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Beyond borders : broadening the artistic palette of (composing) improvisers in jazz

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2. CONTEXT

These are examples of techniques I found in solos by saxophonists Michael Brecker, Mike Sim, Bunky Green and Gary Thomas and by pianist Paul Bley. The transcriptions of (fragments of) their solos served as models inspiring me to extend my improvisations beyond the traditional chord-scale approach. I have chosen the following examples because they represent operations that are relevant at all stages of the development of advanced jazz techniques. The same can be said about the order in which they appear in the sections below. In short, harmonic displacements precede tonal superimpositions and parallel harmonies, and from there it is a relatively small step towards non-tonal superimpositions. In jazz education these steps can also serve to illustrate the well-informed construction of a solo. The effect of sounding “outside the chords” can be increased by merging these displacements and superimpositions with traditional bebop patterns and conventional melodic and rhythmic sequences. From the time I discovered the operations in the following examples I transcribed them, transformed them, and transferred them into my personal musical backpack.

2.1 Michael Brecker: tonal superimpositions, and harmonic displacements

In a solo by tenor saxophonist Michael Brecker on Cole Porter’s standard “What Is This Thing Called Love” on guitarist Jack Wilkins’ LP *You Can’t Live Without It* (1977), I encountered exemplary examples of tonal superimpositions and harmonic displacements.

First there is the superimposition of a minor melodic scale starting on the flatted ninth of the altered dominant seventh chord. In the following example Brecker superimposes a melodic pattern using the Ab minor melodic scale on the G7 altered chord. Beside he applies harmonic displacement by starting this pattern two beats too early, in the second half of bar 5, instead of on the first beat of bar 6.

What is This Thing Called Love



[ex 2.1.1]

Hereafter in bars 38–40 he applies harmonic displacement by extending another Ab minor melodic pattern over the bar. Hereby he delays the resolution of G7 to the tonic chord Cmaj7 with six beats.



[ex 2.1.2]

In the following example the G7 chord in bar 62 is extended over the bar so that it partially obscures the C7 chord in bar 63.



[ex 2.1.3]

A comparable operation occurs in bars 90–91, but with the superimposition of an octatonic scale on a C7 chord. He extends this line over the bar and obscures the Fm chord.



[ex 2.1.4]

Beside these superimpositions that add tension to dominant seventh chords and delay the resolution to the tonic chord, Brecker's solo also contains superimpositions on minor and major seventh chords. For instance, starting from the second half of bar 10, by alternating descending pairs of triads Gb and Fm on the tonic chord in bars 11 and 12, a

harmonic movement is added to this static Fm chord, by the partial superimposition of the Gb triad, the tritone of its dominant C7 chord.



[ex 2.1.5]

Another interesting superimposition is that of a seemingly pre-composed chromatic line ending on a target note in the next chord, such as in bars 50 – 53. The shape of the encircled line is more important than the exact analysis of its harmonic content.



[ex 2.1.6]

This short solo on “What Is This Thing Called Love” by Michael Brecker comprehends examples of how to combine tonal superimposition with harmonic displacement. In the actual practice of jazz improvisers these techniques have become quite conventional operations to delay or obscure the resolution of dominant 7 chords.

2.2 Mike Sim: “incorrect” parallel ii-V chords

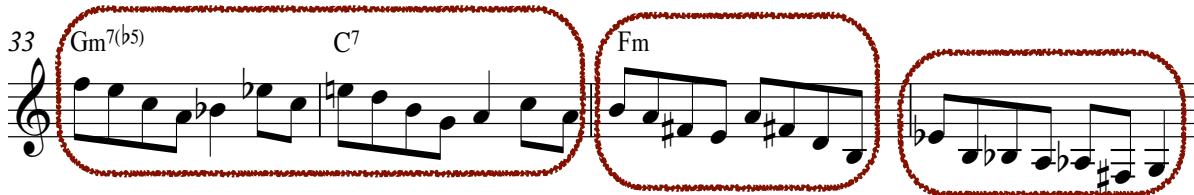
In addition to these tonal superimpositions, alto saxophonist Mike Sim’s solo on “Hot House”, a contrafact by Tadd Dameron of “What Is This Thing Called Love” as played on Barbara Dennerlein’s CD *Take Off* (1995), demonstrated examples of the superimposition of theoretically incorrect changes on the original ones. The next example shows his application of parallel ii-V patterns in bar 13, where he superimposes Em7 – A on the original chord Dm7b5.

