

What's Up With II-V-I's

An Introduction to the Jazz Language

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THE JAZZ VOCABULARY

Learning to improvise is often compared with learning to speak a language. As jazz musicians, our objective is to learn to speak through our instruments with the fluency of a great story-teller, using an unrestricted vocabulary to enhance our musical narrative with emotion, energy, and creativity.

When learning a language, we start begin basic words and word combinations that allow us to express simple ideas. As our vocabulary and understanding of sentence structure grows, we learn to communicate more complex ideas. A similar process can be applied when learning the jazz language.

FIRST THINGS FIRST:

Developing an understanding of the most basic chords/scales used in jazz and the way these chords work together is critical in learning to speak the jazz language. Minor seventh (m7), dominant seventh (7), and major seventh (maj7) chords are fundamental to this approach because, in their unaltered forms, they are constructed from modes of major scales. These chords are often grouped together in a common progression known as a II-V-I.

In this type of progression, the II and V chords and scales are constructed based on the corresponding second and fifth steps of the major (I) scale. The example below shows a II-V-I progression in the key of C major.

Notice in the example that the Dm7 and G7 scales/chords are generated from tones found in the C major scale. These scales are known as the dorian (second) and mixolydian (fifth) modes.

The image shows three musical scales on a treble clef staff. The first scale is labeled 'Dm7 (II) Dorian Mode' and consists of the notes D, E, F, G, A, Bb, C. Fingerings are indicated as 1, 3, 5, 7, 9. The second scale is labeled 'G7 (V) Mixolydian Mode' and consists of the notes G, A, B, C, D, Eb, E. Fingerings are indicated as 1, 3, 5, 7, 9. The third scale is labeled 'Cmaj7 (I) Major Scale' and consists of the notes C, D, E, F, G, A, B. Fingerings are indicated as 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9.

PRACTICE:

1. Since II-V-I progressions are perhaps the most common chord combinations in jazz, It is important to learn to recognize and play them in all keys. Assuming you have a working knowledge of your major scales, pick a key and play the major (I) scale. Follow this with the II and V scales and arpeggios. The arpeggios should consist of the 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9 in relation to each scale, as shown in the example above. Reinforce your knowledge of the progression by repeating the arpeggios in II-V-I sequence.

NOTE: A II-V-I practice progression has been provided on the last page of this lesson.

HINT: Recognizing II-V-I's is easy. Examine various tunes in a fake book for m7-7-maj7 progressions and ask yourself if they have the II-V-I relationship. II-V's are also often seen without the I chord resolution. Look for m7-7 chord combinations and determine whether or not they share the same hypothetical I chord.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Since II-V-I progressions are created from scales that have all the same tones, you may wonder why you can't just play major scales throughout the progressions. In short fact, you can. But remember, we're working to develop a vocabulary that offers unlimited potential for expression. If all you play is one scale over a chord progression, that's very limiting.

By using the arpeggios/chord tones, we are able to play lines that offer a distinct identity to each chord. Given this, it is fair to say that not all chord tones are created equal. In unaltered minor, dominant, and major chords, the third and seventh tones are the most important for a couple of reasons.

Most importantly, thirds and sevenths provide the identity for these chords. Major 7 chords contain major thirds and major sevenths. Minor 7 chords contain minor thirds and minor sevenths. Dominant 7 chords contain major thirds and minor sevenths.

Thirds and sevenths are also referred to as guide tones because they guide the movement of the harmony from chord to chord. In II-V-I progressions, descending chromatic movement is found between the sevenths of the minor and dominant chords to the respective dominant and major chords.

NOTE: Thirds and sevenths are so vital in establishing the identity of unaltered minor, dominant, and major chords that they serve as the basis for piano voicings of these chords.

PRACTICE:

2. Practice playing only the thirds and sevenths in II-V-I sequences in all keys. First, play the third followed by the seventh, as shown in the "Thirds and Sevenths Example" below. Once you gain confidence in your ability to play these tones with accuracy, practice improvising using only thirds and sevenths.

Thirds and Sevenths Example

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef, divided into three measures. The first measure is labeled 'Dm⁷' and contains two notes: a D4 (third) and a C5 (seventh). The second measure is labeled 'G⁷' and contains two notes: a G4 (third) and a F#5 (seventh). The third measure is labeled 'Cmaj⁷' and contains two notes: a C4 (third) and a Bb5 (seventh). Below each note is a vertical line with a number (3 or 7) indicating the interval.

NOTE: Insure that you are practicing in all twelve keys by using the practice progression included at the end of the lesson.

PATTERNS AND IMPROVISING:

Scales, arpeggios, and a working knowledge of guide tones constitute the foundation of a fluent jazz improvisation vocabulary. After this knowledge is acquired comes the process of creating musical sentences.

Just as you practice building sentences when learning a language, you also practice creating musical lines known as phrases. One of the most effective methods of exercising your jazz vocabulary is to practice patterns. Patterns are licks, phrases, or any combination of notes that you transpose and practice in multiple keys.

PRACTICING:

When practicing patterns for improvisation, it is important to work with concepts in mind, rather than just to learn licks. Several arpeggio based patterns have been provided in the examples below that utilize guide tones to connect the changes. Practice these in all twelve keys, then work to come up with additional patterns that incorporate the same concepts.

Follow pattern practice with improvisation practice, working to include the same concepts.

Ex. 1

Ex. 2

Ex. 3

Ex. 4

HINT: Transpose patterns from one key to another by assigning numbers to the chord/scale tones in relation to their positions on the respective dorian, mixolydian, and major scales. Learn to think by the numbers rather than always having to write things out. You'll soon learn to do this with relative ease.

NOTE: II-V-I play-along resources are available online through a website called *Play Jazz Now*. A link to *Play Jazz Now* can be found at www.randyhunterjazz.com by scrolling to the bottom of the homepage.

II-V-I Practice Progression

Dm⁷ G⁷ Cmaj⁷

Cm⁷ F⁷ B^bmaj⁷

B^bm⁷ E^b7 A^bmaj⁷

A^bm⁷ D^b7 G^bmaj⁷

F[#]m⁷ B⁷ Emaj⁷

Em⁷ A⁷ Dmaj⁷

E^bm⁷ A^b7 D^bmaj⁷

C[#]m⁷ F[#]7 Bmaj⁷

Bm⁷ E⁷ Amaj⁷

Am⁷ D⁷ Gmaj⁷

Gm⁷ C⁷ Fmaj⁷

Fm⁷ B^b7 E^bmaj⁷