Jazz at Lincoln Center's
Band Director Academy
Frederick P. Rose Hall, New York, NY

Applicable Theory for Jazz Improvisation - Part I

Instructor

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Course Description and Objectives

This session will help teachers develop strategies for incorporating the use of theory in a very applicable way. The study of harmonic theory will be used to help enhance the students' ears while focusing on how to use the ears intelligently in approaches to improvisation.

Outline and Core Concepts

Participants in this session will gain understanding and experience in:

1) A syllabic approach to jazz language;
2) The use of scales for melodic invention;
3) Using and hearing arpeggios for melodic purposes;
4) Hearing and using intervals intelligently;
5) Hearing scale degrees in tonal centers.

Handouts

Jazz Language Syntax
Scale Symmetry for Melodic Devices
Arpeggio Exercises
Bye, Bye Blackbird

Applicable Theory for Jazz Improvisation

The study of music theory should not be an end unto itself. We do not study scales for the purpose of playing scales. This is not trivial knowledge. **We study music theory to learn how to hear music.** Music is an aural art form and to communicate within that art form, we must learn to hear and speak the language. Music theory does not offer rules to be followed for creating music. Instead, theory guides us in how music has been created to help us better understand how to create. Remember, the music always came before the theory.

It is also important to note that music theory does not only refer to harmonic theory. Theory seeks to show how music is structured. This includes melody and harmony, of course, but often we neglect **rhythm, form, phrasing, texture and feel.** In fact, the most often neglected of these attributes is **"feel"**. It is important that all exercises be done in time in order to create the appropriate **time/feel**.

"Theory is theory!"

The concept of *jazz* theory is a bit misleading. Yes, there are differences between the *jazz language* and other musical dialects, but the basic theoretical concepts remain the same. The concept of tonality has not changed; nor has the fundamental concepts of harmony, melody, rhythm, form, timbre or texture. Though the character of the melody or the articulation will change, the fundamental concept is the same. So, **music theory is music theory**; it doesn't matter what style of music.

It is also important always remember that we are dealing with music theory, not music fact. There will always be exceptions to the "rules" that we devise in our study of music theory. Great musicians throughout history have proven that there can be many ways to approach melody, harmony, etc. Our goal will be to use the concepts that have been identified in theory to help us to hear, imitate, assimilate and finally create within the jazz language.

Hearing the Language

It is important to remember that students should be making **sonic associations** with the **theory knowledge** they are attaining. In other words, **students should recognize these sounds when they hear them and associate them with something on our instruments**. We practice these sounds in order to have them in our ears, under our fingers and at our disposal as we combine them into musical language.

The first step to assuring that we understand the jazz language is in our ability to articulate it with the voice – **sing it**! This not only means singing the notes that have been practiced but in the appropriate **dialect** as well. This will be developed as students continue to **actively** listen to great examples of the jazz language. There are some basics of the language, however, that can assist in that active listening endeavor.

(See "Jazz Language Syntax" handout as needed.)

Making Scales Matter

The use of scalar practice as a learning tool is in no way a new concept. However, do we ever think about *why* we practice scales? It certainly is not for the purpose of playing scales and it is not just to get notes under the fingers. The use of scales should teach us:

- How to hear within a tonality;
- How melodies are created;
- How chords and scales are related.

Students often play **"random right notes"** when using scales for improvisation because they have not considered the use of the scale beyond knowing what notes can be played. Ask probing questions that make students get more involved with how scales work. Questions such as:

- *How does a particular melody use scale tones?*
- *Are all melody notes contained in the scale?*
- *How does the scale relate to the chord(s)?*
- *What are the different forms of minor?*
- *Why is the harmonic minor scale called harmonic?*
- *Why is the melodic minor scale called melodic?*
- *Why use modes?*

These probing questions can help students to understand harmonic and melodic function and help them to hear within a given tonality.

