now let's add some more changes to the blues progression. More changes gives us more choices! This is one of the most common variations of the Blues progression.

Bb7	Eb7	Bb7	F-7 Bb7
Eb7	Eb7	Bb7	Bb7
C-7	F7	D-7 G7	C-7 F7

All that was added was a basic 2-5-1 cadence in several places. You learned this in basic music theory. No voodoo jazz theory here!

Written exercises over chord changes - Licks!

Using the more complex blues progression have students focus on measure four to write their first lick. Write the licks including the first note of measure five. After all this is the point of the lick, to get somewhere. In this case the goal is to get to beat 1 of measure five. Have students compose two licks.

Use the following rules:

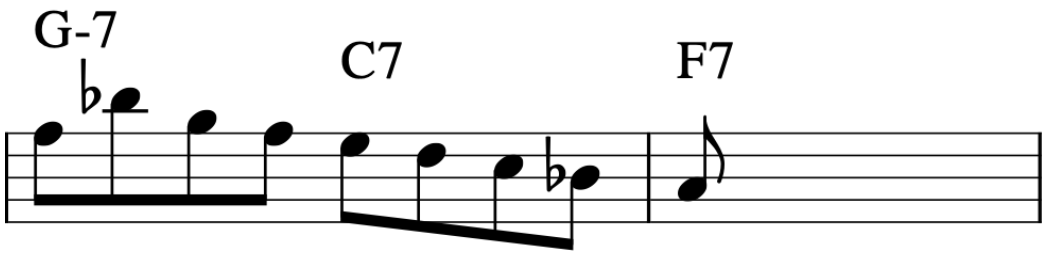
1. Every downbeat must use a chord tone.
2. When you change chords you must use 7th of the first chord to the 3rd of the next.
3. Fill the entire measure with eight notes.
4. No repeated notes in succession.

Talk about how students can change from note to note when composing their lick. In sequential order or a jump.

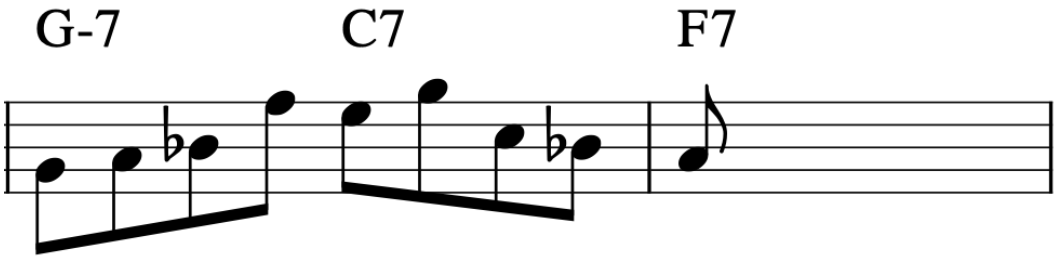
Encourage students to be objective with their licks. If it doesn't sound good trash it and start over.

A student turns in the following two licks. Check to make sure it follows the rules.

