I'm not a bot

Entertainment All Entertainment Careers Employee Benefit Presentations All Careers Activities All Activities Humor All Humor Skip to content Let me show how to analyze the jazz standard Recorda-Me. You can find the final analysis, along with 1300+ other jazz standards fully analyzed in The Jazz Standards Progressions Book by mDecks Music I'll show you the process we go through when we create an analysis of a jazz standard. The harmonic progression in Recorda-me seems pretty simple at first glance. Recorda-me Chord Progression The first chord is Am7, and the key signature, with no flats, indicates we could be in C major or A minor. If we look at the first chord, it's an Am, and the last chord in the song is E7 – the V7 of a minor. So everything is pointing to the key of A minor. So let's set the map up to the key of A minor and add the I minor. The first thing to notice is that the i minor is paired with the melodic minor scale by default. Remember, in jazz the best scale to use over a I minor is the melodic minor. You get the natural 6th and natural 7th, which are great notes to use on a I minor. But look closer at the chord symbol and the melody in the chord progression: It says Am7, and the melody lands on F# both pointing at an A minor Dorian scale. Then we must choose the correct chord-scale for this chord, and luckily for us, Mapping Tonal Harmony offers a Dorian scale on a I minor. Now, the next chord is Cm7, which clearly doesn't belong in the key of A minor. It is true it could be the sub/V (shown in the picture) but this chord should eventually target the V7, which is not what's happening here. The sub/V in A minor is a Cm7 This Cm7 is functioning as the ii of Bb. In fact, we can see a 2-5-1 in the key of Bb: Cm7 F7 Bbmaj7. This could only be a direct modulation – probably to the key of Bb. So, let's see what happens if we do that. I'll add a direct modulation to the key of Bb and enter iim7 – which is Cm7, a V7 here (the F 7,) and the Imaj7, which is Bbmaj7. So far, so good. Now, the chord still makes sense in the key of Bb. A ii – V of the bVII, borrowed from the minor, and resolving as expected to the bVIImaj7. This is a very common move – turning the Imaj7into a minor chord, which becomes the ii/bVII – as you can see indicated by the headless arrow that Mapping Tonal Harmony is showing. Direct modulation to Bb major (measure 5) Now the same trick will take us to the bVI. The bVIImaj7 turns into a m7, making it the ii/bVI. So this is a simple ii – V of bVI. Abm7 – Db7 – Gbmaj7 (the bVI in the key of Bb,) and now a ii – V of V. Also very standard, except this Fmaj7 should be an F7 – if we're staying in Bb – since the V is a dominant chord. So this must be a modulation to F, which is also very common – modulating to the key of the V. So we can insert the Gm7 as the ii/V in the key of Bb. The C7 is the V7/V in the key of Bb, and then it is used as a pivot chord, turning into the V7 of the new key. So let's change to the key of F on the C7. And there it is. The C7 is now a pivot chord. It was the V7/V in the key of Bb, and it is now functioning as the V7 in the new key of F. And the last chord is an E7#9 which is theV7/iii in the key of F. Now, since we're going back to the key of A minor – at the beginning of the song – we can add a new pivot chord modulation right here – on the E7#9. So let's change to the key of A minor and the E7 is now functioning as theV7 in the new key. You must be thinking: "Great! That's the analysis!"Actually, this is where it gets interesting, because if we look at the melodic structure of the song, something stands out right away, which will make this analysis ok, but not perfect. If we take a closer look at the melody – on the Am7 – it's sequenced on the Cm7. So, this is clearly a transposition of both the melody and the harmony. Look, the first note is the natural 13 – an F# in Am7 – and an A natural on the Cm7, which implies Dorian for both chords. And all the rest of the notes are the same degrees against their current chord. OK, I can hear you thinking: "So what? Everything looks good. The Am7 says Dorian, and the Cm7 says Dorian also. We modulated to Bb – right on the Cm7 – which agrees with the melodic line being a transposition. Everything looks right to me!" Well, not quite. When we look at the melody…The transposition is a minor 3rd up, but our modulation was from A minor to Bb major.And even worse, we're modulating from a minor key to a major key. But nothing changed, if we look at the melody against the harmony. But the worst problem is that the Am7 is playing the role of the tonic here, and the Cm7 is playing the role of the iim7. This is a red flag that we absolutely cannot ignore. So, my first intuition was to reconsider this Am7 as also being a iim7, which implies we're in the key of G major. Then the Dorian scale makes total sense – with Am7 being the iim7. Also, the song modulates to Bb, which is a minor 3rd up exactly as the melody does. But… there's always a but… where's the G chord? How could we be in G without a G chord ever being played, not to mention, there's no D7 from the dominant region! How can we be in the key of G major without ever playing a chord in the tonic region, or the dominant region. Well, we can't! So what's going on here? Actually, the issue is that we're trying to fit the section of the song into a tonal setting, and this song is modal in the first eight bars. It only changes to a tonal progression after this F7. What's confusing is that, at the end of the song, we have this E7#9, which is the V7 in the key of A minor. And a V7 in a minor key implies that we're in a tonal piece of music. Had we been in Dorian throughout the entire song, the V chord would have been a m7 chord. This is where we can push the limits a bit of Mapping Tonal Harmony Pro, and take it into modal music. So the Am7 was a Dorian im7 chord, and then the Cm7 is a direct modulation to C Dorian, which I can do simply by adding a direct modulation to C minor, and inserting the im7 with the Dorian scale. And Mapping Tonal Harmony is now showing a direct modulation from a i minor Dorian to another minor Dorian. See? We have never moved outside our home- the tonic – which is actually a Dorian tonic. When we arrived at the F7, we should already be in the key of Bb, and in a tonal setting. So let me simply repeat the Cm7 on the first two beats of this bar (here,) and insert a pivot chord modulation from the key of C minor to the key of Bb major. The Cm7 was the one minor in C Dorian, and will now become the iim7in the key of Bb. It's still a Dorian sound, but should now be reinterpreted as a iim7 in the key of Bb. Now the map clearly represents the harmonic progression. Recorda-me harmonic analysis as shown in The Jazz Standards Progressions Book by mDecks Music Remember, the first section is modal, and the second is tonal. And here we can see the paths to the bVII, that turns into a m7, taking us to the bVI chord which – as I said before – you'll find in so many tunes. Okay, I hope this was helpful. And it's also showing all the work we