

## **I Am My Own Rhythm Section: Approaching the Unaccompanied Solo**

Jazz Education Network Conference

Friday, January 6, 2017, 6:00 PM

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### **Introduction**

Thank you for joining me today to explore some ways that jazz improvisers can benefit from working on unaccompanied improvisation. The long and rich history of important unaccompanied solos includes Coleman Hawkins' *Picasso* 1948 recording, Sonny Rollins' *Body and Soul* 1958 recording, Michael Brecker's *Naima* 2001 recording, and Chris Potter's viral master class performance of *All the Things You Are*, in addition to a host of solo concerts by Rollins, Anthony Braxton, Dave Liebman, and others.

Performing a successful unaccompanied solo is one of the most challenging improvisational pursuits for "single-line" instruments like the saxophone, trumpet, and trombone, particularly on a tune with any substantive harmonic structure. The performer is called upon to serve as her own rhythm section, and is solely responsible for clearly communicating the melody, rhythm, and harmony of the tune to the audience, a daunting assignment indeed. I wish to emphasize the importance of unaccompanied playing as both a performance and pedagogical tool.

### ***Summertime***

George Gershwin's classic *Summertime* is the perfect song for us to use as the basis for an unaccompanied solo. It is familiar, often recorded, "easy," has a simple and short form, is in minor (V-i resolutions are seemingly easier to hear in minor), and includes the extremely important modulations from i to iv and between major and relative minor (these modulations occur in countless other tunes).

### **Melody**

As with any tune, we must begin with the melody as it *is* the tune, and is far better than anything we can dream up to improvise over the tune. It is ideal to learn melodies by ear, but since this is a handout, we will begin by looking at a generic lead sheet version of the melody (see next page). When we perform the melody, it is important to personalize it and go beyond the basic rhythms we see on a lead sheet. This generally does not apply to more intricate melodies like Bebop tunes, of course, where it is a sufficient challenge to simply play the melody. I prefer to listen to multiple recordings of tunes to see how other musicians interpret the melody, and I always include a singer in my listening whenever possible.

# SUMMERTIME

GEORGE GERSHWIN

The image shows the musical score for 'Summertime' by George Gershwin. It is written in 4/4 time and consists of four staves of music in treble clef. The melody is characterized by a steady groove and includes various ornaments like grace notes and slurs.

Interpreting a melody is very personal, and there is no right or wrong way to do it. Generally speaking, we will “loosen” up the rhythm of the melody and perhaps add some ornamentation (grace notes, turns/flips, glissandi, scoops, etc.) in key spots. I generally approach this with the mantra of “a little goes a long way,” and I often hear young students who do far too much to the melody. When we play unaccompanied, we need to be certain that our rhythmic variations continue to communicate a steady groove and feel to the audience, so keeping things simple is usually the best choice. It is **essential** to actively feel every beat, particularly when we hold notes out – this is where we often make errors in time and rhythm.

Using the melody as the basis for an improvisation, particularly for the newest improvisers, is often quite useful – and “safe.” It limits the number of choices the student needs to make and is a great transition to fully improvised solos.

## Time and Rhythm

When we improvise by ourselves, we must fill each of the roles of the rhythm section. Time, feel, groove, and rhythm have now become our responsibility. If we can play clearly in an unaccompanied setting, our interaction with a live rhythm section will only be enhanced and it will be easier and much more fun to play, for both ourselves and our bandmates.

Developing a good time feel and rhythmic approach to improvisation is a lifelong pursuit. Here are some things we can all work on to help improve this area of our playing:

- Intensive, focused listening to excellent recordings
- Learning to play the drums at a basic level

- Learning to play walking (and Latin) bass lines, either on our instrument, the piano, or the bass itself
- Using the metronome in our practice. When I work on swing, I have my metronome sound on beats 2 and 4 and play along with it. It's like playing just with the drums' hi-hat clicking. I also have my students play etudes and transcriptions with the metronome in this fashion. Over time, this technique helps us to plug into the rhythm section even more.
- I try to play all of my 8th note passages with the every-other-note articulation concept below. I use this foolproof scale exercise with young students to have them learn the articulation, and then I encourage them to play it on all of their 8th note lines. There are so many well-documented exceptions to this articulation, but I use this to establish an articulation baseline from which to work.



All of these things force us into “thinking like a rhythm section player.” At the heart of today’s session is to play clear, functional solos, so we will focus on keeping things simple, sticking to 8th note and triplet rhythms.