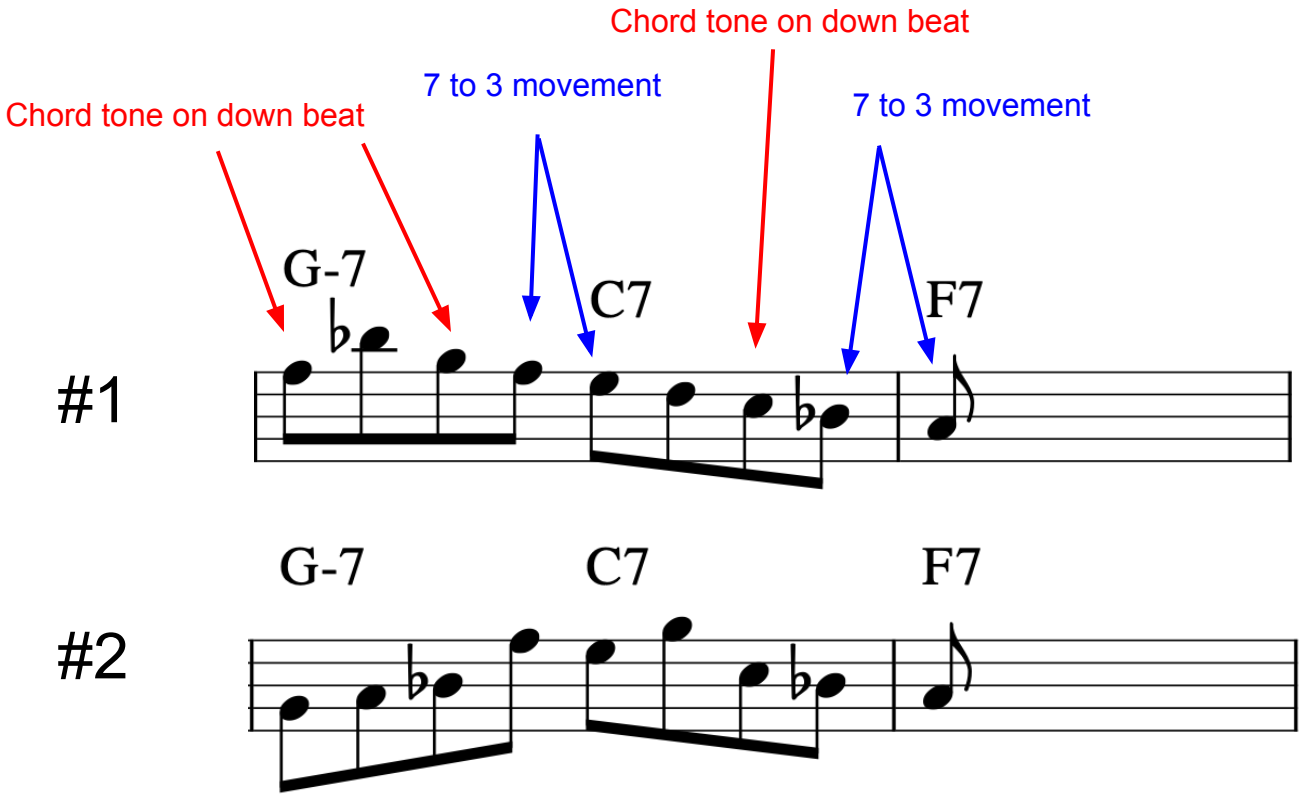
#1



#2

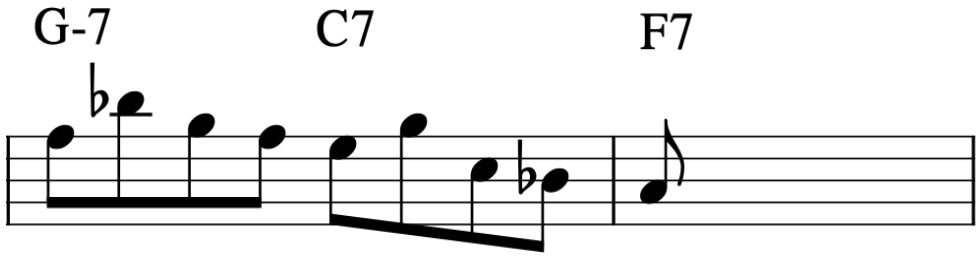


1. Every downbeat must use a chord tone.
2. When you change chords you must use the 7th of the first chord to the 3rd of the next.
3. Fill the entire measure with eight notes.
4. No repeated notes in succession.

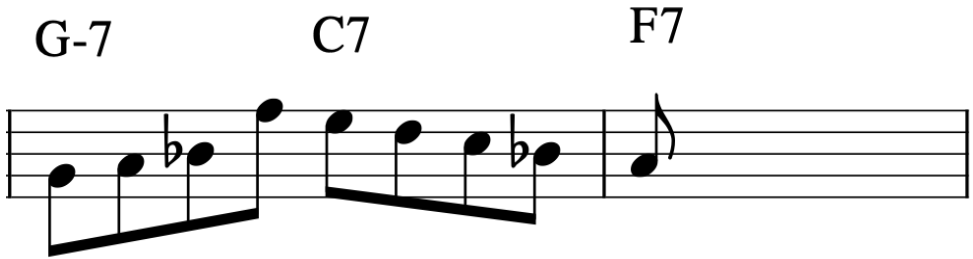


Bonus!!!

Students actually now have 4 licks they can use by mixing the two original licks.



(Lick #1) (Lick #2)



(Lick #2) (Lick #1)

Have students write out several more licks. Remember you can swap out half a one with the corresponding half of another lick.

Have students choose their favorite licks and memorize them. Have them play these licks every time they get to measure four. This is how they develop a vocabulary. Yes they will sound contrived for a while. This is normal. Over time students will absorb these licks and start to play them in different ways.

