



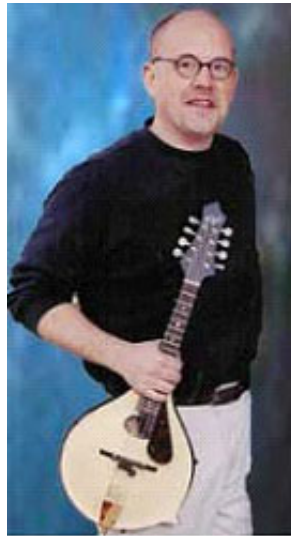
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## Jazz Mandology

### Suspicion of Melodic Intent

**Principles of effective improvisation and the creation of melody**

by Ted Eschliman



#### **Let's eat...**

The picnic is ready to begin. Embracing your paper plate in eager anticipation, you scout the table, endless mounds of hot buns, but... no hot dogs. Unsalted, unbuttered chopped potatoes, bowl of macaroni, but no cheese. More starchy bland food as you manipulate between here and the end of the table where the deserts lie. Pie crusts completely devoid of filling.

Doesn't sound very satisfying, does it? Plenty to fill your stomach, but in the end, will it be an experience you want to repeat (likely not.)?

Improvisation can be like this, whether Jazz or Bluegrass. If your "creativity" consists of just blowing starchy notes of the scale (even the right ones) with no nod to some basics of effective melodic creation, you are doing yourself and your listeners a huge disservice. Again, it's more than using the right notes, it's how you line them up. Let's examine four fundamental principles that can beef up your lines:

1. The lure of the leading tone
2. The defining role of the guide tone(s)
3. The accidental half-step
4. What goes up, must come down.

### The Lure of the Leading tone.

Just to keep things simple, we are going to focus on the **Major scale**, although most of these principles will work for the **Minor Scale**, too. We went over this in an earlier article on understanding [Gravity Notes](#), but it bears repeating. The strongest pull in Western (European) Music is that pull from the **7th** scale degree (a.k.a. "Leading Tone") to the **1st** (Tonic). Respect this; if you want to tease, don't resolve it. If you want to satisfy, follow it up with the Tonic.

Listen to the way the **Leading Tone** "yearns" and leans toward the **Tonic** in the following favorites:

**The Song is You** (Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein)  
 Leading Tone to Tonic  
 C Maj7    **Leading Tones**    E<sup>b</sup>dim7    D m7

Mand (Key of C)

**I Remember You** (Victor Schertzinger/Johnny Mercer)  
 Leading Tone to Tonic  
 F Maj7    **Leading Tones**    Bm11    E7    F Maj7

(Key of F)

### The defining role of the Guide Tone(s)

The **3rd** and **7th** scale degrees or "**Guide Tones**" define chord "character;" "Major-ness" or "Minor-ness," Major by 4 half-steps or frets, minor by 3 half-steps from the Tonic. We call this a **Major 3rd**

or **Minor 3rd** in music theory. The **7th** scale degree (again, the "Leading Tone") changes its character when lowered from a half-step to a **Minor 7th**. This alters the "personality" of the music to something arguably more "restless." (Review our article on [Gravity Notes](#))

If your choice of notes in a melody are dominated by these two notes, you establish the harmonic properties with your choice of these notes, **Major 3rd** or **Minor 3rd**, **Major 7th** or **Minor 7th**. These are the horizontal "meat" of your music hot dog--your chord "protein."

It's pretty clear in the following melody; should you flat the **3rd** and **7th**, it would completely change the character of the tune. Note how clearly the key of **C major** is outlined, even without including the accompanying chords:

**I Could Write a Book** (Richard Rodgers/Lorenz Hart)

**Guide Tones (3rd & 7th)** C Maj7 Am7 Dm7 G7 Em7 Am7

(Key of C) 3rd 7th 3rd

2 3 5 2 0 5 2 0 2

### The accidental half-step.

Looking at the 7 notes of the **Major Scale**, we notice there are 5 chromatic notes that reside outside-frets that when landed on, sound downright wrong and out of place. Used in motion, however, they can be a judicious as well as delicious choice for embellishing notes. These can be a scrumptious spice when allowed to move back into and toward the notes of the scale. These are the mustard on your hot dog, and the mayonnaise in your potato salad.

