

## Keeping Up with the Changes

One of the biggest challenges we face while learning to improvise is to keep our place in a chord progression. I hear plenty of young players (and even some older ones) end a solo somewhere in the middle of a chorus, unaware of where it's supposed to end.

If you're having trouble keeping up, or know someone who is, here are some tips that may help. They go from easy to challenging – try them in order for best results.

To get started,

1. Select a tune to practice with (try one from *300 Standards* that has a background track).
2. Determine the number of bars in one chorus (usually 32).
3. Play the background track for the tune.
4. Count the bars out until you reach the end of the chorus. Notice the number of elapsed seconds in the display of the MP3 player you're using; that will be your checkpoint.

Start the track again and follow the steps below, each time noticing the elapsed seconds.

1. *Sing or hum the melody through one chorus.* That may sound easy, but be sure you can do it perfectly, ending at the correct number of seconds. Then try humming a jazzed-up version of the melody through the chorus.
2. *Try the jazzed-up melody on your instrument.* As you play, keep the original melody in the back of your mind to guide you.
3. Sing or hum a simple solo.
4. Play a simple solo.
5. Take more chances in your solo – use melodic and rhythmic development.

When you're comfortable with the steps above, try turning the time around by using 3 against 4, contour groups of 5, etc. Then ...

### Not My Problem?

Once you get the hang of counting out a chorus, that's the end of your worries – right? Well, what if someone in the group intentionally turns the time around (with consecutive dotted quarters, rubato, or whatever)? Can you recover and stay on track, or do you lose it and hope the drummer will bring you all back correctly? Hmm, maybe it was the drummer who turned the time around in the first place. So no matter how calm you are when the waters are calm, it takes practice to deal with a rhythmically stormy sea.

For a dizzying experience, listen to how the time gets turned around in the bands of Wynton Marsalis or Chick Corea. For example, listen to the ferocious rhythmic interchanges between pianist Chick and drummer Dave Weckl in the Akoustic Band's recording of Nite Sprite. Or check out Marcus Roberts consistently comping one eighth-note ahead of or behind the changes on a burning version of Cherokee. Could you sit in either of those bands and keep the time orientation steady on those tunes? One way to start is to listen to the recordings and mark every bar, every fourth bar, or every chorus exactly as it goes by – even when vertigo sets in. Then your own sense of musical balance only gets stronger.