Write more licks for the other measures in red. Have students transpose their licks to work over measures eleven and twelve.

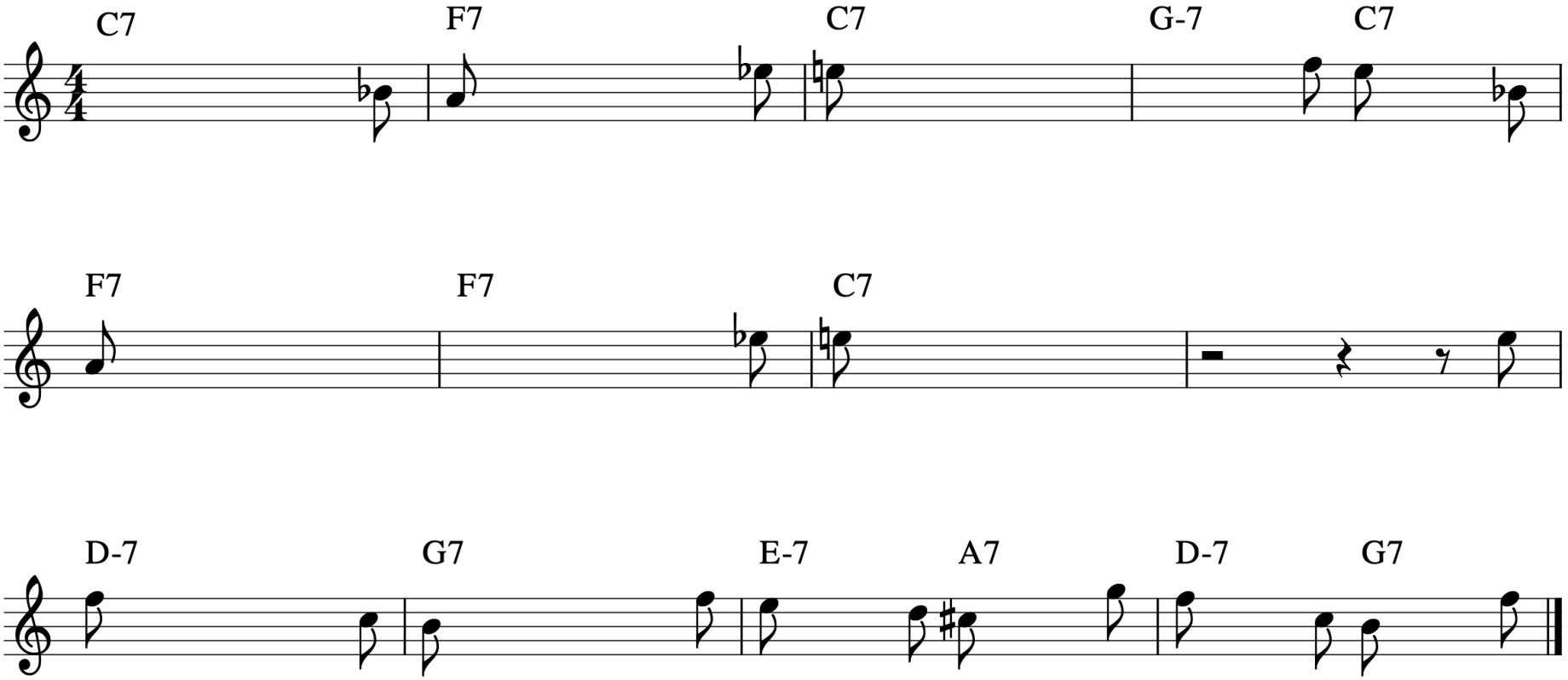
And now the entire progression

Next have students use the four rules and write an exercise over the entire blues progression. It will be very etudish because of all of the eight notes. Younger students may need a sheet with all 7th to 3rd movements filled in for them to begin with.

