

THE GENERAL TONAL CENTER CONCEPT FOR JAZZ IMPROVISATION

In the course of thirty years of teaching music to guitarists , I have formulated a method , if you will, to allow the player to navigate over a series of harmony i.e. chord progressions in a succinct and accurate manner. *It is assumed that the player is aware and fluent with major scales in most,if not all positions* . If you realize that chords are built from *scale tones* and that scale tones are consistent as to their key, *the resultant chords must also be consistent*..If , for instance

we consider the Key of C Major, the scale tone are : C , D , E, F , G , A , B , C. If we assign a numerical value to each scale tone we begin to see the emergence of the diatonic progression :

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	8va (I)
Root	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
3 rd	E	F	G	A	B	C	D	E
5 th	G	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
7 th	B	C	D	E	F	G	A	B

Chord								
Name :	C Maj7	Dmin7	Emin7	FMaj7	G7	Amin7	Bmin7b5	CMaj7
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	8va (I)

These are the *primary chords of the key of C Major*.

Next , we need to map the basic diatonic 7th chords for all 12 keys.

<i>KEY</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>IV</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>	<i>VII</i>	<i>8va</i>
<i>C</i>	Cmaj7	Dmin7	Emin7	FMaj7	G7	Amin7	Bmin7b5	Cmaj7
<i>F</i>	Fmaj7	Gmin7	Amin7	BbMaj7	C7	Dmin7	Emin7b5	FMaj7
<i>Bb</i>	BbMaj7	Cmin7	Dmin7	Ebmin7	F7	Gmin7	Amin7b5	Bbmaj7
<i>Eb</i>	Ebmaj7	Fmin7	Gmin7	Abmaj7	Bb7	Cmin7	Dmin7b5	Ebmin7
<i>Ab</i>	Abmaj7	Bbmin7	Cmin7	Dbmaj7	Eb7	Fmin7	Gmin7b5	Abmaj7
<i>Db</i>	Dbmaj7	Ebmin7	Fmin7	Gbmin7	Ab7	Bbmin7	Cmin7b5	Dbmaj7
<i>F#</i>	F#maj7	G#min7	A#min7	Bmaj7	C#7	D#min7	E#min7b5	F#Maj7
<i>B</i>	BMaj7	C#min7	D#min7	EMaj7	F#7	G#min7	A#min7b5	BMaj7

<i>KEY</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>IV</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>VI</i>	<i>VII</i>	<i>8va</i>
<i>E</i>	EMaj7	F#min7	G#min7	AMaj7	B7	C#min7	D#min7b5	EMaj7
<i>A</i>	AMaj7	Bmin7	C#min7	DMaj7	E7	F#min7	G#min7b5	AMaj7
<i>D</i>	DMaj7	Emin7	F#min7	GMaj7	A7	Bmin7	C#min7b5	DMaj7
<i>G</i>	GMaj7	Amin7	Bmin7	CMaj7	D7	Emin7	F#min7b5	GMaj7

Thus , These are all of the primary Chords for all 12 major keys .

Please note that in each key there are 2 Major type Chords , 4 minor type chords but only 1 Dominant (7th) chord. The V position of the diatonic progression is therefore the defining chord of the key . This is known as the **Primary Dominant Chord** .

To clear some of the mystery of chordal function and terminology , each numerical position of **the diatonic progression** is assigned a modal name derived from the Greek system of tonal organization prior to the western development of the **Tempered Scale**..

The **I** chord is always **MAJOR** . It is called the **TONIC** . It defines the **IONIAN Mode**

The **II** chord is always **MINOR** . It is called the **SUPERTONIC** . It defines the **DORIAN Mode**

The **III** chord is always **MINOR**. It is called the **MEDIANT** .It defines the **PHRYGIAN Mode**

The **IV** chord is always **MAJOR**. It is called the **SUB-DOMINANT**. It defines the **LYDIAN Mode** .

The **V** chord is always **MAJOR**. It is called the **DOMINANT** .It defines the **MIXOLYDIAN Mode**.

The **VI** chord is always **MINOR**, It is called the **SUB-MEDIANT**. It defines the **AEOLIAN Mode**. Note that this is the **RELATIVE MINOR**. Key . More on this later.

The **VII** chord is always **DIMINISHED** as a Triad and **Half-Diminished (Minor 7b5)** as a tetrachord. . It defines the **LOCRIAN Mode**.

So what does this all mean ? If you can see the chord progression of a song, define the key or keys from which the progression is extracted , go to the MAJOR SCALE of that key, You will have under your fingers all of the “ correct “ notes for that series of chords. Once this parameter is established, a pure musical idea , phrase, theme or motif can be produced. In short it reduces the amount of data one needs to process to create a valid improvisation on that harmony.

HOW IT WORKS .

Lets take a standard jazz song like Duke Ellington’s SATIN DOLL. The progression is :

Dmin7	G7	Dmin7	G7	Emin7	A7	Emin7	A7	D7	Db7	Cmaj7	
/ /	// / /	// / /	// / /	/ /	/ /	/ /	/ /	//.//	////	//// //	
II	V	II	V	II	V	II	V	V	V	I	
Key or scale of C Maj.				Key or scale of D Maj				Key of G Maj	Key of Gb/F# Maj	Key of C Maj	

Since the progression is a function of the scale , and we defined the chords position in relation to some major scale, all of the notes we choose ,assuming you are in that scale form , will be “correct” !

Lets look at an excerpt of the chord progression from Jerome Kern’s
“ ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE”

Fmin7	Bbmin7	Eb7	AbMaj7	DbMaj7	Dmin	G7	CMaj7
/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / / / / / /
VI	II	V	I	IV	II	V	I
Scale of Ab Maj.				Scale of C Maj.			
Cmin7	Fmin7	Bb7	EbMaj7	AbMaj7	Amin7	D7	GMaj7
/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / / / / / /
VI	II	V	I	IV	II	V	I
Scale of Eb Maj.				Scale of G Maj.			

Even in a situation as complex as this, by using this method , you can begin to create valid musical statements which are the tonal basis of jazz improvisation. Please be advised that many other elements must also be present such as Time , feel, phrasing and nuance to name a few, but these skills can be acquired through listening to the masters and playing the tunes. What I try to do here is give the novice improviser the tools to play lines of their own creation

through their own voice by recognizing that the major scale , though not the “ cure all “ is a great place to start.

Performance Notes

When playing these exercises, play only eight notes. This will help establish the tonality and prevent you from reverting to “ comfortable licks “ .

The eighth note should be the “ drag “ eighth. I.e. a broken triplet .

Always strive to play in the feel or groove of the song. A good solid medium tempo swing feel will fine-tune your internal clock.

Try to have fun with this. Try to sing your lines as you play them. This will lead to a good sense of relative pitch.

There will be more to come ! Let me know your thoughts on this concept . E-mail me at:
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Good luck!

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