Jazz Piano Voicings

For the

Intermediate to Advanced Pianist

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Jazz Piano Voicings – Intermediate to Advanced

Introduction

Many excellent books and articles have already been written on the art of jazz piano, covering general aspects relating to jazz such as harmony, improvisation, scales etc. However, finding specific information can be time-consuming (and expensive). The purpose of this resource is to focus entirely on chord voicings. While not intending to be exhaustive, it explains the topic in a clear and logical manner, as well as providing practical exercises at each step. No attempt has therefore been made to explain scale theory or harmony. This resource would be used as a workbook, as well as a reference booklet on this topic. My goal is to help you to develop your own repertoire of useful voicings, and encourage you to make your own discoveries in the exploration of harmony – finding new and personalised chord structures and approaches to jazz piano.

Chapter 1. Basic Left-hand voicings.

The first thing to remember in all voicings is that the 3rd and 7th of any chord defines that chord. For example, playing just F and C of a Dm7 chord (Fig 1), establishes that chord as being minor 7th. Of course, the root note cements that fact, but as we are dealing with jazz piano voicings, the assumption is that, in most cases, a bass player will be dealing with the root. The advantages of this are twofold:

- The pianist has more fingers free to add 'colour tones' to the chord.
- The bass player has more freedom to explore substitutions, pedal notes etc.

Fig 1 shows 3rd and 7th movement in a II-V-I progression. This demonstrates the voice-leading aspect in that particular chord progression which is why the II-V-I is such an important foundation of jazz harmony.

Fig. 1

These two-note voicings are a useful starting point in left-hand piano chords. However, if you are familiar with the concept, don't dismiss them as being too simplistic. On many occasions, they are the most suitable voicing for the purpose, especially when there are other comping instruments (such as guitar) and the harmony may become too cluttered, or where the right hand is adding the colour tones. They are also good just as a contrast to a lot of 4-note or close harmony, in order to "open things up" a little.

Practice

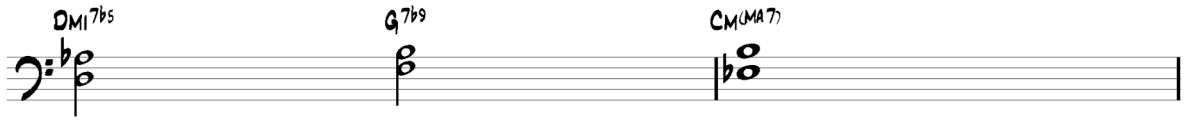
Practice these in II-V-I progressions around the cycle of fourths, or descending by tones as shown below. Try to keep the notes (as a rough guide) falling between C below Middle C and the F above Middle C. (Invert the voicings where necessary). This is the best area for left-hand voicings as they then don't get too low and 'muddy', or too high into the soloing / melody area of the piano.

II-V-I's descending by tones:

Dm7	G7	Cma7	C#m7	F#7	Bma7
Cm7	F7	Bbma7	Bm7	E7	Ama7
Bbm7	Eb7	Abma7	Am7	D7	Gma7
Abm7	Db7	Gbma7	Gm7	C7	Fma7
F#m7	B7	Ema7	Fm7	Bb7	Ebma7
Em7	A7	Dma7	Ebm7	Ab7	Dbma7

These two-note voicings can be equally applied to minor II-V-I progressions (m7b5 – 7b9 – m7 [minor-major 7]), although the colour tones of the II and V would not be highlighted. In this case, a useful variant is to play the root and b5 of the II chord as in Fig 2.

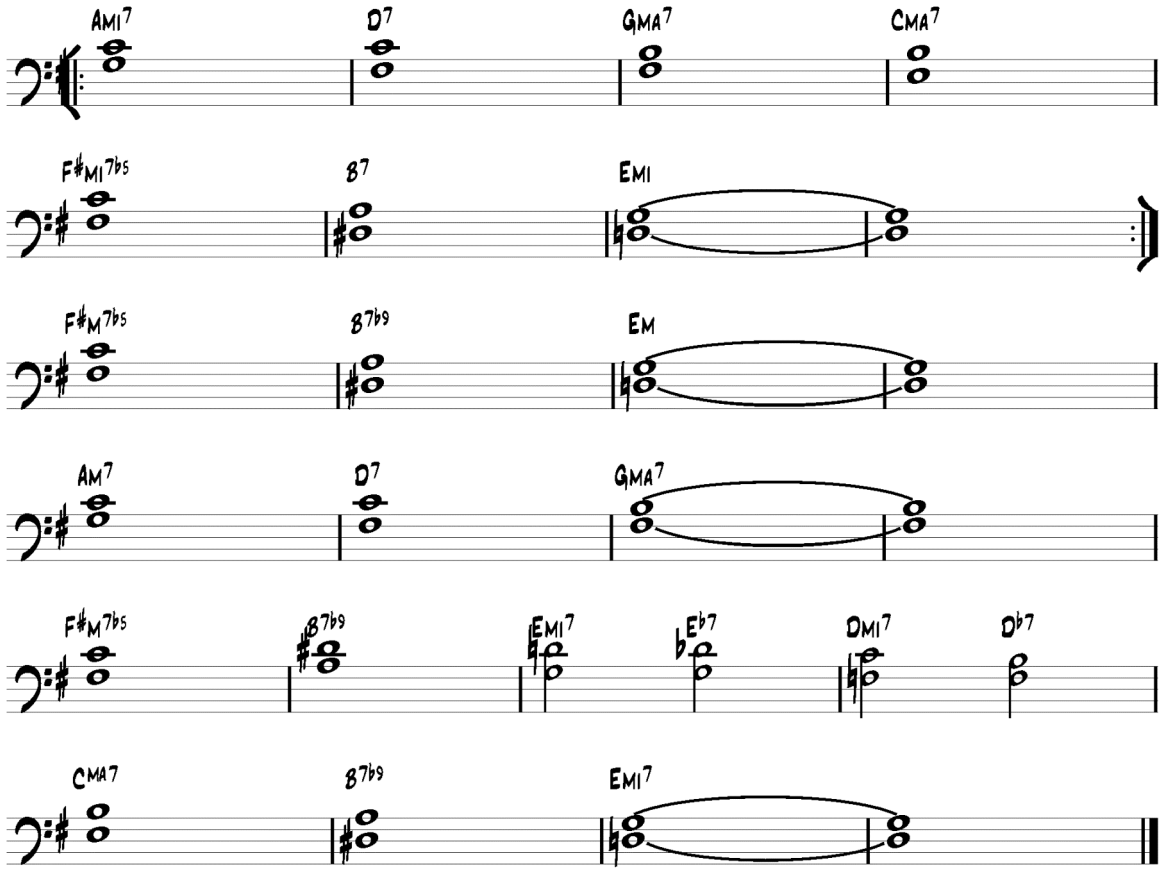
Fig. 2



Practice these minor II-V-I's descending by tones around all 12 keys.

Fig. 3 shows these chords applied to the changes of "Autumn Leaves". Practice this until it is comfortable and then transpose the tune into all keys. This particular tune is good for practicing voicings as it covers major and minor II-V-I progressions.

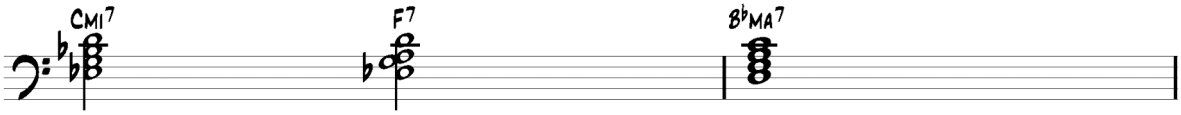
Fig. 3



Four-note voicings

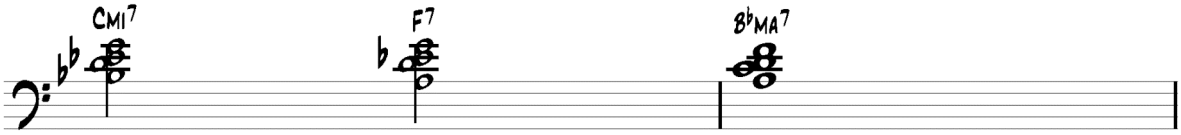
These four-note rootless voicings, pioneered by Bill Evans, are the staple repertoire of jazz pianists and should be memorised and 'played in' until they become part of the subconscious. A thorough knowledge of these voicings is essential. If you are unfamiliar with them, it would be advisable to look no further in this guide until you have mastered them all. The advantages of these voicings should be obvious (see Fig. 4).

Fig. 4



By eliminating the root, we allow the left hand to explore more colour tones in each chord (as well as staying out of the bass player's way). We have added the 9th to our minor 7 and major 7 chords and the 5th of the minor 7 chord is carried over to become the 9th in the dominant 7 voicing. However, notice that the 9th of Cm7 is also carried over and now gives us a lovely 13th tone in the F7. By simply lowering one note from the Cm7 (the 7th or leading tone as discussed earlier), we create a great-sounding F13 voicing.
Of course, just utilising these voicings as written will give us problems in some keys as they will have to be played too low or too high on the piano to be practical. Therefore we have the inversion shape of these chords as shown in Fig. 5.

