

Glossary of Improvisation Terms

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ii-V-I – a chord progression that uses chords built on the second (ii), fifth (V), and root of a key. It is a cornerstone of jazz harmony

ii-V-I chain – a group of ii-V-I progressions that modulate through different keys

3 against 4 – playing rhythms or combinations of notes that give the illusion of 3/4 time in a 4/4 tune.

4 against 3 – playing rhythms or combinations of notes that give the illusion of 4/4 time in a 3/4 tune

A

alterations, dominant – changed notes in dominant chords that add energy. The most common dominant alterations are the -5, +5, -9, and +9

augmentation – increasing a rhythm value by doubling it or adding another amount to it

B

bass “cheater” notes – bass notes added between each chord root to form a smooth connection for learning chord progressions

blues – a 12-measure chord progression based on dominant chords, with a IV chord in bar 5

blues, altered – a 12-bar blues with some substituted chords

blues scale – has the 1, b3, 4, #4, 5, and b7 of a major key. It’s used on dominant and minor chords.

burning – playing controlled notes as fast as you can, regardless of the current tempo

C

chord anticipation – playing a melody that fits the new chord before the new chord arrives

chord delay – means repeating a motif from the old chord into the new chord, changing to the new chord somewhat late

chord symbol – indicates the key and type of the chord, as well as the top note used in the chord

circle of 4ths – (C F Bb Eb Ab Db F# B E A D G C) an arrangement of the 12 keys that provides a good way to practice scales

clave – a short, repeated rhythmic pattern that serves as the rhythmic framework for a tune

color interval – an interval, usually a wide one, where both notes are color notes

color tones – (2, #4 or 4, 6, and 7 for major, dominant, and minor chords) notes that increase tension in a melody

compression – reducing a rhythm value by halving it or subtracting a different amount from it

contour – a melodic shape that can be ascending, descending, or mixed

contour, flattened – a contour with a narrow range, typically with repeated or held pitches

contour, inverted – playing a previous motif but reversing the up-and-down pattern to the notes

cool style – a form of swing that's laid back and uses even eighth-notes

D

development – the art of repeating or varying motifs to build ideas in a solo

diminished chord – contains all minor third intervals

diminished-1 scale – alternates half-steps and whole-steps

diminished-whole-tone scale – goes half-step, whole-step, half-step, then all whole-steps

displacement - repeating a motif 5 beats later, 3 beats later, 4 1/2 beats later, or 3 1/2 beats later

Dorian scale – used with minor chords, is like a major scale with a flat 3 and a flat 7. It's one of the Greek modes, based on the 2nd degree

double-time feel – playing twice as fast but leaving the chords in their original locations

E

embellishments – musical decorations, such as trills, grace notes, turns, and neighbor tones.

expression – how you translate emotion into musical elements

F

fill, complete – notes that fill in all the missing notes of a skip

fill, delayed – notes that fill in the missing notes of an earlier skip

fill, partial – notes that fill in only some of the missing notes of a skip

fill, winding – notes that alternately descend and ascend, usually in stepwise motion

flexible scales – scales that can start on any scale note and go up and down at will

fragmentation – playing part of a motif, resting in the middle of it, playing the next part, etc.

fusion – a style of jazz characterized by aggressive melodies and rhythms, and electric instrumentation. It often merges jazz and other music styles, such as rock, latin, classical, etc.

G

guajeo – a separate rhythmic part played by the piano in a montuno

H

half-time feel – playing half as fast as the original feel

harmonic minor scale – like a major scale with a b3 and b6. It's used on minor chords and against the V of a minor ii-V-I

I

improvisation – Making up music as you perform, choosing notes to fit chords, and communicating through the music you create

improvisation, conservative – restrained creative choices; valuable in situations that call for light or controlled jazz, such as recording sessions or casuals

L

laying back – playing swing rhythms slightly behind the beat

lead sheet – contains the melody, chords, and “road signs” for the tune

Lydian Dominant scale – has the 1, 2, 3, #4, 5, 6, and b7 of a major key. It's used on dominant chords

Lydian scale – like a major scale with a sharp 4th. It's one of the Greek modes, built on the 4th degree

M

markers – places in phrases you spot and remember likely material for development

melodic minor ascending scale – like a major scale with a b3. It's used on minor chords.

melodic resolution – the technique of smoothly connecting a melody between chords, by a no-step, 1/2-step, or whole step

middle keys – those that are neither inside-sounding nor outside sounding

minor pentatonic scale – has the 1, b3, 4, 5, and b7 of a major key. It's used on minor chords.