do to create the analyses of the songs in the The Jazz Standards Progressions Book. If you want to see another jazz standard analysis check Jobim's Girl From Ipanema here:Unlocking the Magic of Jobim's Harmony: A Step-by-Step Guide to 'The Girl From Ipanema' Jazz Harmony Lesson Music Theory and Harmonic Analysis can be great tools when you want to learn jazz and figure out how to improvise over a chord progression. These videos help you get started understanding how to do that, understanding functional harmony, tonal centers, and the rich harmonic language found in Jazz standards. The videos will give you examples of how to analyze songs and also how to choose scales from that analysis. You will learn a lot from analyzing the songs that you play. Remember that it is more important to hear the changes and recognize the sound of the theory as it is to know the name, so working on the songs you already know well will really help you. A fancy name probably won't. Analyzing Jazz Standards – Understand what you play! How To Analyze Chords and Progressions – This video uses the song There Will Never Be Another You as an example and discusses the progressions found in there. All The Things You Are – Harmonic Analysis – All The Things You Are is a great Jazz standard that we all need to have in our repertoire. In this video I am going to go over a thorough All The Things You Are Harmonic Analysis. Analyzing a Standard – Stella By Starlight – Functional Harmony in Jazz – I guess Stella by Starlight is in many ways one of the most mysterious chord progressions among the jazz standards. At the same time, it is so beautiful that everybody just keeps at it until they can play it General videos on Music Theory and Analysis Secondary Dominants – What You Want To Know Understanding what a secondary dominant is and being able to recognize or find them for chords is a powerful tool you can use in your playing and compositions. This video will show you how to use them, understand them and improvise over them And actually, it is pretty simple if you know your basic scales. Jazz Scales! The 3 You Need to practice and How You apply them to Jazz Chords – Jazz Scales can seem like a million options that you all need to learn in all positions and all chords, but there is a way to approach this that is a little easier than trying to learn all jazz scales in all modes. After all the Dorian mode is not as important as the Major or Minor key. This video has a PDF download of the overview of the analysis – Click Here 5 Types of Chord Progressions You Need To Recognize and Be Able To Play – Harmonic Analysis – In this video, I will go over 5 types of progressions that if you can use to better understand the functional harmony that you find in a jazz standard. Music Theory Is The Effective Way For You To Learn Faster – If you know you basic Music Theory well then you can easily start to add another level to how you analyze melodies and chord progressions which will help you work more focused and learn faster when you practice. You can also go through the playlistson YouTube: Analyzing a Jazz Standard – Harmonic analysis of Jazz Pieces Get a free E-book If you want to download a Free E-book of 15 II Valt I licks then subscribe to my newsletter: In this lesson I plan to show you how to analyse a chord progression and discuss how you can use this information to improvise. And we are going to use the first half of the Jazz Standard My Romance as our example. Analysing a chord progression is partially subjective. There are a number of different ways to analyse the same chord progression – so the way I'm going to do it is not the only way you can do it. I've got my own personal preferences and biases which I will explain as we go. And unfortunately, learning how to analyse a progression well only comes with practice. There are certain patterns and clichés that you discover only by analysing lots of different Jazz Standards. How to Analyse a Chord Progression When analysing a chord progression, take the following general steps: Analyse the overall Form of the song; Analyse the First Level Chord Progression – this looks at each individual chord as a separate, standalone entity; Analyse the Second Level Chord Progression – this looks at only the structurally important chords and functionality, ignoring immaterial passing chords. But what is 'important' and what is 'unimportant' is to an extent subjective. My Romance Form So first, we look at the overall form of the song (note that the form shown in the above lead sheet is incorrect). For this you look at the: Number of bars And the sections In Jazz some common song forms used are the: 12 Bar Blues 32 Bar AABA 32 Bar ABAC 16 Bar AB So looking at My Romance, we see it has a 32 bar ABAC form. Easy. Moving on. First Level Chord Progression Next, we look at the First Level Chord Progression. To do this we: Determine the key Find the Key Signature Find Cadences at end of phrases and sections Look for ii-V-I's, V-I's, and ii-V's (incomplete cadences that resolve to the I chord at the beginning of the next section) Or if it's a blues, you'll find IV-I plagal cadences at the end of phrases The last chord of the song is often the tonic Label all chords with Roman Numerals based on their relationship to the I chord If we look at My Romance we see that the key signature is in C Major. We also see that section A ends with a ii-V-I in C with the C7 being a kind of pickup or anacrusis chord (in fact a secondary dominant) leading to the next section. And section B ends with an incomplete ii-V in C. So I think it's pretty clear that this song is written in the key of C Major. Notice also that the last chord of the song (ignoring the turnaround) is C6. Next, we label all chords with Roman Numerals based on their relationship to the I chord (see below). I find it helps to write out all the diatonic chords of the key, just for your own reference. CMaj7, Dm7, Em7, FMaj7, G7, Am7, Bm7♭5 Now, this First Level analysis doesn't tell you very much, but it's a start. Second Level Chord Progression Next, we look at the Second Level Chord Progression. On this level we are looking to reduce the First Level Progression to its simplest form by getting rid of the unimportant chords and keeping only the structurally important chords. In this way we analyse the progression in terms of its functionality. Essentially, we want to reduce each chord into one of three categories: Predominant (P) – pulls or wants to resolve to the Dominant Dominant (D) – pulls or wants to resolve to the Tonic Tonic (T) – sounds at rest and resolved FunctionTensionChord TonicNoneCMaj7, Em7, Am7 DominantLotsG7, Bø7 Pre-DominantSomeDm7, FMaj7 Functional Chord Progressions generally move through the following pattern: Tonic→Pre-Dominant→Dominant→Tonic And in Jazz the PD→D→T Progression generally takes the form of a ii-V-I. ii-V-I's are the building blocks of Tonal Jazz. They are everywhere, so look for them in every song. Once you find this PD→D→T cadential progression, everything before the Pre-Dominant Chord is considered 'Tonic Prolongation' – that