Jazz Articles by Bob Taylor
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Article 14: Expanding Your Color Palette

Expanding Your Color Palette

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I remember the days of … dare I say it … black-and-white television. As a kid, I would watch hours of The Lucy Show, Andy Griffith, Ed Sullivan and more, all in their glorious shades of gray. (Fortunately they've been preserved for history in TVLand syndication…)

I also remember the first time our family got a color television set. As I look back, the colors were appallingly bad – every object looked to be some subtle variation of green or red. Still, the leap from grayscale to "color" was astonishing at the time, much like the jump from monochrome PC monitors to millions of colors in more recent times.

So what's the connection of color to improvisation? If you accept that you can "hear colors" in music (which is no stretch for someone with synasthesia), then learning to find and use them will be very rewarding.

In this article we'll take a look at "audible colors" … in a future article, we'll examine the rhythmic side of color, which is another fascinating topic.

- What are "gray sounds?"

Trapped in Gray

We can compare basic chord tones in a solo to shades of gray, and other tones to various colors. When we see a chord symbol, we think 1-3-5 – and often we play those notes to excess. Not that there's anything wrong with shades of gray – but forgetting or avoiding color can be pretty limiting.

(Notice that I stop short of saying which colors should go with which tones. While that would be an interesting exercise, it would also be very subjective and confining. I'll just draw a general distinction between chord tones as gray, and other tones as "colors" …)

There are places where gray (chord tones) is the best choice, such as "Giant Steps" or other tunes with fast-moving progressions. However, most tunes could definitely use a color infusion to make things more interesting. (And when you try playing "Giant Steps" as a medium bossa nova, you'll see the value of using effective color tones – there's time to play them, hear them, and absorb them.)

So how do you get loose from a gray world? You do it by *shifting your focus* away from chord tones and towards the color tones. That doesn't mean you throw out the chord tones in your solos – you simply learn to balance them with color, just like gray and other colors are balanced in the real world.

▸ Where are the color tones?

A. Color Tones

Here's a brief explanation of color tones from The Art of Improvisation:

Each scale has *resting* tones (1, 3, and 5) that sound relaxing, and *color* tones that sound more tense. In major, dominant, and minor scales, color tones are always the 2, 4, 6, and 7 of the scale.

Color tones for a C Major scale are: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

C **D** E **F** G **A** **B** C

For a C dominant (Mixolydian) scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

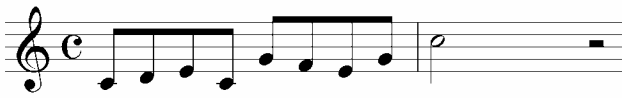
C **D** E **F** G **A** **Bb** C

For a C minor (Dorian) scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

C **D** Eb **F** G **A** **Bb** C

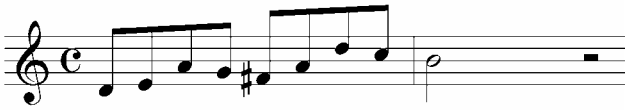
In classical and other types of music, you emphasize the resting tones and pass over the color tones to reach the resting tones. But in jazz you often do the reverse: you emphasize color tones to prolong musical tension.

1 2 3 1 5 4 3 5 1



Example - Resting tones emphasized - not colorful

2 3 6 5 #4 6 2 1 7



Example - Color tones emphasized - more colorful

The important thing to remember is that color tones are *right next door* to chord tones – instead of 1, 3, 5, think 2, 4, 6, 7.

I'm amazed at how often young players will studiously avoid color tones, when all they need to do is go up or down one pitch from the chord tone they're holding onto, and they'd get instant color! (In a way, it seems kind of like pushing a button and getting HDTV instead of normal cable…)

The cost? It does take some practice to recognize where the color tones are in each key (fortunately they are in the 2, 4, 6, and 7 positions in all keys, for major, minor and dominant chords). Finding and using those color tones effectively in your solos is definitely worth it.

▸ How can I use non-harmonic tones effectively?

B. Non-Harmonic Tones

Once you've integrated the basic colors into your solos, it's time to explore the "other colors" – or non-harmonic tones. If regular color tones are avoided by many players, non-harmonic tones must seem even worse – almost as though they would contaminate solos. In reality, these strong non-harmonic colors can become a vital part of a colorful solo.

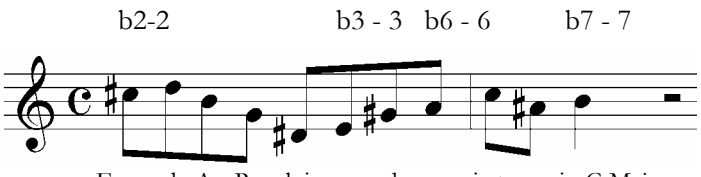
Here's a brief explanation of non-harmonic tones from The Art of Improvisation:

Non-harmonic tones are tones that don't fit in the basic scale (not color tones or resting tones). Non-harmonic tones are fine to play; when resolved properly, they add a lot of interest to your solo. The non-harmonic tones for a major scale are the b2, b3, b6, and b7 (in C Major they are Db, Eb, Ab, and Bb).

A non-harmonic tone is very high in energy. It should resolve to the nearest *color* tone, which has less (but still considerable) energy. If you resolve a non-harmonic tone to a resting tone, the energy decreases too fast, so the non-harmonic tone sounds like a mistake. Here's how to resolve non-harmonic tones in major:

- b2 (or sharp 1) resolves up to 2 (not down to 1).
- b3 (or sharp 2) resolves down to 2 or up to 3. The 3 is a resting tone, but it's the most colorful one.
- b6 (or sharp 5) resolves to up to 6 (not down to 5).
- b7 (or sharp 6) resolves down to 6 or up to 7.

The example below resolves all four non-harmonic tones in C Major.



Example A - Resolving non-harmonic tones in C Major

A critical thing here is to hear the non-harmonic tone you are playing and treat it like a real note. Enjoy each tension and resolution, and that will help you choose and use non-harmonic tones more effectively.

One more thing – playing a non-harmonic tone on the beat usually creates more tension than playing it off the beat. In either case, it should be resolved soon and well.

As you can see, finding and resolving non-harmonic tones takes practice, especially in all keys – major, minor and dominant (see The Art of Improvisation) – but it can open up some great new possibilities in your solos.

C. Outside Notes

The final piece in the color puzzle is the art of playing "outside" the chords. Outside playing relies on chord (color) relationships that are unusual. For example, think of blue apples, a green sky, orange milk, etc., and you get the idea. Outside playing creates an alternate world of chord relationships – a world that can be sometimes exciting and sometimes disorienting.

Perhaps the main problem with learning to play outside is that we tend to focus on too many possibilities at once, some of which are rather complex. A good place to start is using non-harmonic tones for a longer time without resolving them – this will help you set up the outside keys that you need.

So, look for a future article that explains an easier approach to playing outside.

Conclusion

You can dramatically increase you sense of sound color in solos by wisely applying:

- Color Tones
- Non-Harmonic Tones
- Outside Playing

And that's just melodic color – there's also an exciting world of rhythmic color to explore … more about that later!