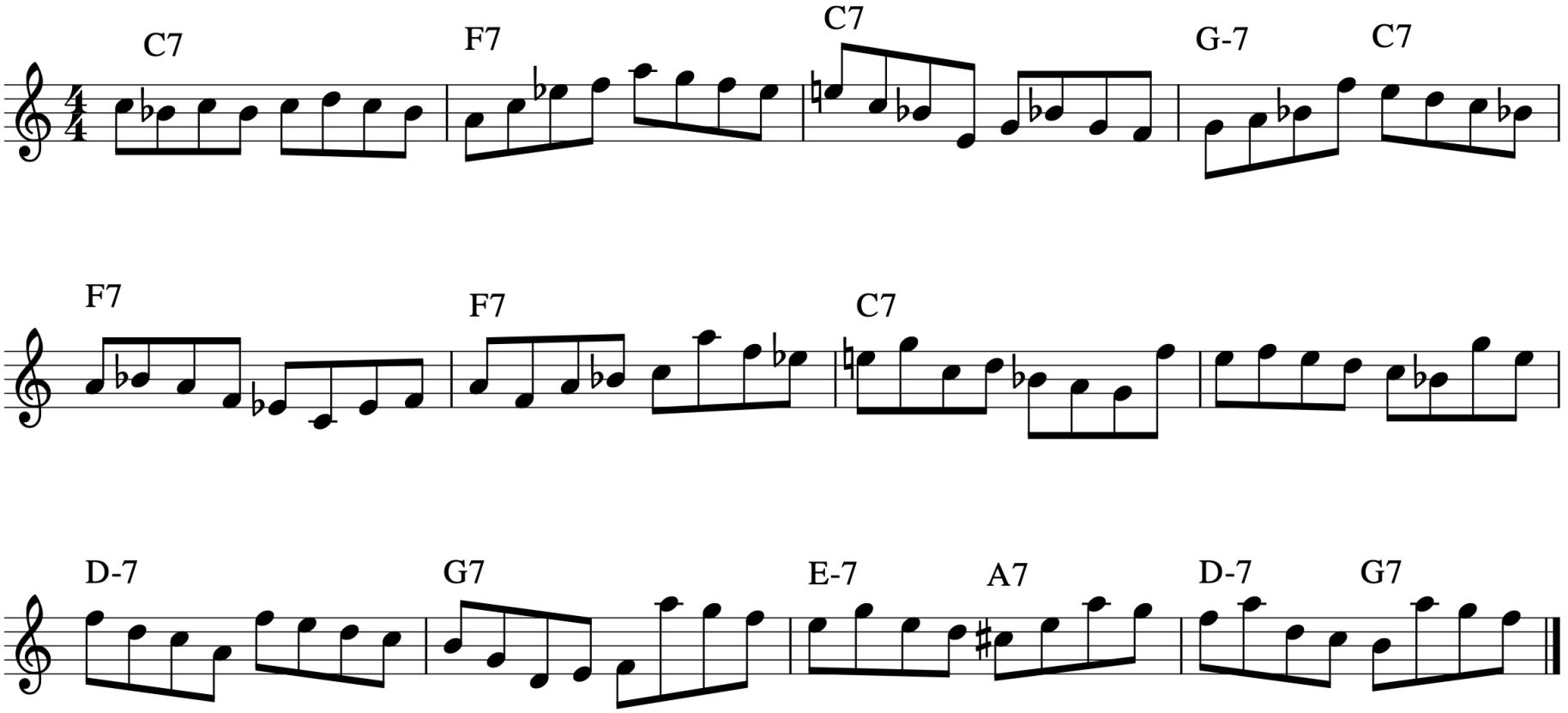
After you have verified that their exercise met all four rules have students go back and erase notes and add rests into their exercise. This will make the exercise sound more musical.

Have them memorize the entire twelve bars. Have them write more examples and memorize them.