Hot House



[ex 2.2.1]

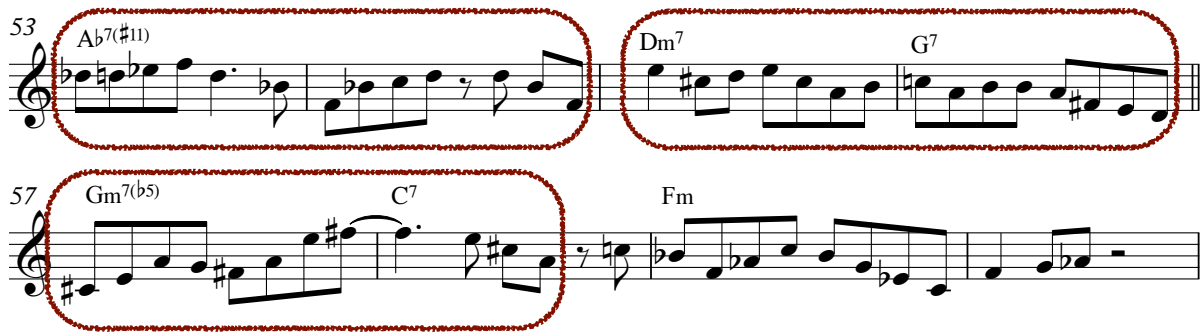
In the next example, the pattern in bar 33 is repeated as a sequence, starting a minor second down, in bar 34, superimposing a Cmaj7 sound on the original C7 chord. In bar 35, a broken Bm7 chord is superimposed on the original Fm. Together with a quasi Bb7-Eb major cadence in bar 36, it vaguely evokes the sound of a Bb7 altered chord.



[ex 2.2.2]

The following line – starting on the second half of the B-section of the tune and ending after the fourth bar of the last A-section – shows an interesting way of alternately playing inside, outside and again inside the stated chords. In bars 53–54, Sim plays a Bb triad as an upper structure of the Ab7^{#11} chord. In bars 55–56 he applies parallel V–V chords, by superimposing an A triad on Dm7, and a D7 chord on G7. The same in bars 57–58: an A7–D sequence is superimposed on Gm7, and an A triad on C7. In contrast with these complex harmonies, the way he embellishes the tonic Fm by including the implied Cm7 in the second half of bar 59 sounds again very conventionally inside the chord.

To me this line evoked the image of an airplane riding on the runway (bars 53–54), taking off (bars 55–56), flying (bars 57–58) and landing safely (bars 59–60).

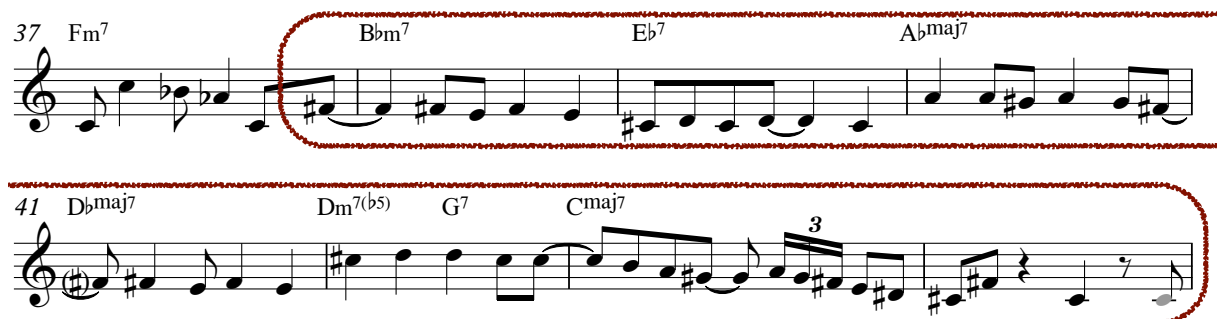


[ex 2.2.3]

2.3 Paul Bley: non-tonal superimpositions, and melodic and rhythmic sequences

Pianist Paul Bley's solo on the standard "All The Things You Are" on Sonny Rollins' LP *Sonny Meets Hawk* (1963) served as an important example of switching between the inside and the outside of a jazz standard's original chords. During three solo choruses Bley alternates non-tonal superimpositions with conventional operations such as melodic and rhythmic sequences and elementary bebop patterns. Despite his intentional harmonic and rhythmic derailments and his fluid timing, his solo never loses contact with the original form.

