

# **Melody in Jazz Improvisation and the Fallacy of the “In-Out” Polarity Regarding Harmonic Content**

*The Role Of Jazz Education In Establishing Belief Systems, Codifying The Learning Of Music And The Relationship Of These Systems To Music And Jazz As Natural Human Expressions.*

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I am fully a product of the jazz educational establishment, having been a student exposed to jazz in high school by my band director whose hero was Stan Kenton while at home I was listening to Weather Report and Billy Cobham with no concept of jazz history. As a teenager I barely knew who Charlie Parker was, had no idea about Duke Ellington and had sort of heard of a guy named Miles Davis. As a university student I studied improvisation at the Eastman School of Music and earned both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in Jazz Performance and Jazz Composition at the University of Miami between 1980 and 1987. There I developed my skills as a saxophonist and composer in the jazz education milieu, and have incredibly positive feelings about my experiences on the whole. I do have, however, a lingering feeling that I somehow internalized beliefs about music that I'm now seeing do not really reflect the natural art of music and in some ways distorted my process of learning.

I am 100% supportive of jazz education. I feel that it offers the possibility to teach students about being whole humans, dealing with body, intellect, and emotion; intuitive and spiritual values as well as social skills, mutual respect and self respect, and team work. Many fine educators who are also outstanding musicians, including David Liebman, Ronan Guilfoyle, Chuck Israels and Todd Coleman, offer wonderful perspectives on the value of jazz education within and outside of the musical world. David Liebman has a fantastic document he circulated some years ago showing how the values we learn to play jazz have immense value in many non-musical pursuits and careers. I am inspired to present this particularly personal introduction in order to be part of the positive growth of our art form. I discovered melody over the last 13 years and would like to share my ideas with you.

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## THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF MELODY, TYPES OF RESOLUTION, COUNTERPOINT AND THE TECHNIQUES OF MELODIC DEVELOPMENT

I am convinced that melody is the primary element in music and as such deserves as much attention in the learning process as rhythm and harmony. Most jazz improvisors are players of single note instruments and almost all jazz solos are primarily melodic, with left hand comping (rhythmic counterpoint) and voicing or enriching of the melodic line (rhythmic unison) the piano, guitar or vibraphone version of the single note line. I define the smallest unit of melody, the motive, as a set of intervals having a rhythmic relationship to each other which is naturally grouped into a phrase, creating meaning. Melodies in the conventional sense, like “All the Things You Are”, are larger groupings of motives which, in combination, create structure that we call “form” and are directly tied to harmonic phrases of the same or different lengths which also influence and affect the perception of formal structure.

Rhythmic phrases and intervals are the elements that create the sense of resolution in melodies, either in relation to chords or without any harmonic context. The types of resolution at work in all styles of music are intervallic (both in terms of pitch direction and size), rhythmic, harmonic, and dynamic, and their interplay creates the feeling of forward motion, coherence and structure that has been central to Western music for centuries. Seen in this context melody has a more profound role than that of harmony, and therefore the techniques of melodic development have greater importance than the harmonic relationships of the notes in a vertical expression. Stated slightly differently, we can say that the quality of the melodic line (the symbiotic effect of its rhythmic phrase, internal intervallic resolution and the details of time feel, interpretation, dynamics and articulation) has greater importance than the simple harmonic relationship of each melody tone to the root of the chord at any given moment, seen as a vertical, simultaneously occurring event.

I have come to see counterpoint as the most accurate definition of jazz improvisation, with the interaction of the linear, rhythmic phrases of bass, soloist, drummer and accompanist having primacy over the vertical relationship of melody tone to chord tones. This leads me to the conclusion that great solos are great melodies because they have outstanding melodic structure and resolution, NOT because they have lots of “hip” notes in them.

I have found the melodic development techniques that classical composers use to be ideal for jazz improvising, and the great diversity of style and context that belong to what we now call jazz demands different techniques at different times. The most commonly used approaches are **Sequence** (chromatic, diatonic, intervallic, rhythmic or shape, where the melody tones have the same relationships to the roots in successive repetitions of the basic interval/rhythm motive), **Change of Mode**, (where the same notes in successive repetitions have different relationships to the chord roots, and thus a different modality), **Change of Rhythm** (any sort of variation to the rhythm of a phrase while retaining some or all of the intervallic content), **Contrary Motion, Adding or Deleting Notes, Question/Answer, and Phrase Repetition with a Different Ending**. The awareness of **Common Tones** between chords allows the improviser to freely use the above techniques across any harmonic boundary while remaining within the diatonic sound of the chords.

I have found in my 35 years of experience as a player, and in all of my discussions with fellow musicians and as evidenced by many quotations from the greats that jazz improvisation comes most authentically and honestly from an intuitive rather than an intellectual focus. Improvised melody is an intuitive sensibility that is linked to and augmented by intellectual knowledge but ultimately is a discovery of the improviser as he or she is in the act of playing it. Awareness of harmony and rhythm and the deepest knowledge of all musical elements is clearly a part of the creation of profound melody, and is evidenced in all of the solo excerpts that I have gathered to present to you. Intellect trains both the intuition and the body muscle memory, but takes the back seat to intuition during the experience of improvising. In brief, the primary focus of attention of the improviser and student of improvisation should be directed towards melody and rhythmic phrase. Harmony as an intuitive sense supports this process.

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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHROMATICISM IN JAZZ AND ITS ROLE IN MELODIC AND HARMONIC FUNCTIONS

Jazz began as a purely diatonic form based on key centers and symmetrical phrases, most often in 12 bar Blues, AABA or ABAC forms, in essence the tunes now called “standards” from the Great American Songbook. The composers of this group of perfect, compact and very individual pieces include Duke Ellington, Richard Rogers, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Victor Young, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Hoagy Carmichael, Jule Styne, Fats Waller and Harald Arlen, among many others. As the

styles of jazz evolved, from Swing to Bebop to Hardbop and with the introduction of Afro-Cuban rhythms and Bossa Nova compositions, the use of chromaticism developed as well, both in the melodies themselves and through the broadening of the harmonic language of the compositions and solos.

Initially melodic chromaticism, in jazz as well as in Baroque and Classical music, was either decorative figuration (upper and lower neighbor notes, delayed or anticipated resolutions and passing tones) or indicative of modulation to other key areas. Beginning in the 1950s the effects of newly introduced musical elements like large intervals, unconventional rhythmic phrases or articulations and the concept of giving all tones of a scale or mode equal weight increased the expressiveness of diatonic melodic lines in jazz. These new ideas created sounds that often were as dissonant than the effect of lines that did not stay within the 7 or 8 notes of the mode/key/scale. Additionally, the importance of the style of the composition, the context of the performance, and the musical conception of the arrangement, band, accompanists and soloists were further determining factors in the musicians' harmonic, rhythmic and melodic choices and therefore the style or the "language" that the bands used.

During the early and mid-1960s the **John Coltrane Quartet**, with McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison and Elvin Jones, and the **Miles Davis Quintet**, with Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Tony Williams, established, in my opinion, the 2 main branches of the modern era of acoustic jazz in melodic, harmonic and rhythmic terms, as well as in the level of interplay of the band. While **Ornette Coleman**, with his incredible melody-based style, had already released 3 of his many revolutionary albums including "The Shape of Jazz to Come", "Free Jazz" and "Change of the Century" by 1960, his music never intentionally dealt with form and harmony and therefore was not so clearly involved in the transition from diatonic to the expanded diatonic, non-diatonic and modal style which characterizes the majority of acoustic jazz since that time. **Miles** and **Trane**, however, broke wide open the polarities of dissonance/consonance and diatonic/chromatic as their bands literally exploded the expressive possibilities of jazz improvisation and composition.

Coincidentally, the resulting, seemingly limitless improvisational explorations of **Ornette**, **Trane**, **Miles** and many other musicians of the 1960s occurred within the same decade that university jazz programs in the United States began to develop and become accepted in the academic world. With the start of the formal, university-

based education of music students and the development of books, classes and workshops, jazz was presented in a standardized and formalized fashion. *“As the discipline expanded it became increasingly necessary to create standardized material to support a jazz curriculum. Early jazz educators such as Jamey Aebersold, David Baker and Jerry Coker laid the groundwork for a more universal educational practice. The first round of textbooks and other resources was characterized by an emphasis on strict formalization and structure, on the definition of levels, and on establishing a relatively narrow core in the early Aebersold books. In this clarification process, harmonic structures also became codified, and progressions such as the twelve-bar blues and the ii-V-I were defined as the easiest and most common, as indeed they were at the time.”*<sup>1</sup>

Among the most widespread and distorted beliefs that are a result of this formalization of jazz education are the terms “inside” and “outside”, which refer to whether melodic tones belong to or do not belong to the key or mode of a given chord, and the further assumption that notes out of the scale, when systematically played in patterns, will increase the melodic tension and, thus, the quality of the phrases, sounding “hip”. Additional terms used in jazz education like “side-slipping” and “avoid tones” in my view pull students of jazz away from intuitive playing and instead encourage the intellectual choosing of notes because they theoretically “sound good”. Ironically a German student of mine mentioned recently how he wanted to use tritone substitution at a jam session to play “hipper” solos, showing me that these ideas are not only in American education, but also in Europe.

This institutionalized focus on harmony and intellectual activity entirely neglects the aspects of jazz improvisation that, for earlier generations, were core - melodic phrasing, time-feel, tone quality, musical presence and swing. An example of this can be found on the website of the Berklee College of Music, a leading jazz school, which describes their introductory improvisation class in this way:

*“ “What notes do I play?” is the first question that comes to mind when a musician is asked to improvise. The answer is easy: notes that are within the key!*

- *Apply harmony to your improvisation by adding chord tones and chord scales*
- *Introduce basic chromaticism to your playing*
- *Exploration of the relationship between improvisation and harmonic context.*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jazz\\_education#cite\\_note-Beale-20](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jazz_education#cite_note-Beale-20)

This kind of approach to improvisation is what I grew up with, and I feel like it's taken me 30 years to find my way out of it, finally by just following melody.

I have chosen solo excerpts from **Charlie Parker, Lee Konitz, Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Paul Bley, John Coltrane and Woody Shaw** in order to pose the rhetorical question, "Would these improvisors describe what they played in terms of *in* or *out*, *side-slipping*, and *avoid tones*, or would they have had a different, more holistic view?" We cannot truly know, but we CAN listen, analyze, and conclude that for these improvisors melody played with the deepest of intuitive harmonic and rhythmic sensibilities formed the core of their styles.

The musical examples begin with an 8 bar excerpt from a 1953 Lee Konitz solo where he impeccably demonstrates chromatic tones functioning as upper and lower neighbor tones and passing tones. Following Lee I present 2 Charlie Parker excerpts demonstrating the remarkable fluidity of his phrasing as reflected in the anticipation, displacement and delaying of harmonic resolutions in the 1950 recordings of "Bloomdido" and "Blues - Fast". In 1963 Sonny Rollins invited the Canadian pianist Paul Bley to join him and Coleman Hawkins on the album "Sonny Meets Hawk", where Sonny plays very unconventionally in all aspects - tone, articulation, phrasing, rhythm and harmony. Paul Bley, perhaps infected by the spirit Sonny brought to the session, plays a solo on "All the Things You Are" that is a masterpiece of melodic development, and a brilliant example of improvisation over a diatonic tune that is not at all limited to the 7 tones suggested by each of the key areas in the chord progression.

The next example shows Wayne Shorter on one of his first gigs with the Miles Davis Quintet in Chicago on December 22, 1965 playing a very adventurous solo over "On Green Dolphin Street" that, like the Bley solo, draws on all 12 notes to build melodic structure. Jumping ahead to 1987, Woody Shaw's solo on the Sonny Rollins composition "Solid" shows Woody playing exceptionally strong melodic phrases that have an identity not at all limited to the chords of the Bb blues. Herbie Hancock's solo on "Stella by Starlight", recorded in 1964 with Miles Davis in Carnegie Hall demonstrates Herbie's melodic and harmonic imagination as he and Ron Carter rework the chords of the tune.

John Coltrane's landmark solo on the 1965 recording of his composition "Transition" reveals his incredibly wide-ranging melodic imagination, encompassing all 12 tones in a volcanically energetic and rhythmically powerful solo based on the E

Phrygian mode. Regrettably the transcription only shows Coltrane's lines; McCoy Tyner and Jimmy Garrison spontaneously created harmony to support Trane's melodies and their performance on "Transition" is emblematic of the John Coltrane Quartet's approach to freely interpreting basic harmonic structures.

I would like to close this exploration of melody and harmony in jazz improvisation with a group of quotes from master musicians related to the natural aspects of music, melody, chromaticism and the intuitive center of jazz.

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### QUOTES AND PUBLISHED CITATIONS FROM MUSICIANS ABOUT JAZZ, INTUITION, CHROMATICISM AND THE NATURALNESS OF EXPRESSION

- **David Liebman:** *"I can play any note on any chord as long as the line has strong internal resolutions and is based on a good rhythmic phrase."*<sup>2</sup>
- **Richie Beirach:** *"Isn't it amazing how you can play any note on any chord with the right accompanist?"*<sup>3</sup>
- **John Coltrane:** *"All a musician can do is to get closer to the sources of nature, and so feel that he is in communion with the natural laws."*<sup>4</sup>
- **Woody Shaw:** *"After 2 choruses I get tired of playing the changes ... I like to superimpose harmonically. I like to play it deliberately in another key and resolve it."*<sup>5</sup>
- **Miles Davis:** *"You have to know 400 notes that you can play, then pick the right four." "It's not the note you play that's the wrong note - it's the note you play afterwards that makes it right or wrong."*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Source: personal conversation with the artist

<sup>3</sup> Source: personal conversation with the artist

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/j/john\\_coltrane.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/j/john_coltrane.html)

<sup>5</sup> U. of Cape Town Dept. of Music PhD Thesis by David Lilley, "The New Sound, Transcription and Analysis of Selected Solos of Woody Shaw"

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.azquotes.com/author/3731-Miles\\_Davis](http://www.azquotes.com/author/3731-Miles_Davis)

- **Sonny Rollins:** *“The thing is this: When I play, what I try to do is to reach my subconscious level. I don't want to overtly think about anything, because you can't think and play at the same time - believe me, I've tried it (laughs).”*<sup>7</sup>

- **Charlie Parker:** *“Don't play the saxophone. Let it play you.” “I'd been getting bored with the stereotyped changes (harmonies) that were being used all the time. ... I found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes I could play the thing I'd been hearing. I came alive.”*<sup>8</sup>

- **Igor Stravinsky:** *“... dissonance is an element of transition, a complex or interval of tones that is not complete in itself and that must be resolved to the ear's satisfaction into a perfect consonance.”*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>[http://www.azquotes.com/author/11313-Charlie\\_Parker](http://www.azquotes.com/author/11313-Charlie_Parker)

<sup>8</sup><http://www.azquotes.com/quote/722552>

<sup>9</sup><http://www.azquotes.com/quote/688580>



# MUSICAL EXAMPLES OF MELODIC DEVELOPMENT AND CHROMATIC MELODIC LINES FROM THE JAZZ LITERATURE

## I. DIATONIC HARMONY EXAMPLES

### A) Passing Tones And Neighbor Tones

\***Lee Konitz**: 1:14 - 1:22 in *All the Things You Are*, Lee Konitz - The Gerry Mulligan Quartet

Two staves of musical notation. The first staff starts at measure 75 and features chords D-7, G-7, C7, and FΔ. The second staff starts at measure 77 and features chords BbΔ, Bm(b9), Eb9, and AΔ. The notation includes various rhythmic values and accidentals, illustrating diatonic harmony with passing tones and neighbor tones.

### B) Chromaticism Revealing Displacement Of Harmonic Borders, Superimposition Of Structures Not In The Standard Chord Changes And Non-Diatonic Intervallic Groups

\***Charlie Parker**: 0:47 - 0:54 in *Bloomdido*, Charlie Parker, "Now's the Time"

Two staves of musical notation. The first staff starts at measure 7 and features chords A-, D7, G7, C7, and G7. The second staff starts at measure 8 and features chords D-, G7, C7, and C7. The notation includes complex rhythmic patterns, triplets, and chromaticism, illustrating displacement of harmonic borders and non-diatonic intervallic groups.

\***Charlie Parker**: *Blues (Fast)*

One staff of musical notation featuring chords G7, C7, G7, and G7. The notation includes complex rhythmic patterns, triplets, and chromaticism, illustrating displacement of harmonic borders and non-diatonic intervallic groups.

C) Chromaticism Arising Presumably As A Result Of Development Of The Melodic Lines Without Regard To Pre-Ordained Harmonic Structures

**\*Paul Bley:** 3:33 - 3:43 in *All the Things You Are*, “Sonny Meets Hawk”

Musical score for Paul Bley's "All the Things You Are". The score is in 3/4 time and features a complex melodic line with chromaticism. The key signature has three flats (B-flat major/C minor). The score is divided into two systems, each with four measures. The first system has chords: F#m7, B7, EΔ, and C7. The second system has chords: Am7, D7, and GΔ. The melodic line includes triplets and chromatic runs.

**\*Wayne Shorter:** 9:05 - 9:08 in *On Green Dolphin Street*, Miles Davis, “Live at the Plugged Nickel”

Musical score for Wayne Shorter's "On Green Dolphin Street". The score is in 7/8 time and features a complex melodic line with chromaticism. The key signature has one flat (F major/C minor). The score is divided into two systems, each with four measures. The first system has chords: CΔ, Cm7, and CΔ. The second system has chords: D7, DbΔ, CΔ, and A7. The melodic line includes triplets and chromatic runs.

**\*Woody Shaw:** 3:26 - 3:42 in *Solid*, Woody Shaw, “Solid” 1987

Musical score for Woody Shaw's "Solid". The score is in 4/4 time and features a complex melodic line with chromaticism. The key signature has one flat (F major/C minor). The score is divided into three systems, each with four measures. The first system has chords: C7, F7, C7, G-7, and C7. The second system has chords: F7, F#o7, C7, E-7(b9), and A7(b9). The third system has chords: D-7, G7 STRAIGHT, E-7, A7, D-7, and G7. The melodic line includes triplets and chromatic runs.

**\*Herbie Hancock:** 9:14 - 9:43 in *Stella By Starlight*, Miles Davis, "The Complete Concert 1964 My Funny Valentine"

Measures 3-5 of the piano accompaniment. The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat). Measure 3 starts with a  $D-6^9$  chord. Measure 4 features  $G-7$  and  $C7alt.$  chords. Measure 5 contains  $F\Delta$  and  $D7^b9/F\sharp$  chords. The notation includes triplets in both the treble and bass staves.

Measures 6-8 of the piano accompaniment. Measure 6 has  $E\Delta/G$  and  $E/G\sharp$  chords. Measure 7 features  $F\Delta/A$  and  $G\flat\Delta/B\flat$  chords. Measure 8 contains  $A-9$  and  $D7alt.$  chords. The notation includes triplets in both the treble and bass staves.

Measures 9-11 of the piano accompaniment. Measure 9 has  $G13sus$  and  $G7alt.$  chords. Measure 10 features  $G13sus$  and  $G7alt.$  chords. Measure 11 contains  $C-9/G$  and  $F-9/G$  chords. The notation includes triplets in both the treble and bass staves.

Measures 12-14 of the piano accompaniment. Measure 12 has  $C-9/G$  and  $F-9/G$  chords. Measure 13 features  $G\flat\Delta$  and  $E\Delta/G\flat$  chords. Measure 14 contains  $G\flat\Delta$  and  $G\flat\Delta^b5$  chords. The notation includes triplets in both the treble and bass staves.

## II. CHROMATIC or PEDAL POINT HARMONY EXAMPLES

**\*John Coltrane:** 3:07 - 3:23: *Transition*, John Coltrane, "Transition"  
(open harmonic phrasing based loosely on E Phrygian)

The image displays five staves of musical notation for John Coltrane's piece "Transition". The notation is written in a single system across five staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The music is characterized by frequent triplets, indicated by a bracket with the number "3" below the notes. The phrasing is highly chromatic, with many notes marked with accidentals (sharps, flats, and naturals). The second staff continues the melodic line with more triplets and chromatic movement. The third staff shows a continuation of the phrasing, with some notes marked with a double sharp (x) and a double flat (x). The fourth staff features a more complex rhythmic pattern with many eighth and sixteenth notes, still incorporating triplets. The fifth staff concludes the phrase with a final triplet and a note marked with a double sharp (x). A dashed line labeled "8va" is positioned above the final staff, indicating an octave transposition for the final notes.