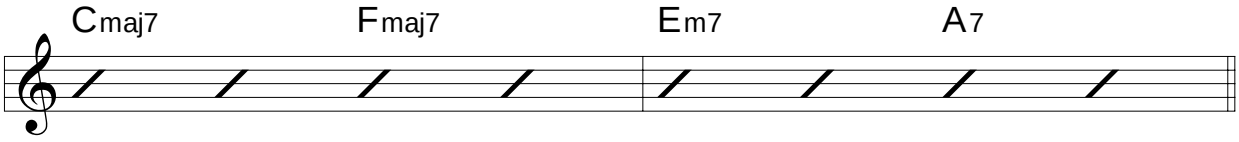
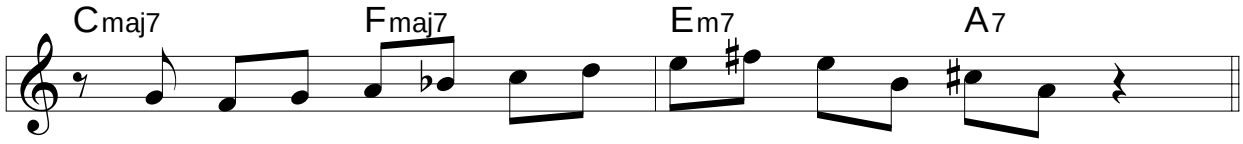
Improvisation

An ear for harmony can improve your improvising beyond suggesting possibilities for reharmonization. There are two fundamentally different ways that people are taught to improvise, and I describe these briefly below. While they both have advantages and disadvantages, I am finding that learning to hear harmony in the way I have been discussing can improve the way your improvised melodies fit the chord progression, regardless of the basic approach you use. In effect, familiarity with harmony forms a bridge between the two approaches, allowing you to take advantage of the best of both.

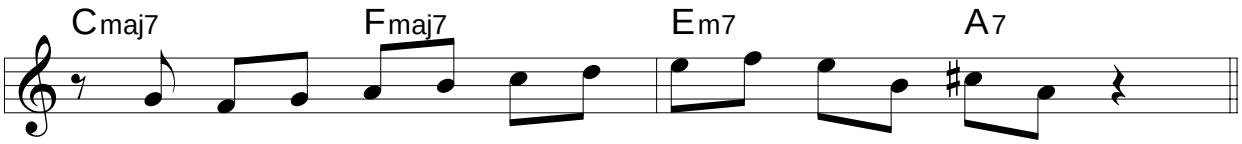
Jazz educators for the last several decades – since emergence of modal jazz in the late 1950's and 1960's – have tended to focus on a *chord/scale approach*, where each chord is associated with a scale, and with every chord change, you change scales as well. This approach works wonderfully for modal or non-tonal jazz, but when playing standards, it can make improvising seem more complicated than it need be. Most standards, as we have seen, pass through only a very few key centers, so in theory there should be no need to change scales so often. Learning the theory of harmony as presented in this book can help you see the bigger picture and choose scales that can be held constant across several chords. For example, in the following progression, a naïve application of the standard chord/scale approach would have you using four different scales in the following progression:



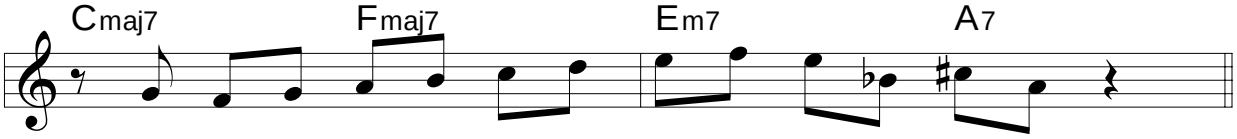
The standard scales would be **C** major, **F** major, **E** dorian, and **A** mixolydian. Assuming you are not overwhelmed by having to play four different scales in two measures, this approach might lead you to play a phrase like the following:



Yet this progression can be analyzed as a simple **I-IV-iii-VI** precadential progression in the key of **C**, and it never really leaves that key. This suggests that the **C** major scale can be used across the whole progression, perhaps with only a single note change from **C** to **C#** to better fit the non-diatonic **VI** chord. The same melodic impulse that underlies the previous example might now come out like this:



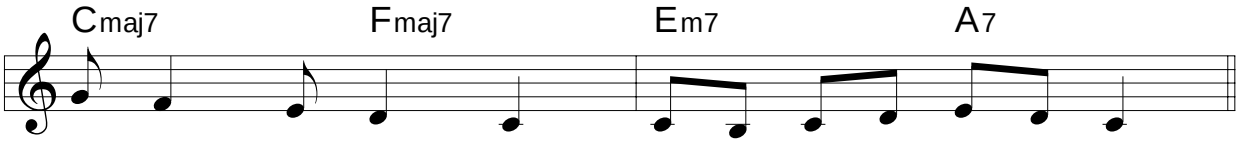
Or, you might consider the **iii-VI** to represent a transition to the key of the **ii**, even though the **iii** chord is not notated as a half-diminished chord. This interpretation might suggest that you use the **D** harmonic minor scale there and thus play this type of line:



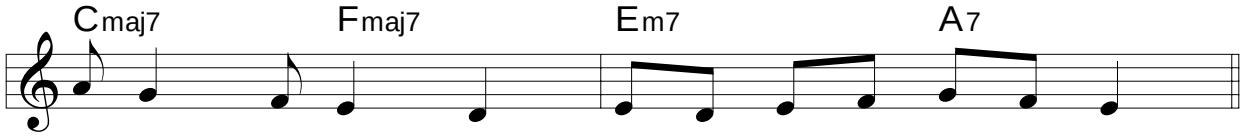
For someone who has been taught to change scales with each chord, this can simplify the thinking that is required in order to improvise by allowing you to stretch one scale across more than one chord. It also results in lines that are more centered in the original key and thus fit more organically with the progression.

This is also the basis of the *key center approach* to improvisation, which was the predominant method used over the first fifty years or so of jazz history, and is still used by most players who have not been specifically taught otherwise. In the key center approach, instead of expecting to change scales with every chord, we assume from the beginning that the scale of the key will be all we need to play over the progression. This approach is ideally suited to simple, mostly diatonic tunes, which is the type of tune most often played in the early years of jazz. The approach falls apart when playing complex modal or non-tonal tunes where the chords do not function according to the guidelines of tonal harmony, as it becomes difficult or impossible to identify key centers. Most standards, though, contain only a few key centers; so in theory, all one needs to know in order to improvise over a standard is the keys it travels through.

The danger of a pure key center approach is creating lines that are too generic sounding. There are a lot of different chord progressions that are possible in the key of **C** major, yet if "key of **C**" is all you have in mind when you are improvising, you might end up playing the same melodic lines over any standard. It is much more satisfying to hear lines that really follow the tensions and releases within the progression. And this is where the ability to hear harmony can help. For example, simply using a **C** major scale to guide your improvisation over the progression shown above might result in lines like this:



While this line technically works over the progression, it is not particularly evocative of it, largely because there is no sense of which melody notes are chord tones and which are not. If you can hear the harmonies, though, you will be more likely to play chord tones at appropriate places. The resulting line will fit the progression better, even without changing scales:

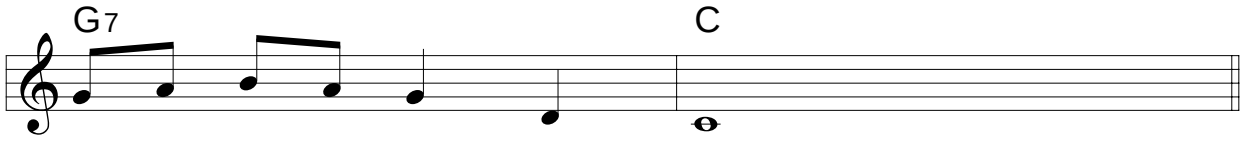


Too many beginning key center players do not know the chords to the tunes they play, and as a result they are not able to fit their lines to the harmony in this manner. An understanding of harmony can help these players hear and recognize the chords and thus respond to them better.

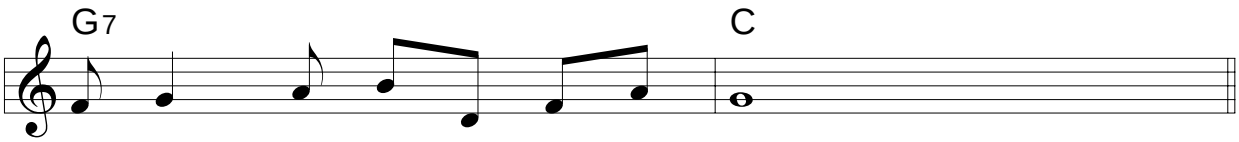
So the study of harmony can help the chord/scale player better capture the sound of a phrase as a whole, and it can help the key center player be more sensitive to the individual chords within the phrase.

Another way that an understanding of harmony can improve your improvisation has to do with broader contours of tension and release. Knowing the scale and note choices associated with a given chord is certainly useful in fitting your melodies to the changes, but we can also consider harmony in a more abstract manner. Regardless of the specific chords involved, the different categories of phrases – cadential, precadential, static, transitional, and modulations – each have their own distinct character, and the melodies you create should reflect this in some way. If you are aware of the tension and release patterns inherent in the chord progression, your improvised lines can exploit them and take on a level of meaning and interest that goes beyond merely containing the "right" notes.

