

Harmonic Elaboration in a Jazz Context
a few starting principles

Ideally, a jazz fakebook gives the most basic version of the progression behind a melody. These basic changes provide the underlying tonal and phrase-structural framework for the piece. This most basic structure is essential to the improviser: it indicates the main harmonic points of arrival, the length of sections and the modulatory scheme. In most cases, while still conscious of the overall formal/harmonic skeleton, a jazz musician will amplify the progression in various ways (especially if the harmony is particularly repetitive or slow-moving). There are a number of standard techniques to do this.

ii—V—I Insertion

The most distilled summary of harmonic function in jazz (and in most diatonic tonal music for that matter) might be the Roman numerals ii—V—I, where ‘ii’ represents pre-dominant, ‘V’ dominant, and ‘I’ tonic. In a jazz context, each of these chords routinely has a seventh added to it. Thus, in the key of F major, ii—V—I would be: Gm⁷—C⁷—F^{maj7}. But the ii—V—I progression can be conceived both in the context of the overall key and in the context of modulations or tonicizations. So, one might think of an entire progression as a series of ii—V—I’s moving between various keys (or tonicizing various chords) and returning to the overall tonic. Furthermore, one might memorize a progression in exactly this way: “first ii—V—I in F, then ii—V—I to G; then ii—V—I in....etc.”

One way of elaborating a basic progression then, is to insert ii—V—I (or some portion of it) into an otherwise singular harmonic context. The insertion highlights and enhances circle-of-fifths patterns within a basic progression. It may be done to embellish an already established tonic (overall or local):

F	F	F	
F	Gm ⁷ C ⁷	F	

or to prepare the arrival of a new (local) tonic:

F	F	B ^b	
F	Cm ⁷ F ⁷	B ^b	

or to elaborate a single dominant chord with its paired ii chord:

D ⁷	G ⁷	C ⁷	
Am ⁷ D ⁷	Dm ⁷ G ⁷	Gm ⁷ C ⁷	

Tritone Substitution

The tritone in any given dominant seventh chord (located between the third and seventh of the chord) is shared in common with one other dominant chord. So, for instance, the notes which form the diminished fifth in C⁷ (E and B^b) are also present in G^{b7} (B^b and F^b). Thus, these two chords (a tritone away from each other) can be exchanged, one for the other—this is how the tritone substitution works. It is essentially a common-tone chord replacement. For every dominant seventh chord in a progression it is possible to substitute an alternate dominant seventh chord a tritone away.

Gm ⁷	C ⁷	F	
Gm ⁷	G ^{b7}	F	

Or, combining ii—V—I insertion (above) with tritone substitution:

F	F ⁷	B ^b	
F	B ⁷	B ^b	
F	F ^{#m7} B ⁷	B ^b	

Chromatic/Stepwise Fundamental Bass

Another method of generating harmonic detail in a basic progression is by means of linear (i.e., stepwise or chromatic) fundamental bass motion. So, for instance, two chords a step away may be connected by an intermediate chromatic chord (often a diminished seventh):

| F | Gm⁷ | C⁷ |
| F f[°] | Gm⁷ | C⁷ |

Or, in a procedure called “planing,” two similar chord-types, one a step below the other, may be connected by a descending chromatic chord of similar type.

| F | Am⁷ D⁷ | Gm⁷ |
| F | Am⁷ Abm⁷ | Gm⁷ |

HOW IT ALL FITS TOGETHER

In a jazz performance context, how does one decide which of the various possible harmonic choices the ensemble will play? There are several answers to this question:

1) The “linear harmonic logic” answer.

In some sense, it depends which instrument you are playing. The soloist has perhaps the most latitude to introduce interesting (possibly unexpected) harmonic variants into a solo line. This is because the solo line is heard, to some extent, as a independent. Its internal harmonic logic is enough to make convincing even a very dissonant harmonic superposition. A good example of this is when a soloist clearly outlines a circle-of-fifths progression over top of a non-circle-of-fifths progression.

Rhythm changes: | B^b G⁷ | Cm⁷ F⁷ | Dm⁷ G⁷ | Cm⁷ F⁷ | B^b
Soloist plays: | F^{#7} B⁷ | E⁷ A⁷ | D⁷ G⁷ | C⁷ F⁷ | B^b

Though the circle is very much in conflict with the underlying changes, it has a clear functional harmonic progression of its own, which is compelling in its own right. Furthermore, the two progressions come together at the end in m.5 to reinforce an important structural harmonic point in the underlying progression.

In an early jazz ensemble, which may feature multiple soloists (clarinet, trumpet, trombone) this idea is even more apparent. In collective improvisation, it is the internal logic of the individual lines, in addition to their similar harmonic background, which makes the three-part counterpoint work. This “internal logic” principle may also be said to apply to the rhythm instruments, though to a lesser degree. A rhythm section player would not take quite as much harmonic initiative, though they may suggest in their playing some of the more common harmonic variants.

2) The “active listening” answer.

All members of a jazz ensemble engage in careful listening at all times. In this way any harmonic nuances incorporated into a progression can be heard and appropriated (or rejected). This sort of responsive dynamic is required for good ensemble playing in a jazz context.

3) The “it’ll-all-work-out-in-the-wash” answer.

Many of the harmonic elaborations discussed above are based on common-tone relations. That is, the substituting/embellishing chord has one or more notes in common with the original chord. Thus, in many cases the harmonic variants do not create real or substantial harmonic conflict. The bass articulates only single notes, and its lines are not always sufficient to create a severe harmonic conflict in a medium tempo. (Not coincidentally, bass players are often more conservative in their note choices in a slower tempo—i.e., sticking closer to the basic progression.) But, more to the point, a single bass line may support many possible upper voice harmonic choices. A bass player also introduces many non-harmonic elements—passing notes, neighbor notes and the like—but these, because of their context (see #1) do not obscure the harmonic underpinning.

The harmonic rhythm instruments (piano, guitar) do not typically play consistent sustained chords. As a result, actual harmonic conflict is fleeting and tends to defer aurally to another perception: that there are certain points in a progression (e.g., m.5 in the blues, m.17 in rhythm changes, m.31 in a song form) which are less subject to variation. They serve as harmonic “meeting points” which continually re-focus the ensemble harmony and serve to unambiguously clarify the harmony at key junctures.