## Harmony

There are many alternate, re-harmonized versions of *Summertime*, but today we will refer to the most “bare bones” version, presented below:

## SUMMERTIME CHORD CHANGES

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Four staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, each containing four measures of rhythmic slashes. The chords are indicated above the staves:

- Staff 1: D MIN (measures 1-2), D 7(b9) (measures 3-4)
- Staff 2: G MIN (measures 1-2), E MIN 7(b5) (measures 3-4), A 7(b9) (measures 5-6)
- Staff 3: D MIN (measures 1-2), G MIN 7 (measures 3-4), C 7 (measures 5-6)
- Staff 4: F MAJ 7 (measures 1-2), E MIN 7(b5) (measures 3-4), A 7(b9) (measures 5-6), D MIN (measures 7-8), E MIN 7(b5) (measures 9-10), A 7(b9) (measures 11-12)

Clearly communicating the harmony of the tune is of utmost importance in any improvisational setting, but even more so when we play unaccompanied. In addition to being responsible for the time-keeping roles of the rhythm section, we are now the sole provider of the harmony, too. We will focus on a number of specific techniques to strengthen our harmonic concept.

### The Piano

For us single-line instrumentalists, the piano is the gateway to connecting our instruments, eyes, and ears, as it is the only way we can play and see chords. After I have learned the melody of a tune, the next thing I do is to play the harmony on the piano. Depending on your own piano skills, any of the following options will help you:

1. Playing the roots of the chord in the left hand in whole notes
2. Playing the roots in the left hand and the third of the chord in the right hand in whole notes
3. Playing the roots in the left hand and then thirds and sevenths in the right hand in whole notes (see Piano Example 1 on page 5)
4. Adding a repeating comping rhythm mirrored in both hands with any of the above

Beyond that, being able to play a walking bass line in the left hand and fuller, non-root voicings in the right hand is a bonus. Playing both hands of Piano Example 2 on page 6 transforms us into a true rhythm section player, especially when we comp using some basic rhythms, but this will take some dedicated piano practice time. Time well spent, to be sure.

Piano Example 1: Basic Voicings<sup>1</sup>

The image shows a piano exercise in 4/4 time, divided into four systems. Each system consists of a right hand and a left hand. The right hand plays chords, and the left hand plays single notes. The chords are:

- System 1: D MIN (measures 1-3), D 7(b9) (measure 4)
- System 2: G MIN (measures 1-2), E MIN 7(b5) (measures 3-4), A 7(b9) (measures 5-6)
- System 3: D MIN (measures 1-3), G MIN 7 (measure 4), C 7 (measures 5-6)
- System 4: F MAJ 7 (measures 1-2), E MIN 7(b5) (measures 3-4), A 7(b9) (measures 5-6), D MIN (measures 7-8), E MIN 7(b5) (measures 9-10), A 7(b9) (measures 11-12)

<sup>1</sup> Note that I prefer to think of the D minor chord in measures 1-3, 9-11 and 15, as well as the G minor chord in measures 5-6 as a minor 6/9 chord, and that is reflected in the voicings in the example.

## Piano Example 2: Walking Bass line and Non-Root Voicings

The image shows a piano exercise in 4/4 time, consisting of four measures. The right hand plays chords, and the left hand plays a walking bass line. The chords are labeled as follows:

- Measure 1: D MIN
- Measure 2: G MIN
- Measure 3: E MIN<sup>7(b5)</sup>
- Measure 4: D 7(<sup>#9</sup>/<sub>b9</sub>)

The second system shows the following chords:

- Measure 1: G MIN
- Measure 2: E MIN<sup>7(b5)</sup>
- Measure 3: A 7(<sup>b9</sup>)
- Measure 4: A 7(<sup>b9</sup>)

The third system shows the following chords:

- Measure 1: D MIN
- Measure 2: G MIN<sup>7</sup>
- Measure 3: C 7
- Measure 4: C 7

The fourth system shows the following chords:

- Measure 1: F MAJ<sup>7</sup>
- Measure 2: E MIN<sup>7(b5)</sup>
- Measure 3: A 7(<sup>b9</sup>)
- Measure 4: D MIN

The fifth system shows the following chords:

- Measure 1: E MIN<sup>7(b5)</sup>
- Measure 2: A 7(<sup>b9</sup>)
- Measure 3: E MIN<sup>7(b5)</sup>
- Measure 4: A 7(<sup>b9</sup>)

I also like to learn to play and hear difficult chords and/or progressions by playing my instrument **and** the piano “simultaneously.” I play a chord on the piano, hold it with the sustain pedal, and then play an idea on my saxophone. This is done out of time, of course, but I find it be an effective way of training my ear to hear what I am trying to play.

### Outlining the harmony

When I meet young, enthusiastic improvisers, I often hear a willingness to improvise, an understanding of the blues scale and perhaps a couple of other scales, but no real understanding of how to play functional harmony. The most basic and important concept to learn is the ability to successfully resolve a V chord to tonic in major or minor. The most important voice-leading

concept a young improviser can learn is to resolve the leading tone upward to the tonic, as indicated in the example below. When I work with students on this concept, I encourage them to improvise freely (or not at all) in the measures with rests, and then play/integrate the boxed notes **every single time through**. I find this to be a great starting point in learning to communicate the harmony of a tune.