Fig. 5



Notice that the bottom note of the II chord is a 7th, which becomes the 3rd of the V and then the 7th of I: (7 – 3 – 7), whereas in the Fig. 4 voicings, the bottom note progression is 3 – 7 – 3. This can be a useful way of remembering and differentiating between these inversions.

The minor and dominant chord shapes in Fig. 5 are great 'cluster' voicings due to the semitone interval in the middle of the chords.

Practice

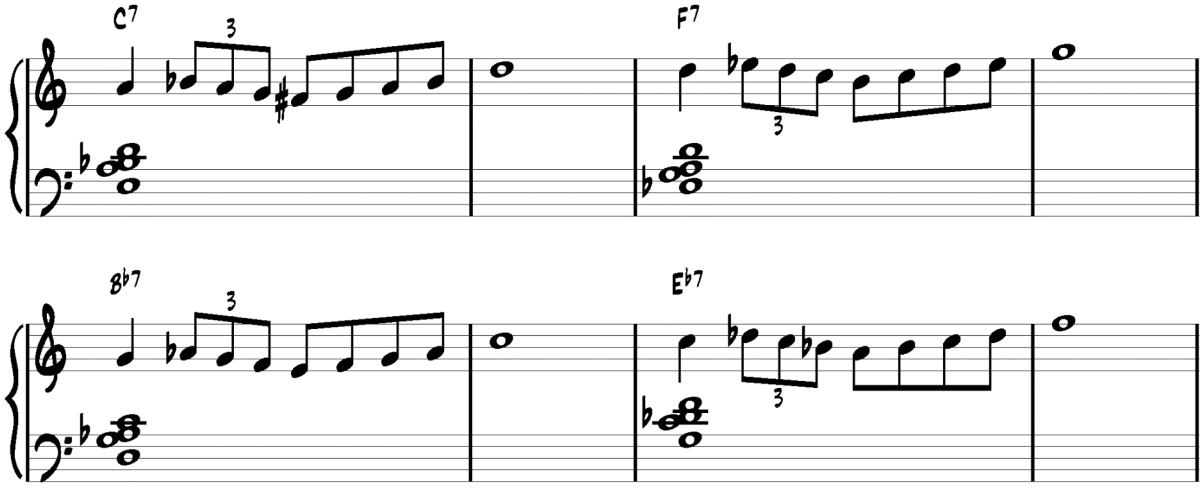
If these voicings are new to you, firstly practice them in the right hand with your left hand playing the root, until you get used to the sound and shape of each chord. The transition to left hand voicings is then easier. If you still have difficulty recognising the chord in the left hand, a good practice technique is to play the root as octaves with the right hand above the voicings, which reinforces the chord type.

1. Play Fig. 4 shape ONLY, around the cycle of fourths or descending by tones as shown on page 2. Important: Don't try Fig. 5 voicings until you have these smooth and memorised. In fact, if these ARE new to you, spending a month on these Fig. 4 shapes is not a bad idea! To keep things fresh, vary the rhythm between swing and bossa and randomise the keys.

2. Only after step 1 is comfortable, do the same with Fig. 5 shapes. Spend a month with these.

3. You should now be fairly comfortable with these shapes and you will have noticed what inversions suit what keys the best. As a rough rule-of-thumb, keys from Bb up to E (inclusive), suit Fig. 4 shapes, while keys from Eb up to Bb (inclusive) suit Fig. 5 shapes. This keeps the voicings around the middle of the keyboard. Play II-V-Is descending by tones, alternating the inversions to suit. Now separate the voicings from the II-V-I progression. In other words, practice the minor 7 chords around the cycle of fourths, doing the same with the dominant and major 7 chords, especially the dominant voicings. Why? Because these are the hardest to visualise independently, yet occur in tunes on their own more often than minor or major 7 chords. Here's a little Lydian dominant riff to help keep things interesting:

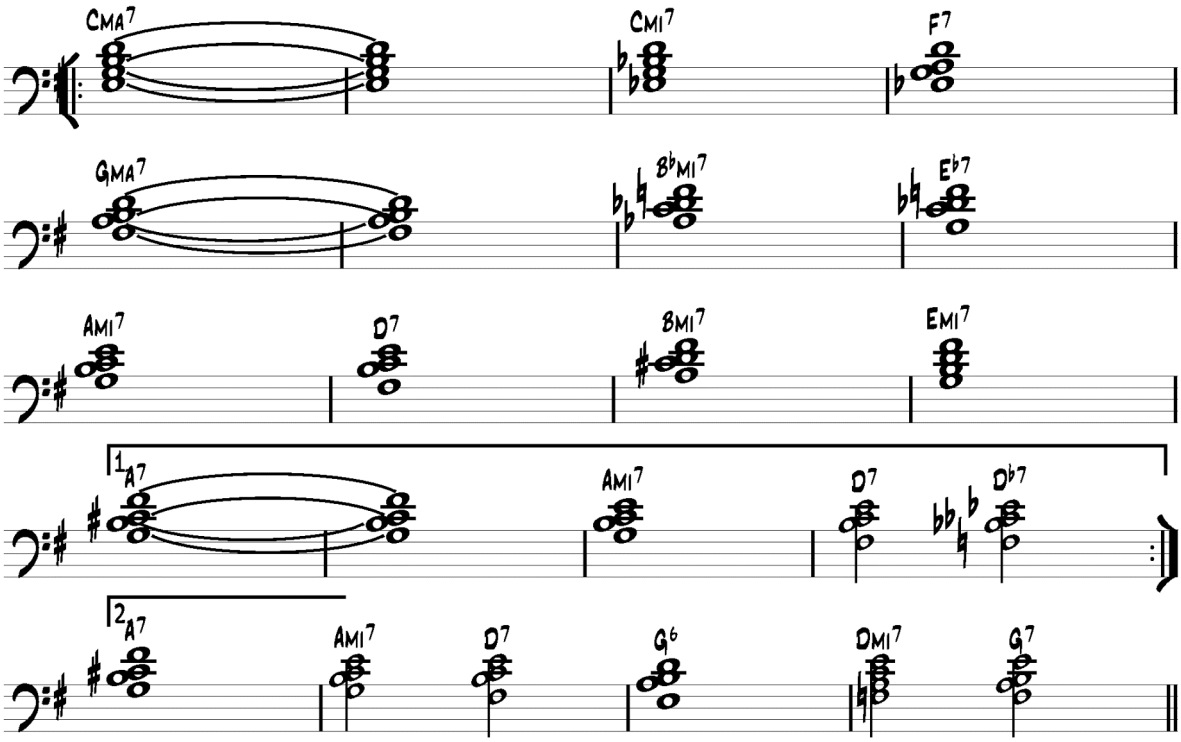
Fig. 6



etc. around the cycle

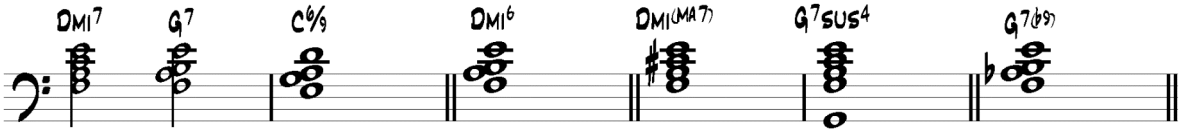
4. Practice the voicings within the context of tunes. This is very important and is the best way to really achieve fluidity. As we haven't yet covered minor II-V-I voicings or alterations, choose tunes such as 'Just Friends'. Here are the voicings for this piece as a guide:

Fig. 7



You may have noticed the G6 chord in the second to last bar. By dropping the 7th to the 6th we create a nice 6/9 voicing – a shape preferred by many pianists to the straight maj9 voicing (Fig. 8a). This also highlights how it is easy to play variations on the basic chord types by changing one note. Fig. 8b demonstrates a few of them:

Fig. 8a Fig. 8b



The last voicing for a dominant b9 chord brings us to the next stage of using these shapes for minor II-V-I progressions.

Minor II-V-I voicings

From the previous section, we could easily create a minor7b5 voicing by taking our existing minor7 chord shape and flattening the 5th (Fig. 9a).

However, in most cases we avoid using that shape. Why? The problem is the 9th. There are two scales that are predominantly played over a minor7b5 chord – one is the Locrian and the other is the Locrian natural 9 (derived from the 6th mode of the Melodic Minor scale). Of course the only difference between them is the 9th, which is flattened in one scale and not the other. Therein lies the problem. Which scale is used depends on the melody of the tune and the taste of the individual improviser, although the natural 9 sound is nicer and used much more these days. The best solution is to avoid the 9th in the chord altogether, which leads us to a voicing for a minor II-V-I as shown in Fig. 9b.

Fig. 9a Fig. 9b Fig. 9c

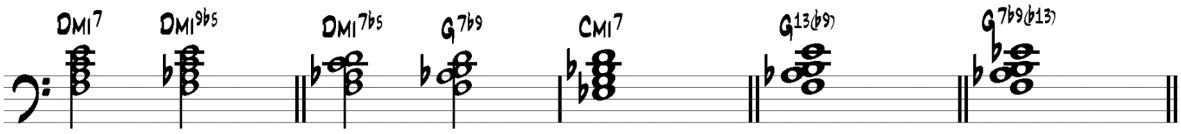


Fig. 9c shows us some variations on the b9 chord that highlight either the natural 13 (from diminished harmony) or the b13 (from melodic minor harmony). While the minor II-V-I voicing in Fig. 9b is perfectly useable, there is yet another approach to this progression which is more interesting and in some ways, easier.

