

Demystifying the Notes to Play Over Jazz Chords

by Michael Lake



Music theory is an useful foundation to improvisation but is it possible to improvise well without any knowledge of theory? Yes, but a certain amount of intellectual understanding of chords, scales, and why notes sound as they do within a given harmony can benefit a player.

There is a balance in improvisation between the intellectual reliance on music theory and the guidance by what a musician hears. In order to achieve that balance, and why this theory course is unique is that the instruction and exercises within it will offer you a basic instruction of theory that is supported by corresponding audio examples. The objective is for you to hear what you are being taught.



The balance between left and right brain is critical since we are, after all, learning an aural art form. For the listener, all that matters is what they hear. Few listeners care about the theoretical nuances of your improvisation. They care about how it makes them feel.

Learn some of the theoretical underpinnings of the music but realize that all that matters in the end is that you expressed something deep within you that resonated with your listeners.

How to use this ebook

The exercises and audio files within this ebook are organized into three sections.

- **Section one** use the song Happy Birthday as its foundation for improvising over a single key song form. The rhythm tracks are modern and well-played in order to make it interesting for you to start your learning of theory with a very simple song.
- **Section two** uses the blues as the foundation for expanding the theory instruction to a slightly more complex harmonic form. A simple 12-bar three-chord blues is discussed and offered as exercises as is a more complex blues.

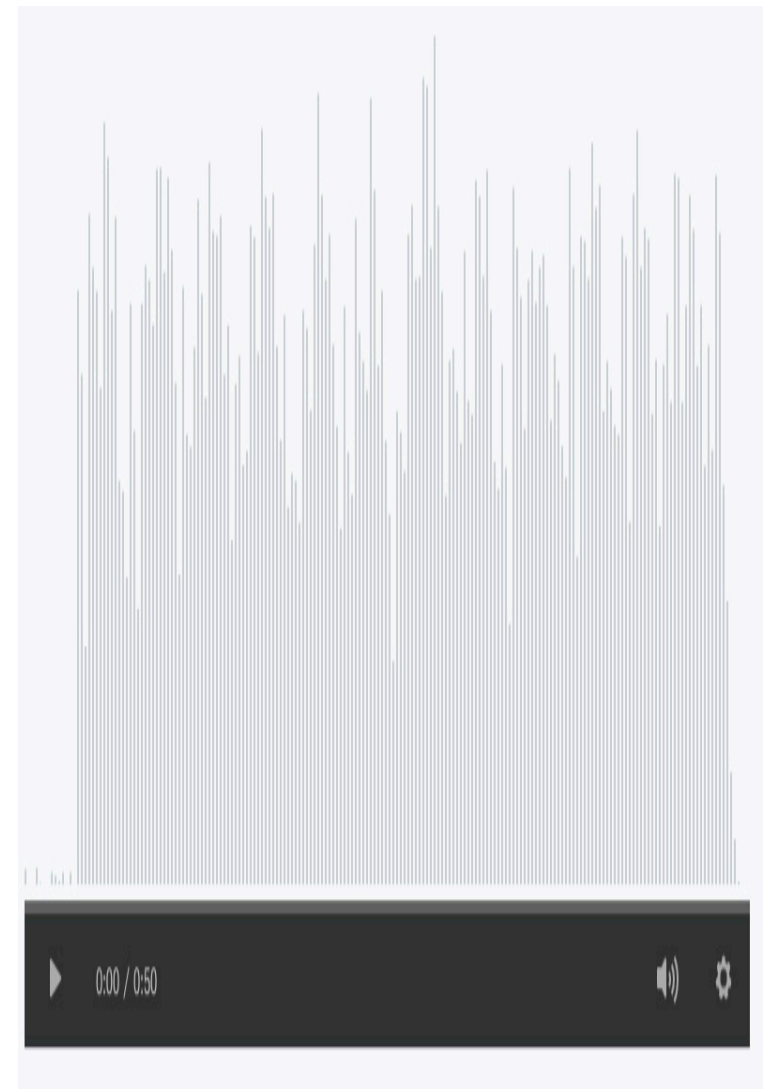
■ The Audio Files

Each exercise in the book is associated with an audio file within Dropbox.

