

“Thoughts on Getting Started with Improvisation”

presented by

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Cutting The Changes

Most students and most of their teachers know how to get started on a blues tune or even a modal tune: learn the blues scale or the one modal scale that applies; and make up melodies! But when a “standard tune” pops up—even an eight-bar solo on a Cole Porter tune within a big band chart—panic sets in. The chord changes look like Calculus!

Do not be afraid. Most standard tunes are actually easier to solo over than a blues or a modal tune—because whereas most young musicians in America don’t come to jazz band or combo knowing their modes or blues scales, most know at least half their major scales already. And that’s all you need to get started on standard tunes!

Whether I get to demonstrate with a live musician today or just share the concepts in our limited time together, here’s the deal:

Example 1:

Modes of the Major Scale (in C)

D DORIAN (MINOR) F LYDIAN (MAJOR) A AEOLIAN (MINOR)
C IONIAN (MAJOR) E PHRYGIAN (MINOR) G MIXOLYDIAN (DOMINANT) B LOCRIAN (DIMINISHED)

I hope you’ll agree that I could call the Dorian mode “Fred” and the Locrian mode “Pass the Salad”; they’d still just be the *same notes of the C major scale* but starting on different scale steps, right? And if you stacked a series of chords in thirds above each note of the C major scale, all notes staying in the key of C, then all the chord tones would also be the *same notes of the C major scale* but starting on different scale steps.

Example 2:

Chords Derived from the Modes of the Major Scale (in C)

IONIAN (MAJOR) DORIAN (MINOR) PHRYGIAN (MINOR) LYDIAN (MAJOR) MIXOLYDIAN (DOMINANT) AEOLIAN (MINOR) LOCRIAN (HALF-DIMINISHED)

(BOTTOM NOTES ARE C MAJOR SCALE.)

Therefore you can play the C major scale over each of these chords and sound just fine! That's one scale for *seven* chords! And those seven chords are the chords most likely to appear in a standard tune in C major—plus they often appear in tunes in the relative minor key of A minor. Now *that's* a great way to start soloing over the 8, 16 or 47 chord changes in a standard tune: start with the tonic key's home major scale.

Once you or your students are bored with that, take things to the next level. Chord-progressions are based in a key center; so when chords leave that tonic key (such as our example tonic of C) and stray elsewhere, they enter a new key for a while before returning. Find those keys and adapt accordingly. If it's a *iii-VI-ii-V* in Ab for four bars, then you can solo in the key of Ab major for four bars while forgetting about those chords. If it's a progression in F minor, you can still solo in its relative key of Ab major. I call this "Cutting the Changes."

The table below represents a quick look at a few tunes and the resulting statistics (which of course vary depending on whose version of the tune you're examining). The *Minimum Number of Key Centers* shows how few keys a soloist could use to be completely "inside" the chord changes:

TITLE	# of Chords	# of Different Chords	Minimum # of Key Centers
All the Things You Are	37	25	7
Blue Moon	62	10	3
But Not for Me	45	11	1
Bye Bye Blackbird	34	9	2
Do Nothin' 'Till You Hear From Me	50	14	5
Girl From Ipanema	27	11	8
I Got Rhythm	51	9	4
Love is Here to Stay	51	13	3
(The) More I See You	50	16	5
My Funny Valentine	58	14	3
Over the Rainbow	61	14	4
Summertime (<i>16 measures</i>)	30	11	1
They Can't Take That Away From Me	63	14	4
What's New?	61	18	5
With a Song in my Heart	51	13	2
You Make Me Feel So Young	73	16	2
AVERAGE	50	14	4

The practicality of this approach is self-evident: these tunes average *more than 10 times* as many chord-symbol interruptions as key centers. I ask you: would you rather initially learn to solo over a new tune approaching these concepts with the numbers from *left to right* or from *right to left*? As I study jazz history, I don't see jazz invented from micro to macro (though it's often taught that way). I see jazz created from macro to micro. "Oh, I'm sitting in on this tune. What key is it in, and how long can I play there before someone throws a cymbal at me?" And then, having survived, you seek more detail. Conversely, the regular musicians on that gig are *not* going to have the time to take you aside and dictate all the chord changes to you before you sit in 30 seconds later. Jazz is best learned *macro to micro*.

If you want to know more about my book, ***Cutting the Changes: Jazz Improvisation via Key Centers*** (Kjos Music), visit <www.garciamusic.com/educator/books/ctc.html>, where there are links to a lot of free articles on the topic. Yes, you can buy the book/CD/CD-ROM as well—it's great! But the *concepts* existed long before this book, and I encourage you to learn them well regardless of whether you buy the book or not!

Thematic Dissonance

Young improvisers fear mistakes, the accidental dissonances as they solo. This is not surprising, as American musical education generally teaches consonance first and thoroughly so, leaving dissonance more a mystery. And yet a soloist's identity or "sound" might well be determined more by how he or she treats *dissonance* in a solo: who wants to hear an entirely consonant composition, written or improvised?

I propose that before we clutter the minds of students with "left-brain" theory, chord/scale relationships, and patterns (all of which tend to encourage a frustrating, "cut-and-paste" sound in a soloist), we instead introduce them to the "right-brain" creative stimuli of tension and release, theme and variation, melodic contour, pace, lyricism, and yes, dissonance. By proving at the outset the strength of improvising thematically,

we can greatly reduce students' fear of soloing and provide for them the proper internal creative framework on which to apply the external theory that will follow in later study. After all, aren't we teaching spontaneous composition?

So before getting deep into theory—maybe even before teaching any theory at all—let's PROVE that there are no “wrong” notes. (What could lower a player's fears more than that?) I demonstrate this using four sequential, chromatic exercises, three of which everyone does simultaneously to save time and lower inhibitions. Each exercise limits the parameters of an individual's choices such that dissonance is guaranteed to result. You can find these exercises and the accompanying article “Thematic Dissonance: No Wrong Notes!” on my web page at <www.garciamusic.com/educator/articles/articles.html>. I doubt we'll have time to demonstrate them within our excellent but brief period today.

Improve Your Groove

When you're listening to a concert, what startles you more: wrong notes played within the right rhythms, or any notes that are falling randomly outside of the time-feel? Wrong rhythms almost always sound worse than wrong pitches, and the same is true when soloing. It's important to develop your rhythmic pulse and groove. For very practical exercises towards doing so, I encourage you to check out the articles “It's About Time: Improve Your Groove” and “Where's the Beat?” at the above link. Both include notated and audio examples so that you can hear what you see!

Stealing From The Masters

If you want to play jazz, there is no substitute for *listening* to jazz, live and recorded. And if you want to study jazz, there is no substitute for learning some of the great jazz solos of the masters who have preceded you. Many people are intimidated, however, by the notion of somehow notating on paper the notes and chords of a solo. I understand that.

This makes it even more important to recognize that you can learn a lot from a solo without ever writing it down. Sing along with the solo. Regularly. Go for “the big picture” if you can't mimic it all: learn it like a pop song on the radio. Breathe where it breathes; accent to match the recording; know where the rests fall; be loud/soft as it goes; find syllables that best depict the articulation. If you love that solo, make it yours. Be able eventually to sing it with or without the recording. That level of learning is very important and *will* influence your own jazz vocabulary. How did you learn English? From your parents and family. Now you're learning jazz—from your jazz parents and family. Simple as that.

Ready for the next step of writing something down? You still don't have to write down notes and chords to learn a *lot* about an artist's jazz vocabulary. You can focus on and notate the interesting starts and stops, shapes, articulations, dynamics, rhythmic density, melodic tension and release, tone, areas of swing versus straight eighths, thematic development, quotes, rhythm-section influence, rhythms themselves, and the emotional peaks of the solo without scribing a single pitch or chord. At the simplest level, I've done this with middle-school students to their great delight, whether listening to classical or jazz music.

If this is your next move, check out “Transcribing Jazz Solos without Pitches” at the above link. It'll be ear-opening!

Jazz Theory

If curiosity brings you to the need for a greater understanding of jazz theory, I offer you several resources:

- Regarding chord nomenclature only, visit the above site for “Clear Chord Symbols.” Supporting audio for the examples is also included within the CD-ROM accompanying my *Cutting the Changes* books.
- For a broader view of all kinds of self-study you can do within jazz theory, I refer you to the **Jazz Handbook** by Jamey Aebersold, downloadable as a free PDF from <www.jazzbooks.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=FQBK&Store_Code=JAJAZZ>. It includes *lots* of jazz theory information, lists of artists to listen to, plus a list of some of their best recordings. The last section of the book deals specifically with piano voicings and is an excellent primer. It's part of the overall site at <www.jazzbooks.com>, which has a lot of great stuff!

- Aside from that, my favorite approachable Jazz Theory book is **The Jazz Language** (Alfred) by Dan Haerle, selling for under \$20 at such locales as www.jazzbooks.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=JAJAZZ&Product_Code=JL&Category_Code=-.UgO3IOA0vuc. This and Aebersold's **Handbook** are the two texts I've used for my Jazz Theory classes for over 25 years.

I hope that this workshop has provided you with practical information you can consider applying *today!* If I can be of further assistance—or if you'd simply like me to e-mail you a PDF of this handout so that you can easily click on its links, please feel free to contact me (see below).

I am honored to share the panel with Tony Baker and Bill Holmes. Special thanks to SSG Victor Barranco, SFC Craig Arnold, and SFC Sam Woodhead for their assistance in organizing this panel. My presentation today would not have been possible without support from The American Trombone Workshop, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Conn-Selmer. I hope that you will find the following information of interest.

Jazz Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University

The VCU Jazz Studies program provides its students outstanding opportunities to pursue jazz performance and writing, as evidenced in part by such successful former students as Steve Wilson (sax, Chick Corea's Origin); James Genus (bass, Saturday Night Live Band; recordings with Dave Douglas, Michael Brecker, Mike Stern and John Abercrombie); Victor Goines (sax/clarinet, Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra; director, Northwestern Jazz Studies); Alvester Garnett (drums, recordings with Abbey Lincoln, Cyrus Chestnut, James Carter); Mark Shim (sax, Blue Note recording artist, member of Terence Blanchard sextet); Al Waters (sax, featured with Ray Charles); Alvin Walker (trombone, Count Basie Orchestra), Daniel Clarke (pianist, Mandy Moore, k.d. lang); and Emre Kartari (drums; Jazz Department, Yasar University, Izmir, Turkey). For more information, please visit www.jazz.vcu.edu.

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I have played Bach trombones exclusively for decades and am pleased that Conn-Selmer has co-sponsored me as a clinician for so many wonderful educational events at schools and festivals over the years. My instruments are simply exceptional horns. They assist me in creating my best possible sound, and they respond to me as no others do. I have performed on them around the world and recommend them without reservation!

For those of you seeking technical detail, my tenor trombone is a Model LT16M, purchased in 1980: .509" medium bore, 7-1/2" one-piece yellow brass bell, open gooseneck, chrome-plated nickel silver seamless inner slide, lightweight nickel silver outer slide, nickel silver handgrip, tubular nickel silver body braces, disc balancer, Vincent Bach 6-1/2 AL mouthpiece. After the first 30 years, I decided to buy a new slide, which is also superb.

My bass trombone is a Model LT50B3LG, purchased in 1982: keys of Bb/F/Gb, .562" bore, 10-1/2" one-piece hand-hammered gold bell, traditional double in-line independent rotor system, traditional wrap, chrome-plated nickel silver seamless inner slide, lightweight nickel silver outer slide, nickel silver handgrip, tubular brass braces, Vincent Bach 3G mouthpiece.

For an application form for Conn-Selmer support towards bringing me to your school or event as a clinician, please contact me at ajgarcia@vcu.edu.

Antonio J. García is a performer, composer/arranger, producer, clinician, educator, and author in both instrumental and vocal genres. The Director of Jazz Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, his book, *Cutting the Changes: Jazz Improvisation via Key Centers* (Kjos Music) offers musicians of all ages the opportunity to improvise over standard tunes using just their major scales. He has performed as trombonist, bass trombonist, or pianist with 70 major artists including Ella Fitzgerald, George Shearing, Mel Tormé, Billy Eckstine, Doc Severinsen, Louie Bellson, Dave Brubeck, and Phil Collins. A Bach/Selmer clinician/soloist and avid scat-singer, he is Associate Jazz Editor for the *International Trombone Association Journal*, Past Editor of the International Association for Jazz Education *Jazz Education Journal*, Past President of IAJE-IL, Board member of The Midwest Clinic, is Co-Editor/Contributing Author of *Teaching Jazz: A Course of Study*, and authored a chapter within *The Jazzer's Cookbook* (Meredith Music). He serves as a Network Expert (for Improvisation Materials) for the Jazz Education Network. His articles have been widely published; and his compositions have been published by Kjos, Kendor, Doug Beach, ejazzlines, Walrus, UNC Jazz Press, Three-Two Music, and his own company. García is also the subject of an extensive interview within *Bonanza: Insights and Wisdom from Professional Jazz Trombonists* (Advance Music). Visit his web site at www.garciamusic.com.

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