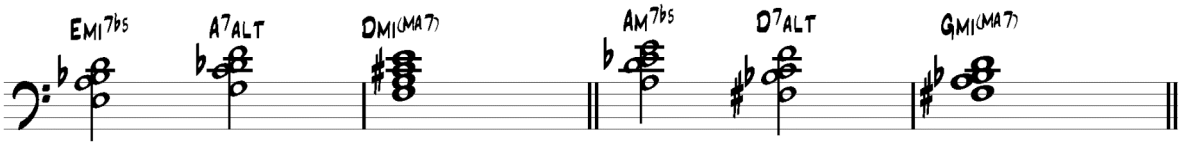
Just before we get there, let's look at the 13b9 chord in Fig. 9c again. Dominant b9 alterations and diminished harmony are probably the most used tension in adding colour to a V-I progression in major or minor harmony. Therefore, try using this chord in a major II-V-I progression as shown in Fig. 10:

Fig. 10

Practice this around the cycle of fourths or descending by tones as before. You'll be surprised at how often you will use b9 dominant chords like this when improvising. As an exercise, play left-hand voicings through a jazz standard, but in this case, make all V chords (when part of a major V-I progression), b9 chords.

Back to minor II-V-Is. Fig. 11 demonstrates another approach to these progressions. Notice that now, for the II chord, the voicing consists of the root, 11th, b5 and 7th. The V chord now has a #9 and b13 (or #5).

Fig. 11a Fig. 11b

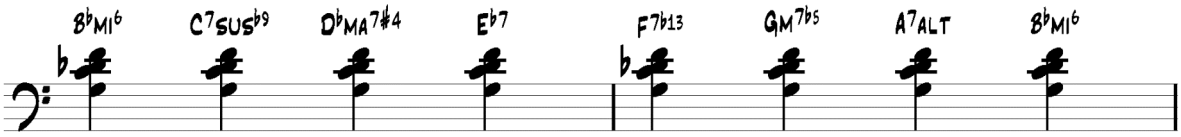


So what's so special about these voicings? A number of exciting things! Firstly, the II chord has an interesting 'suspended' quality due to the presence of an 11th instead of the 3rd. Secondly, in Fig. 11a, the A7alt voicing is simply the Em7b5 voicing transposed up by a minor 3rd. Thirdly, another way of deriving the 'alt' voicing is by playing our left-hand voicing for a dominant 7 chord a tritone away (in this case, Eb7). In fact, you should recognise the Em7b5 voicing as being the same as a C7. That is what is so great about these voicings – they are shapes we already know. (Another good reason to know your dominant chord shapes well).

The reason for all this is due to the harmony being derived from melodic minor scales. To explain briefly: Em7b5 comes from G melodic minor (6th mode = Locrian natural 9). A7alt comes from Bb melodic minor (7th mode = Altered). Bb is a minor 3rd above G, therefore the voicings are a minor 3rd apart. That is the beauty of melodic minor harmony – there are no 'avoid' notes in this harmony, therefore chord voicings are interchangeable.

To illustrate this, look at Fig. 12. We have taken the voicing for our A7alt and applied it to each mode of the Bb melodic minor scale.

Fig. 12



Does this voicing work for every mode? Let's have a look:

- The first one is a good min6 voicing, which can obviously work over a min-ma7 harmony.
- The second works well to highlight the susb9 sound although doesn't have the 7th. Try inverting the chord so that it builds from the root – this can be used for a Phrygian sound as well.
- The third chord works very well as a Lydian major7 chord, which obviously works with Lydian Augmented harmony. Again, try inverting it so that builds from the root (Db in this case).
- Number four is our Eb7 voicing, which we already have learned. This illustrates an important concept with Lydian Dominant harmony. We don't need to play the #11 in our left-hand voicing as it will be highlighted in the melody or solos (or added as a right-hand colour tone).
- The fifth voicing is not very useful as a F7 chord. As mixolydian b6 harmony is not common anyway, it is not a problem. If you do use that harmony, better to play a dominant voicing we already know and either flatten the 13th or replace the 13th with a 5th.
- The m7b5 voicing is the one we have been illustrating here.
- Finally, the altered dominant chord is a wonderful voicing, highlighting the #5 (b13) and #9 tones.

So you see, a voicing we have already learned in major II-V-I progressions can work for just about all of melodic minor harmony! This makes things a lot easier…

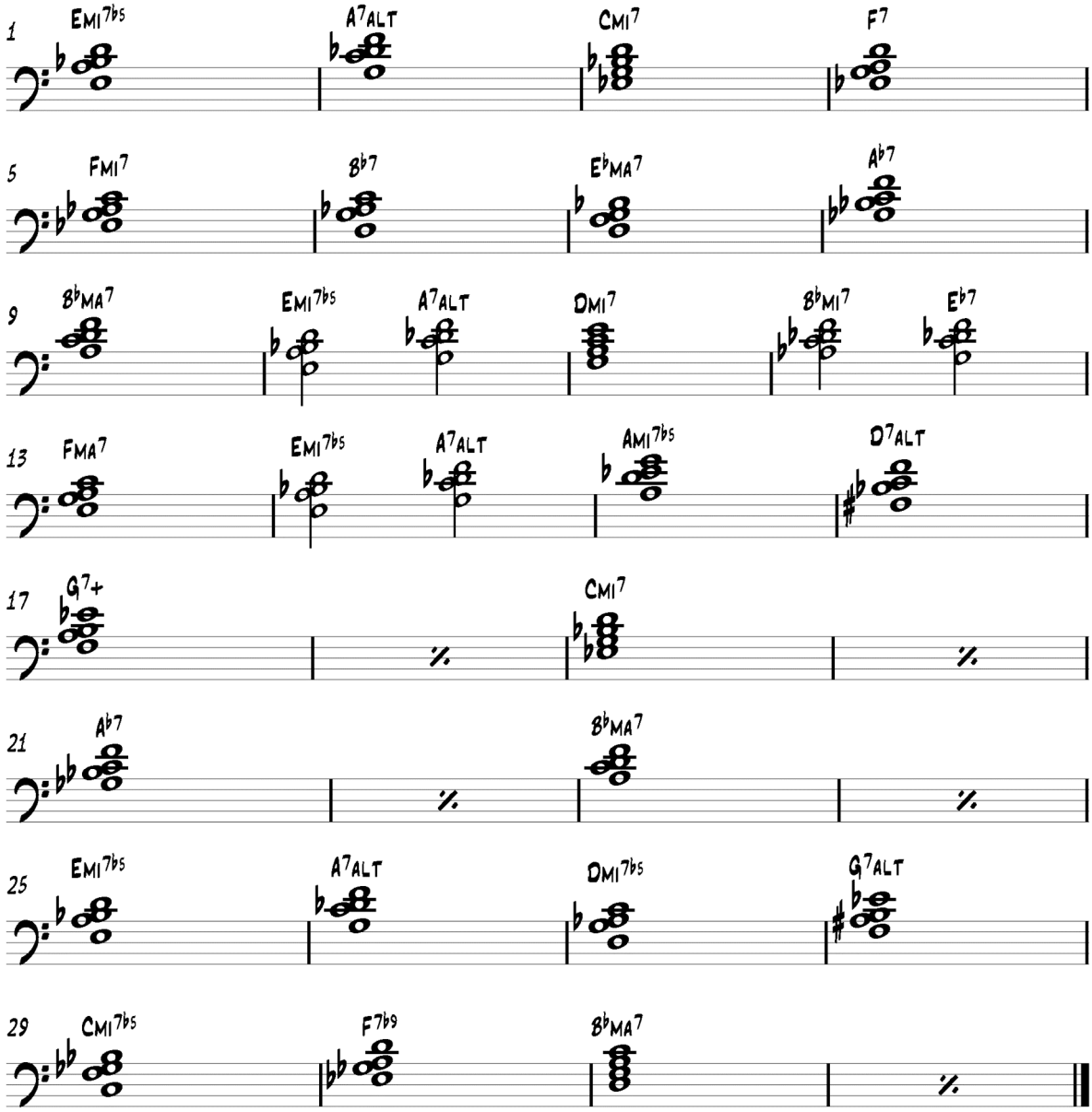
Practice

Practice the voicings shown in Fig. 11 around the cycle of fourths or descending by tones. Some of the V chords need to be played in the inversion built from the 3rd as shown in Fig. 11b, but most II chords can be built from the root. Notable exceptions are Bm7b5 and Bbm7b5, which can be voiced as a left-hand G7 chord and Gb7 chord, respectively. *(See Appendix 1, pg 35 for these voicings in all keys).*

Play these voicings in the context of tunes. Go through a Real Book, even choosing tunes you don't know, and play the changes utilising all left-hand voicings we have learned. Where you encounter V chords as part of a major II-V-I (or that resolve down a 5th), play them as b9 chords. You won't want to do this all the time on a gig, but it's a good way of playing the voicings in. To get you started, Fig. 13 shows voicings for 'Stella By Starlight'. All minor II-V progressions have been voiced with altered dominant chords except the last F7, which is b9. It is a matter of taste and melodic requirements as to your use of b9 or altered dominants, although a 'safe' option, at least for getting used to the voicings and their tensions, is to use b9 chords when resolving to a maj7.

