

## Chart Overload

I know quite a few improvisers who look at chords on a lead sheet and then their minds begin to freeze up. Why? There is a lot of information in a lead sheet, but it's not just the quantity that overwhelms – it's also that the information is layered in ways that aren't always apparent. The goal is to interpret the chart so you can be inspired to create a good solo. That means putting the information in the right order so you know what to use and when.

### Hierarchy of Information

The first thing to understand is that there is a hierarchy of information in a chart or lead sheet. This information goes from high-level (the big picture) to low-level (the details). Often, lead sheets are scratched out in a hard-to-read format. Even with good manuscript, it takes a while to study and absorb the information in the chart.

The basic kinds of tune information are listed below from high-level to low-level:

1. Tune form – know the sections (A, B, C) and their lengths, with repeats and road signs.
2. Keys – know the key centers in the tune, such as simplified ii-V-I's.
3. Modulations and transitions – know when the tune moves to a new key and when new sections are approaching.
4. Chord qualities – be aware of the major, minor, dominant, and suspended chords, especially those that last for a measure or more.
5. Chord details – be aware of the extensions (top number) and dominant alterations if any.

### The Backwards Approach – Common but Ineffective

Human nature often drags us into worrying about the details before we understand the big picture. When we see a chart we often look at the information backwards – 5 through 1. First we worry about dominant alterations, then majors and minor chords, etc. We may play the right alterations but our shapes and ideas may have little to do with the form or character of the tune. Ironically, the alterations are often interchangeable on a chord, or they printed differently in different tune versions.

Each tune should have its own character and imprint that influence the soundscape of the solo. That doesn't mean we can play the wrong chord qualities – we just need to make sure that our chord details are adding up to a meaningful bigger picture.

### The Top-Down, Flexible Approach

When you keep the overall goal in mind (using the chart to create a good solo), it's easier to take a more flexible approach. Here are some guidelines to soloing from a lead sheet:

- Remember, the solo and the melody are most important.
- Focus on SHAPE and soundscapes (see Chapter 4A).
- Don't overload the solo with density.
- Know the form and transitions.
- Use variety in how much you outline a chord – sometimes play statically (see Chapter 4F), sometimes hit the alterations, sometimes go outside, sometimes focus on scale patterns.