Fundamentals of Jazz Composition

An Exploration of Musical Language

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Introduction

Jazz musicians are necessarily improvisers, and must spontaneously manipulate rhythms, melodies, and chords, effectively composing in real time every time they perform. All great jazz composers have been performers, and virtually all great jazz performers have developed unique and compelling compositional styles of their own. The history of jazz is a story of the interplay between these two crafts, as improvised material is assimilated into new compositions which, in turn, inspire new improvisational approaches.

Though there is a great deal of literature focusing on jazz from the perspective of improvisation, far less has been written on how that same musical language might be used to compose music. This is perhaps partly due to a general de-emphasis on the study of composition within the culture. For many musicians, opportunities to perform original music are limited. Many musicians compose only infrequently if at all, and rely on vague and inconsistent notions of trial and error or intuition rather than on well-defined processes and techniques to guide their compositional practice.

There is a tendency in wider culture to romanticise the creative process. The musical composer in particular is often characterised as being at the mercy of a fickle and intermittent muse. This is not a useful way for a musician to approach the craft of composition, and has probably inhibited many latent composers who were not immediately struck with inspiration as soon as they picked up a pencil. As an alternative, let us try to conceptualise writing music as a process of trouble-shooting and problem-solving. Whatever stage we are at in an incomplete work, our immediate task is to identify the next hurdle. We proceed by asking ourselves 'which chord should go here?', 'could this melody be improved?', 'which key should the next section be in?', or simply 'what should happen next?'.

This book aims to lay out in a clear and coherent manner the fundamentals that guide harmony, melody, and form in jazz music. These are the tools that jazz composers use to solve their compositional problems. This book's aim is to present a metaphorical toolbox, collating and categorising the concepts and techniques found in the music of the canon in a logical format that may either be read in sequence or used as a reference.

If you have picked up this book, you probably either already write music or have done so in the past. It must be stressed that nothing in your current process is incorrect and that there are no right or wrong ways to create music. This book will not attempt to prescribe any particular procedure for writing. Instead, it suggests that we should look at what we currently have, and ask what it needs.

It is not our purpose within these pages to explore specific compositional styles in real depth. Instead, this volume is intended to be a study of the fundamentals, and we shall primarily focus on the common language that unites the music's significant practitioners. Writing in the style of a particular composer is a process that must begin with studying their music and identifying the tropes and techniques present. Although this practice is highly encouraged, pastiche has not historically had a large role in the output of jazz composers. Ultimately most of us will discover and develop our own unique aesthetic sensibility. On the other hand, innovation is not generally a path that is deliberately pursued by artistically successful musicians. We need not actively pursue or invent our own style, because it will find us in its own time over the course of practising, gaining experience, being persistent, and staying open to a healthy degree of trial and error.

The best jazz invariably emphasises improvisation, spontaneous interplay, individual expression, and personal style. All of these elements require that the composer does not obstruct those who are to perform their music. The role of a jazz performer is not to realise a composer's intentions accurately so much as it is to manipulate the written material to their own ends, using the piece as a medium for their own personal expression.

Although many musicians have found or invented alternative ways to graphically represent their ideas, conventional music notation is the most direct way to communicate most mainstream jazz. Some composers have deliberately eschewed any kind of notation, preferring to transmit ideas aurally to their performers. Such a method is probably more time consuming than notation, but might encourage musicians to be more aurally receptive in performances, and to personalise their contributions.

There are various software options for producing notation, and the advantages of these over handwriting are broadly the same as the advantages of a word processor as opposed to pen and paper in producing text. Music notated in software can be manipulated very easily, duplicated, and backed up, and there is little risk of illegibility. Some musicians do prefer to handwrite their music,

particularly in casual and spontaneous circumstances, or if they wish to notate in unconventional ways.

Traditionally, a composer working in the western tradition might expand their initial drafts or sketches into a score: a document consisting of systems of vertically aligned staves, with one stave for each instrument. From the score, parts are produced to be read by the performers, each showing only what is to be played by a single instrument. When a prescribed instrumentation is required to perform a specific arrangement, this remains the best process, but in many situations, composers working within the jazz idiom may instead produce what is called a lead sheet.