## GUIDETONE LINES FOR "SUMMERTIME"

Four staves of music showing guide tones for "Summertime" in 4/4 time. The first staff has a D MIN chord in the first measure and a boxed D 7(b9) chord in the fourth measure. The second staff has a G MIN chord in the first measure, an E MIN 7(b5) chord in the second measure, and a boxed A 7(b9) chord in the fourth measure. The third staff has a D MIN chord in the first measure, a G MIN 7 chord in the third measure, and a boxed C 7 chord in the fourth measure. The fourth staff has an F MAJ 7 chord in the first measure, an E MIN 7(b5) chord in the second measure, a boxed A 7(b9) chord in the third measure, a D MIN chord in the fourth measure, an E MIN 7(b5) chord in the fifth measure, and a boxed A 7(b9) chord in the sixth measure.

### Resolution Devices

Moving a step further, the example below provides some basic resolution devices that every improviser should know and use. I often encourage my students to dream up many more of these devices and/or search high and low for other devices (via transcriptions or even classical music – if it is good enough for Bach and Mozart, it sure should be good enough for us!).

Three staves of music showing resolution devices. Each staff consists of four measures. The first staff shows a sequence of A 7(b9) and D MIN chords. The second staff shows a sequence of A 7(b9) and D MIN chords with a chromatic movement in the second measure. The third staff shows a sequence of A 7(b9) and D MIN chords with a chromatic movement in the second measure and a chromatic movement in the fourth measure.

Note: All of the above examples can be resolved to D major by changing any F naturals to F sharps.

We can take any of those examples and superimpose it over *Summertime* like this, transposing to other keys where appropriate:

Four staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, showing various chord progressions and melodic lines. The first staff has chords D MIN and D 7(b9). The second staff has G MIN, E MIN 7(b5), and A 7(b9). The third staff has D MIN, G MIN 7, and C 7. The fourth staff has F MAJ 7, E MIN 7(b5), A 7(b9), D MIN, E MIN 7(b5), and A 7(b9).

### The Harmonic Minor Scale

One of the important developments of the Bebop era was the use of the flat 9 on the dominant chord. While this chord contains a strong diminished harmonic implication, it is even **more** consonant to approach this sound with the harmonic minor scale in mind.

In his book *Elements of the Jazz Language for the Developing Improviser*, Jerry Coker dedicates Chapter 4 to this concept, which he refers to the “3-<sup>b</sup>9” concept. He supplements his discussion with excerpts from classic jazz tunes and significant solos. It is a very good follow-up to my basic introduction to this idea. Here is perhaps the best way to summarize the concept:

You are playing the harmonic minor scale **of the key you are going to**  
over the dominant chord that precedes it!  
(making certain to put the dominant chord's chord tones on the downbeats)

In our case, we are using the D harmonic minor scale over the A7(<sup>b</sup>9) chord to resolve to D minor. We can also do this on *Summertime* when we resolve to G minor and F major. Here are two resolution devices using the harmonic minor scale. Note the octave displacement from the 3 to the <sup>b</sup>9, something that gives a nice boost to the voice leading of the line.

Two staves of musical notation showing resolution devices. The first staff shows a melodic line starting with A 7(b9) and resolving to D MIN. The second staff shows a melodic line starting with A 7(b9) and resolving to D MIN, with an octave displacement from the 3 to the <sup>b</sup>9.



Here are some longer examples of this harmonic minor scale usage:

Two musical staves showing harmonic minor scale lines. The first staff shows a line starting on A4, moving up to A5, with a sharp on the 6th degree (F#) and a flat on the 7th degree (Gb). The second staff shows a line starting on A4, moving up to A5, with a flat on the 6th degree (Fb) and a sharp on the 7th degree (G#). Chord labels above the staves include A7(b9) and DMIN.

Here is a chorus of *Summertime* using these harmonic minor lines. Notice that in the “short ii-V” measures, I “ignore” the ii chord. Rhythm section players should always account for that chord, but since the improviser’s melodic line is aurally supreme, we can omit it and just play on the V chord if we wish, since that is where the important voice leading happens.

A musical score for a chorus of *Summertime* in 4/4 time. It consists of four staves. The first staff is in treble clef with a 4/4 time signature, showing a melodic line starting on D4 and ending on D5. The second staff is in bass clef, showing a bass line starting on G3 and ending on G4. The third staff is in treble clef, showing a melodic line starting on D4 and ending on D5. The fourth staff is in treble clef, showing a melodic line starting on F4 and ending on F5. Chord labels include DMIN, D7(b9), GMIN, EMIN7(b5), A7(b9), GMIN7, C7, FMAJ7, and EMIN7(b5).