For instance at the beginning of his second solo chorus in bar 37, Bley starts inside the original Fm7 chord. But from the last eighth note of that bar until bar 44, he goes outside the chords by the superimposition of a melodic line that sounds a half note too high. However, thanks to the rhythmic sequences in bars 37,41 and 38,40 the solid structure of this line completely blurs these conflicts with the original chords.



[ex 2.3.1]

In contrast with bars 37–44, bars 45–49 in the following line sound more inside the chords and end with a conventional bebop pattern in bar 48.



[ex 2.3.2]

Bley frequently switches between the inside and the outside of the harmonic and rhythmic structure by playing rhythmic sequences. For instance in bars 55–60 he plays a sequence of 12 times the same rhythmic pattern – in rhythmic displacement. The first (accentuated) notes of these patterns form a melodic line that, although rhythmically displaced (in order to correctly fit the chords it should have started from bar 57), refers well to the original melody.



[ex 2.3.3]

The sequences in bars 62–65, and in bars 70–71, take the opposite direction. With their more inside approach they refer to conventional rhythmic riffs to mark the end of this chorus.

61 Fm⁷ Bbm⁷ Eb⁷ Abmaj⁷

65 Dbmaj⁷ Dbm⁷ 3 Gb⁷ Cm⁷ B°

69 Bbm⁷ Eb⁷ Abmaj⁷ Gm⁷(b5)

[ex 2.3.4]

By alternately moving away from and getting back to the form of the song, Bley evokes the image of someone driving his car on the service lane next to a highway, following, passing by, getting behind and meeting up again with the rhythm section who is driving on the main lane.

2.4 Bunky Green: stacked perfect fourth intervals, and superimposed triads

On his recording of "It Could Happen To You" on the CD *Another Place* (2004), alto saxophonist, jazz educator, and author of the method *Jazz In A Nutshell* (1985) Bunky Green primarily fascinated me by his floating timing. For instance in the melody he freely moves back and forth around the beat and accelerates to eighth note triplets and double tempo passages, both times at the second half of the chorus.

Hereafter, Green shows how patterns with perfect fourth intervals can be moved intelligently in and out the harmonic fabric. For example during his playing of the first theme, the pattern of perfect fourths on a whole note distance, starting on the third beat of bar 21, stays inside the Eb and Ab chords, while the one starting on the fourth beat of bar 22 starts outside and moves back into the Gm chord.

It Could Happen To You

1st chorus (melody)

[ex 2.4.1]

As an addition to the improvisational techniques discussed above, Green plays upper structure triads as tonal superimpositions, like in bars 33–36. The G triad on top of the Bb7 chord (in which he plays the note a instead of the correct a^b) in bar 34 is extended over the Ebmaj7 chord in bar 35, and followed by the F-triad on top of the Eb chord in bar 36.

[ex 2.4.2]

The following line in the third solo chorus illustrates Green's way of deliberately creating a harmonic vagueness. In the first two bars he starts a conventional bebop line that ends in a series of four perfect fourth intervals, starting on the sixth eighth note of bar 10: descending b^b-e^b; ascending e^b-a^b; ascending a^b-d^b; descending b^b-e^b; and ascending g-c. The last interval creates harmonic vagueness, by superimposing the tonal color of C minor to the Eb chord.

In bars 12–13 he plays three intervals of perfect fourths (ascending a-d; ascending b-e in bar 12; ascending g^b-b in bar 13). In bar 12, he superimposes an A minor triad on Dm7-G7 which results in a conventional Gsus4 sound. In bar 13, he superimposes a Gb minor triad on the Cm7 chord, which results in a more outside sound. In bar 14, he

continues his playing outside the chords, by superimposing an E major triad (considering the notes a^b and g^b , enharmonized into $g^\sharp$ and $f^\sharp$) on the original F7 chord.

Bar 15 contains two intervals of perfect fourths: descending $e^b - a^b$; and ascending $d^b - g^b$. These four notes are repeated in a permuted order. Together with the original root note f, they superimpose a Db major triad on the original Fm7 chord.