is, chords that prolong the Tonic without a cadence. A phrase can have a complete cadence – so ending on the Tonic: T—————— PD D T Or an incomplete cadence – so ending on the Dominant: T—————— PD D For example: So Tonic Prolongation is literally that; chords that just serve to prolong the Tonic function. These are generally substitutions of the tonic chord or just quick passing chords. Even the V7 chord above doesn't really sound like a cadence as it is very quick and hasn't been prepared by a Pre-Dominant chord. Second Level Analysis Steps When analysing a chord progression on the Second Level I perform the following steps: Complete the First Level Analysis Look and label all ii-V-I's Look for Tonic Prolongation Look and label non-diatonic chords Non-diatonic chords can either: The thing passing chords, borrowed chords and secondary dominants all share in common is that they are generally very quick and last for no more than 1/2 to 1 bar, and as such do not have time to change the tonal centre, or only change the tonal centre for a short period of time. My personal bias: modulation is a last resort. I try to analyse chords as passing, borrowed, substitute or secondary dominant first, if possible. And only then do I consider modulation. This is just a personal bias, and you can argue otherwise. So looking at Section A of My Romance. I label all the ii-V movements with brackets and all the V-I movements with arrows; this allows me to find all the ii-V-I movements Then everything before this ii-V-I movement is a Tonic Prolongation I look for and label passing chords, borrowed chords, substitutions, and secondary dominants. Below is a table with the chord progression for My Romance written out and analysed. The first row is the bar numbers. The second row is the chord progression. The third row is the First Level Chord Progression. The fourth row is the Second Level Chord Progression. The fifth row is the Function of each chord. Roman Numerals in red are the modulations/key changes Section A Bars 1 & 2 are just a Tonic Prolongation of the CMaj7 chord. FMaj7 is a quick passing chord. Em7 and Am7 are both chord substitutes of CMaj7. E♭o (which is an alternate chord given in the lead sheet) is just a passing chord. In bars 3 & 4 we have a ii-V-I in C, which we label PD, D and T. So bars 1 – 4 are all in the key of C Major. At the end of bar 4 we have a secondary dominant, which I have labelled SD. This E7#5 chord tonicises the Am7 chord, which is of course, the relative minor of C Major. Then another E7#5 chord takes us to another Am7 chord. Here we are playing a V-I-V-I chord progression in the key of A minor. I would call this a modulation, because it lasts for 2 bars, which is a relatively long time, and because it's moved to the relative minor which is a really common modulation. And there are no ii-V-I's in the key of A minor, so there is no PD→D→T progression. Instead the chord progression moves quite quickly through a V-I-V-I progression, so I would call this a Tonic Prolongation of the Am7 chord. Then at the end of bar 6, we have another secondary dominant which is tonicising the Dm7. In bar 7 and 8 we have a ii-V-I in C. So then to summarise, Section A starts in C Major, plays a Tonic Prolongation followed by a ii-V-I. This then modulates to the key of A minor for two bars, and returns to the key of C Major for the final two bars with another ii-V-I. This is followed by a secondary dominant, tonicising the FMaj7, which is the first chord is Section B, to which we now turn our attention. Section B In bars 9 & 10 we have an FMaj7 (which is the IV chord of C Major and has a PD function) moving to the B♭7 chord (which is a♭VII7 and a D function). And this is where practice and experience comes in handy. This may look like a bit of a strange progression, but really it's a simple backdoor progression. And the B♭7 is a borrowed chord from the parallel minor (C Aeolian). And this B♭7 functions as a plain old Dominant chord. So it's still a PD→D→T progression in the key of C, we've just used modal interchange to make it a bit more interesting. This is then followed by a secondary dominant tonicising the FMaj7 chord and we go straight into another backdoor progression. So bars 9 – 12 are all in the key of C Major, even though the contain some non-diatonic chords. In bars 13 & 14 we have a minor ii-V-I in E minor, so we have modulated to the key of E minor. We then have a B♭7 moving to an Am7. Now, the B♭7 is a tritone substitution of an E7, which is the V7 chord of Am7. So really this is a tritone substitution of a secondary dominant chord. Then in bar 15 we have a ii-V in G Major, which is the relative major of E minor. And we finish with a ii-V back in our original key of C Major. You could also argue that bars 15 – 16 are both in the key of C Major and the D7 is just a passing chord between Am7 and Dm7. And that very long explanation is how to analyse a chord progression. First and Second Level Improvisation Ok, so we have now analysed the above chord progression. Great. Now what? What do we do with this information? Well, we can use it to influence how we improvise over this song. In the same way that we distinguished between the First Level chord progression and the Second Level chord progression, we can make a similar distinction with improvisation. We can have a First Level improvisation or a Second Level improvisation. A First Level improvisation (the first row under the Roman Numerals – 4th row down) simply involves soloing using the relevant mode for each chord. This is a perfectly fine way to solo, but it has one obvious drawback. Because the chords change every half bar on average, you have to change scales every half bar. This can be a little bit challenging. So instead we can play a Second Level improvisation. That is, play the scales that relate only to the Second Level, functional, important chords (the 5th row down). Further, if there is a non-diatonic chord played for a short period of time (like in bar 6 with the A7#5; or in bars 8 & 10 with the C7; or bar 14 with the B♭7) I would just play straight through or straight over the harmony, ignoring the chord change. Because these chords only last for a short period of time (only half a bar), you're only playing the 'wrong' scale very quickly (which builds up tension) before resolving that tension with the next chord (so keep playing A minor over the A7#5; C Major over the C7's; and E minor over the B♭7). So the Second Level improvisation is much easier than the First Level because we are using far fewer scales. And of course, you would use these scales as a 'base scale' from which to depart into more exciting improvisational ideas and techniques – like side slipping, cycled patterns, chromatic runs, etc. So even though we have a relatively complex chord progression, by thinking about it on the Second Level we can break it down to a few really simple keys and scales and then add the usual chromaticism and complexity that Jazz typically exhibits. Conclusion So as you can see, analysing a chord progression can actually be quite