

More Static

No, we don't want more static in our FM reception – but static improvisation can be good. Even so, static improv is often misunderstood, mostly because of competing “soundwaves.”

Arpeggio-itis

Here's the issue: we get bombarded with the message of “you've gotta play arpeggios.” I've heard jazz performers, clinicians, and educators say that a successful solo is one where the soloist outlines as many of the chords as clearly as possible, so there's no doubt in the listener's mind what chord is sounding. OK, that works for Giant Steps, but that can lead to a “solve-the-puzzle by playing the right arpeggio” mentality. Let's look at the pros and cons of “arpeggio-itis” here:

1. Pro – Learning arpeggios helps you navigate chord progressions and convey the chord quality.
2. Pro – Arpeggios can be valuable in outlining *outside* chords.
3. Con – In most cases, the rhythm section is already playing the progressions and conveying the chord quality. Too many arpeggios in your solo duplicates the rhythm section.
4. Con – It's easy to focus on root position for arpeggios but harder to play inversions. Too many improvisers find the root positions and then relax from there.
5. Con – Excessive arpeggios can lead to the “sine wave” approach – musical dizziness through too much up and down motion.
6. Con – What about non-harmonic tones, chromaticism, fills, narrow ranges, etc? These techniques all depend on scale-wise playing, not arpeggio playing.

This isn't to say arpeggios aren't important – they are still fundamental to improvisation. Still, I disagree with the arpeggio-itis approach. There is great beauty and contrast in scale-wise playing and in leaving some chords *ambiguous*, not solving each chord like a crossword puzzle.

The Value of Static

A better approach than continually running arpeggios in solos is to concentrate on SHAPE, with some occasional static playing. Static playing is like the opposite of resolving arpeggios - you purposely avoid playing something that sounds like harmonic movement. Repeated notes and rhythms, narrow ranges, and interesting rhythms can all provide food for thought for static playing. Then when you *do* include arpeggios, they will sound more refreshing than rehashing.