A lead sheet is effectively a multi-use part for all instruments, consisting of only a single stave of melody with chord symbols above it. This enables a composer to show the chord progression, melody, form, style, and tempo of a piece in a manner that enables interpretation by any combination of instruments, and with little preparation or rehearsal. Although it cannot be said that all composers necessarily conceive of their music in this form – though many certainly do – the lead sheet is also an ideal format for us to begin thinking about and writing music. A lead sheet is a complete and performable jazz piece, but can also serve as the basis from which we might flesh out specific details of instrumentation and arrangement.

The only prerequisite skill strictly necessary to study from this book is familiarity with standard stave notation. In addition to this, basic keyboard facility is surely one of the best tools for aspiring composers, as the piano is the only instrument that enables us to play music with multiple parts easily. Composing at the piano is by no means a necessity, but it is worth bearing in mind that the overwhelming majority of jazz composers have worked in this way.

Each of the musical excerpts included here are invented by the author to demonstrate a specific principle, and most are presented in lead sheet format. Neither tempo nor performance style are specified when these details do not affect the issue in discussion. Excerpts that introduce harmonic concepts are always presented in relation to the keys of C major and C minor. This is to facilitate easy cross-comparison, and it is expected that the student makes themselves familiar with all of this material in all keys.

Learning to compose music from a book alone is like painting landscapes whilst blindfolded; results may be highly idiosyncratic and inconsistent. Recordings and live performances are the primary sources for jazz composition. Original scores are excellent resources where they are available, but transcriptions made by

anyone other than the composer, such as anything found in a fake book, should be assumed to be inaccurate. Listen to as much music as you can, and learn as much as you can from it, whether by active transcription or casual absorption of the sounds. Write as much music as you can, and experiment with all of the techniques described in these pages.

The Jazz Tradition

In the first decade of the twentieth century, musicians in New Orleans began to synthesise African-American forms, such as ragtime and blues, with European harmony and brass band instrumentation. The music of these anonymous pioneers was to become the central hub in a vast web of interrelated styles that, together, were to become a defining American art form in a century where America dominated global culture.

Many of jazz music's greatest practitioners – the likes of Charles Mingus, Max Roach, Duke Ellington, Art Blakey, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Charlie Parker – have explicitly and publicly repudiated the word 'jazz', considering it to be irrelevant, inappropriate, or racist. Suggested alternatives have included New Orleans music, American music, black American music, modern music, and simply The Music. With some hesitation, and with no disrespect intended toward those that are uncomfortable with it, the J-word will be used throughout this book. In these pages, 'Jazz' is intended to serve as a shorthand for 'the music of Pops, Duke, Bird, Trane, and of their musical antecedents and descendants'.

Early jazz, sometimes called traditional jazz, Dixieland, or New Orleans jazz, is a style most associated with the late 1910s and the 1920s. Compositions of this era are often based around simple forms such as the twelve-bar blues, but may have rather complex arrangements featuring collective improvisations and passages in which the band drops out to feature a single soloist. A typical ensemble might consist of a singer, trumpet, trombone, and/or clarinet, and a rhythm section of piano, double bass, drums, and optional guitar. Practically any of the music made by Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, or Sidney Bechet in the 1920s represents this style well.

During the early 1930s jazz bands were becoming increasingly popular in dance halls, and the need for greater volume led to bands taking on more and more musicians. Having ten or fifteen musicians on stage rather than five or six was a new challenge for jazz composers, and the music of this era placed a little less emphasis on improvisation and a little more on orchestration and arrangement. The preeminent style from early 1930s to the mid '40s is often called 'swing', and is most typically associated with the Big Band, an ensemble which became standardised to feature four trumpets, four trombones, five saxophones, and a rhythm section of piano, bass, drums, and, sometimes, guitar.

Duke Ellington – along with his in-house composer and arranger Billy Strayhorn – and Count Basie are perhaps the most significant composer/performers of this era.

The repertoire of jazz musicians in this period began to incorporate and take influence from the music of the Great American Songbook. This term refers broadly to the popular music written between the 1930s and 1950s as part of a thriving industry centred on New York's Tin Pan Alley. Professional songwriters such as George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, and Cole Porter produced hundreds of songs in a uniquely American style for musical theatre, film, and for recording by popular singers. The assimilation of these songs brought new material into the jazz language in the form of melodies that were perhaps descended a little more directly from older European music, an extended harmonic vocabulary, and the 'song form', which was to become practically ubiquitous in jazz practice.