challenging and rather subjective. Again, it's worth repeating that there is more than one way to analyse a chord progression, and my way isn't necessarily 100% definitive. And also note that chord progressions can be far more complex than this. You can also have Pre-Dominant Prolongation and Dominant Prolongation chords, but Tonic Prolongation is the most common. It's also worth mentioning that this Second Level harmonic analysis only works with functional chord progressions. In more modern Jazz, we often find non-functional chord progressions. That is, the chords do not pull towards a tonic chord or tonal centre, so we have chord progressions that seemingly float around without any reference point or resolving chord. Now, you can't really analyse a non-functional chord progressions using this functional Second Level harmonic analysis. Instead, we would just stop at the First Level and look for common scales. >> NEXT LESSON >> Born in America, jazz can be seen as a reflection of the cultural diversity and individualism of this country. At its core are an openness to all influences and personal expression through improvisation. Throughout its history, jazz has straddled the worlds of popular music and art music, and it has expanded to a point where its styles are so varied that one artist may sound completely unrelated to another. First performed in bars, jazz can now be heard in clubs, concert halls, universities, and large festivals all over the world. New Orleans, Louisiana, around the turn of the 20th century was a melting pot of cultures. A major port city, people from all over the world come together there, and as a result, musicians are exposed to a variety of music. European classical music, American blues, and South American songs and rhythms came together to form what became known as jazz. The origin of the word jazz is widely disputed, although it is thought to have originally been a sexual term. One thing that distinguishes jazz music is its focus on improvisation. Louis Armstrong, a trumpet player from New Orleans and then Chicago, is considered the father of modern jazz improvisation. His trumpet solos were melodic and playful and filled with energy that could only result from being composed on the spot. A leader of several groups in the 1920s and 30s, Armstrong inspired countless others to make the music their own by developing a personal style of improvisation. Thanks to early records, the music of Armstrong and others in New Orleans could reach a broad radio audience. The music's popularity began to increase as did its sophistication, and major cultural centers around the country began to feature jazz bands. Chicago, Kansas City, and New York had the most thriving music scenes in the 1940s, where dance halls were filled with fans that came to see large jazz ensembles. This period is known as the swing era, referring to the lilting "swing" dance rhythms employed by the Big Bands. Benny Goodman popularized the music for white audiences. Other influential bandleaders were Cab Calloway and Count Basie. One of the greatest jazz vocalists of the 1930s to the 1950s, Billie "Lady Day" Holiday could wrench enormous emotion out of any word in a jazz tune. She made her first recordings with Benny Goodman but found wider fame with Count Basie's orchestra. Influential bandleader, composer of American standards, and pianist Duke Ellington was a pioneer in the Big Band era, and his band lasted for more than 50 years, based out of New York, though they toured worldwide. He is widely renowned as America's greatest composer. His career started in the 1920s and extended into the 1970s. Big Bands gave musicians the opportunity to experiment with different approaches to improvisation. While members of a Big Band, saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie began to develop a highly virtuosic and harmonically advanced style known as "bebop," an onomatopoeic reference to the rhythmic punches heard in the music. Parker and Gillespie performed their music in small ensembles all over the country, and musicians flocked to hear the new direction jazz was taking. The intellectual approach and technical facility of these pioneers of bebop set the standard for today's jazz musicians. Other bebop influencers include Thelonious Monk and Max Roach. One of jazz's most popular singers for 50 years was Ella Fitzgerald, who sold 40 million records in her lifetime and toured the nation widely, leading her own band. She started her career during the Big Band era but adapted to bebop and other styles, becoming a pioneer in scat singing. In 1944, Miles Davis joined Charlie Parker's band (his idol), but it wasn't long before his experimentation and improvisation led him to front his own projects. (See "Kind of Blue," the biggest-selling jazz album of all time.) His 1960s quintet, which included John Coltrane, is lauded as one of the most influential in jazz—and this was even before he recorded "Bitches Brew." He's the most influential jazz artist of the second half of the 20th century, due to his constant reinvention of himself and jazz music. Jazz is a highly developed art form that continues to evolve and expand in numerous directions. The music of each decade sounds fresh and distinct from the music that preceded it. Since the days of bebop, the jazz scene has included avant-garde music (Sun Ra, Charles Mingus, Eric Dolphy, Ornette Coleman), Latin jazz (Tito Puente, Stan Getz, Cal Tjader, Mongo Santamaria, Poncho Sanchez) jazz/rock fusion (Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Freddie Hubbard), and countless other styles. Jazz today is so diverse and broad that there is something interesting to find in every artist's style. Reddit and its partners use cookies and similar technologies to provide you with a better experience. By accepting all cookies, you agree to our use of cookies to deliver and maintain our services and site, improve the quality of Reddit, personalize Reddit content and advertising, and measure the effectiveness of advertising. 