Next, in bars 16–17, Green starts his “landing procedure” by playing correctly inside Bb7, with added 11, b9, and b10, and by clearly resolving to the Eb triad in the second half of bar 17. Eventually bars 18–21 are played perfectly inside the original chords.

9 Fm7 Bb7 Eb Dm(b5) G7

13 Cm7 F7 Fm7 Bb7

17 Eb Gm7 C7 Fm Am7 D7 Eb

[ex 2.4.3]

2.5 Gary Thomas: changing expected scale qualities

In his solo on “Tablet Of Destinies” on the CD *The Seventh Quadrant* (1987), tenor saxophonist Gary Thomas shows examples of various operations to create harmonic vagueness, by changing the quality of expected superimposed scales.

In bars 11–12, his superimposition of Bbmin7 on the Cm chord can be seen as a harmonic displacement of the upper structure of Ebm7. Arguably, his way of phrasing the Bbm pattern in bar 11 also suggests that he is preluding to the sound of the A7 altered chord in bars 13–19.

The Ebm triad on the last beat of bar 12 moves chromatically to Em in bar 13, and back to A7^{alt} in bar 14. Instead of applying the conventional tonal color of the Bbm melodic scale over the altered A7 chord, he superimposes the Bb major scale.

His line starting on the last beat of bar 15 is another example of how changing the quality of an expected scale can cause an outside sound. The notes in bar 16 constitute the nine-tone row a, b^b, c, c[#], d[#], f, g, g[#], a. Despite the note g[#], bars 16 and 17 still suggest the sound of an A7 altered chord, pulling to a tonal color of a D minor.

In bars 18–19, starting on the second beat, he plays a descending sequence over Bbm, Gm, and (incomplete) Dbm triads, the latter evoking C7^{alt}.

Tablet Of Destinies

Gary Thomas

The image shows three staves of music. The first staff (measure 11) is in 3/4 time, marked Cm and Ebm. A red dashed box highlights a melodic line starting on the last beat of the previous measure. The second staff (measure 13) is marked A7. Two red dashed boxes highlight melodic lines. The third staff (measure 17) is marked C7. A red dashed box highlights a melodic line.

[ex 2.5.1]

At the end of his first solo chorus Thomas plays a line over a ii-V pattern over four bars. In bar 34, the line over F[#]m7 turns into an F whole tone scale pattern, with the note f itself overtly conflicting. After playing a very inside pattern on B7 in bar 35, he adds the tension notes f and g in bar 36. But by phrasing the line as a sequence of two six-note groupings (starting with the same three notes) he avoids the conventional sound of the C minor melodic scale.



[ex 2.5.2]

2.6 Conclusion

I am aware that the summary of techniques in my selection of solos in this chapter does not justify the level of artistry of the jazz artists that recorded them. It is just meant to illustrate the initial stage of my search for systematic approaches to broaden my harmonic skills as an improviser. In Brecker's early works, I found the characteristics of his style that quickly became imitated by many saxophone soloists of those days. Sim showed me how basically incorrect parallel harmonies can help a soloist to create attractive lines that alternate between clearly inside and distinctly outside the stated harmonies. Bley made me aware of the strength of autonomous melodic ideas, especially when these are phrased in melodic-rhythmic sequences. Green fascinated me by his capricious lines, his piling up of perfect fourth intervals, and his explicit ideas of harmonic vagueness and continuity as he expressed these in Anil Prasad's on-line article "[Bunky Green, Urgency and Continuity](#)". Green comments on his ideas as follows.

"The way I approached the harmonic fabric was suggestive, rather than just playing the harmony as it was. I created a lot of tension and relief by going against standard harmony and then ultimately resolving it with continuity. That's the whole bag. You can play so many things. You can play whatever you hear, but it has to have continuity for it to all hang together" (Prasad 2012).

In his instruction booklet *Jazz In A Nutshell* Green defines his idea of continuity by listing the essential techniques it can be achieved with in an improvisation: sequential imitation, scale wise imitations, alternating chord progressions and rhythmically vital alternations between double-time and half-time feelings.

Thomas I have brought up in this survey because in my opinion he demonstrated a next level in outside playing at that time, by changing the tonal colors of conventional techniques of superimposition. His way of addressing superimpositions comes close to my personal approach to improvisation that is the subject of this research: creating a sound that is noticeably different from what the informed listener would expect to hear, but without losing contact with an existing or imaginative harmonic source.