

Chapter 20

IMPROVISATION 2: MELODY

Melody is a series of pitches attached to rhythms in a harmonic scheme. Improvising melodically requires attention to all these factors—pitch, rhythm, and harmony. However, usually one or two factors dominate. For example, if you play long scale runs with little empty space you're mainly thinking about pitch and harmony, while if you play shorter phrases with more space you'll pay more attention to rhythm.

In this chapter, you will learn techniques for bringing rhythm to your melodic improvising. Almost everything in this chapter uses techniques you've practiced before, but now you're making them melodic. The exercises following this chapter lead you through these steps in greater detail.

[IF YOU'RE LOOKING AT THIS ON THE MUSICIAN'S GUIDE TO RHYTHM WEBSITE: Here are two of the more self-explanatory concepts from Chapter 20: addition and subtraction. In other chapters of the book, you'll have learned about guide patterns, rhythmic ostinatos that organize ensemble orchestrations in many musical styles, for instance clave in Cuban music or partido alto in Brazilian samba. In these styles, guide patterns provide the rhythmic basis for melodic development. In this section, we're explaining some of the ways this works; the full chapter includes additional ideas.]

ADDITION AND SUBTRACTION

In the last chapter we introduced improvising by adding and subtracting notes from a guide pattern. You can do the same with melodic ideas. Begin with stepwise motion:

The image shows two systems of musical notation in 4/4 time. Each system consists of a vocal line (top staff) and a piano accompaniment line (bottom staff). The vocal line features a guide melody with notes and rests. The piano accompaniment provides a rhythmic and harmonic foundation, including subdivisions and accidentals.

By the end of the above example, you've filled in a lot of subdivisions and created a bridge between the third and last notes of the guide. To avoid filling too many notes, use doubles. Think about patterns developed from other patterns, like cascará coming from rumba clave:

The image shows two systems of musical notation in 4/4 time, similar to the first example. The vocal line (top staff) and piano accompaniment (bottom staff) are shown. The piano accompaniment uses 'partido alto' patterns, which are characterized by specific rhythmic groupings of notes and rests, often used to create a bridge between notes in the guide.

Here's an example of subtraction with partido alto. The second measure is partido alto skeleton, but you can strip it down even further.