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Donate Today The Complete Collection of Jazz Standards Progressions Fully Anlayzed Watch the video to learn what's new in the 3rd edition. We use the Jazz Standards Progression Book To Write an Arrangement Understanding the harmonic progression will take your playing to the next level Return & Refund Policy Jazz is a kind of music in which improvisation is typically an important part. In most jazz performances, players play solos which they make up on the spot, which requires considerable skill. There is tremendous variety in jazz, but most jazz is very rhythmic, has a forward momentum called "swing," and uses "bent" or "blue" notes. You can often hear "call--and--response" patterns in jazz, in which one instrument, voice, or part of the band answers another. (You can hear Ella Fitzgerald and Roy Eldridge do "call and response" in Ella's Singing Class.) Jazz can express many different emotions, from pain to sheer joy. In jazz, you may hear the sounds of freedom-for the music has been a powerful voice for people suffering unfair treatment because of the color of the skin, or because they lived in a country run by a cruel dictator. Jazz musicians place a high value on finding their own sound and style, and that means, for example, that trumpeter Miles Davis sounds very different than trumpeter Louis Armstrong (whose sound you can hear in Louis's Music Class.) Jazz musicians like to play their songs in their own distinct styles, and so you might listen to a dozen different jazz recordings of the same song, but each will sound different. The musicians' playing styles make each version different, and so do the improvised solos. Jazz is about making something familiar--a familiar song--into something fresh. And about making something shared--a tune that everyone knows--into somethingpersonal. Those are just some of the reasons that jazz is a great art form, and why some people consider it "America's classical music."Jazz developed in the United States in the very early part of the 20th century. New Orleans, near the mouth of the Mississippi River, played a key role in this development. The city's population was more diverse than anywhere else in the South, and people of African, French, Caribbean, Italian, German, Mexican, and American Indian, as well as English, descent interacted with one another. African-American musical traditions mixed with others and gradually jazz emerged from a blend of ragtime, marches, blues, and other kinds of music. At first jazz was mostly for dancing. (In later years, people would sit and listen to it.) After the first recordings of jazz were made in 1917, the music spread widely and developed rapidly. The evolution of jazz was led by a series of brilliant musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington (listen to Ellington in Duke's Music Class), Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis. Jazz developed a series of different styles including traditional jazz, swing (listen, for example, to Benny Carter, who got his start in swing music, in Benny's Music Class) bebop, cool jazz, and jazz?rock, among others. At the same time, jazz spread from the United States to many parts of the world, and today jazz musicians--and jazz festivals--can be found in dozens of nations. Jazz is one of the United States's greatest exports to the world. You don't need to know much about jazz theory to learn how to play jazz. This is one of the biggest misconceptions jazz-curious musicians have. Many of the deeper jazz theory concepts develop naturally after you've been listening to and playing jazz music for a little bit. To get the train rolling with jazz improvisation, jazz harmony, and learning jazz standards, you really only need to understand some basic music theory concepts. After that, the snowball effect takes over! Learning jazz is more like learning a language than learning algebra—the more you immerse yourself in it and interact with other speakers, the more quickly it will come. Though having a basic command of music theory and jazz harmony helps, speaking a new language naturally isn't something you learn from books. Likewise, learning jazz music and jazz music theory is best approached through listening, playing, and interacting with jazz musicians. In this ultimate guide to jazz theory, we will make learning jazz simple! We're going to stick to the basics of what you need to know with the understanding that the other more complicated stuff will come to you naturally with time. We'll cover four steps to master the basics of jazz theory and get you playing jazz right away: Step #1: Basic 7th Chords (The Building Blocks of Jazz Music) Step #2: Scales (aka. Pitch Collections) Step #3: Guide Tones and Voice Leading Step #4: Jazz Chord Progressions Take these four steps, and you'll be well on your way to understanding jazz theory. If you want to take the plunge and go deeper into jazz theory, jazz harmony, and jazz improvising, then you should check out the Learn Jazz Standards Inner Circle. The Inner Circle has everything you need to take your jazz playing to the next level, whether you play jazz guitar or harp! We have instrument-specific resources, instrument-agnostic courses, and masterclasses to help you become the best jazz musician you can be! Improve in 30 days or less. Join the Inner Circle. Jazz music is a language. It doesn't matter what instrument you play, whether it's jazz guitar, piano, trumpet, drums, or voice. All instruments can speak the jazz language. All languages have rules—music theory is simply the grammar, sentence structure, and analysis element of understanding jazz language. However, you don't need to know all the rules to converse with someone. In fact, before you went to school and started learning the basic theory behind whatever your native language is, you were already speaking it. Learning grammar helps you intellectually understand the language better and expand your abilities to express and formulate your own ideas, but knowing it isn't necessary to communicate. Most native speakers of a language don't have an excellent understanding of advanced grammar anyway! Knowledge of jazz theory—all the jazz scales, rich chords, and chord progressions—will certainly help you expand what you can do on your instrument, but you don't need to know it inside and out to start playing! It certainly helps, though! Here's how. Have you ever learned a jazz lick from one of your favorite players and didn't understand why it sounded so cool? Check out this Sonny Rollins jazz lick: Sonny Rollins outlines the jazz harmony (a ii-V-I progression, in this case). By that, I mean he is choosing specific notes that complement or deliberately contrast with the harmony of the moment. The ii: First, he outlines an F-9 arpeggio (G-F-C-Eb or 9th-1st-5th-7th) The V: Then he resolves to the 3rd of the dominant seventh chord (the D in Bb7alt) from a whole step below and a half step above, also emphasizing the b9 altered extension (the B♮) The I: Then, he resolves to the 3rd of the Eb7 (G) Don't be intimidated if this doesn't make sense yet! We'll get there. Understanding chord progressions and what notes are available to you is essential when learning jazz standards. If you recognize what chord progressions you are dealing with, you can start simplifying things into categories rather than trying to remember individual chords and choose notes accordingly. Check out this article for more on ii-V-I progressions. Jazz theory gives musicians a logical framework for understanding and communicating what is happening in jazz music. It helps players navigate jazz harmony and explains various characteristics of the jazz language, like chromaticism and swing. If you understand the harmonic relationships jazz music takes advantage of, you'll realize just how many possibilities you have when playing and composing in the jazz style. Jazz theory helps contextualize and explain the jazz language, just like grammar helps you contextualize and explain your native language. However, jazz theory can only take you so far on its own. There are things that jazz theory won't