Note Discovery Progressions for Ear

by Michael Lake

How quickly can you hear a chord and find the notes to create a phrase within your improvisation?

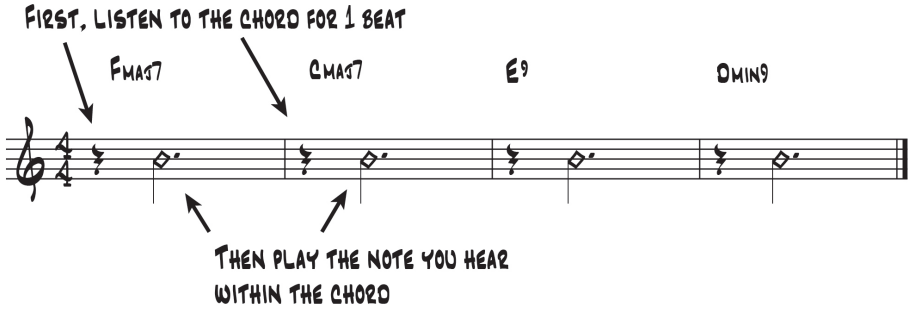
Here are some exercises to quicken your reaction time and to strengthen your ability to find the "right" notes in real time. Clearly these are critical skills for improvisers and other musicians. You will certainly struggle to play jazz if you cannot find notes on your instrument as the rhythm section charges forward.

This skills can be developed, and the three exercises within this booklet will challenge your ear to guide your instrument to the "right" places. I am using quotation marks around the word "right" because I don't want you to think that there are only right and wrong notes. Notes are always right if they further your musical ideas, but you won't find them unless you've developed an acute sense of how certain frequencies fit within various chords. Maybe the better work is "deliberate". These exercises will help your ear deliberately guide your instrument to the notes it hears.

How to use these exercises

The following three exercises consist of 8, 10, and 12 bar original chord progressions at ballad tempos. Your assignment is to pick a note that fits in the first chord after the countoff. From there, move either upward or downward by either a half step of whole step being guided only by your ear to deliberately find the next note that fits with the chord. Listen over the first beat to hear the next chord so that your ear has a moment to direct your instrument to the next note.

Just as other exercises in this ear training module were call and response to notes or short phrases, the call here is the chord, and your response is the next note your ear directs you to that fits that chord.



The note that fits each chord is always either a whole or half step from the preceding note. Your challenge is to quickly make that decision as to the half or whole step. Sometimes, however, either note works.

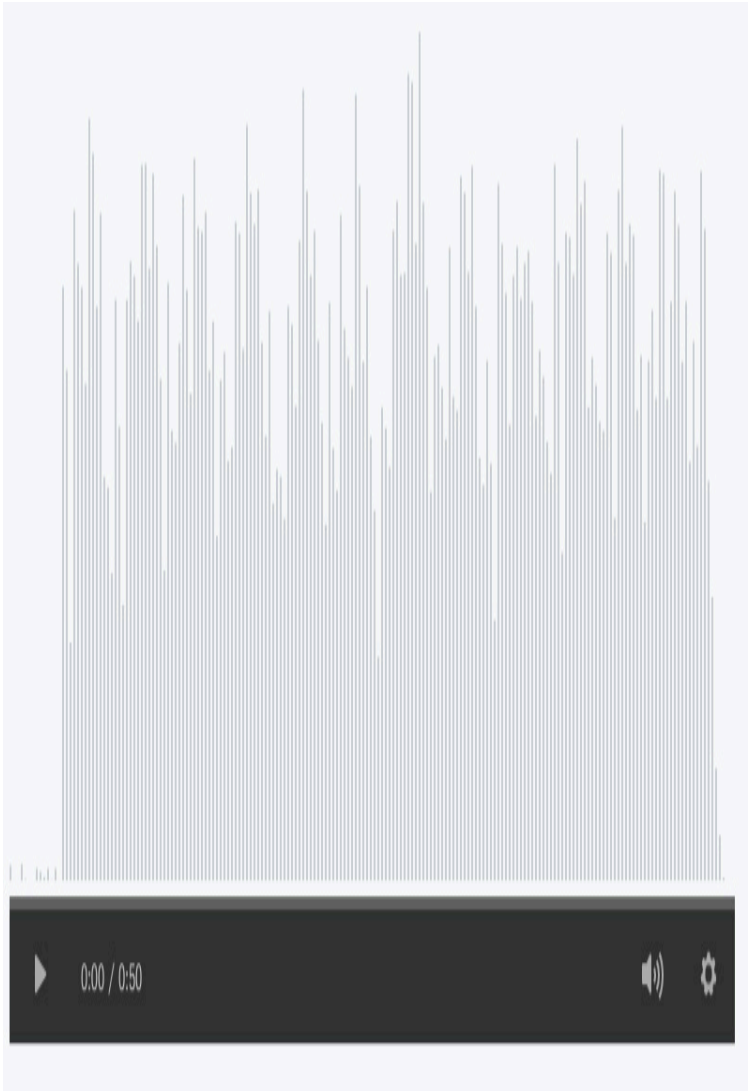
Do this exercise also over the chord changes on the tunes you are learning. It will greatly help your reaction to more quickly land on the notes of intention and make your improvisation fit better within the harmony and make your solos more deliberate rather than accidents of "crashing" into the wrong notes!

The Audio Files

Each exercise in the book is associated with an audio file containing the rhythm track.

Simply click or tap the icon associated with the file to bring it up in a Dropbox audio player window. The audio files stream from Dropbox. Play the files in your browser by tapping play, stop, pause and repeat. Download each file as you wish from Dropbox.

The rhythm track icon plays the discovery progression associated with each exercise.



Discovery Progression #1

Tap to play the audio files

Progression #1

This 12 bar progression is looped 5 times until ending on the final chord. It begins and ends on the same chord but the other 10 chords are all unique.

One hint is to start on E concert and move up a whole step to the second chord. Another is to start on concert B and again, proceed to a whole step above. A more challenging starting note concert G. Your next note is a half step up but from there you need to make a choice between a weak note for the chord and a note that is not strictly in the harmony, but a colorful choice nonetheless.

Remember to try this both up and down.

Discovery Progression #2

Tap to play the audio files

Progression #2

This 8 bar progression is looped 5 times until ending on the final chord.

One hint is to start on concert B natural and move up a half step to the second chord. From there, the sequence of whole and half steps should be pretty intuitive.

A less intuitive starting point is concert G. Similar to Progression #1, you'll have to make a choice on the third chord between a weak note or a color note slightly outside the chord.

Remember to try this in both directions. Concert E is an easy starting note going downward.

Discovery Progression #3

Tap to play the audio file:

Progression #3

This 12 bar progression is looped 5 times until ending on the final chord. This is a more challenging progression that begins and ends on very different chords. All other 10 chords are unique and do not repeat.

Begin by starting on a concert E going up. Since the progression is looped, consider continuing up or down past just one chorus of changes. You may need to adjust octaves but is another way to randomly proceed with the exercise.

Once you up for a more challenging starting point, try starting on concert G going down. The hint is to use half notes for the first few chords. Listen carefully for bar 6.