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**Article 15:
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Approach to Chord
Progressions**

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Keep It Simple: An Approach to Chord Progressions

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In my earlier article “MR ED CPA” I talked about how so many players try to dig into complex chord progressions before they have a solid grasp of melodic and rhythmic creation. In this article I’ll explore a simple approach to chords that works – and keeps the focus on the improvisation melody, not just the chords behind it.

The Problems

Here are three basic problems that most players encounter as they try to read chord progressions:

1. They start with tough progressions too soon.
2. They think one chord at a time instead of seeing the larger picture.
3. They get distracted by the complexity of some the chord symbols.

1. Starting Tough

Why do they start swimming at the deep end of the pool? I think there are two reasons why players jump into tough changes too early:

- a. They’re forced to cope with difficult solo changes written into jazz band charts in the schools.
- b. Mastering tough changes is seen as a sign of accomplishment.

► Why is chord-reading in solos so difficult for many players?

Point A – For a time, many jazz band charts had solos with difficult chord progressions. Frequent modulations and plenty of altered chords have kept young soloists tied up in knots or tempted to just write out solos beforehand (so much for improvisation ...) Fortunately, things have gotten better recently as publishers have seen the need to write charts with easier changes. However, there has also been a “backlash” movement of sorts, with an overabundance of blues and modal charts that minimize chord progressions. Students (and directors) are then tempted to take the easy route, avoiding more interesting progressions while focusing only on blues and modal tunes.

Point B – This is what I call the “I Learned Giant Steps” approach. Sure, Giant Steps is a great tune with a classic chord progression – but all too often it turns into an achievement vehicle instead of a musical experience. Unfortunately, there are many soloists who have learned how to negotiate these tough changes but who still can’t play a thoughtful, meaningful solo on a ballad, for example.

For many young players, this fixation with mastering tough progressions can also lead to the “path through the forest” mentality. Basically, that’s where you memorize a few melodic twists and turns that take you safely through the chord progression (no running into trees). This usually leads to technical and rote-sounding solos, with weak rhythmic content and little development.

Solution

With a *visual* approach to soloing, you begin to see *thousands* of paths through the forest, and your improvisation takes flight. The visual approach in *The Art of Improvisation* is designed to help you see, hear, and play possibilities in the moment, instead of relying on the same “safe paths” time after time.

2. Chord-by-Chord Soloing

Building a solo one chord at a time is something like reading a paragraph and pronouncing each word equally. The magic of reading lies in seeing chunks of information at a time, so you’ll know what to emphasize, what to gloss over, etc. Because we’ve read thousands of paragraphs, this process is pretty natural for us.

It’s much the same with chord reading – you need to see the big picture, the *meaning* of the chords. Otherwise, your solos will likely be choppy or stiff, with ideas that never seem to flow. Some chords are vital to the key, and some are just there to embellish – it’s important to know the difference between the two.

Solution

The key here is – well, *keys*. One of the most important skills a young improviser needs is the ability to see and hear *key centers* in the music. Each key center defines the chords to emphasize and the chords you can “skip over” (much like reading words in paragraphs). This also lets you simplify chord progressions, resulting in much less chord clutter in your solos.

Here's an excerpt from 'The Art of Improvisation on simplifying chord progressions:

When you see several consecutive chords belonging to the *same key*, you can improvise on all of them with a *single scale*. For example, Dm7 and CMa7 belong to the key of C Major, so they share notes. A C Major scale works for *both* the chords. This means fewer chords to worry about, so you navigate the progression more easily.

However, simplifying progressions does have some disadvantages. When you simplify, you miss some of the more colorful tones, like the raised 7th of the ii chord (C# in D minor), or the #4 of the I chord, or dominant alterations (explained in Chapter 3K: *Dominant Alterations*).

In the first example below, all the chords belong to the key of C, so the notes of a C Major scale can be used for the entire progression. In the second example, all the chords belong to the key of E, so an E Major scale works for the entire progression.

CMa7	Am7	Dm7	G7	CMa7
I	vi	ii	V	I

Example - Chord progression in C – use a C Major flexible scale for the entire progression

EMa7	AMa7	F#m7	B7	EMa7
I	IV	ii	V	I

Example - Chord progression in E – use an E Major flexible scale for the entire progression

You can also play a single flexible scale across all three chords in a ii-V-I progression. For example, with a Dmi to G7 to CMa7 progression, you can play just C Major (the I chord scale), or just D Dorian (the ii chord scale), or just G Mixolydian (the V chord scale). The most common choices to use across the ii-V-I are the I scale or the ii scale.

3. Chord Calculus

I was recently handed a lead sheet by a local saxophone soloist and asked, “What kind of scale do you play when you see this C7b9+5 chord here?” I gave him the stock answer – you can try diminished-whole-tone – then I added, “But that’s kind of missing the point. The chord you pointed to lasts for two beats – I doubt you’d have much need of running an entire scale there.” (Yes, a scale would have been more applicable if the chord had lasted longer.)

Here’s the problem: people get all wrapped up in assigning a special scale for each chord. This leads to chord-by-chord playing, as we discussed earlier, and can lead away from the most important priority – knowing and using the key centers.

Solution

Don't get so worried about the dominant alterations, extensions and suspensions of chords. Concentrate on how you're constructing your overall melody in the current key center. And that leads us to the following "overall" solution ...

Solution: Subtract, then Add

Looking at a chord chart or lead sheet can sometimes seem like reading hieroglyphics. So if we're in the tomb with the flashlight, we might as well keep it simple – we need to subtract (filter out) what's secondary, and add what's primary.

When I approach a chord progression, here's what I do ...

1. Identify the primary key center of the tune and the type (major, minor, or dominant).
2. Identify the key centers (and modulation chords) and imagine that all the other chords have been stripped away. This is the subtractive part.
3. With the key centers in place, I add the embellishing (secondary) chords back in. This is the additive part.

The curious thing about adding the chords back into the tune is that it's usually not quite the same as the original – after I take apart the engine, I always seem to have a few parts left over, or I add a few of my own. This customization, even if slight, gives me a sense of control over the music, allowing me to experiment with different sounds and colors. As I get more familiar with the tune, I'll try some of the chords I previously skipped in the original tune, or I'll try even more variations. The important thing is that the *chords serve the melody*, not the other way around. And that's a very liberating feeling.

Conclusion

When it comes to chord progressions,

- Subtract.
- Enjoy.
- Add.
- Enjoy more.

Keep it simple, and then rev it up. Your ideas will soar, riding on top of the chords you need.