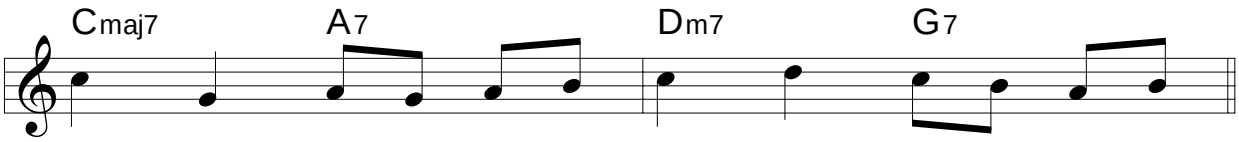
For example, a cadence is all about tension and release. The dominant creates tension that is released by the tonic. Try to consider ways in which your melodic line itself can suggest a corresponding sense of tension and release. For example, to me, this phrase contains all the "right" notes for a G7 chord, but somehow it does not generate the sense of tension I expect of a cadence in jazz:



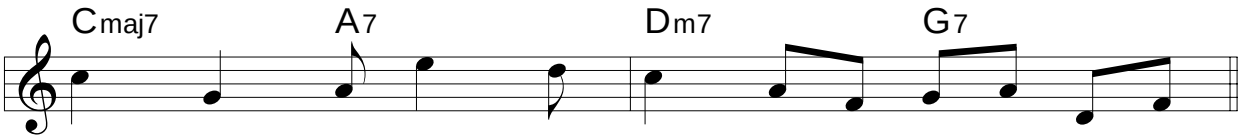
This phrase, on the other hand, creates more tension through its use of leaps and syncopation:



Static progressions constitute another opportunity to take advantage of tension and release patterns. You can choose to create a line that is itself static:



Or, you can choose to create a line that exaggerates the tension and release dynamic within the phrase:



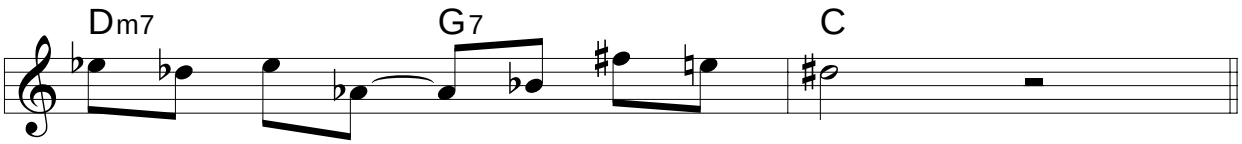
This is all rather subjective, and I will admit the differences are often subtle, so you can, if you wish, consider this an advanced technique and move on if this discussion does not resonate with you right away. At some point, you may find this to be the low hanging fruit.

An understanding of harmony can also make a difference even when playing "outside" the changes. Students often ask me to give them advice on how to play "outside", and I have to admit, the question baffles me a little. To me, playing "outside" is *exactly* like playing "inside", except you do not worry about playing chord or scale tones so much. Your primary consideration is always making interesting melodies. The individual phrases should relate together in the way sentences in a paragraph relate together, and the entire solo should "tell a story", building to some sort of climax. None of this has anything to do with what chords or scales you use.

When you are playing "inside", you should, in addition to thinking about creating interesting melodies, relating phrases, and telling a story, also be thinking about making your melodic line fit the changes. When playing "outside", however, you simply do not try so hard to fit the changes. You do need to become comfortable improvising with the full chromatic scale; if your lines are too diatonic, they will not go far enough "outside" the changes to be perceived as such. But if you think about the full chromatic scale at all times, your lines will be "outside" with no further effort required. In particular, you do not need any formulas to tell you what scales to use over what chords in order to get "outside". As long as your melodies use enough non-diatonic tones, they will be heard as "outside". You can control the degree of "outsideness" by choosing to fit your line to a few of the chords while ignoring the changes the rest of the time, or by choosing to hit

some chord tones along with the non-chord tones. The success of your "outside" playing, like that of your "inside" playing, will still depend on your handling of the basic elements of creating interesting melodies, relating phrases, and telling a story.

With all that in mind, let us return to the discussion of tension and release contours and the differing characters of the various phrase categories. One way to organize your thinking when playing "outside" is to honor the characters of the different phrase categories, even while mostly ignoring the chords themselves. For example, the phrase used over the following cadence *sounds* to me like a cadence, even though the notes are all "wrong":



Therefore, to me, this would be a better choice of a phrase than one that did not *sound* like a cadence, even if the latter consisted solely of "right" notes.