help you with. While jazz theory is helpful for understanding and conceptualizing jazz language, it's not great for internalizing it. Children don't learn to speak by reading grammar books. They learn through imitation and repetition of the sounds they hear. Learning jazz utilizes the same process. We listen, imitate, repeat, and as a result, we internalize the characteristics of jazz music. You'll sound calculated and robotic if you rely on theory or sheet music to learn jazz language. When it comes to becoming a great improviser, improving your ear is one of the most important things you can do. But music theory alone isn't the best way to go about this. You want to learn licks, solos, and standards by ear. You'll also want to know some of the fundamentals of ear training to identify certain chords, scales, and important intervals. Books can teach you how to do this, but at the end of the day, you have to do it yourself. Now that we know what jazz music theory can and can't do for us, let's dig into the four steps for mastering jazz harmony and music theory. To refresh, they are: Step #1: Basic 7th Chords (The Building Blocks of Jazz Music) Step #2: Scales (aka. "Pitch Collections") Step #3: Guide Tones and Voice Leading Step #4: Jazz Chord Progressions Jazz chords are the place to start. If you understand jazz chords, jazz harmony is much easier to grasp. 7th chords are the basic chords used in jazz music. Triads are important, but the majority of jazz standards use 7th chords. Chords with more than three notes are called 7th chords because, in theory, after stacking a triad (root-third-fifth), the following note is the 7th. What's a 7th chord? A 7th chord is a triad plus the 7th tone of its corresponding scale stacked on top. Basic formula: Root-3rd-5th-7th (3rd, 5th, or 7th altered depending on quality) There are five qualities (or basic varieties) of 7th chords: major 7th chords dominant 7th chords minor 7th chords half-diminished chords diminished 7th chords Let's start with the major 7th. Formula for a maj7 chord: Root-3rd-5th-7th You can think of a maj7 chord as a major triad (Root-3rd-5th) with the 7th scale degree stacked on top. By 7th scale degree, I mean the 7th scale degree from the major scale. When you stack these scale degrees on top of each other, you get a Cmaj7: C-E-G-B. Chords can be inverted, too. That means all the same notes are present, but the order in which they are stacked changes. Here is a Cmaj7 notated in Root Position, 1st Inversion, 2nd Inversion, and 3rd Inversion. Notice how the root moves to the top to give us a first inversion maj7 chord. Then, the third, on the bottom in the first inversion, moves to the top to give us a second inversion maj7 chord. This puts the fifth on the bottom, which moves to the top to give us a third inversion chord. Formula for a dominant seven chord: Root-3rd-5th-b7 The formula is nearly the same as a maj7 chord; however, a dominant chord has b7 instead. Dominant seven chords play a massive role in jazz, the blues, and jazz improvisation, so these are important chords to know! This chord is built from notes of the Mixolydian scale, one of the modes of the major scale: When you stack these scale degrees on top of each other, you get a C7: C-E-G-Bb. Here is a C7 notated in Root Position, 1st Inversion, 2nd Inversion, and 3rd Inversion: C7 C9 (dominant seventh chord with a natural 9th) C7b9 or C7#9 (dominant seventh chord with an altered 9th) C7#11 or C7b5 (dominant seventh chord with a sharp 11th or b5th) Csus7 (dominant chord with a natural 11th or 4th) C13 (dominant chord with a natural 13th) C7#5 or C7b13th (dominant 7th chord with a sharp 5th or b13th) Formula for a minor 7 chord: Root-b3-5th-b7 Minor seventh chords have a flat 3rd (or minor third) and a flat 7th. You can think of them like a minor triad plus a minor 7th interval. This chord is built from the root, third, fifth, and seventh of the natural minor scale: When you stack these scale degrees on top of each other, you get a Cmin7: C-Eb-G-Bb. Here is the Cmin7 notated in Root Position, 1st Inversion, 2nd Inversion, and 3rd Inversion. Formula for a Half-Diminished chord: Root-b3-b5-b7 Half-diminished chords are diminished triads with a minor seventh interval added on top. These chords are also minor 7(b5) chords because they are like min7 chords with a flattened 5th. These chord tones come from the Locrian scale, a major scale mode: When you stack these scale degrees on top of each other, you get a Cmin7(b5): C-Eb-Gb-Bb. Here is the Cmin7(b5) notated in Root Position, 1st Inversion, 2nd Inversion, and 3rd Inversion. Formula for a Diminished seven chord: Root-b3-b5-bb7 To make a fully diminished 7th chord, take a half-diminished chord and flat the 7th again! We can build this chord from the Whole-Half Diminished scale: When spelling this chord, we call the 7th a bb7th, not a 6th, even though they are enharmonically equivalent. In the key of C, the 7th in a fully diminished chord would be a Bbb. When you stack these scale degrees on top of each other, you get a Cdim7: C-Eb-Gb-Bbb. You can play most jazz standards if you know how to build these five types of 7th chords. The basic chord quality types we just reviewed are just the beginning. Jazz musicians will add chord extensions and alter chord tones to produce the many colorful and rich-sounding chords in jazz music. Let's go over some of them! Chord extensions are essentially chord tones added above the basic 7th chord structure. In other words, chord extensions are the notes beyond the root, the 3rd, the 5th, and the 7th. These extensions don't replace the R-3rd-5th-7th but are added in addition to achieve the desired sound. Depending on the voicing, certain chord tones can be omitted, usually starting with the 5th. The possible extensions are the 9th, 11th, and 13th. The 9th is the same as the 2nd, just up an octave. The 11th is the same as the 4th, up an octave. The 13th is the same as the 6th, up an octave. You can add a 9th to the following basic 7th chord types: Maj7 Dominant Min7 Half-diminished Formula: R-3rd-5th-7th-9th Example: Cmaj9 You can add an 11th to the following 7th chord types: min7 half-diminished diminished Formula: R-3rd-5th-7th-9th-11th Example: Cmin11 You can add a 13th to the following 7th chord qualities: Formula: R-3rd-5th-7th-9th-13th Example: C13 An altered extension is a chord extension that is raised or lowered by a half step. Altered extensions are commonly found on dominant chords (i.e., b9/#9), but other 7th chord qualities can also have them. The natural 11th is not used on maj7 chords because it would clash with the 3rd. However, the #11 can be used on Maj7 chords. Dominant chords resolve back to the tonic chord in chord progressions. Because of this function, musicians often heavily alter them to create strong tension that gets released upon the resolution. Dominant chords are the most flexible when it comes to altered extensions. Altered extensions for dominant chords: Alt Chords are dominant chords where anything goes. When you see C7alt, you can assume any alterations are on the table. Here is a C7alt chord: That's a pretty comprehensive crash course on jazz chords! Let's move on to step 2, or scales! Scales are extremely important, but unfortunately, they are often misused! Scales are often thought of as the building blocks of solos and melodies. This is technically true because scales isolate which notes you should or shouldn't play over a certain tonality. However, memorizing every scale won't make your solos better. Think of scales like clay and your solo like a sculpture. You can buy all the varieties of clay you want, but that won't make you a good sculptor. The same is true for scales. You can memorize all the scales you want, but if you don't know how to shape, use, and develop ideas with them, it's all a bunch of clay. Let's break down what memorizing scales will and will not help you with. Scales are essential for navigating your instrument, understanding chord qualities, reading music, and learning other cornerstone elements of playing. If you want to be a good jazz improviser, you need to know your instrument inside and out. Musicians use scales to practice the act of playing their instruments. They are one of the musical categories—along with chords, arpeggios, and chord progressions—musicians can practice to improve on their instruments and deepen their understanding of music theory. Scales are kind of like the medium we use to paint melodies. Using the earlier metaphor, they are the clay we use to sculpt musical ideas. Scales can help you identify pitch collections that conceptualize a harmonic or melodic concept. Understanding different aspects of music theory can be incredibly helpful. Again, scales are ways of organizing groups of pitches. They are the medium musicians use to create melodies, but they are not the melodies themselves. It would be like trying to label paint "Impressionist paint," "post-modern paint," or "high Renaissance paint." It's not the paint that makes a piece of art belong to a certain style. Likewise, it isn't the scale that makes a piece of music belong to a certain language. Scales are pitch collections, not musical phrases. A scale is not a melody. It is a set of pitches ordered by frequency! Scales are an essential part of melody, but they aren't melodies themselves. Only my learning melodies can you play melodically! Scales show you the "right note" to play, but they don't teach you how to create actual music. Practicing scales won't directly improve your ear (at least not nearly as well as dedicated ear training practice will). You can certainly use scales as a subject of study for ear training, but playing scales robotically will not push your ear where it needs to go. To get started with ear training, check out these three ear-training exercises! Think pitch collection when you hear scale. Scales are a set of pitches organized by frequency—low to high and high to low. However, the order from low to high can limit your imagination. That is why you should think of scales as a set of all possible note choices or, in other words, pitch collections. When playing diatonically (in a major or minor key), a pitch collection represents all the possible correct note choices you have. Thinking of scales as pitch collections helps you break free from the linear thinking scales often lock students into. When we think about scales this way, it's no longer "play melodic minor scales over the minor i chord." Instead, it is "use the melodic minor pitch collection to target different important chord tones." You only need to find one scale (or pitch collection) to play over each of the five 7th chord qualities discussed earlier in the section on jazz chords. Four of the five scales we're about to discuss are modes of the major scale, meaning they are the same scale but start on a different note in the sequence. To quickly break down modes, check this out: 1st Mode: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C 2nd Mode: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C 3rd Mode: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C 4th Mode: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C 5th Mode: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C 6th Mode: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C 7th Mode: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C The sequence of notes stays the same, but the note you start on changes based on which mode of the major scale you are playing. For more on modes, check out our ultimate guide to the modes of the major scale. So, the five scales you need to play over the five different chord qualities most commonly found in jazz are: Major Scale (Ionian mode) Dorian Minor Scale Mixolydian Scale Locrian Scale Whole-Half Diminished ScaleLet'ss look at each in greater detail. Intervallic formula: W-W-H-W-W-W-H Scale tone formula: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7 C major scale: C-D-E-F-G-A-B Chord Quality: Maj7 chords (either the I chord or the IV chord—that is, diatonic maj7 chords) Dorian is the 2nd mode of the major scale and starts on the second scale degree. You can also consider this scale a natural minor scale with a raised 6th. Intervallic formula: W-H-W-W-W-H-W Scale tone formula: 1-2-b3-4-5-6-b7 D Dorian: D-E-F-G-A-B-C Chord Qualities: Dmin7 (ii) or Dmin7 (i) Check out this article for more on the Dorian minor scale. Mixolydian is the 5th mode of the major scale and starts on the fifth scale degree. You can think of this mode as a major scale with a flatted 7th. Intervallic formula: W-W-H-W-W-H-W Scale tone formula: 1-2-3-4-5-6-b7 G Mixolydian: G-A-B-C-D-E-F Chord Qualities: G7 (V) or any dominant 7th chords Check out this article for more on the Mixolydian scale. Locrian is the 7th and last major scale mode. It starts on the seventh scale degree. The Locrian mode is a bit of a more obscure one. Intervallic formula: H-W-W-H-W-W-W Scale tone formula: 1-b2-b3-4-b5-b6-b7 B Locrian: B-C-D-E-F-G-A Chords Qualities: Half diminished/min7(b5) chords (diatonic viiø chords or iiø chords in a minor iiø-V progression) Diminished scales are octatonic symmetrical scales. Symmetrical scales can be evenly broken into smaller, even pieces. The diminished scale breaks up into four even groups of minor thirds, which are made of a whole step and a half step (or a half step and a whole step). Other symmetrical scales are the whole-tone scale and the chromatic scale. The whole-half diminished scale starts with a whole step, and the half-whole diminished scale starts with a half step. Octatonic scales break an octave up into eight notes (as opposed to the major scale, which is a heptatonic scale with seven notes). Intervallic formula: [W-H]-[W-H]-[W-H]-[W-H] Scale tone formula: 1-2-b3-4-#4-#5-6-7-8 C whole half diminished scale: C-D-Eb-F-Gb-G#-A-B Chord Qualities: Any diminished 7th chord We can talk about many other jazz scales and scale applications, like the altered scale or many uses for pentatonic scales, but knowing about them isn't necessary to start playing jazz. In fact, you can check out this video to learn more about the only two scales you really need