

The Contour Map

When I was young (before there was electricity or even Pop-Tarts) I liked to look at contour maps of wilderness and mountain ranges. You know – those maps with the weird squiggly circles that showed what was up and what was down.

Ups and Downs

As you learn about musical contours, you learn to avoid the deadly “sine wave” of up-and-down predictability. But there is another key to developing interesting contours, and that is the ability to find new directions (or directions that don’t occur to you right away). Rather than wishing or hoping for new directions, you can actually find them in your practice with a few simple tips.

Plotting and Altering Contours

By plotting the contours of your improvised melodies after you play them, you can see where your “paths of least resistance” – where you are most likely to go with a melody. Although you can record yourself and listen to the playback, it’s not necessary to do that in order to plot your melodies. Instead, you can hum and finger a short improvisation and use that as a way to find new paths.

Here are the steps to follow:

1. Choose a chord, key, or easy standard tune. For more informal practice, limit yourself to just one chord. For more extended practice, use a progression in the MidiJam folder or a tune from 300 Standards.
2. Hum and finger a short (one- or two-bar) improvised melody that comes easily to mind.
3. Repeat the melody so you can clearly see the contour of the melody, including specific places where you decided to change directions or use skips. This becomes the “plotted” contour.
4. Try the melody again and make different choices with the contour directions and skips.
5. Think about the new melody you just played vs. the original one. Are there barriers or ruts you are falling into? Are the new choices harder to execute? What specific things do you need to practice to make the new directions come more easily?
6. For more practice, repeat the above steps with a new improvised melody.

Over time, you can quickly internalize this practice method to help you see new directions in your playing. And you can use it when you listen to recordings of other players – just visualize alternate choices in their melodies and see where they would take you.