The G7+ chord in bar 17 can also be voiced as an altered chord (bar 28) – a somewhat more interesting harmony.

Fig. 13

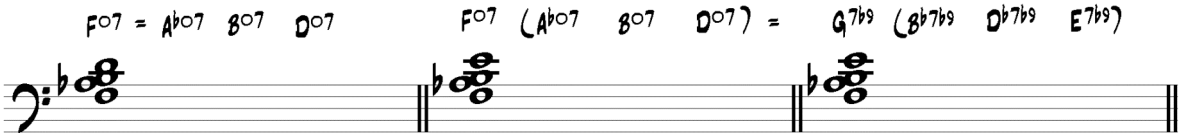


Diminished Chords

Before we leave this chapter on left-hand voicings, a few words on diminished chords. The simplest voicing is to stack minor 3rd intervals as shown in Fig. 14a, which also gives us three other chords derived from diminished harmony. However, to create interest, the top note of the voicing can be raised by a tone (Fig. 14b). In fact, ANY note of the voicing can be raised by a tone and still be within the harmony (with varying degrees of usefulness). Try it!

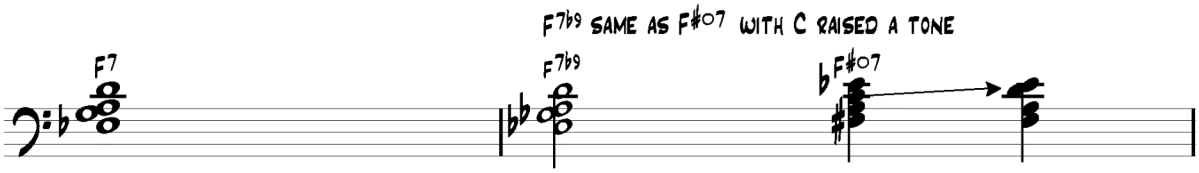
As dominant 7b9 chords are also derived from diminished harmony, we quickly see that one voicing can satisfy eight chords – four diminished 7th and four 7b9 chords (Fig. 14c).

Fig. 14a Fig. 14b Fig. 14c



The trick is being able to voice a diminished 7th chord quickly, as they are not as common and tend to be 'passed through' fairly quickly (apart from Jobim tunes). One common technique when encountering a diminished chord is to think of the dominant b9 from the same harmony and play that. In other words, play a 7b9 chord a tone above or a semitone below. For example, let's say you came across a F#dim7 chord. One way to voice this is to play a F7b9 chord (or a G#7b9). Because you already are very familiar with the F7b9 voicing, a nice-sounding diminished chord results. (Fig. 15)

Fig. 15



This may seem long-winded and confusing, but in many contexts it makes sense. To explain: A typical chord progression featuring diminished chords is this one:-

|| Bbmaj7 | Bdim7 | Cmi7 | C#dim7 | Dmi7 | etc.

Applying the above idea, the voicings we can play would be:-

|| Bbmaj7 | Bb7b9 | Cmi7 | C7b9 | Dmi7 | etc.

As semitone progressions are common with diminished harmony (used to create a chromatic bass line), it is easy to think of 7b9 chords a semitone below.

However, this is just one technique. You may well find other approaches to diminished harmony that will be more relevant or easier for your own playing (and, in fact, are encouraged to do so). Another important way of understanding the above progression is to recognise that the diminished chords are really just substitutes for a V chord of the following tone centre. i.e. the chord progression is really:-

|| Bbmaj7 | G7b9 | Cm7 | A7b9 | Dmi7 |

In any case, dig out tunes with diminished chords in them and try the technique outlined above. Here are some to get you started:

Bewitched
Easy Living
How Insensitive
I Remember Clifford
Once I Loved
Quiet Night Of Quiet Stars (Corcovado)
You Took Advantage Of Me[1]

[1] All these tunes are found in The Real Book - Sixth Edition published by Hal Leonard Corporation ISBN 0-634-06038-4

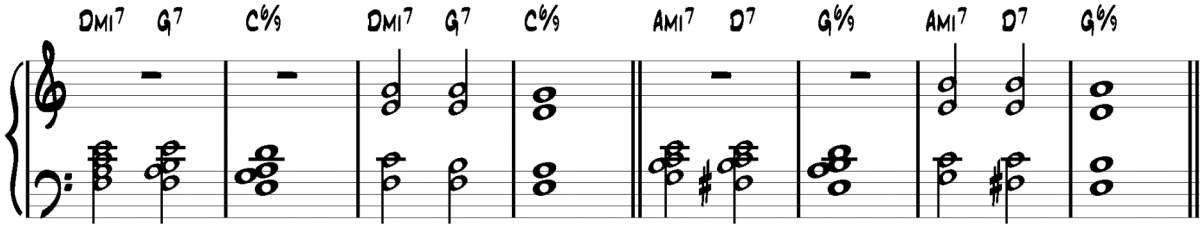
Chapter 2. Two-Handed Voicings

We now move on to an often-neglected aspect of jazz piano, and that is comping. While left-hand voicings are suited to right-hand soloing or melody, the jazz pianist needs to know how to comp – in other words, accompany other soloists. The *art* or technique of comping is beyond the scope of this book, but, like any aspect of jazz, the best way to learn is by listening. Three recordings that you can learn a lot from in regards to comping, are: Miles Davis' *My Funny Valentine*, with Herbie Hancock on piano, John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, with McCoy Tyner on piano, and Stan Getz's *Sweet Rain*, featuring Chick Corea on piano.

What *can* be taught here, however, are the basic components of comping, which are two-handed voicings.

To get started, take our standard II-V-I voicings and distribute the voicing over two hands. This is done by taking the second note from the bottom and transposing it up an octave, giving us two notes in each hand (Fig. 16).

Fig. 16



Note that both inversions of our left-hand voicings are shown here, and the I chord is voiced as a 6/9 chord in each case.

To get these 'under your fingers', practice both types of inversions through all keys beginning with the first type in Fig. 17a, and the second type in Fig. 17b.

Fig. 17a

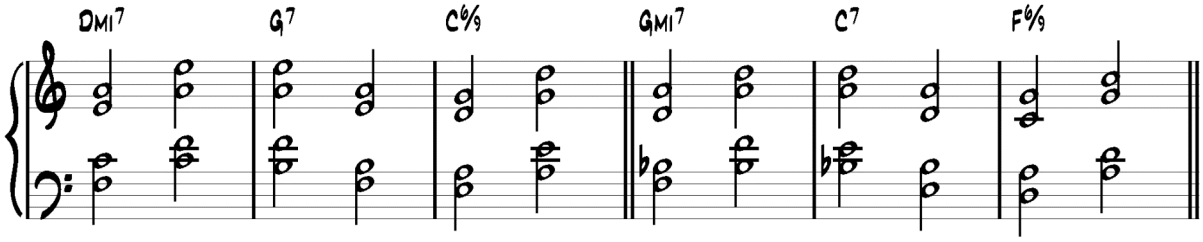
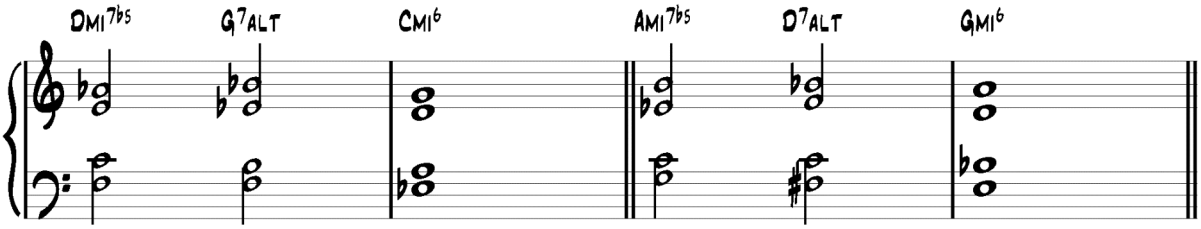


Fig. 17b

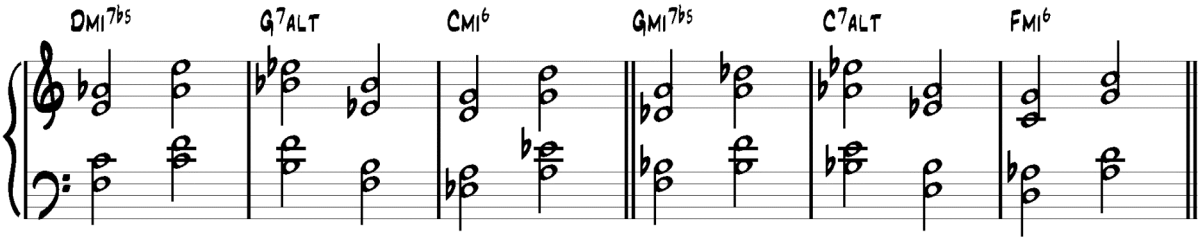
These voicings can easily be altered to give us minor II-V-I voicings as shown in Fig. 18. Here, as in some of the subsequent two-handed voicings that will be illustrated, the voicing incorporates the natural 9 on the mi7b5 chord. As has been mentioned already, this is a more common tension on the mi7b5 chord, hence its inclusion here. You will find that most soloists will be quite happy with it. However, be prepared to either not play the note at all, or else drop it down to the root, depending on the soloist.