### The Bebop Scale Applied to Harmonic Minor

The Bebop scale simply adds an additional half step to the scale, most frequently between the root and 7<sup>th</sup> of a dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord. This keeps the chord tones of the dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord in strong downbeat positions, giving us a big voice-leading assist. We can add the same half step to the harmonic minor scale and reap the same benefit of the chord tones being on downbeats:

A musical staff showing the Bebop scale applied to a dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord. The scale starts on A4, moves up to A5, with a flat on the 6th degree (Fb) and a sharp on the 7th degree (G#). The chord label above the staff is A7(b9) and DMIN.

### “Short” ii-V-I Progression

Measure 12 of *Summertime* offers a “short” ii-V-I progression in F major, one where the ii and V chords last only two beats each. I often encourage students to transcribe, borrow, or invent some basic devices to navigate these shorter ii-Vs, like the ones in the example below. These can be adapted to work over minor ii-V progressions.

The image displays two musical staves illustrating a "short" ii-V-I progression in F major. The first staff shows a sequence of chords: G MIN7, C7, F MAJ7, G MIN7, C7, F MAJ7. The second staff shows a sequence of chords: G MIN7, C7, F MAJ7, G MIN7, C7, F MAJ7. The notation includes treble clefs, stems, and notes for each chord, with some notes beamed together to show rhythmic patterns.

### Conclusion

If we piece together the different concepts I have covered today, we find ourselves with a functional unaccompanied solo, one that clearly communicates the melody, rhythm, and harmony of *Summertime* to the listener. Using these concepts as our foundation, we can work to build more complexity into our playing, knowing that we are always clearly relating the tune to the listener.

**Thank you** for attending my session today!

You can follow up on much of this information by visiting my website, [www.MattOlsonMusic.com](http://www.MattOlsonMusic.com), where you will find more detailed handouts (under the Teaching tab of the navigation tab at the top) on the harmonic minor scale, the Bebop scale, and much more about me and my musical endeavors and projects.

## Matt Olson, Saxophonist

Equally at home as a jazz and classical saxophonist, Conn-Selmer Endorsing Artist **Matt Olson** is Associate Professor of Saxophone and Director of Jazz Studies at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. He hails from Racine, Wisconsin, and holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and a Master of Music degree in Jazz Pedagogy and Bachelor of Music degree in Saxophone Performance from Northwestern University. Matt's teachers have included Frederick Hemke, Debra Richtmeyer, Mike Kocour, Don Owens, Paul Bro, Ron Bridgewater, Tom Wirtel, Thomas Matta, and Jonathan Helton.



Matt's professional work includes performances with Randy Brecker, Kurt Elling, Benny Carter, John Fedchock, Jason Marsalis, Byron Stripling, Ken

Peplowski, Kevin Mahogany, Doc Severinsen, Ryan Keberle, Andy Martin, Chris Vadala, Manhattan Transfer, Aretha Franklin, Natalie Cole, Bernadette Peters, Lou Rawls, Michael Feinstein, Johnny Mathis, Ben Folds, Bob Newhart, Wayne Newton, the Temptations, the Four Tops, children's entertainer Shari Lewis, the Chicago Jazz Ensemble, the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, and the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra. His performances have taken him to the Montreal Jazz Festival as well as to Chicago's Jazz Showcase and Orchestra Hall.

Matt is a founding member and co-leader of the *Unbinged Sextet*, a collaborative jazz sextet dedicated to the recording of original compositions. The group features educators from a number of key music schools throughout the United States. *Unbinged's* first recording, *Clarity*, released on OA2 Records in March 2015, has received worldwide radio airplay and numerous positive reviews. They will release their second project, *Don't Blink*, in the spring of 2017.

Matt has been part of commissions that resulted in new works for the saxophone by composers Frank Ticheli, John FitzRogers, Christopher Dobrian, Don Owens, and Roscoe Mitchell. He has presented performances and master classes at numerous national and regional conferences of the North American Saxophone Alliance and the 2003 World Saxophone Congress. He has also been a featured guest artist at Northwestern University, Arizona State University, the University of Chicago, the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, the University of Idaho, and high schools throughout the United States. Matt's debut jazz recording, *Vortex*, was released in 2006. He has published articles in both *Downbeat* magazine and *The Saxophone Symposium*, and Walrus Music publishes Matt's original compositions for large jazz ensemble.

Matt is active nationally as a clinician and adjudicator. He has presented clinics at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic and Jazz Education Network Conference. He was previously the instructor of saxophone for the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities and a summer instructor for the National High School Music Institute at Northwestern University. He also conducted one of two 2005 South Carolina Band Directors Association All-State Jazz Ensembles. He holds memberships in a variety of professional music societies including the North American Saxophone Alliance, Jazz Education Network, National Association for Music Education, BMI, Pi Kappa Lambda, and Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia.