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Memorizing Chord Changes/Tunes

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I: Introduction

In this brief lesson I will show you a few exercises that I have personally found to be effective when it comes to memorizing chord changes for jazz standards.

Memorizing changes allows you to have a better understanding and internalization of the piece of music, which in turn allows your playing to be freer and more creative because you are no longer wasting mental energy reading the changes whilst soloing.

The 3 exercises presented here are simple but effective. They may sound tedious to more advanced players but they will supply you with a deep knowledge of the tune you are working on.

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II: Exercise #1

The first thing to do is play the bass note of each chord in the progression. It also helps if you say the name of the chord that corresponds to the bass note in your head (or aloud) when doing this exercise. It is also extremely helpful if you can sing the bass line along with your instrument. These notes can be played in any register of the guitar. With this exercise and all of the following it is best to play with a backing track or a metronome. Also start slow (around 50) and increase tempo gradually (by intervals of 5 bpm or so) to faster tempos (200 and above).

Here is an example on the first 8 bars of a well-known jazz standard.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, with a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb). The first staff contains the first four bars, and the second staff contains the next four bars. Each bar has a single bass note on a staff line, with the corresponding chord name written above it. The notes are: E (4th line), A (3rd space), C (2nd space), F (1st space), F (1st space), Bb (2nd space), Eb (3rd space), and Ab (3rd space). The word 'etc.' is written at the end of the second staff.

III: Exercise #2

Simply play the basic, root-position arpeggio for each chord in the progression. This means play the 4 notes that make up each 7th chord in the progression (if the lead sheet presents a chord as a triad play the three notes and repeat the root an octave higher). If you see a chord that is presented as “altered” or with a tension (C9, C-9 etc.) play the basic arpeggio of the 7th chord (tensions are not part of the basic structure.) These arpeggios should be played in all registers of the instrument.

Here are the basic arpeggio structures (any time a 5th is altered change the fifth in one of these basic structures)

Major 7: 1-3-5-7

Minor 7: 1-b3-5-b7

Minor 7 b5: 1-b3-b5-b7

Dominant 7: 1-3-5-b7

Diminished 7: 1-b3-b5-bb7

Here is an example of this on the same tune.



The image shows two staves of musical notation in G major (one sharp). The first staff starts at measure 33 and contains four measures with the following chords: E-7b5, A7, C-7, and F7. The second staff starts at measure 37 and contains four measures with the following chords: F-7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, and Ab7, followed by an 'etc.' label. Each measure contains an arpeggio of the respective chord, with the notes written in a sequence that generally moves from the root to the 3rd, 5th, and 7th.

IV: Exercise #3

Once you have the roots and the arpeggios down the next step is to memorize the chord tones of each chord. In order to achieve this we will practice a variation on exercise #1. Instead of playing just the root play the 3rd of each chord in time. When you have done that play the 5th and then the 7th. Play each note on beat one of the measure in time with a metronome or backing track. Make sure to do this in all registers of the instrument. You can continue to do this with the 9th, 11th or 13th of the chord.

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Happy Practicing!

-Ryan Carraher

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