

## **LINEAR TONALITY**

### **5 levels of form and phrase perception of a diatonic tune**

1. Bebop Chord-Tone Resolution Level
2. Diatonic and Sequential Chord Relationship Level
3. Key Centers and Modal Plateaus Level
4. Linear Tonality with Harmonic Reference
5. Linear Tonality without Harmonic Reference

1. The first, top layer of perception operates with the systematic resolution of bass notes and guide tones as the most prominent factor in the ear and mind of the improvisor. The structural resolutions that arise from chord functionality (3rd to 7th and 7th to 3rd) as well as the upper extensions which create dominant chord identity (5 to 9, 9 to 5, 13 to 9) function linearly and harmonically to create short-term phrase development. This structure-creating level of note choice specificity using chord tones and their diatonic intervallic resolutions I call the Bebop Chord-Tone Resolution Level. The player's focus is less on overall form than on individual chord resolutions on the scale of several beats to several bars. Charlie Parker's performance of his composition "Donna Lee" is an excellent example of layer I.

Charlie Parker

"Donna Lee" example:



2. The second layer is where the soloist is aware of and phrases melodically through the chord progression in simpler and more general terms than in layer one, for example as in the common movements "ii-V to the fourth step", "iii-VI-ii-V", or in more composition-specific chromatic ii-V or ii-V-I sequences. Below the first layer the focus of attention gradually shifts from individual intervallic resolution tied directly to chord tones, as above, to a broader and less diatonically specific intervallic resolution. Awareness on this level, as expressed in linear phrasing and accompaniment figuration, often includes larger general relationships than the guide tones of the first layer. I call the second layer the Diatonic and Sequential Chord Relationship Level. Two representatives of this layer are saxophonist Rich Perry's 2004 CD "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" on the piece *The Touch of Your Lips*, and John Taylor's solo over *Everything I Love* on the Peter Erskine CD "You Never Know", where in both cases the harmony is explicitly stated in every measure from all of the musicians but the linear resolutions and voice leading are uncoupled from the direct movement of layer I.

3. In the third layer of perception, which I call the Key Centers and Modal Plateaus Level, both the improviser and accompanist are aware mainly of key areas, modal plateaus, and non-key contexts like diminished scales. Key centres are created either with a single mode of 2 or 4 bar duration (as in the 1st half of Joe Henderson's piece "Recordame") resolved ii-V progressions (as in the 2nd half of Joe Henderson's piece "Recordame"), unresolved ii-V progressions (as in John Coltrane's composition "Moment's Notice" and Jerome Kern's song "Speak Low"), or with fully resolved V-I progressions (as in Coltrane's "Giant Steps"). Note choice and intervallic resolution are no longer tied directly to guide tone resolutions of 3rd to 7th, 9th to 13th, and 5th to 9th. For key centres like a ii-V-I Jerry Coker created the term Harmonic Generalization, which "occurs when an improviser chooses one scale to accommodate two or more chords of a progression ... (for example) the use of the tonic (I) major scale against chords which call for a derivative of that major scale."<sup>1</sup> Another common representation of this layer is an improviser's reliance on the common tones between chords to create linear coherence while remaining within the chords. Wayne Shorter's solo on his piece *Tom Thumb* from the Blue Note CD "Schizophrenia" is made up of overlapping tonal groups rhythmically and harmonically clearly within the form and chords yet completely free of reliance on the guide tones of the first layer. The saxophone solo over *Yes or No*, from Wayne's Blue Note CD "Juju", again demonstrates this lack of guide tone specificity occurring in a line that nevertheless remains diatonic to the given harmony.

4. The fourth layer of perception reveals the musicians to be aware of harmony and form in ever-larger groupings of measures and note relationships, including: 1) the main points of harmonic resolution, 2) in which key the phrases begin and end, 3) short or long-term modulations, and, 4) the varied harmonic rhythms of different parts of each phrase. At this level the direct, vertical, chord/scale connection between the chord of the moment and the melodic tones begins to uncouple completely, and the importance of the "linear tonality" of the melodic phrase takes precedence. The group of individual tones in each phrase may or may not correlate completely with the theoretical group of tones that the chord "contains", and we no longer hear the non-chord tones as not belonging to the sound of the chord progression. I call this layer Linear Tonality with Harmonic Reference. A good example a group performance on this layer is the Keith Jarrett Trio's rendition of "Everything I Love". Another example that reaches toward the fifth and final layer is McCoy Tyner's composition "Blues on the Corner", on the recording "The Real McCoy". As his solo progresses, McCoy marks the choruses regularly while freeing the linear and harmonic content within the 12 bar structures from direct harmonic reference. Henderson's solo has even

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<sup>1</sup> "Elements of the Jazz Language for the Developing Improvisor", Jerry Coker, Alfred Music 1991

fewer direct connections to the chords as stated in the melody, but McCoy's comping keeps the band in the 4th layer.

5. At the fifth layer, the deepest and most large-scale structural level, the awareness is focused almost entirely on the overall aspects of the form in terms of duration, for example, four 8 bar phrases, or a single repetition of a 12 bar blues, without the need for harmonic references to mark the passage of the chords. Resolution of small-scale chord progressions using guide tones as in "Donna Lee", above, are mostly absent in this level of focus. I call this layer Linear Tonality without Harmonic Reference. The entire Miles Davis Quintet recording "Live at the Plugged Nickel" exquisitely represents the principles of this layer on every track. A clear example drawn from this CD is found in Wayne Shorter's solo on "Autumn Leaves" on Disc 6, where 53 seconds pass (almost 2 full choruses) with only 1 direct, discernible reference to the melody or chords of the piece. As the solo progresses Wayne remains for long passages completely independent of harmonic reference, with Herbie and Ron occasionally stating chords clearly enough to hear if one has counted from the beginning of the form.