to play jazz: For more on other jazz scales, check out this article on 16 jazz scales. You can also check out this article on the many different applications for pentatonic scales. We've learned the chords and scales you need to know in order to play jazz and master jazz theory. But there's more! We're about to take the next step and learn about guide tones and voice leading. It is the guide tones of a chord that make the magic happen. Guide tones are the 3rd and the 7th of each chord. Here is why they are important: The 3rd lets you know if the chord is major or minor The 7th lets you know if the chord is minor, dominant, or major. Putting aside diminished and half-diminished chords, which have b5s, you can see that the 3rd and the 7th are the most important chord tones in terms of identifying a chord's quality. Guide tones are notes within a chord structure that both help define a chord and can be used to transition to another chord melodically. When you examine guide tones in a chord progression—like a ii-V-I progression—you'll notice how guide tones move stepwise. Dmin7 guide tones: G7 guide tones: Cmaj7 guide tones: In the transition from D-7 to G7, the F remained the same through both chords, and the 7th of the D-7 (C) moved down a half step to become the 3rd of the G7 (B). In the transition from G7 to Cmaj7, the B remained the same through both chords, but the 7th of G7 (F) moved down a step to become the 3rd of Cmaj7 (E). This is an example of voice leading. Voice leading is the smooth melodic movement of notes (or voices) from one chord to the next. Prioritizing smooth, stepwise motion is the key to using guide tones effectively. Guide tones are effective for outlining jazz harmony, but you don't have to play them in the context of chords. You can also play them as lines. If your jazz improvisation incorporates the principles of guide tones and strong voice leading, you won't even need a chord player! You'll be outlining the changes with your note choices. There are many ways to do this, but basic guide tone maps like the one above are a great place to start. Check out this article exploring 20 jazz lines to learn more about the characteristics of jazz vocabulary. That brings us to the last step! Jazz Chord Progressions! The last piece of our puzzle is jazz chord progressions. We've already talked about the ii-V-I, which is probably the most important progression in jazz harmony. But where do these Roman numerals come from, and why are things structured this way? Diatonic chord progressions use chords built from the major and the natural minor scales (with some borrowed chords in the minor chord scale). Here is the major scale harmonized in 7th chords. The Roman numerals beneath indicate both the scale degree and the quality of each chord. The number lets you know the scale degree the chord is based on. In the key of C major, the I would be Cmaj7; the ii would be D-7, and so on. Uppercase numbers (I, IV, and V) indicate major tonality, while lowercase numbers indicate minor tonality (ii, iii, vi, and viiø). Take a look at the major diatonic series shown in the following chart: When you see Roman numeral chord progressions like the ii-V-I, you are actually referring to harmonized scale tones. With a major ii-V-I, you are harmonizing the second, the fifth, and the first scale degree in the major scale. Let's use the C major scale as our default. the ii is built from D the V is built from G the I is built from C The major scale limits what kinds of thirds, fifths, and sevenths you get depending on the scale tone you start on. Check out the appropriate scale tones bolded below: ii: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-c-D-E-F-G-A-B-C V: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-c-D-E-F-G-A-B-C I: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C-D-E-F-G-A-B-c-D-E-F-G-A-B-C Minor harmony uses chords from three minor scales: Natural Minor Scales Harmonic Minor Scales Melodic Minor Scales Let's harmonize them. Here is one minor diatonic series of 7th chords. However, remember that you may encounter chords from other minor scales depending on the song. For a more detailed explanation of minor harmony, check out this video: Or, check out this podcast episode on minor chord progressions: Let's dig into the four most common chord progressions in jazz. As we discussed, the major ii-V-I is jazz's most important chord progression. This jazz chord progression is also important in other styles of music as well. Spend plenty of time working on major and minor ii-V-I's! Example: In this case, we are in the key of C major. Dmin7 is the ii chord, G7 is the V chord, and Cmaj7 is the I chord. Refer back to the Major Diatonic Series chart to see where these come from! There is a minor variant on the ii-V-I that uses chords from the minor diatonic series. Example: The V chord often has altered chord extensions with minor ii-Vs, meaning you can add a b9, #9, or #5 (sometimes #11). You see this chord progression all of the time, especially in turnarounds. Example: It's important to note that the vi chord is minor. However, jazz musicians will often turn it into a dominant 7th chord. This is a common chord substitution you should be aware of. Check out this article to learn more about this chord substitution and other chord substitutions. The I-vi-ii-V also has a minor variant, which pulls from the three minor scales discussed above. Example: Remember that the vi chord in the minor diatonic series is pulled from the melodic minor scale and is half-diminished. The ii chord is half-diminished also, just like the regular minor ii-V. For more on other chord progressions, check out this article on 9 jazz chord progressions. Here are some actionable tips for practicing jazz chord progressions: Learn licks by ear over these important chord progressions that you find on recordings. Map out the chord tones and connect them together with voice leading. Map out the guide tones and connect them together with voice leading. Map out the scales and connect them together with voice leading. This is where we come full circle to what jazz theory is and isn't good for. Remember, jazz theory is important, but it isn't everything! Listening extensively, ear training, and learning licks from the masters are just as important. Jazz theory helps you put that stuff in context. If you want to go beyond the basics and take your jazz playing to the next level, then check out the Learn Jazz Standards Inner Circle. When you join the Inner Circle, you get access to everything you need to accelerate your jazz playing and exponentially expand your jazz theory knowledge, including access to: Monthly jazz standard studies to help you understand jazz theory in practice and improvise over jazz standards In-depth courses and practice programs to help you target and fill the holes in your playing and theory knowledge Plus, you'll join a diverse community of musicians who love jazz as much as you do Ready to accelerate your jazz playing and understanding of jazz theory? Improve in 30 days or less. Join the Inner Circle.