Simply click or tap the icon associated with the file to bring it up in a Dropbox audio player window. The audio files stream from Dropbox. Play the files in your browser by tapping play, stop, pause and repeat. Download each file as you wish from Dropbox.



The rhythm track icon plays the audio file associated with each exercise.

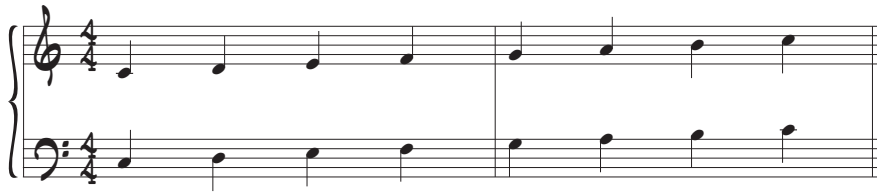


Single key improvisation - Happy Birthday

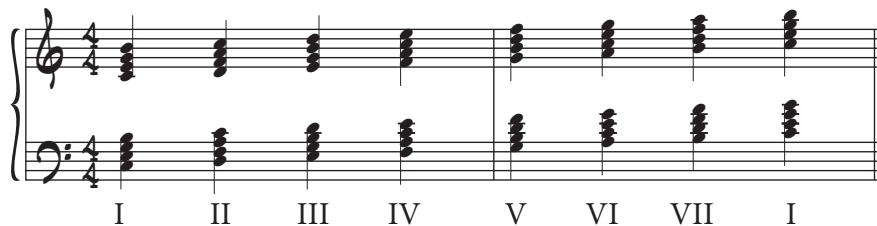
We start our discussion and practice of theory with the tune Happy Birthday in the key of concert C. Happy Birthday is a great tune over which to learn improvisation because everyone knows the melody and because it contains only one key in its most basic form.

Before looking at the tune, let's introduce some important concepts to lay the foundation for this module on theory.

Jazz is composed from many different chords. Each of those chords supports a key center. So, for example, the key of C major is defined by a C major scale:



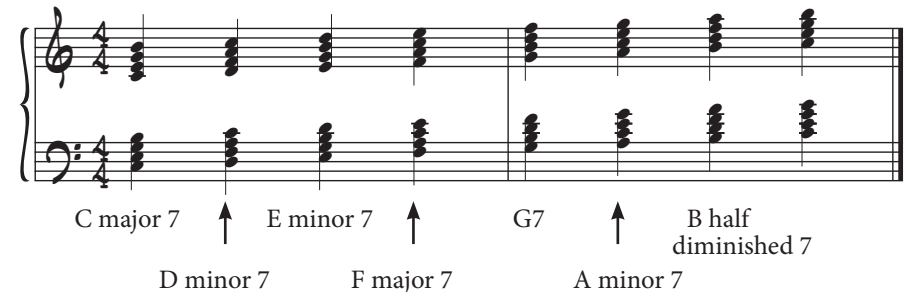
The basic chords within the key of C have roots on each of the scale tones, and are designated as such by Roman numerals:



The vocabulary of jazz chords consists in large part of the Roman numerals. For example, a very common chord progression is designated as II V I (“two, five one”).

In the key of C major, that three chord progression consists of D minor 7 to G7 to C major 7. Knowing that allows you to play all three of those chords using just the white notes of the piano, or the key of C major.

The actual chords built off the C major scale tones are:



Why does this matter and how do you use this knowledge? It matters because you know that any of these seven chords can be improvised over using the C major scale or the key of C, as will be demonstrated with the tune Happy Birthday.

In this course, we use prefer to talk in terms of keys rather than scales. When musicians associate chords with scales, many will automatically associate the scale with an ascending root to root sequence.

If you think in terms of key, you may not be so inclined to aim for the root and simply play up the scale. Music education tends to ingrain the idea of scale primarily as starting on the root and playing up the steps of the scale to the upper root. Thinking in terms of keys may free you from that root to root ascending habit. As you learn keys, you will start to think about *notes* like E or G or B as starting places for your musical phrases, rather than running a C major scale.

Here is the basic lead sheet for Happy Birthday in the key of concert C major. For the rhythm tracks within this lesson, seventh chords will be used in place of major triads.

The image shows a piano accompaniment for the song 'Happy Birthday' in the key of C major, 3/4 time. It consists of two systems of music. The first system has four measures with chords C, G, C, and C. The second system has four measures with chords G7, F, G, and C. A page number '5' is at the bottom left.

Tap to play the audio file



Happy Birthday melody
and solo by Michael

Notice that each of the different four chords are derived from the key of C (C major scale) so that to improvise over the tune, all you need are the white keys on the piano.

In the audio track to the right, I play the melody and then improvise over three choruses of Happy Birthday.

A transcription of that solo is on pages six through nine, covering the four instrument classes. At first glance, the solo may look complicated, but once you hear it, you will agree that it is not as complicated as it looks. I start out by paraphrasing the melody for the first chorus. I then improvise over the next three choruses.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TRANSCRIPTION - CONCERT C

Musical score for Happy Birthday transcription in Concert C. The score is written in treble clef with a 4/4 time signature. It consists of eight staves of music. Chords are indicated above the notes: Cmaj7, G7, Fmaj7, and Cmaj7. Triplet markings are present over several notes in measures 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, and 27. Measure numbers 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, and 29 are marked at the beginning of their respective staves.

Tap to play the audio file



Happy birthday solo



Rhythm only
No solo

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TRANSCRIPTION - B \flat INSTRUMENTS

5

9

13

17

21

25

29

Tap to play the audio file



Happy birthday solo



Rhythm only
No solo

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TRANSCRIPTION - E^b INSTRUMENTS

Musical score for E^b instruments, featuring guitar chords and triplets.

Chords: A^{MA}7, E7, D^{MA}7, A^{MA}7

Measure numbers: 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29

Triplet markings: 3

Tap to play the audio file



Happy birthday solo



Rhythm only
No solo

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TRANSCRIPTION - BASS CLEF INSTRUMENTS

Musical score for bass clef instruments (bass guitar, double bass) of the song "Happy Birthday". The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of 29 measures. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major). The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, quarter notes, and triplets. Chord symbols are placed above the staff: Cmaj7, G7, Fmaj7, and Cmaj7. Measure numbers 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, and 29 are indicated at the start of their respective lines.

Tap to play the audio file



Happy birthday
solo



Rhythm only
No solo

Blues improvisation

Below is the lead sheet for the simple blues form used in these audio files.

Handwritten lead sheet for a simple blues form in Bb major, 12/8 time. The sheet consists of three staves of music, each with four measures of rhythmic notation (diagonal slashes). The first staff is labeled with a handwritten $Bb7$ above it. The second staff is labeled with $Eb7$ above the first measure and $Bb7$ above the third measure. The third staff is labeled with $F7$ above the first measure and $Bb7$ above the third measure. The key signature has two flats (Bb and Eb), and the time signature is 12/8.



Basic Bb blues rhythm track (6 choruses)

Here are three scales starting on concert Bb that can be played over the blues form.

TRADITIONAL BLUES SCALE

Musical notation for the Traditional Blues Scale in Bb major, 4/4 time. The scale is shown in two staves (treble and bass clef) over two measures. The notes are: Bb, C, D, Eb, E, F, G, Ab, Bb. The first measure contains the first eight notes, and the second measure contains the last two notes (G and Ab) followed by a whole rest.

MINOR PENTATONIC SCALE

Musical notation for the Minor Pentatonic Scale in Bb major, 4/4 time. The scale is shown in two staves (treble and bass clef) over two measures. The notes are: Bb, C, D, Eb, F, G. The first measure contains the first six notes, and the second measure contains the last two notes (F and G) followed by a whole rest.

DIMINISHED WHOLE TONE SCALE

Musical notation for the Diminished Whole Tone Scale in Bb major, 4/4 time. The scale is shown in two staves (treble and bass clef) over two measures. The notes are: Bb, C, D, Eb, E, F, G, Ab, Bb. The first measure contains the first eight notes, and the second measure contains the last two notes (G and Ab) followed by a whole rest.

The minor pentatonic can be played over all three of the main chords of the Bb blues.

Musical notation for the Bb7 chord. The treble clef staff shows the notes of the Bb minor pentatonic scale: Bb, Db, Eb, F, Ab, Bb. Handwritten annotations include "Bb7" above the first measure, "#9 OF Bb7" with an arrow pointing to the Eb note, and "7TH OF Bb7" with an arrow pointing to the Ab note. The bass clef staff shows a simple bass line for the Bb7 chord.

Musical notation for the Eb7 chord. The treble clef staff shows the notes of the Bb minor pentatonic scale: Bb, Db, Eb, F, Ab, Bb. A handwritten annotation "Eb7" is above the first measure, and "7TH OF Eb7" with an arrow points to the Ab note. The bass clef staff shows a simple bass line for the Eb7 chord.

Musical notation for the F7 chord. The treble clef staff shows the notes of the Bb minor pentatonic scale: Bb, Db, Eb, F, Ab, Bb. Handwritten annotations include "F7" above the first measure, "b13TH OF F7" with an arrow pointing to the Eb note, and "b9 OF F7" with an arrow pointing to the Ab note. The bass clef staff shows a simple bass line for the F7 chord.

The audio file below is the Bb minor pentatonic played over each of the three main chords of the basic Bb blues.

It demonstrates that any note within this scale will work over any of these chords. The choice of any of these notes for musical phrases in large part depends on the context of the rest of the phrase.

As an example, Ab may clash with the A of the F7 (the major third) if the Ab is simply held out over the chord rather than being used as a passing tone in a phrase.



Minor pentatonic over the three basic chords

Obviously, running scales over chords is much less preferable than creating musical phrases from notes that add color and emotion to your improvisation.

Play the following five musical phrases over the audio file of the three main chords each played for two bars. Listen to the difference in each phrase as it is played over each of the three chords.

C INSTRUMENTS



B^b INSTRUMENTS

Obviously, running scales over chords is much less preferable than creating musical phrases from notes that add color and emotion to your improvisation.

Play the following five musical phrases over the audio file of the three main chords each played for two bars. Listen to the difference in each phrase as it is played over each of the three chords.



The audio file below consists of Bb7 for two bars, Eb7 for two bars, and F7 for two bars. Those six bars are looped several times.

Play each phrase over the six bars in order to hear the contrast of each over the three chords.

Do not feel the need to play through them one after another. Instead, focus on each one at a time to deeply hear the role each note plays over each of the three chords.

Some notes sound better than others within a given chord. How they sound determines how you will use them in your improvised phrases.



Three 2-bar chords looped at 110BPM



Three 2-bar chords looped at 140 bpm

E^b INSTRUMENTS

Obviously, running scales over chords is much less preferable than creating musical phrases from notes that add color and emotion to your improvisation.

Play the following five musical phrases over the audio file of the three main chords each played for two bars. Listen to the difference in each phrase as it is played over each of the three chords.

#1

#2

#3

#4

#5

The audio file below consists of Bb7 for two bars, Eb7 for two bars, and F7 for two bars. Those six bars are looped several times.

Play each phrase over the six bars in order to hear the contrast of each over the three chords.

Do not feel the need to play through them one after another. Instead, focus on each one at a time to deeply hear the role each note plays over each of the three chords.

Some notes sound better than others within a given chord. How they sound determines how you will use them in your improvised phrases.



Three 2-bar chords looped at 110BPM



Three 2-bar chords looped at 140 BPM

BASS CLEF INSTRUMENTS

Obviously, running scales over chords is much less preferable than creating musical phrases from notes that add color and emotion to your improvisation.

Play the following five musical phrases over the audio file of the three main chords each played for two bars. Listen to the difference in each phrase as it is played over each of the three chords.

#1

#2

#3

#4

#5

The audio file below consists of Bb7 for two bars, Eb7 for two bars, and F7 for two bars. Those six bars are looped several times.

Play each phrase over the six bars in order to hear the contrast of each over the three chords.

Do not feel the need to play through them one after another. Instead, focus on each one at a time to deeply hear the role each note plays over each of the three chords.

Some notes sound better than others within a given chord. How they sound determines how you will use them in your improvised phrases.



Three 2-bar chords looped at 110BPM



Three 2-bar chords looped at 140 BPM

We've analyzed and heard how scales and patterns sound over the three chords of the basic blues. Now let's focus on individual notes. After all, your solos are composed of individual notes, hopefully not strings of scales and memorized patterns.

For this reason, it is critical that you be able to hear the color that various notes add over chords. Your musical vocabulary will be enriched by your instinct for the color of individual notes against chords and key centers.

This exercise provides you with pairs of briefly held 7th chords. Over the first chord of the two, a note is played - a 7th, a flat 9, sharp 9, or flat 5th on various instruments. After hearing that note played over the first chord, the chord is played again, but this time, you are to sing or play the previous note you heard.

See if you can name the chord tone of each note after hearing and playing it. Can you recognize the particular color of a 7th, a flat 9, sharp 9, or flat 5th? These notes give the blues some of its character, and hearing them will allow your blues improvisations to sound more like blues. To better hear that, listen to great blues players.



Held chords and notes
for singing notes



B \flat BLUES TRANSCRIPTION - CONCERT C

The musical notation is presented in four staves, each with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B \flat major / D \flat minor). The time signature is 4/4. The notation includes various note values, rests, and triplets. Handwritten chord symbols are placed above the notes: $B\flat 7$, $E\flat 7$, $B\flat 7$ on the first staff; $E\flat 7$, $B\flat 7$ on the second staff; $G 7$, $C-7$, $F 7$ on the third staff; and $B\flat 7$, $G 7$, $C-7$, $F 7$ on the fourth staff. Measure numbers 5, 8, and 11 are indicated at the start of their respective staves.

The transcription of the second and third choruses of the solo are left for you to do. Transcribing is one of the most beneficial things you can do to sharpen your ear for notes and connect your instrument to your right brain.

Both for this written out chorus and the two remaining ones, identify notes that stand out to you. They are likely the notes discussed earlier.

Tap to play the audio file

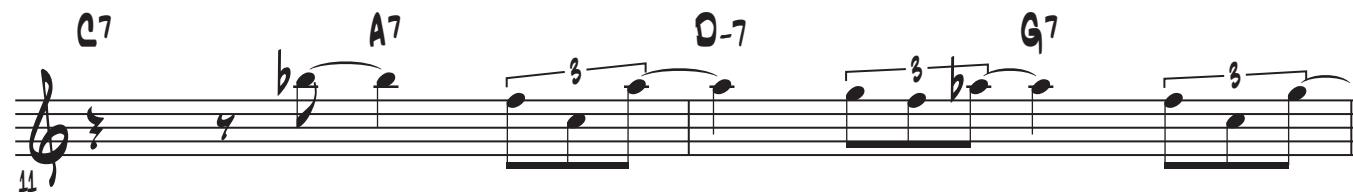


Complete ML blues solo



Ten choruses of B \flat blues rhythm track
No solo

B^b BLUES TRANSCRIPTION - B^b INSTRUMENTS



The transcription of the second and third choruses of the solo are left for you to do. Transcribing is one of the most beneficial things you can do to sharpen your ear for notes and connect your instrument to your right brain.

Both for this written out chorus and the two remaining ones, identify notes that stand out to you. They are likely the notes discussed earlier.

Tap to play the audio file



Complete ML blues solo



Ten choruses of B^b blues rhythm track
No solo

B \flat BLUES TRANSCRIPTION - E \flat INSTRUMENTS

Chords: G7, C7, G7, C7, G7, E7, A-7, D7, G7, E7, A-7, D7

The transcription of the second and third choruses of the solo are left for you to do. Transcribing is one of the most beneficial things you can do to sharpen your ear for notes and connect your instrument to your right brain.

Both for this written out chorus and the two remaining ones, identify notes that stand out to you. They are likely the notes discussed earlier.

Tap to play the audio file



Complete ML blues solo



Ten choruses of B \flat blues rhythm track
No solo

B^b BLUES TRANSCRIPTION - BASS CLEF

Handwritten chord symbols above the staves: Eb7, Eb7, Bb7, Eb7, Bb7, G7, C-7, F7, Bb7, G7, C-7, F7. Fingering '3' is indicated above several notes in staves 2, 3, and 4.

The transcription of the second and third choruses of the solo are left for you to do. Transcribing is one of the most beneficial things you can do to sharpen your ear for notes and connect your instrument to your right brain.

Both for this written out chorus and the two remaining ones, identify notes that stand out to you. They are likely the notes discussed earlier.

Tap to play the audio file



Complete ML blues solo



Ten choruses of B^b blues rhythm track
No solo