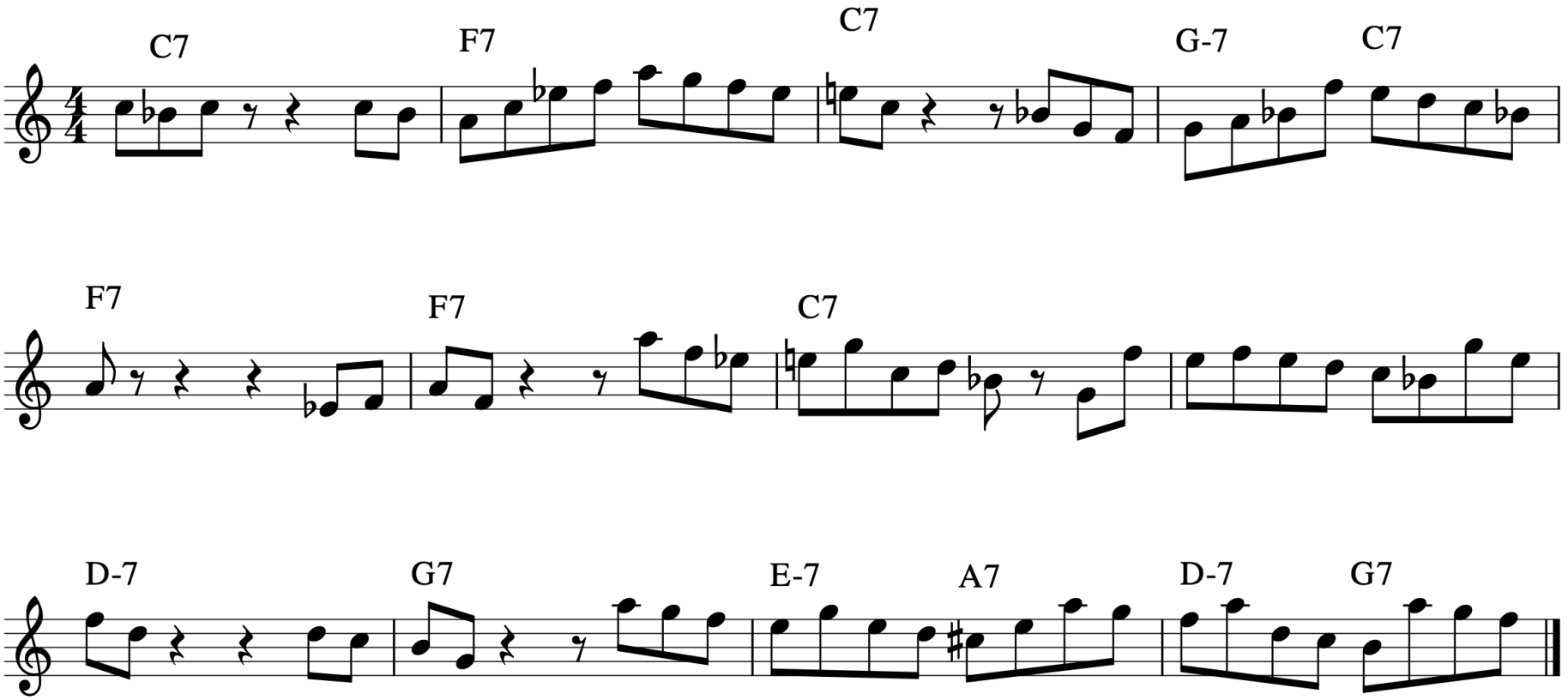
I focused on the blues in the last examples but the same idea applies to all songs with chord changes.


C7
F7
C7
G-7
C7
F7
F7
C7
D-7
G7
E-7
A7
D-7
G7

Completed Exercise



Exercise with editing



Please notice that I never once mentioned the Blues Scale. Students who are taught the Blues Scale first often do not “*play the changes*”. They just noodle around using the Blues Scale. Although this may sound jazzy at first, many times the notes played have no relation to the underlying chord changes. Since the Blues scale has a certain sound the underlying chord progression is never outlined. Notes such as the b3rd can be taught just like the individual notes in the exercises from the very beginning of this presentation. It is more important that they experience how the b3rd feels so they know when and how to use it. They need to use these notes because they choose to, not because it is the next note in the scale.

Drummers

It’s simple. Have them notate and memorize their own licks as well.

If they have fills in a song have them compose licks for those spots. We don’t expect a horn player to spit out licks over changes at first so we can’t expect a drummer to spit out perfect fills in a chart. They need to work on this skill just like pitched instruments.

Transcribing

There is no better way of learning than to study what the masters do. Start with an easy transcription such as Miles Davis's first two solo choruses of Freddie the Freeloader from the Kind of Blue Album.

Work out the first four measures in class so they can learn the process. Have them just memorize the solo first.

After they can play the solo for you have them write it out. Students don't need to write the actual rhythms first. Have them just write note heads grouped accordingly of the correct pitches.

Software

iRealPro - This software provides backing tracks to practice with. Thousands of songs can be imported for free and you can write your own charts or exercises. Available on iOS, Mac and Android. This is a must have.

NoteFlight - Notation software. A education subscription allows you to write exercises and push these out to your students as a template. When the students open the file it automatically creates a new file from your template for them to work on. You can pull it up and check their work online.

Youtube - Use the speed setting to slow down a song to help with transcribing. If you can’t find the song on Youtube there are many apps available to do this.