Scale Symmetry

Music is full of symmetry. It is the symmetry that helps us to organize and remember musical phrases. By studying the symmetry of scales and their relationship to chords, we can do a better job of creating melodies rather than playing random right notes. Breaking down the symmetry also allows us to break information into smaller, easier to see, usable pieces.

(See "Scale Symmetry for Melodic Devices"" handout.)

Arpeggios

The practicing of arpeggios also helps students better understand the sound of chords and melodic construction. The norm for practicing arpeggios has been to either arpeggiate triads up to the octave or arpeggiate 7^{th} chords. This is limiting to jazz music because chord voicings and melodies tend to also use more upper extensions of the chord. Arpeggiating up to the 9^{th}, 11^{th} or even the 13^{th} will help students to here the upper extensions. This practice will also help students see the relationship between arpeggios and scales. We can then find the symmetry within the arpeggios just as we did with the scales and break the information down into smaller pieces.

(See "Arpeggio Exercises"" handout.)

Finally, it is time to put all of these ideas into *practice*. Practice can never be avoided. These ideas are simple but they are not easy.
But once the time is put in and these ideas are in the ears and under the fingers, students can move from "random right notes" to **good melodic construction within the jazz language!**

Jazz Language Syntax

Remember, "Jazz is a vocally oriented music; its players replace the voice with their instruments, but try to recreate its singing style and blue notes by using scooping, sliding, whining, growling, and falsetto effects." (Southern) We will always start with singing.

I. Back to Basics of Jazz Language (review)

A. *Letters:*

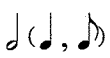
1. Each beat unit is subdivided into three equal parts. (Triplets)

Doo-dl- a

Doo un da

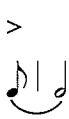
•Use the **D** sound for more of a consistent jazz attack. This system was derived from Clark Terry's method on teaching jazz doodle tonguing.

2. Each syllable represents an articulation.



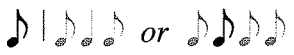
Doo (long notes)

Dit (short, not accented)

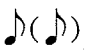


Dah (long accented note)

Dot (short accented note)



Da (pick-up or second 8th in a series)

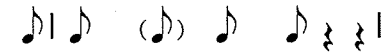


Do(d) - Un (ghost note)

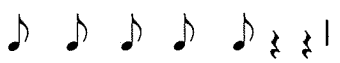
B. *Words:*

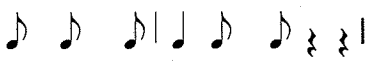
1. Combine articulations to create "word" ideas.

Doo Dit Dot



Da Dod-un Doo Dot

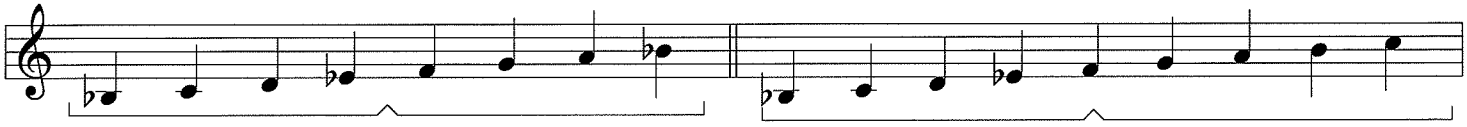




Scale Symetry for Melodic devices

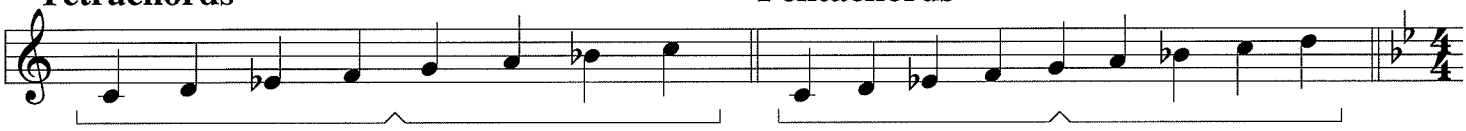
Tetrachords

Pentachords

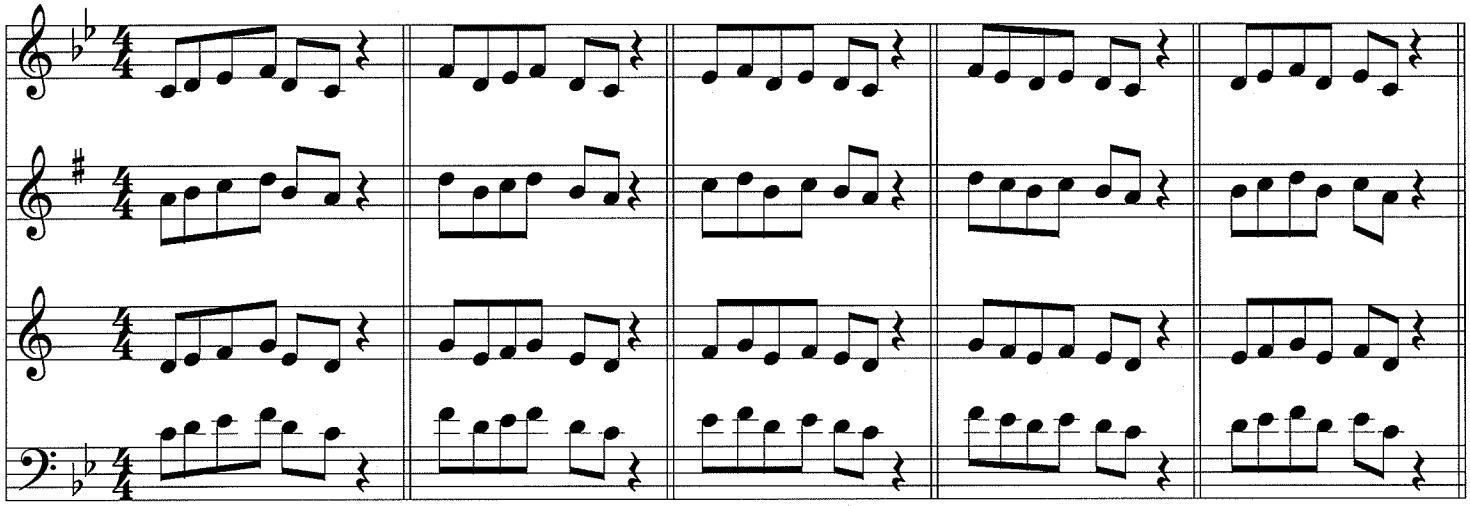


Tetrachords

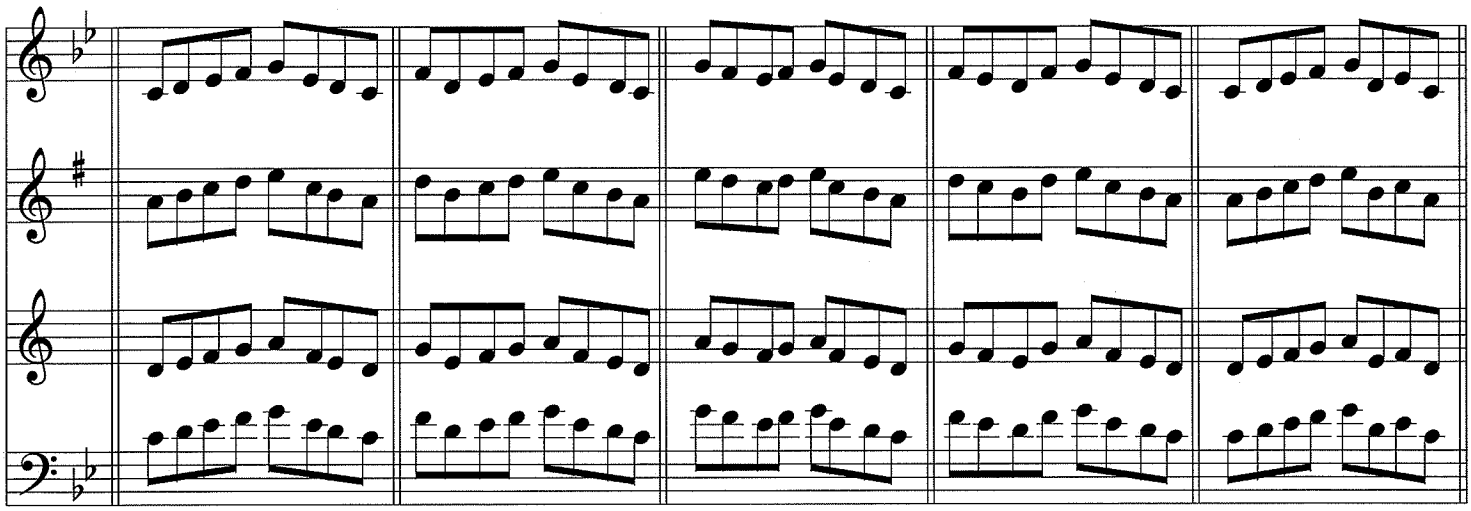
Pentachords



Tetrachord motifs

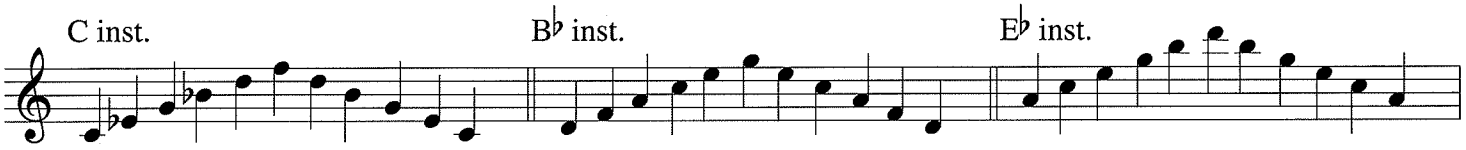


Pentachord motifs

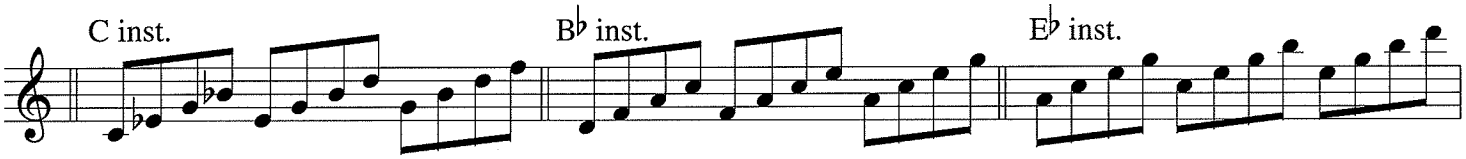


Arpeggio Exercises

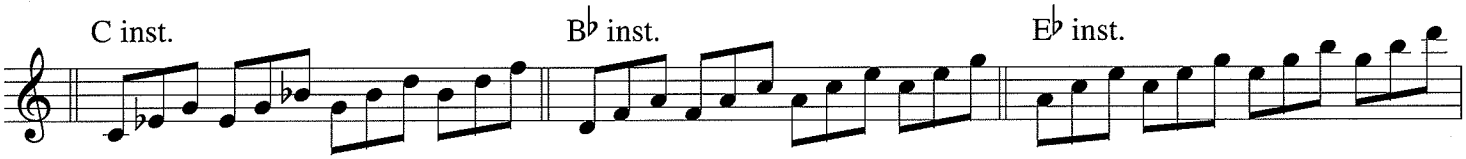
1. Begin by practicing these arpeggios. After getting them under your fingers, try hearing a different note as the root of the chord. Assume the 1st note of the arpeggio to be either the root, the 3rd or the 5th of the chord. Remember that the goal is to get the notes under the fingers and make a connection with the ear.



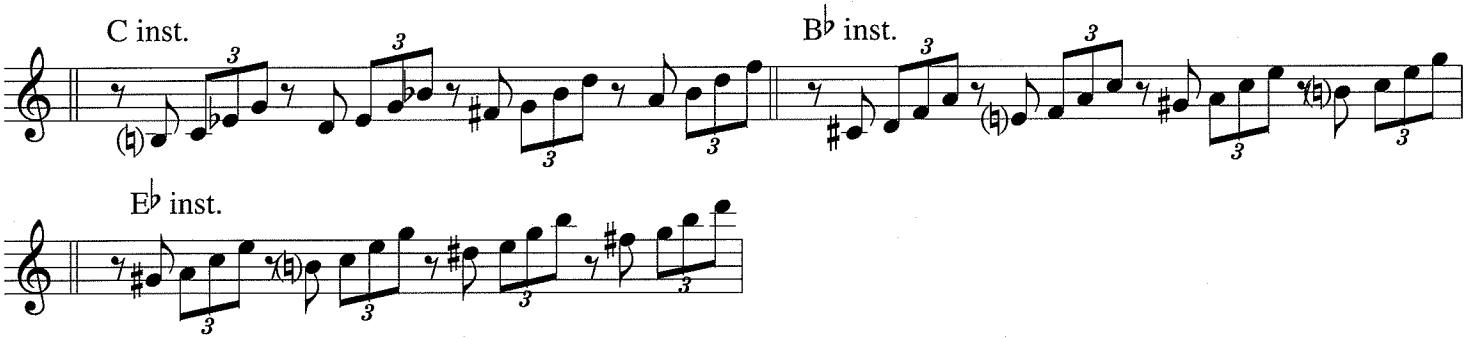
2. Next, break these arpeggios into 4-note groupings (1, 3, 5, 7 - 3, 5, 7, 9 - 5, 7, 9, 1



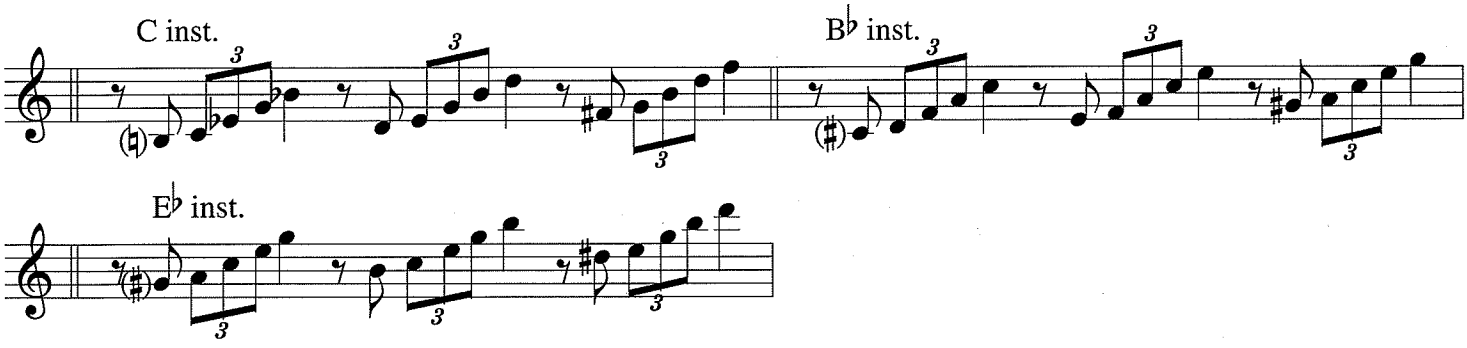
3. Now, break these arpeggios into 4-note groupings (1, 3, 5 - 3, 5, 7 - 5, 7, 9 - 7, 9, 1



4. Using a leading tone pick-up into any 3-note grouping makes a good "sha hoodla".

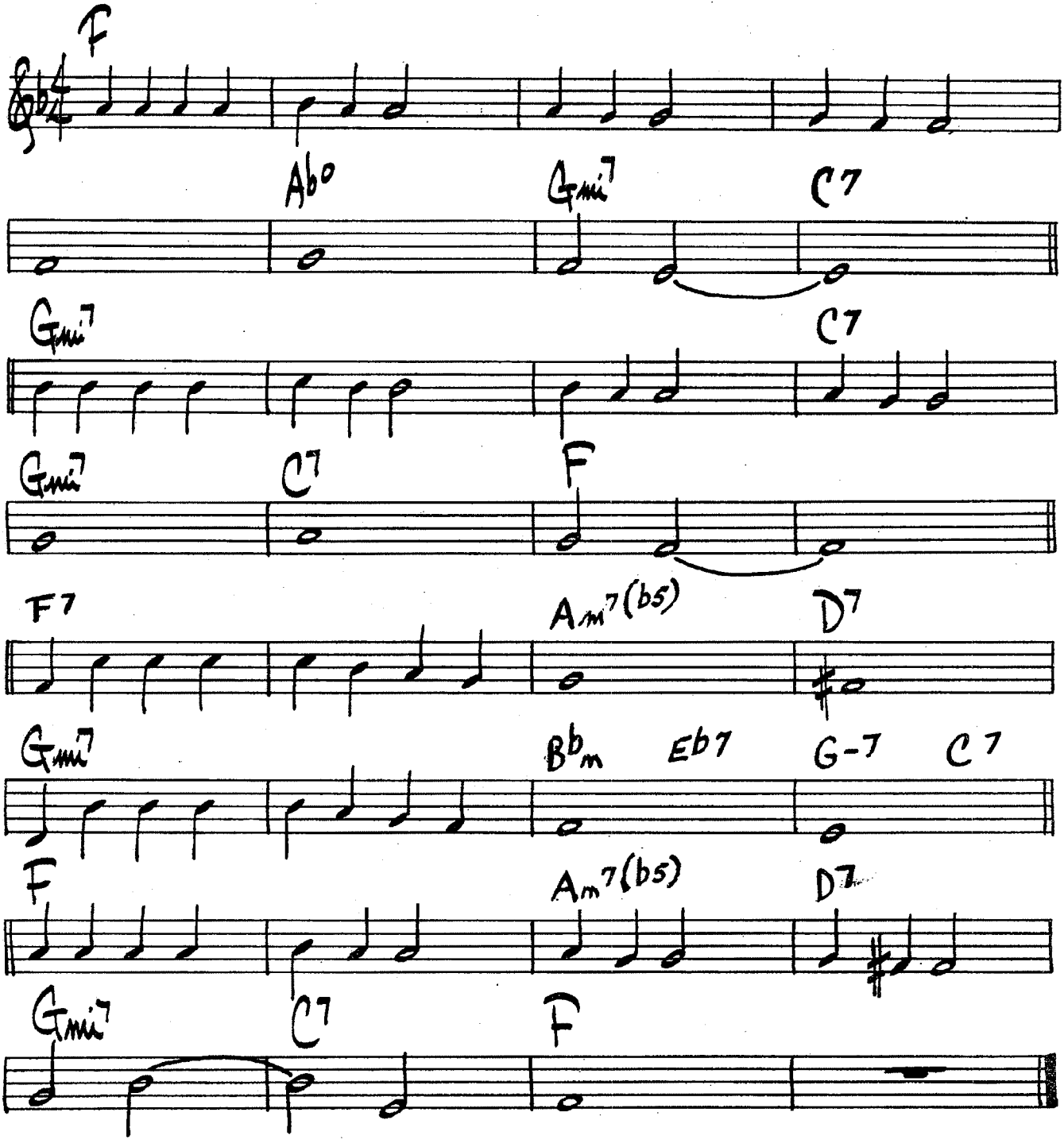


5. Using a leading tone pick-up into any 3-note grouping makes a good "sha hoodla dwee"



BYE BYE BLACKBIRD

DIXON / HENDERSON



MILES DAVIS - "ROUND MIDNIGHT"