



Pete McCann

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How To Develop a Motif While Improvising

Modern jazz educators typically bombard students with exercises to practice making changes, scales to play over chords, extended arpeggios to memorize, traditional jazz licks to try, quotes from other melodies to incorporate, solo transcriptions to write, instructional videos to watch and so forth. With so many different things to think about, it can be a challenge to find the time to develop an interesting and melodically rewarding solo.

A small melodic motif—a short succession of notes producing a single impression—can be a valuable tool to add to your improviser toolbox. In my three decades of teaching improvisation, I always show my students how to incorporate motivic development into their solos. I often start with a short three- or four-

note melodic motif.

The set of changes I will be using to demonstrate this concept is from “All The Things You Are,” a frequently played jazz standard. Let’s take a look at Motif A, a three-note motif shown on the opposite page. The notes happen to be the seventh, root and fifth of an A_b major chord, and A_b is the tonal key center of the tune. This motif, which is commonly referred to as a “shape,” is an ascending half step and perfect fifth. This shape happens to be the bass line of the intro presented in retrograde inversion. The first motif can be played in a total of five additional variations (see Motif A Variations).

For now, let’s stick with the initial motif and use it over the first eight measures of “All The Things You Are” (see Example 1).

Note that the interval of the fifth can change from perfect to diminished to correspond to the changes, as in measures 3, 7 and 8. Also, it should be noted that the motif can start on various nonchord tones, as in measures 3, 4, 5 and 6. The first notes of the motif in these measures are called approach notes (i.e. notes below or above a chord tone).

Example 2 shows the same motif developed rhythmically and phrased like a solo. Now, go back and play this motif in the other five variations of Motif A. Just one small motif has an infinite number of ways you can use it, simply by changing the direction of notes, the rhythm that you use to play the notes and the chord tones to which you want to apply the motif.

Before moving on to the next two exam-

ples, take a look at Motif B, another three-note motif. The intervallic structure of this motif is a descending perfect fourth and a whole step. Again, there are five variations (see Motif B Variations). In measure 3 of Example 3, the intervallic structure adjusts for the harmony as the second changes to a half-step. Also, measures 5, 6 and 7 give us an additional melodic element by playing the motif in ascending minor thirds, and the motif in measure 6 emphasizes upper extensions of the G7 chord (flat 9, sharp 5 and sharp 11).

Example 4 is a fleshing out of Motif B using jazz rhythms and one possible way to phrase this shape.

Motif C is a four-note motif that happens to be the first four notes of a half-whole diminished scale. I tend to use this one a lot, and it has a significant number of uses over many types of chords, especially the dominant seventh. With this four-note motif, we now have 23 additional variations of the same notes. Motif C Variations shows just a few examples of these.

Let's use Motif C on the changes in Example 5. The first note of the motif acts as an approach note to a chord tone, which gives us some great color tones. Note that the arrival tone in measure 3 of Example 5 is the sharp 9 of the Eb7 chord, and the last second of the motif is a major second between measures 3 and 4 to accommodate the Abmaj7.

Example 6 is one possible way you could use this motif with bebop phrasing.

Think of the three- and four-note motifs as the Swiss Army knife in your improviser toolbox. It's always challenging to add something new to your improvising lexicon, but as with any new idea, it will take some time to get this concept under your fingers.

I've been working at this concept for decades, and it never bores me. Often I will take a small motif from the melody of whatever tune I am working on and see how long I can solo using a shape, bending and twisting it to fit the harmony, or using it chromatically to get to a cadence. Try to use a motif over eight bars, and gradually work up to a full chorus.

As with any new concept, it's always best to listen to what the jazz masters have done. Think of how important John Coltrane's four-note motif (tonic, second, third and fifth of a major scale) was when he played it over many of the chords in "Giant Steps." Listen to Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh take a small shape and twist it over a standard set of changes. Thelonious Monk often used motifs from the whole-tone scale in his improvisations. Every great player knows how to manipulate a small shape and use it during their solos. Motivic development is an incredibly useful tool in composition, so why not extend the concept into your own improvisation? The possibilities are endless. **DB**

Guitarist Pete McCann has been an integral part of the New York jazz scene for more than 25 years. Last year he released his sixth recording as a leader, *Pay For It On The Other Side* (McCannic Music). A sought-after sideman, McCann has played guitar on more than 100 recordings. He has performed and/or recorded with Kenny Wheeler, Dave Liebman, Lee Konitz, Patti Austin, Brian Blade, Grace Kelly, Bobby Previte, the Mahavishnu Project and the Maria Schneider Orchestra. As a commercial recording artist, he has worked on projects for CNN, BBC, *Sesame Street* and IBM. McCann received a bachelor of music degree from the University of North Texas and has taught at New York University, The New School, City College of New York and the Maine Jazz Camp. Visit him online at petemccann.com.

Motif A Motif A Variations



Example 1

Example 2

Motif B Motif B Variations



Example 3

Example 4

Motif C Motif C Variations



Example 5

Example 6