

Jazz Mandology with Ted Eschliman



Critical Decisions in Improvising: 'Gravity' Notes

Review:

In our last two articles, our focus has been on chord progressions, or the “vertical” dimension of jazz. Our first article looked at the most basic “sentence” of jazz, the [‘ii V7 I’ progression](#), and second article took us into the [‘tonal micro-centers’](#) that use this progression to take us in and out of “key centers” within a song.

A “Linear” Approach

This article, we want to look and explore at the linear or “horizontal” aspects of improvisation. Good melody is not just a random sequence of notes. It has its own aspects of tension and release that once unlocked, can give us valuable insights into great, creative melodies. Let’s start with a **C Major Scale**:

C D E F G A B C, but we’ll look at it in **scale degree relationships**, and of course your “defining” major chord tones are **C, E, & G**:

C = 1	G = 5
D = 2	A = 6
E = 3	B = 7
F = 4	C = 8 (or 1)

C Major Scale (C Major Chord = C E G)	Gravitational "Pulls" 7 to 1, 4 to 3, 6 to 5, 2 to 1

Hear the tension...

Play the scale on your instrument, but stop on scale degree 7 or **B**. Notice when you hang there, an intense feeling of restlessness draws you to resolve to the 8th scale degree, or **1** which is **C**. This is the strongest “gravitational” pull in Western (European) music. There is “tension” whenever this is unresolved.

The same phenomenon occurs to a slightly lesser degree when we play four notes and stop on the 4th scale degree, or F. Perhaps it wants to go to 5, G but the sense of “completeness” is even stronger when it pulls back to the 3rd note, E. Play that, C D E F and land on E.

7-1 4-3

A little observation, both the 7-1 and the 4-3 are half steps (or one fret) which is a clue to the most powerful resolving relationships in the diatonic or major scale. We can feel a similar pull in the 6th scale degree resolving to the 5th, A to G, as well as the 2nd resolving to the 1st, D to C, (notice two frets) but these “pulls” are not as strong as the 7-1 and 4-3.

Give your improvisation “meaning!”

In poetry, the greatest art is experienced when depth and meaning are communicated in as few words as possible. We have the same phenomenon in music when we try to “say” as much in as few notes as possible.

One could meander all over the major scale of a key center, and the notes would be “appropriate” but not compelling, meaningful, or “defining.” Understanding this pull of gravity notes will make your solos all the more powerful and meaningful.

Here’s another little secret: you’ve no doubt noticed the notes of resolution, C E G C all spell the ‘I’ (tonic) chord. Did you notice the unresolved or “pull” tones B D F A spell out a dominant function ‘V9’ or vii7 chord? (*The V or G lives in both worlds, and because of its sort of tonic/dominant “dual citizenship,” doesn’t have to be voiced.*)

Even though our topic is linear (melodic) function, the vertical (chordal) function is implied. Your melody notes are still defining the harmony, and working to define tonal center to the ear.

Here’s a brief exercise you can play to hear how these functions work, and put it from your ears into your fingers. When I taught undergraduate music theory, we would actually *sing* the number names to start the process of understanding scale relationships so I would suggest singing along with it, “4-3, 7-1, 6-5, 2-1” along with the played pitches. Try to involve both ear and brain in this exercise.

Ready for all 12 keys!

When you’ve mastered this, it’s time to move on to all 12 keys. This is simpler than you think, and I’m offering you (at no extra charge!) an exercise that can start taking this sound from ear and brain (hopefully...) to your fingers. We not only want to *think* the relationship, we want to start developing a tactile sense of the relationship.

One way to go about this is to embrace the wonderful transposable opportunity or gift mandolinists have on the fretboard to move basic patterns up and down frets and across strings. I’ve developed this into a concept called the [Four Finger Closed Position](#) system, or [FFcP](#).

You can read more about this on my website, but the basic idea is to abandon open strings in the ‘academic’ portions of your practice sessions.



In this system, you are afforded the opportunity to play a major scale anywhere on the fretboard, using four different start points; simply the first finger, second, third, or fourth. That's it! It's not **twelve** positions, like the **twelve** keys, it's only **four**. (*Ha, Ha, Sax players!!!*)

Now I can hear the collective groans of pinkies all across the land, because initially it's an awkward approach, but let me offer you encouragement. If you want to increase your fingering efficiency by 25% AND be able to play in all **12** keys (and you WILL in jazz), this is the shortest distance between two points. Just be prepared for a little pinky workout.

Diatonic Linear Gravity:

- 7 pulls to 1
- 4 pulls to 3
- 6 pulls to 5
- 2 pulls to 1

Guides and Gravity

*A 'Circle of Fifths' approach
in learning all 12 keys.*

jazzmando.com

Mandolin

Start off SLOWLY!

1X E 4 2X4 4 4 A 1X

4 2X D simile 4 G

8 C F

12 Bb Eb

16 Ab

19 Db F#

22 B

More about the exercise: **DON'T FEEL LIKE YOU ARE REQUIRED TO PLAY THE WHOLE THING STRAIGHT DOWN!** This would be like drinking a glass of frozen concentrated orange juice out of the can. Dilute it a little and just take one or two key centers and try to master them. Maybe you have a jazz tune like last article's exercise (["Fascinatin' Doll"](#)) with key centers in **C, D, G, Gb, F**.

Before you play that tune, grab just the measures of the exercise in the key of **C, D, G, Gb, F**. Work them over. Repeat them. Play them slow, play them fast. Repeat them. Play them until the cows come home. (Or if you're not from Texas, just play them a lot.) Do the same thing with other tunes, and the exercise will be more meaningful, and these relationships will stay in your brain and fingers longer.

Pinky Power!!!

Give yourself several months to get used to the [FFcP](#) approach. You're not going to give up open strings all together, but come on! You already know how to use them, and you won't forget. You just need to include this in your morning fretboard calisthenics! A good hint to the more awkward string crossings (5ths): plant your finger for the second note of the pair before you hit the first. You want these notes to be as connected as possible.

Until the next time, this is your pinky drill sergeant, saying thanks again for all the positive feedback, and feel free to email me with any questions you might have mandohack@aol.com.