Fig. 18



Practice these with both inversions as you did with the major progressions (Fig.17), through all keys (Fig. 19).

Fig. 19



You may have also realised that we could quite easily play our left-hand voicings from chapter 1 and double them with our right hand to create two-handed voicings. While perfectly acceptable in some cases, there are much better options to create space and colour.

An alternative is to play our left-hand voicings but double 9^{ths}, 11^{ths} and 13^{ths} in the right hand as shown in Fig. 20a, or roots, 5^{ths}, 9^{ths} and 11^{ths} as in Fig. 20b.

Fig. 20a

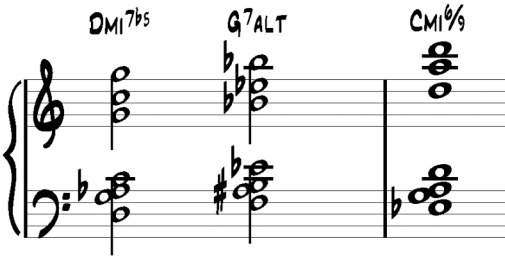
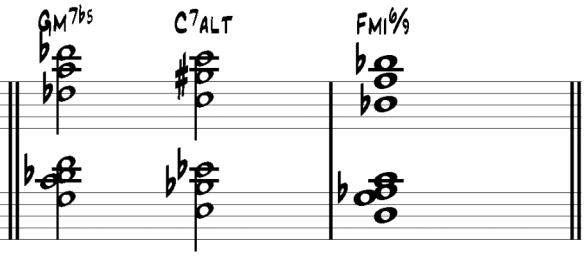


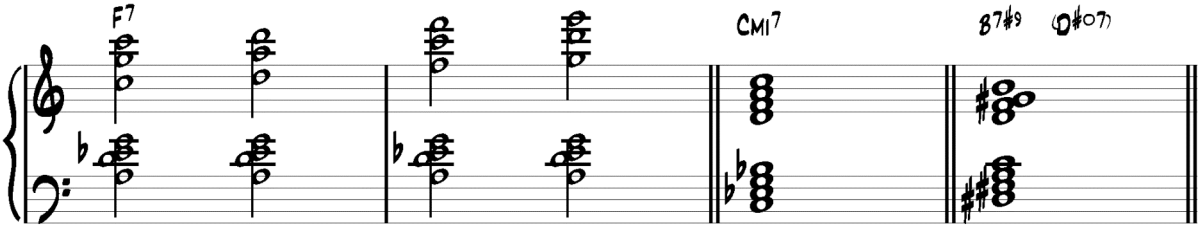
Fig. 20b



While these voicings are shown in the context of minor II-V-Is (with the right hand taking advantage of the II and V chords being a minor 3rd apart in Fig. 20a), right-hand octave doubling can work equally well over major II-V-Is, (naturally avoiding 11^{ths} on unaltered dominant and major chords). Notice also, that the left hand for C7alt (Fig. 20b) has omitted the flat 13 as it is played in the right hand. Sometimes leaving out extensions from left-hand voicings where they are present in the right hand is a good way of “opening up” the sound more.

Experiment around all keys trying the various combinations. Some will work better than others, but it’s a matter of personal preference as to particular voicings. Let your ears be the best guide. You can also explore octave doublings by playing them over the same left-hand voicing. Fig. 21a demonstrates octave combinations built off the notes of the major pentatonic scale of F7.

Fig. 21a Fig. 21b Fig. 21c



Practice these voicings also in the context of tunes. Try “All The Things You Are” as a good starting point. Of course, if you like big chords, try the voicing in Fig. 21b for a min7 chord. It is just a Dm7 chord over a Cm7, but includes all the notes of the dorian scale. You can even play diminished 7th chords on top of each other, voiced a semitone apart (Fig. 21c), an interesting voicing for both dominant 7th and diminished 7th chords.

“So What” voicings

These voicings were named after the chords that Bill Evans played on Miles Davis’ tune ‘So What’ from ‘Kind Of Blue’. If we analyse the Dmin voicing in Fig. 22, we can see that it consists of the root and 11th in the left hand, with the 7th, 3rd and 5th in the right hand – in other words, a Dm11 chord. The beauty of this voicing is due to its ‘open’ construction as it is really stacked diatonic 4ths with a major 3rd on top. The quartal nature of this chord reveals some of the secrets of quartal voicings in the fact that they are extremely versatile, both in where they can be played on the piano, and their application to other harmony. (See Quartal Voicings Ch. 3).

Fig. 22

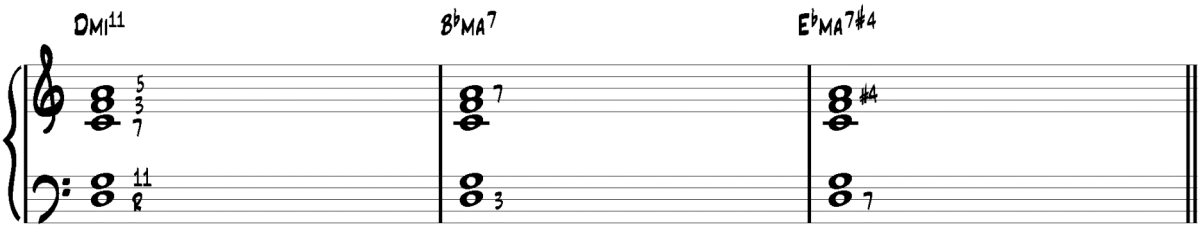
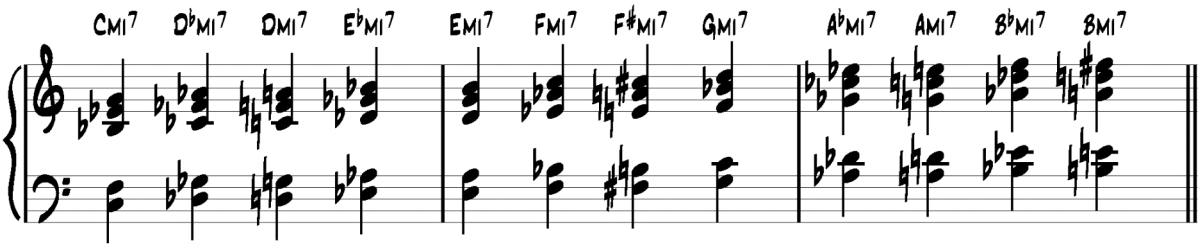


Fig. 22 also shows us the other important uses for this voicing. Firstly, it can be used as a nice maj7 chord built from the third (in reality a maj6/9 chord with a maj7 on top), as well as a maj7#4 built from the maj7.

Practice

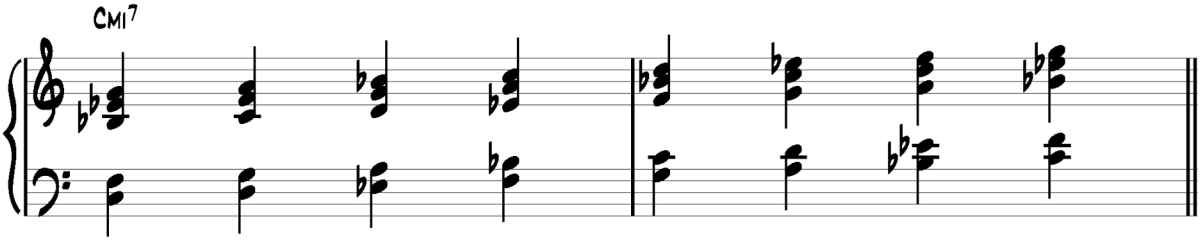
Before we get into practical applications of these chords, we will explore some two-handed dominant voicings in the following section (Upper Structures). However, these ‘So What” voicings need to be played in. Begin by ascending chromatically through the keys, so that the shapes start to become familiar (Fig. 23).

Fig. 23



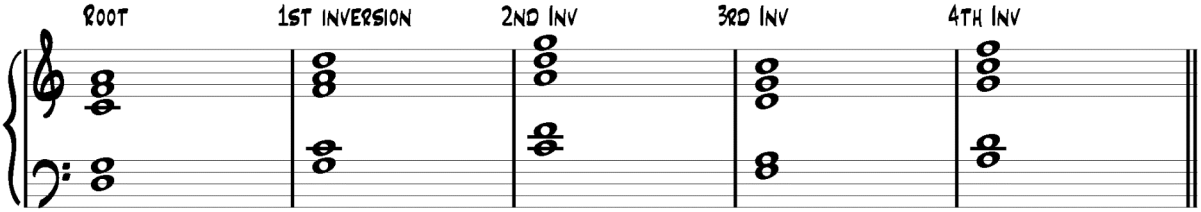
Once you're comfortable with these, play them from random root notes (without consulting the above diagram).
If all this seems too easy, now play them diatonically through each dorian scale (as illustrated by Fig. 24 for C dorian). You will soon see that these chords are a nice alternative for a root position min7, especially in modal tunes where you may encounter several bars of a min7 in one key.

