

Improv for Beginners

There are three things you can call on in your improvisations: scales, chords and licks(!)

Scales and Chords

Chords are made out of scales using the formula 135:

C Major scale = CDEFGAB

Start on any note, give it the number 1, and find 3 and 5

e.g. C = 1 E = 3 G = 5 – so C Major is made up of the notes CEG

G = GBD

F = FAC

Some of the chords are minor and some are major. There is a formula to remember which is which (a small m = minor, a large M = Major):

MmmMMm and diminished

So, the key of C Major is made up of the following chords:

C Major D minor E minor F Major G Major A minor and B diminished

Now, going back to the 135 formula: take D as the starting note. This gives a triad of DFA. Our Major/minor formula tells us that D is a minor chord in this key. So, DFA = D minor.

Here is the important part for improv: if all the chords are made up of notes chosen from the 'parent scale', it follows that the scale can be used over all these chords.

Take that a step further: it is possible to play any chord on top of any other. For instance, a pianist can play C Major in the left hand and G Major in the other, because all notes belong to the same parent scale.

Practical advice: when improvising in C Major, you can play the C Major scale PLUS any arpeggio which belongs to that key, i.e. C Major D minor E minor F Major G Major A minor and B diminished.

Seventh Chords

Jazz musicians prefer the formula 1357 for chord structures. This just means that all the chords become sevenths:

CMaj7 Dm7 Em7 FMaj7 G7 Am7 and B half-dim (more on the diminished chord later)

Here are the notes which make up each chord. Notice that they still belong to the parent scale of C Major (no sharps or flats).

C E G B
D F A C
E G B D
F A C E
G B D F
A C E G
B D F A

So What

This Miles Davis classic (from the album, *Kind of Blue*) has an A section which is made up of two chords: Dm7 and Em7. Notice that both these chords belong to the key of C Major. This means that we can use the scale of C Major for improv PLUS any of the other chords in the Key of C as arpeggios. The B section just shifts everything up one semitone.

To improvise effectively on *So What*, you should know C and C# (or Db) Major scales and all the arpeggios of the chords which these two keys contain. Get practising!!!

Advanced Concepts

To take it one step further try adding in a touch of chromaticism. For example, between the first two notes of the C Major scale, C and D, add C# - just don't dwell there too long! Wherever two notes are a tone apart, fit in a passing semitone.

Tone and timbre effects – scraping, growling, harmonics, slides – anything goes!

Side stepping: play a short phrase of, say, three notes. Play it again a semitone below or above. Then play it in its original position. The middle version will be 'out of tune' but will be acceptable because the ear hears the structure, and the dissonance is short-lived.