Mixolydian scale – used with a dominant chord, is like a major scale with a flat 7. It's one of the Greek modes, based on the 5th degree.

mode – one of the 7 Greek scales, each corresponding to a step of the major scale

modal tune – a tune that relies on one to several modes to create a simple chord progression with a static feeling

motif – a group of consecutive notes forming a short musical idea

montuno – a repeated rhythmic part (vamp) for the rhythm section, usually 2, 4, or 8 bars, played behind a percussion or horn solo

N

natural minor scale – like a major scale with a b3, b6, and b7. It's used on minor chords.

neighborhood – group of pitches close to the pitch you are currently playing

non-harmonic tone – a tone that doesn't fit in the basic scale (not a color tone or a resting tone)

note – pitch + rhythm + musical expression

O

outside notes – ones that don't fit in the home key, such as non-harmonic tones or certain chord combinations

P

pattern – a group of sequenced motifs

pattern, offset – a pattern that starts off the beat, such as the “and” of 1 or the “and” of 4

pattern, pulling – a pattern that moves in the opposite direction from each sequence's contour

pattern, short – has two or three beats and may have a varied rhythm, offset contour, etc.

pedal – the technique of playing against the old chord, usually with one note, and omitting a new chord

pentatonic scale – has the 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 of major scale. It's used on major and dominant chords.

PHASE – “Play, Hear, and See Errors,” a typical approach to improvisation that should be avoided

phrase – a group of one or more separate or joined motifs, somewhat like a sentence in writing

polytone arpeggio – indicates the sound of two unrelated chords, usually in four or five notes

pulse – the basic beat of a tune that can be manipulated to create the illusion of other meters

Q

quote – all or part of the melody of a well-known song played in your solo

R

resting tones – (1, 3 or b3, and 5) notes in a scale that create relaxation

rhythms, stepped – rhythm values that gradually increase or decrease to make the rhythmic feel faster or slower

riff – a short, fast, motif (one- or two-part) that is repeated several times

rubato – playing notes with rhythmic freedom, often out of the original tempo

S

scale wandering – the technique of changing keys quickly as you play longer phrases

semi-sequence – a repetition of a motif that changes one or more of the intervals

sequence – a repetition of a motif, starting on a different pitch

sequence, diatonic – a sequence whose notes all belong to the current key

sequence, linked – where the last note of the motif is a step away from the first note of the sequence

sequence, transposed – a sequence whose notes fit exact transposition intervals, so the notes may not fit in the original key

SHAPE - “See, Hear, And Play Expressively,” a powerful way to visualize and play effective improvisation ideas

sine wave – a monotonous melodic contour that goes up and down predictably

soundscape – a musical landscape that you paint with sound

special effect – an unusual sound made by an instrument or voice

static playing – avoiding ii-V-I's to draw attention away from harmony and towards the basic key, style, rhythms, and expression in a solo

swing – a foundation style of jazz that relies on 2-against-3 rhythms and uneven eighth-notes

T

trading bars – where multiple soloists alternate short solos with each other, usually 4 bars long

triple-time feel – playing four times as fast as the original feel (twice as fast as double-time feel)

triplets, shifted – quarter-note or half-note triplets that begin on offbeats

turnaround – a way to add chords to a progression so that you get back to (“turn around” to) a certain starting place

V

Virtual Practice Method – a strategy that helps you practice away from your instrument, strengthening your creative and ear-training skills

W

whole-tone scale – a scale made up entirely of whole-steps

wiggling – playing random notes so fast that they are “out of control”