The next clear stylistic leap came in the mid-1940s. In response to an economic need for smaller bands, a group of brilliantly innovative New York-centric musicians spearheaded by Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, and Dizzy Gillespie began to play and write in a style that later become known as bebop. This music returned the emphasis to small groups and to improvisation, with a renewed insistence on instrumental virtuosity. Like the word 'jazz', the word 'bebop' is exonymic, and was explicitly rejected by virtually all of its originators.

Bebop compositions typically feature complex and asymmetric melodies, often performed in unison and at high tempos. Ensembles typically retained the swing-era rhythm section of piano, double bass, and drums but reduced the front line to just two or three horns. Much of the best bebop has the feel of a jam session; it is loose, freewheeling, and passionate rather than cool and controlled. The role of the rhythm section also evolved significantly during this era. Drummers in particular began to free themselves from background timekeeping roles, and started interacting with the melodic material much more actively.

One type of compositional characteristic of bebop is the contrafact, in which a melody is composed to fit a pre-existing chord progression, usually a popular songbook tune. The chord changes of George Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm*, the 'rhythm changes' (page 153), in particular were the basis for a huge swath of bebop repertoire.

Another growing trend of the 1940s was the integration of Latin American rhythms, in particular the music of Cuba and Brazil. Dizzy Gillespie's

collaborations with Cuban musicians were early contributions to this trend, which provided jazz rhythm sections with alternatives to 4/4 swing time. After the enormous popularity of Stan Getz's early 60s work with guitarist João Gilberto, Brazilian styles such as bossa nova and samba were enthusiastically assimilated.

By the mid-1950s the prevailing aesthetic had transformed into what is now called 'hard bop'. This music cooled the boiling intensity of bebop with a little blues, gospel, and soul music. Any of the recordings made between about 1955 and 1965 by Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers or Horace Silver's bands are great examples of this style, as is virtually any of the other music released on the Blue Note label during that decade.

Typically, a hard bop ensemble might feature two or three horns and a rhythm section. This music places a little more emphasis on horn harmonies, orchestration, and arrangement than is found in bebop, and makes more frequent use of rhythm section ostinatos – repetitive patterns – than in any earlier styles. Popular Tin Pan Alley songs were also incorporated into the repertoire of most musicians by this time, where they mixed freely with bebop, swing, and hard bop style compositions.

Much has been written about modal jazz, particularly with reference to Miles Davis' enormously popular and influential 1959 album *Kind of Blue*, which more or less laid out a manifesto for this new style. This said, for most musicians, modal music has only ever made up a small portion of repertoire, so it does not quite seem accurate to describe it as a genre. Modal jazz is perhaps better understood as a series of interrelated compositional techniques. A modal piece might utilise long durations of a single chord, and the structures of harmonies themselves might be unusual, such that they might have no relation to the major and minor triads that are integral in tonal music.

Furthermore, the harmonic sequences within a piece might not be 'functional', in that chords might not relate to one another in obvious ways. In this regard, modal jazz represented a major deviation from the conventions that jazz harmony had inherited from pre-twentieth century European traditions. The 1960s albums of Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, and their work with Miles Davis during the same period, feature many seminal compositions that demonstrate this gradual movement towards abstraction in harmony.

From the early 1960s onwards, musicians such as Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, and John Coltrane began to discard conventional melody, form,

harmony, rhythm, or all of the above in favour of more spontaneous musical expression.

Coleman's 1961 album *Free Jazz* was to give its name to a movement that had previously been called 'The New Thing'. Although this music heavily emphasised improvisation over pre-composed material, all of the free jazz movement's pre-eminent artists did develop powerful compositional techniques and styles of their own. A free jazz composition might consist of approximate sketches of the contour or texture that a piece is to have. A composed melody might be combined with improvised backing, or the reverse. Many free jazz performances are completely improvised without any preconceived material at all, and free jazz ensembles may consist of virtually any instrumentation.

The harmonic innovations of Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, and the free jazz of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor were, in reality, not particularly distinct movements. These were interrelated aspects with an increased emphasis on improvisation and a general movement towards abstraction, and were accompanied by a gradual emancipation of the rhythm section from their historic roles of anonymous accompaniment.

It would be egregious to talk about jazz composition in the 1950s and 60s without mentioning the charismatic and prolific bassist Charles Mingus, though his music does not fit easily into any category. By referencing early jazz, free jazz, bebop, hard bop, and classical music simultaneously in his work, Mingus was perhaps the first significantly postmodern jazz composer.

As the 1960s came to an end, Miles Davis was once again found at the forefront of stylistic revolution. Albums such as *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*, released in 1969 and 1970 respectively, are often held to represent the inception of jazz fusion. It is difficult to describe the compositional techniques of jazz fusion in anything other than extremely general terms. Davis' fusion music combined funk and rock with modal harmony and free jazz, but other jazz fusion statements have also incorporated R&B, free jazz, electronica, and the music of Cuba, Brazil, or India in practically any combination. The most consistent element in jazz fusion is the incorporation of electric instruments into the jazz ensemble: electric guitars, bass guitars, synthesisers, and electric keyboards are all characteristic elements of the fusion sound.

From this point onward, the proliferation of aesthetic threads frustrates any attempt to identify a single narrative in the development of jazz style, though a few very general trends may still be identified. From the mid-1980s many musicians became interested in a return to pre-fusion styles and acoustic

instrumentation. A loose collective emerged, centred on the Marsalis brothers, Wynton and Branford, whose ostensible aim was to pick up exactly where acoustic jazz had left off in 1969. Whilst there were musicians playing acoustic music through the 1970s, all of the major stylistic innovations during that period had been within fusion genres. The generation that played this 'neo-bop' music (or, as Miles Davis described it, 'warmed-over turkey') are often referred to as The Young Lions.

In response to the Young Lions, a brilliant wave of young musicians and composers appeared in the early 1990s. Musicians such as Mark Turner, Brad Mehldau, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Christian McBride, and Joshua Redman assimilated Marsalis-style neo-classicism with fusion, earlier jazz styles, and a newfound openness to pop music. Musicians of this era might open a set swinging like Art Blakey, then combine Wayne Shorter-style harmony with a J-Dilla beat, or adapt a Beatles song to fit a 7/4 time signature.

The new millennium is too close at hand for us to clearly identify the important new trends in jazz style. The music is more vital than ever, but also more divided, and there are composers working at the highest levels in almost any style. The assimilation of jazz with electronica and/or hip hop is one major branch, as is the exploration of increasingly complex rhythms. There is also ongoing work on the synthesis of jazz with rhythmic patterns from other cultures. Acoustic small-group jazz continues to evolve towards greater levels of abstraction and group interplay, and elsewhere, large ensemble music is being made that references electronica and twentieth century orchestral music.

Although polystylism abounds in all twenty-first century music making, contemporary jazz musicians generally engage in neither pastiche of older styles nor ironic references to the past. Styles are assimilated and referenced in a spirit of reverence and affection, and contemporary jazz musicians are expected to have a deep knowledge and love for the entirety of the jazz tradition. Even the most avant-garde and forward-thinking jazz composers would benefit from a deep understanding of the fundamentals outlined in the following chapters, rather than simply casting them aside, as may be popularly conceived. As with the old aphorism, one must first learn the rules in order to break them.

From the canon emerges a shared repertoire of jazz standards. These are the pieces that jazz players are expected to commit to memory in order to perform spontaneously with other musicians. There can be no strict definition to what constitutes a jazz standard, and shared repertoire may vary hugely depending on time and place. Many would only consider those pieces that were adapted from

the Great American Songbook to be standards, but there are also a great number of jazz compositions in the common repertoire.

Below is a list of musicians who have made significant aesthetic contributions in the field, either as performers or interpreters of jazz composition. They may all be heard on recordings under their own names, and as sidemen or women, and most of them have written compositions that have been performed and recorded by others:

Aaron Parks
Abdullah Ibrahim
Ahmad Jamal
Albert Ayler
Alice Coltrane
Allan Holdsworth
Ambrose Akinmusire
Andrew Hill
Anthony Braxton
Antonio Carlos Jobim
Art Blakey
Benny Golson
Bill Evans
Bill Frisell
Billie Holiday
Bobby Hutcherson
Brad Mehldau
Bud Powell
Cannonball Adderley
Carla Bley
Cecil Taylor
Cedar Walton
Charles Mingus
Charlie Parker
Chick Corea
Chris Potter
Christian McBride
Clifford Brown
Coleman Hawkins
Count Basie
Dave Holland
Derek Bailey
Dizzy Gillespie
Django Reinhardt
Don Cherry
Duke Ellington
Earl Hines
Eric Dolphy
Erroll Garner
Fats Waller
Fred Hersch
Freddie Hubbard
Gary Burton
Gil Evans
Gilad Hekselman
Henry Threadgill
Herbie Hancock
Horace Silver
Jackie McLean
Jakob Bro
Jan Garbarek
Jelly Roll Morton
Jim Hall
Jimmy Giuffre
Joe Henderson
John Abercrombie
John Coltrane
John Lewis
John McLaughlin
John Scofield

John Taylor
Joshua Redman
Julian Lage
Keith Jarrett
Kenny Wheeler
Kurt Rosenwinkel
Lee Konitz
Lee Morgan
Lennie Tristano
Lester Young
Louis Armstrong
Mal Waldron
Maria Schneider
Mark Guiliana
Mark Turner
Mary Halvorson
Mary Lou Williams
Masabumi Kikuchi
McCoy Tyner
Miles Davis
Ornette Coleman
Pat Metheny
Paul Bley
Paul Motian
Peter Brötzmann
Robert Glasper
Ron Carter
Sonny Rollins
Stan Kenton
Steve Coleman
Steve Swallow
Tadd Dameron
Thad Jones
Thelonious Monk
Tony Williams
Tyshawn Sorey
Vijay Iyer
Wayne Shorter
Wes Montgomery
Wynton Marsalis

Chapter 17
Non-Functional Harmony

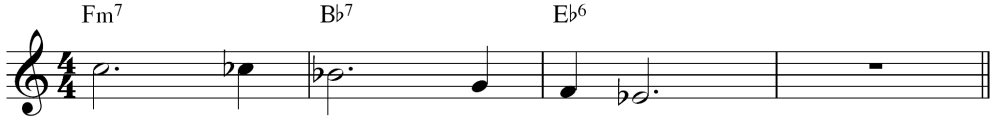
Functional harmony describes the set of conventions where musical information implies the existence of a destination tonic. Non-functional harmony, therefore, must simply be everything else. Jazz nomenclature makes no strict or widely accepted delineations between non-functional and modal harmony, although pieces with slow harmonic rhythm, such as single chords lasting for four bars or more, are particularly likely to be described as modal rather than non-functional.

Similarly, the delineation between tonal and non-functional/modal harmony is often unclear. We might best understand chords and chord progressions in terms of a subjective continuum from functional to non-functional.

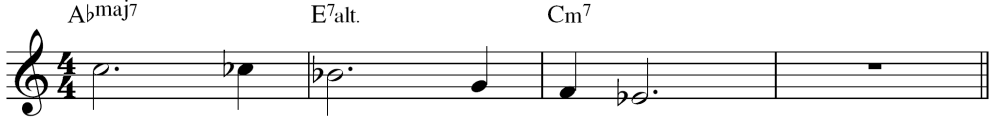
The 'everything else' nature of the non-functional category means that there can be no rules or conventions to non-functional harmony. Freed from the necessity to establish key or tonal centre, we may utilise any chords we wish in our compositions, and in any order. This chapter aims to suggest a few interrelated analytical tools that we might use to understand some of the ways that unconventional chords might relate to one another.

Substitutions and Secondary Substitutions

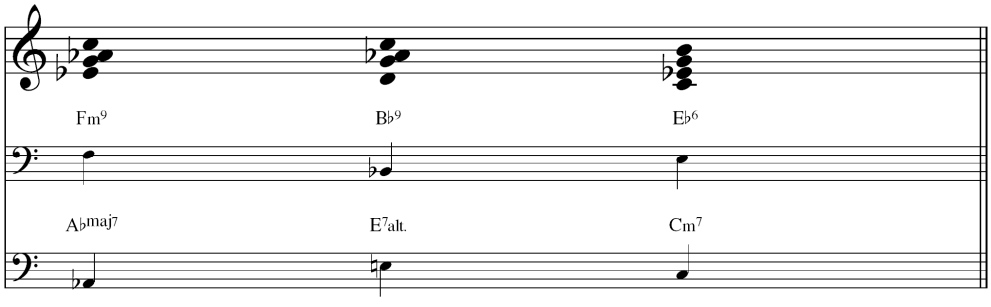
Unorthodox harmonic progressions can often be related to functional ones. In the following excerpt, a simple melody is harmonised with a II-V-I progression in the key of E-flat:



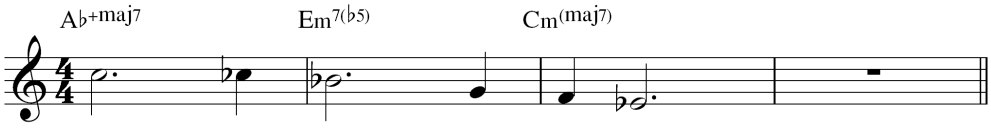
We can re-harmonise this passage in a non-functional style:



A closer inspection reveals that these new chords are actually identical structures over new bass notes. This particular re-harmonisation abandons the characteristic ascending fourth/descending fifth bass movement of the II-V-I, but keeps the upper structures of those chords intact:



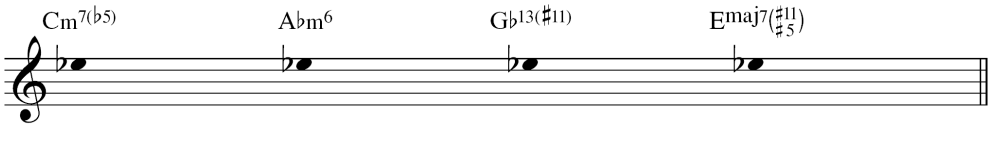
The same melody could be harmonised with an even more abstract progression. Below, our first re-harmonisation is itself re-harmonised. This time chord qualities are altered but the bass notes are retained. We could conceptualise of these chords as secondary substitutions, as they are substitutions of substitutions:



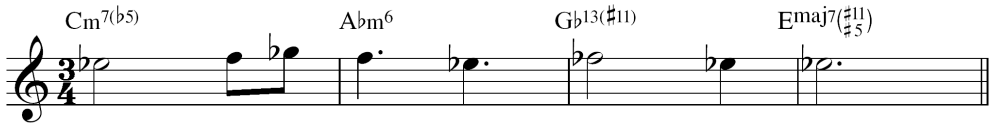
The resulting sequence is highly abstracted, and appears to bear very little resemblance to the original II-V-I. Nevertheless, melody is still well supported, and many of the same pitches within the chords are retained. Such non-functional re-harmonisation can allow for different interpretations of the same underlying melody.

Common Tones and Voice Leading

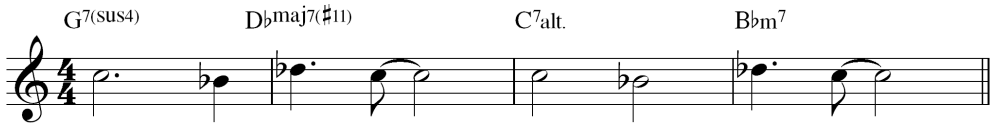
A melody may use common tones to connect a string of apparently unrelated chords. The following chords are all very different in terms of harmonic proximity, but all share E-flat/D-sharp as a common tone:



This means that we may use E-flat as an adhesive, attaching these harmonies together and disguising their discontinuity. The pitch is restated in each bar of this melody:

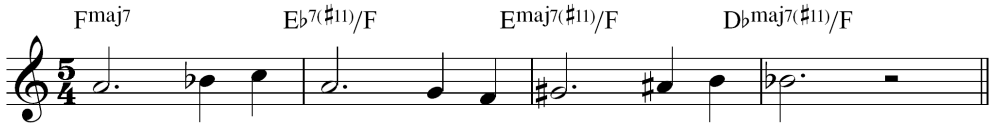


The example below shows how the repetition of the C-natural in the melody excuses an otherwise abstract chord progression:

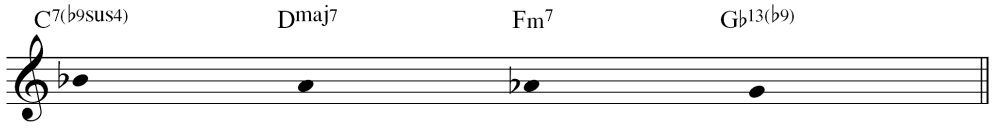


Another expression of this idea is that chords might move over a consistent bass note, often called a 'pedal' because of the origin of this technique in organ music in which the bass notes are operated with the feet.

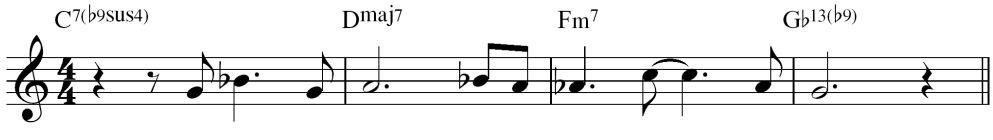
Below, both melody and harmony are anchored by the stability of an F pedal, with even the highly dissonant $E^{maj7\sharp11}/F$ being aurally permissible as an interstitial harmony:



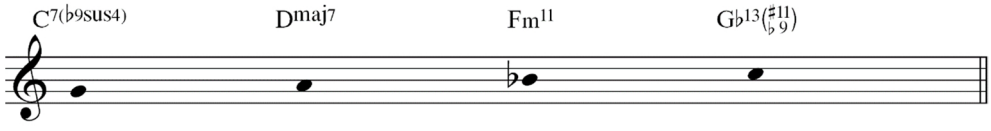
Rather than a single, static pitch, we might use an active melodic voice to connect chords. We might progress through the following four chords with a chromatically descending sequence of pitches:



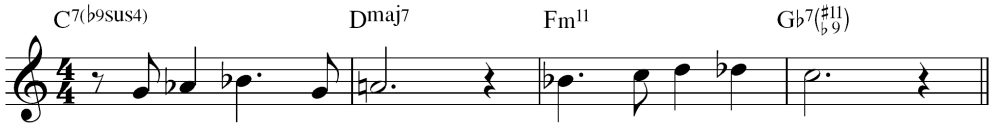
Again, a florid melody can obscure this hidden structure, bringing adhesive logic to otherwise strange sequence of harmonies:



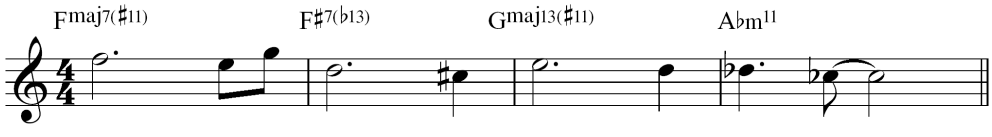
Such a melody highlights the voice leading possible within a harmonic sequence. A voice leading line might ascend through a progression rather than descend, and might do so by whole step rather than by half step movement. Movement of more than a whole step compromises the effect, as our ear will begin to lose the thread. The example below suggests a line over the same chord progression that ascends in a mixture of whole and half steps:



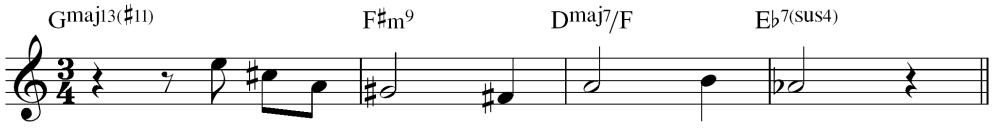
And the same idea, hidden within a melody:



As with common tones, stepwise voice leading may occur in the bass voice. Unrelated harmonies may be justified by logical bass movement. Below, the bass ascends in half steps while the melody descends:



Below, the bass movement descends in a mixture of whole steps and half steps, as with the pedal point idea above. The logic of a stepwise bass allows for unusual and dissonant harmonies, such as the D^{maj7}/F in the third bar:



Pedal points and voice leading lines such as these are also essential to tonal melody writing, and are explored in greater detail in the 'Implicit Counterpoint' section on page 250. The slash chords produced by the use of static or stepwise-moving bass notes also have application in tonal writing, and are explored further in Chapter 20.

Non-functional harmony is essentially harmony in the absence of conventions. The ideas in this chapter are necessarily rather vague and subjective. They attempt to provide some possible frameworks by which we might understand harmonic movements that are without established precedent.

The introduction of the ideas present here into the jazz composer's vocabulary marks a well-defined watershed in the history of the music. Following the modal innovations of George Russell, Miles Davis, and Bill Evans in the late 50s, non-functional harmonies in the music of Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Joe Henderson, and their peers were massively influential on future jazz styles.

Chapter Summary

Chord progressions that do not move in conventional ways do not establish or confirm tonality. As such, we understand them to be non-functional. There are no secure boundaries between these two types of chord progression, and in many passages the presence of functionality is nebulous or subjective.

Chords may be replaced by structures that resemble them, and those may in turn be substituted to form secondary substitutions.

Common pitches between chords have an adhesive effect and may be utilised in chord voicings or melodies to tie together otherwise unrelated harmonies. A similar adhesive effect is produced when a line ascends or descents in steps and half steps through a progression.

A common bass note might similarly unite disparate chords, as might a bass line that ascends or descents predictably in steps and half steps.