Let's stop for a quick Music Theory Primer:

#### The musician's 12-step program. Basic music theory review:

In Western (European) music, we have 12 steps of tones that are distinct and separate, and don't repeat again until the octave. In most key centers, we only use 7 of those steps (the 8th being a repeat of the 1st, and octave up).

**12 notes:** C C# D Eb E F F# G Ab A Bb C (chromatic)

**7 notes:** C D E F G A B C (diatonic)

In a **Major scale**, the **Minor 3rd** (Eb) flirts with the **Major 3rd** (E), the **flatted 5th** (F#) really wants to pal up with the (Perfect) **5th** (G). This is old news to you blues players (Blues Scale), but it's just the start of what you can do with the other "accidental" notes, the chromatic outside the **C Major Scale**.

The **Minor 6th** (Ab) also wants to stop straying and visit the **5th** (G). The **Flatted 2nd** has a half-step

pull downward, but keep in mind, these can also embellish the more inert tones of the **6th** and **2nd** if your journey "home" is not concluded.

Now, these are all very subjective, but don't be confused, we are still within the harmonic framework of one single chord, the **C Major Chord**. These notes may hint at other harmonies, but that's the beauty of jazz, that *ambiguity!* We may well be opening up the horizontal (chord) vocabulary with these accidentals, but for purposes of this discussion, let's assume we are using them in the context of embellishing the notes of the **Major Scale**.

The following standard departs from the **Tonal Center** of **F Major**, but demonstrates all of these principles. Traveling through a "Circle of Fifths" progression (review our article on [Tonal Micro Centers](#)) which only temporarily leave (and progress toward the key of F), key Guide Tones outline the chords magnificently, and throw in some juicy accidental half-steps as well:

**Lazy River** (Hoagy Carmichael/Sidney Arodin) (Note: Key of F Major, BUT Circle of 5ths)

Guide Tones (3rd & 7th); Accidental Half-Steps

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the song "Lazy River". The first staff covers the first four measures, and the second staff covers the next seven measures. Above the first staff, the chords are labeled as D7, Db7 C7, G7, and Ab7 G7. Above the second staff, the chords are labeled as C7, Db7 C7, F, Gm7, C7, F6, and A7. The notation includes guide tones (3rd and 7th) for several chords, 1/2 step accidentals, and embellishing accidentals. Fingering numbers are provided below the staff.

### What goes up must come down.

As much a principle of gravity as it is music, this very obvious melodic principle requires a conscious effort to balance out the direction of your melody. Of course, you can choose from the consecutive notes of a scale, or the skips of a outlining a chord (arpeggio), but let's go deeper, and suggest it's not just the notes you choose. It's the motion--the direction or better, the directions up and down that raise your improvising above those of mere amateur effort.

Look close at the above note heads of "**Lazy River**." It doesn't even take the ability to read notation to observe the fascinating combinations of up and down movement. Not only on a note by note basis, but a more "macro" view of the phrase demonstrates terrific variety in motion. The combination of motion and exciting half-step accidentals makes this whole song a very catchy, clever classic.

### A Little Spice? (or not...)

Much is said about the benefits of **Pentatonic Scales**, and chances are if you are into Bluegrass and Folk music, this is a regular staple of your playing. Patterns on these are easy to pick up for the beginner, but bear in mind that other than the **Root** and the **3rd**, these are some of the most inert, spiceless degrees of the major scale. Devoid of the tasty "gravity notes" of the **4th** and **7th**, these are like a savorless hospital meal to the connoisseur of good cooking.

## C Pentatonic Scale = C, D, E, G, A

Your food will be bland and flat if you never **go beyond Pentatonic Scales** in your jazz improvisation. Don't be afraid to sacrifice speed for inventiveness. Do yourself a favor and liberate yourself from the dreary world of Pentatonic...

### Conclusion

Granted, improvisation is a series of perpetual split second decisions, most of them subconscious rather than conscious. However, this is no excuse to *NOT* start trying to apply these principles. As I mentioned, there is a tremendous amount of subjectivity here, more art than science, but attempt to be aware of how these scale degrees affect you, personally. If you want tension in your music, you'll use the "tense" notes. If you're playing is more traditional and conservative, you'll avoid them or better, resolve them.

But... know them!

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