Fig. 24



Another useful aspect of 'So What' voicings is that they can be inverted (Fig. 25), giving us even more colour and harmonic possibilities.

Fig. 25



Notice also that in the 4th inversion, the 3rd interval has disappeared, giving us a voicing constructed entirely of 4ths.
A further investigation reveals that the notes of a 'So What' chord are the notes of a minor pentatonic scale, meaning that any of these voicings can be used for chords where a minor pentatonic would be used. In other words, for the above example of a Dmin 'So What' chord, the voicings could be used not only for Dmin, Bbmaj and Ebmaj, but also for Fmaj, G7sus, Amin (Aeolian) and B7alt. (This last application is a little more obscure as the 3rd of a B7alt chord would be missing.)

If you are fairly new to 'So What' voicings you may find all this a lot to absorb, in which case move on to the next section (Upper Structures), and refer back to this when you are more familiar with two-handed chords in general. However, if you are comfortable with these concepts, read on!

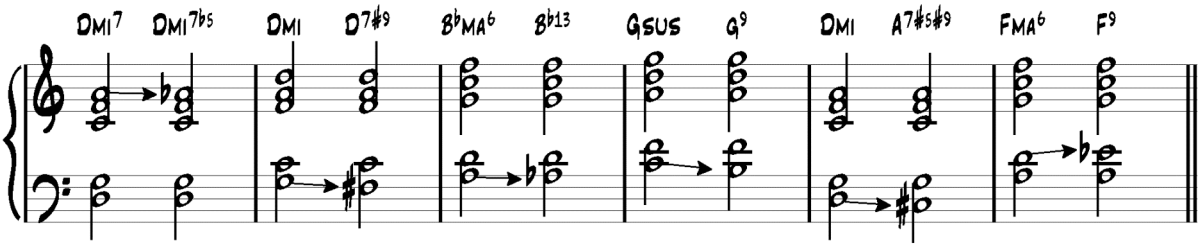
Some of the inversions make their applications obvious by their shape. For example the 1st inversion has a good G7sus voicing in root position already, so this could be used for sus4 chords. (2nd inversion also makes a nice G7sus built from the 4th with the root on top). 3rd and 4th inversions similarly make good Fmaj6 chords while the 4th inversion makes a Bbmaj6 chord built from the 7th.

Of course, other melodic or harmonic considerations need to be taken into account but spend time with these voicings and you'll find that they add a lot of colour to your comping as well as in harmonising melodies.

Practice these inversions of the 'So What' chord for every key around the cycle of fourths. As you practice them, say to yourself the chords that they can apply to (e.g Cmin, Ebmaj, Abmaj, Dbmaj, F7sus). It can also be helpful to hold various bass notes with the pedal while playing the voicings in order to really appreciate their sound and application.

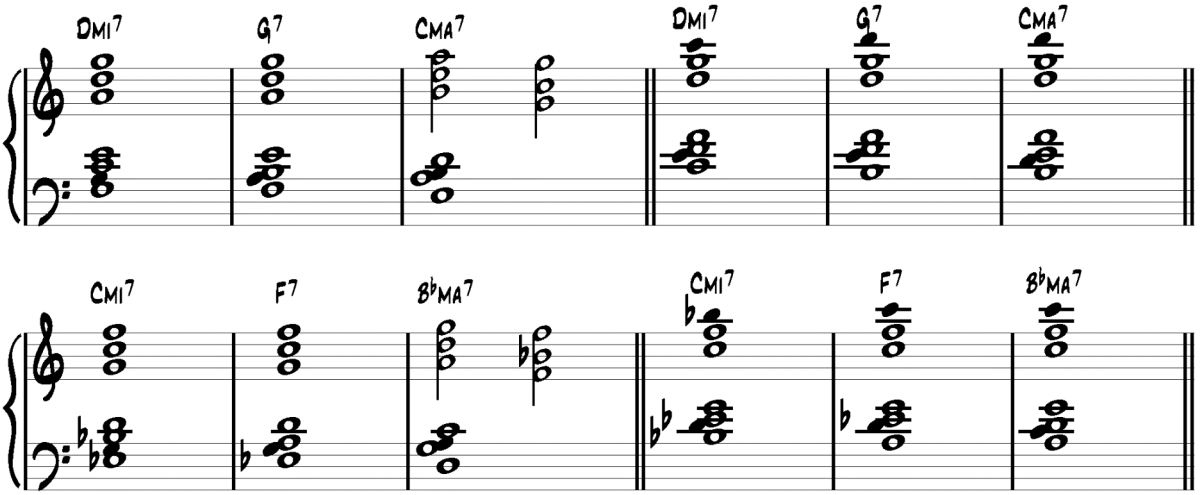
Another interesting feature of 'So What' chords is that other harmony can be obtained by altering one note of the voicing. Fig 26 shows some of the useful variations that can be derived. The first one creates a good min7b5 chord, useful because the ninth is avoided as in our left-hand voicings. There are many more possibilities apart from those shown here, but use these as a starting point for your own explorations of harmony.

Fig. 26



Taking some of these ideas and combining them with left-hand voicings can give us alternate two-handed chords for major II-V-Is (Fig 27). These voicings hint at quartal harmony which we'll explore in Chapter 3. For now, practice both inversions of these voicings around the cycle of fourths, or descending by tones (pg 4). The filled-in notes are optional or doubled notes.

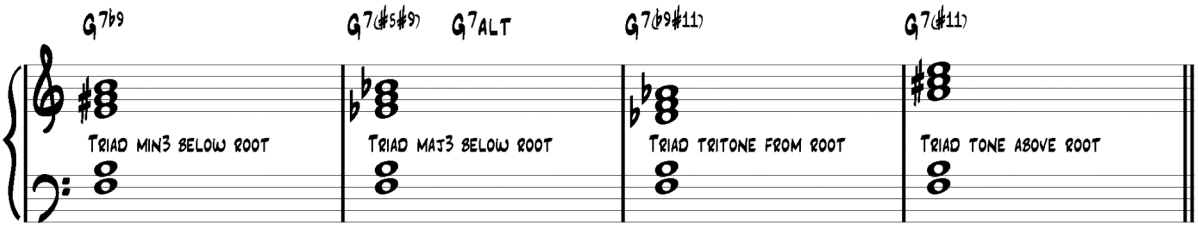
Fig 27



Upper Structures

Now to find some interesting two-handed voicings for dominant chords as well as melodic minor derived chords. These are called Upper Structures as the right hand generally plays notes from the extensions or alterations of these chords. These voicings are easy to play and remember as they consist of a simple triad over two notes (a tritone) in the left hand. Fig. 28 shows the most common voicings for various dominant 7th chords.

Fig. 28

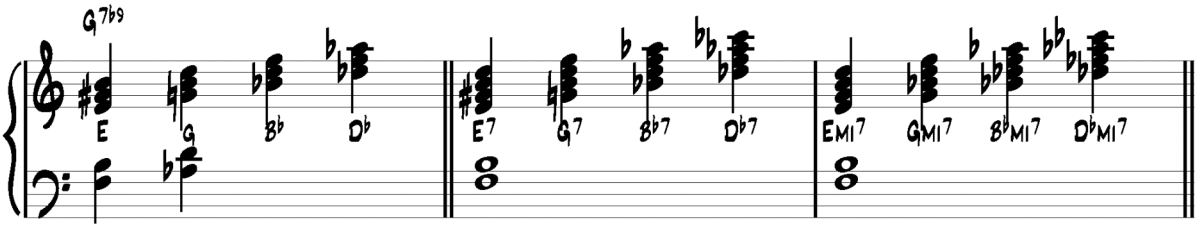


The first chord is a simple 7b9 voicing derived form playing a major triad a minor 3rd below the root, over the 3rd & 7th in the left hand. This can be used in major II-V-I applications with diminished harmony in the V chord. The second is a good altered voicing (a triad a MAJOR 3rd below the root over the 3rd and 7th). The third chord (triad a tritone away from the root) suits either diminished or altered harmony, while the last (triad a tone above the root) is a simple 7#11 chord.

These voicings may appear very simple, but the fact is, they sound good! Of course many other alterations can be highlighted apart from those listed here, by superimposing other major AND minor triads over a 3rd and 7th. The reader is encouraged at this point to investigate other excellent publications to illustrate these, such as *The Jazz Piano* book by Mark Levine.[1] However, these listed here are the most common that are used and are a good starting point to equip you with a decent vocabulary in two-handed voicings.

The triads in these voicings can be inverted for further colour, but be careful of the doubled 3rd in the first chord. This voicing sounds better where the 3rd in the right hand is kept near the top of the chord. Another good point about this chord is that, as it suits diminished harmony, the entire voicing (or at least, the triad), can be transposed up by minor 3rd intervals (Fig 29a), for variation. In fact, ANY chord that can be found in the diminished scale can be used, noticeably, dominant 7th and minor 7th chords (Fig 29b). Diminished 7th and Half-diminished 7th chords are also available.

Fig 29a Fig 29b

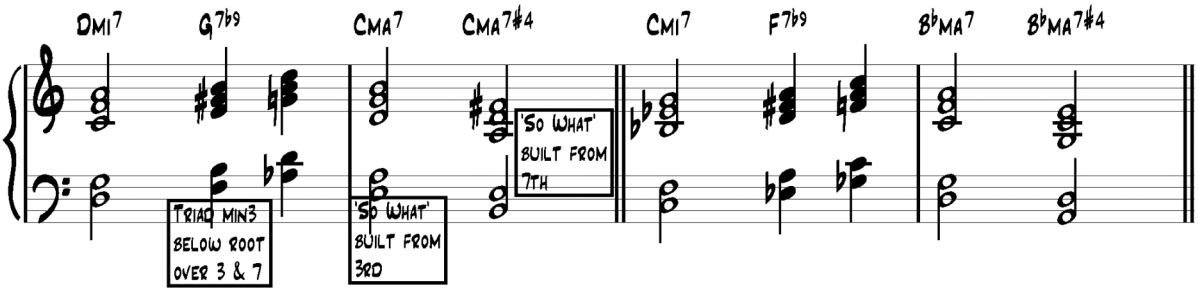


[1] Mark Levine, *The Jazz Piano Book,* Sher Music ISBN 0-9610741-5-1, pp. 109-124

So with our ‘So What’ chord satisfying the II and I voicings, and an upper structure for the V, we can now put together workable two-handed voicings for major II-V-Is. Fig 30 shows an arrangement for a II-Vb9-I progression. The V voicing has the triad transposed up a minor 3rd as well. When practicing these voicings, include both V chords – by doing this, it will give you the ability to vary between these on a gig so that you can create more movement and colour (and patterns). Play with inversions of the right-hand triads as well.

Both maj7 and maj7#4 voicings are shown, again, to give you more options in a performance. Practice the progressions firstly going to the maj7, and secondly, to a maj7#4. As usual, play these through all keys until they are second nature.

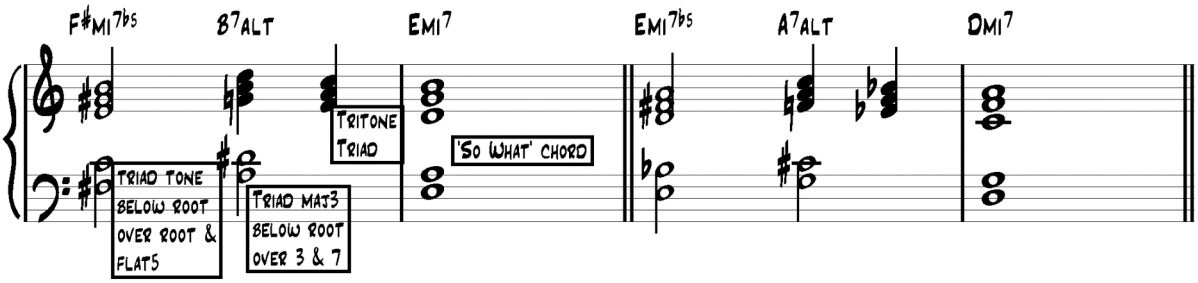
Fig 30



Now for Minor II-V-I progressions, we haven’t covered the voicing for a min7b5 chord. However, because of the nature of melodic minor harmony, we already have a chord to suit. Look at Fig 28 again. The second voicing (altered) comes from melodic minor harmony, as the altered scale is the seventh mode of (in this case), Ab melodic minor. The sixth mode is Locrian natural 9, so this voicing would suit a Fm7b5 chord. An easy way to build this chord, is to play the root and b5 in the left hand, with a major triad in the right hand a tone BELOW the root.

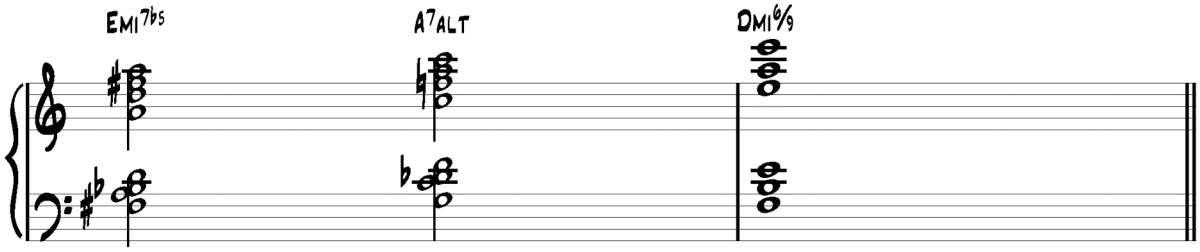
Fig 31 should make this clear. Note also, that there are two voicings for the V chord. The first suits altered harmony as it includes the #5 and #9. The second (our third chord in Fig 28) suits either altered or diminished harmony. Like our variations on the V chord for major II-V-Is above (Fig 30), practicing both voicings gives us more options and colour when comping. The I chord is a straight ‘So What’ voicing as a Imin7 is a more common resolution in tunes than a Im(maj7). However, if you need either this or a Imin6 chord, the appropriate notes can be altered within the ‘So What’ voicing.

Fig 31



These Upper Structures can also make use of octave doubling. Fig 32 shows an example of this with the octave doubled on the top note of each triad for the II and the V (highlighting the 11 on the m7b5, and #9 on the altered dominant).

Fig 32



Practice the minor voicings in Fig 31 through every key and then you're ready to put it all together within the context of a tune.

Fig 33 shows the two-handed voicings for the standard "All The Things You Are". Only 'So What' chords and Upper Structures have been used as a means of practicing these voicings in the context of a tune. In reality, you will find that you'll use all manner of voicings on the gig (including your own), but for now, limit yourself to these voicings until they become natural.

Notes:

- All V chords have been voiced as b9 chords. In reality, you will obviously vary the voicings, but this is a good discipline for practicing these chords – swap between b9 and altered (#5, #9) chords for variation.

- Bar 6 demonstrates a couple of triads on a b9 chord as per Fig 30.

- Bars 9, 25, 30 and 31 are 1st inversion 'So What' voicings.

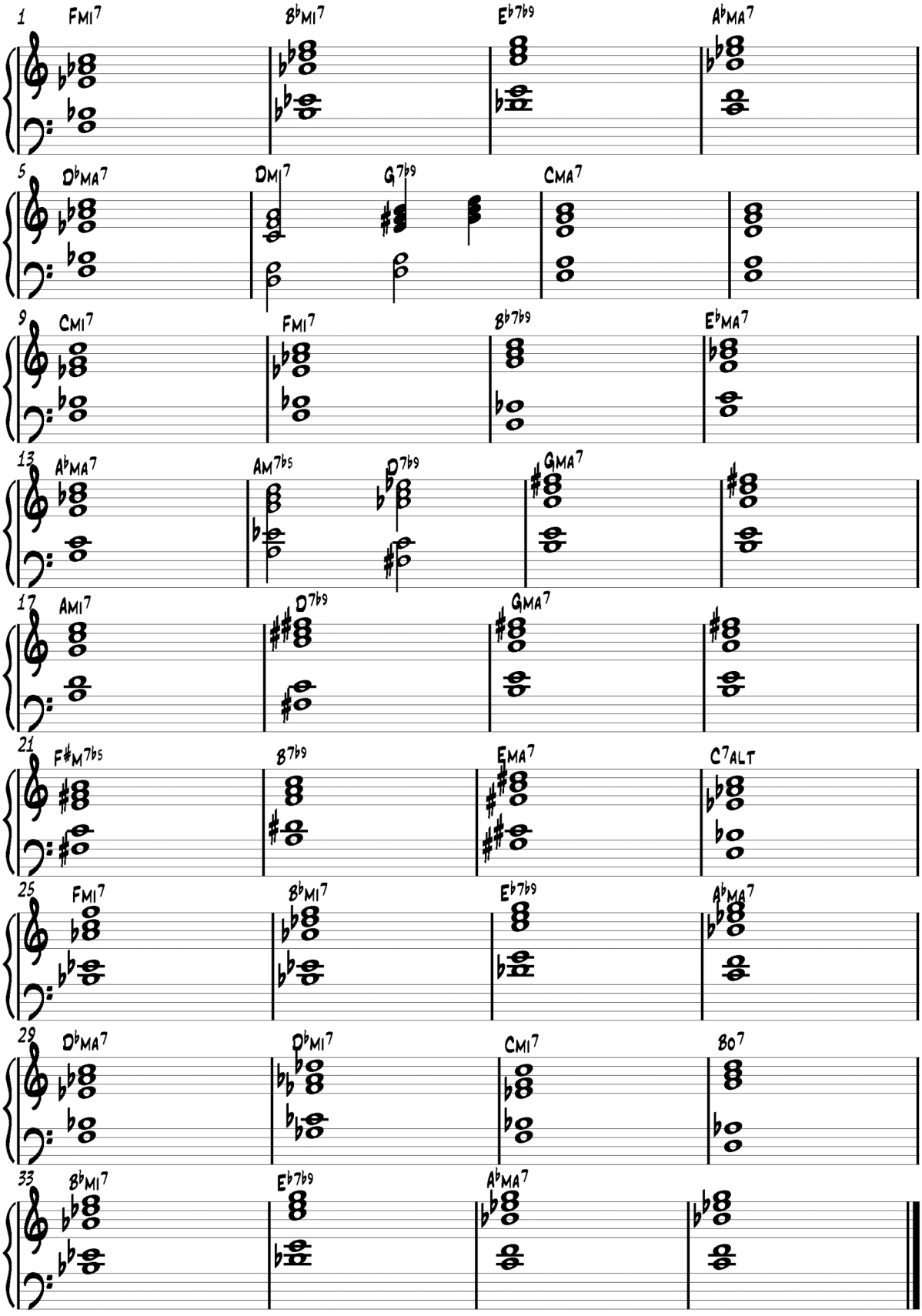
- Bars 14 and 22 have tritone triads in the right-hand of the dominant chords, for variation as well as highlighting the #11.

- Bar 32 is the voicing for a Bb7b9 which works as a Bdim7 (see pg 10). A good substitution is to play a B7alt in this bar.

- Bar 13 (Abma7) is the same as bar 12 (Ebma7), giving us the nice #11 sound on the Ab.

- Look at the min7 voicings in bars 10 and 26. You will notice that these are only one semitone different from the previous voicings. This is a very interesting feature of 'So What' voicings – successive chords in the cycle of fourths can be voiced by changing one note by a semitone. (See page 21)

Fig 33


1
FMI7
B♭MI7
E♭7♭9
A♭MA7
5
D♭MA7
DMI7
G7♭9
CMA7
9
CMI7
FMI7
B♭7♭9
E♭MA7
13
A♭MA7
AM7♭5
D7♭9
GMA7
17
AMI7
D7♭9
GMA7
21
F♯M7♭5
B7♭9
EMA7
C7ALT
25
FMI7
B♭MI7
E♭7♭9
A♭MA7
29
D♭MA7
D♭MI7
CMI7
BO7
33
B♭MI7
E♭7♭9
A♭MA7

Look at Fig 34. This shows 'So What' chords ascending by 4$^{ths.}$ As the chords progress, the inversions descend. Not only that, but the note that changes between successive chords ascends by a semitone – and this note is a note higher in each voicing. For example, the bottom note in Fmi7 ascends by a semitone to form Bbmi7. The *2nd* note from the bottom in Bbmi7 ascends a semitone to Ebmi7, the 3rd note for Abmi7 and so on. Fig 35 shows the same thing for ma7 voicings ascending by 4^{ths}

The advantage of this feature of 'So What' voicings becomes obvious in tunes where you have cyclic chord movement of the same type. E.g. the m7 chords in bars 1, 2; 9, 10; 25, 26 of 'All The Things You Are'. Voice leading is therefore very strong and physical movement is minimised between chords. Understanding exactly *which* note you change between chords becomes apparent once you play through Figs 34 and 35.

- With minor 7th chords ascending by 4^{ths}, the note that changes becomes the 3rd of the new chord (from the 5th).
- With major 7th chords ascending by 4^{ths}, the note that changes becomes the 5th of the new chord (from the 7th).
- If you don't change the chord from one ma7 to the next in the cycle, the 2nd chord becomes a ma7#4, as shown in bars 12-13 of Fig 33 (see Fig 36).

Play through these sequences, but also try ascending by 5^{ths} as shown in Fig 37 (In this case, the 3rd moves down a semitone to the 5th of the new chord for min 7 voicings, and the 5th moves down to the major 7th in major 7 voicings.)

Fig 34

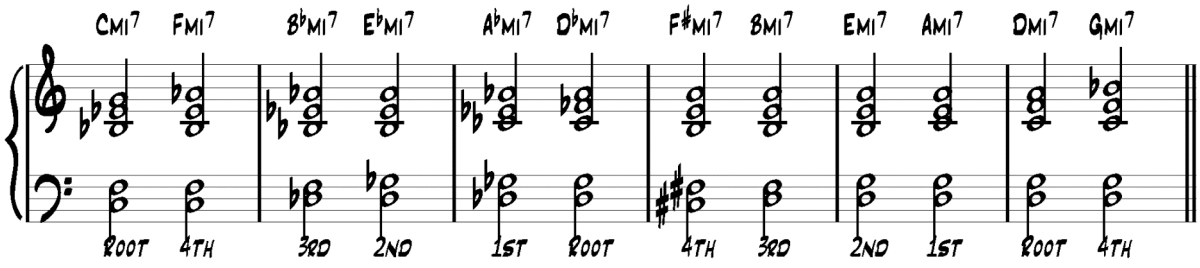


Fig 35

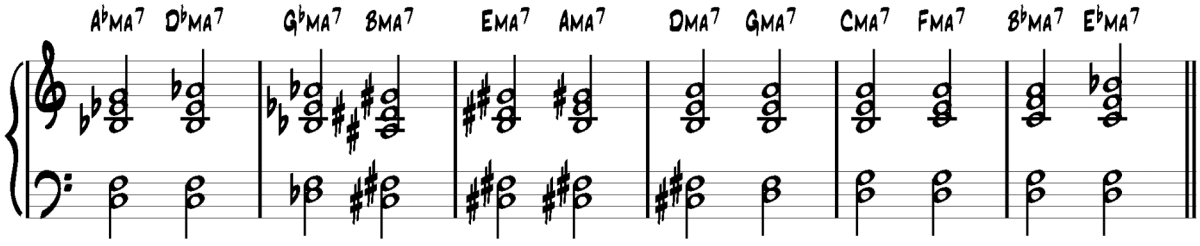


Fig 36

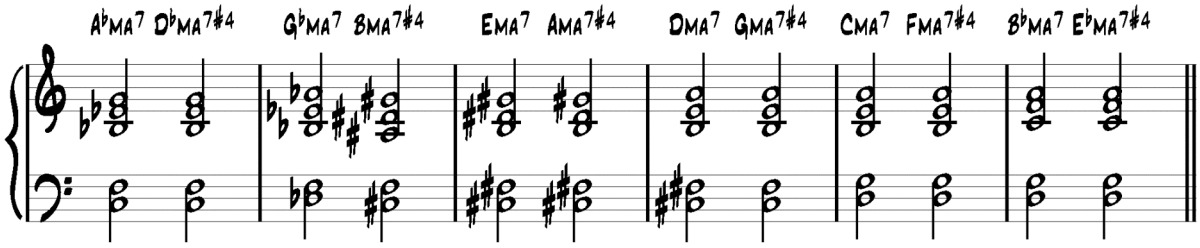
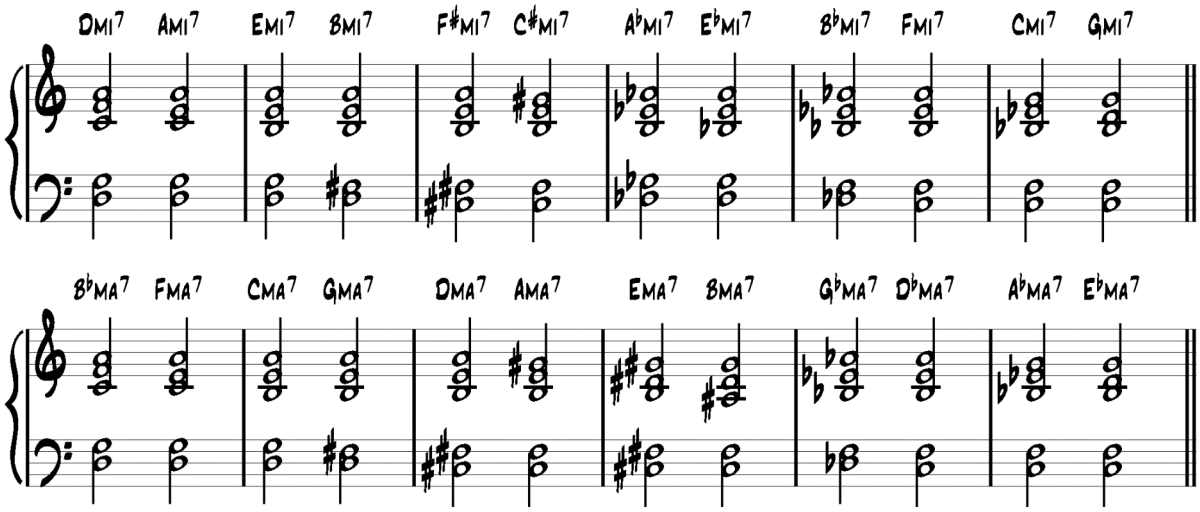


Fig 37



Practice

So what is the practical application of all this? Here are some exercises to make this clear:

- Practice Fig 34 as written, but keep playing around the cycle five times until you end up on a root position Cm7 again. By doing this, you'll end up playing *every* inversion for *every* key! Be sure to say to yourself exactly what chord you're playing each time. This 'finger' practice will help internalise the various 'So What' inversions, which in turn will give you a greater range of colour and voicings.

- Do the same for the ma7 voicings in Fig 35.

- Look for tunes that have successive min7 or ma7 voicings in the cycle of fourths (such as "All The Things You Are"). Generally, you don't find more than two successive chords in most standards. Practice this semitone movement in the context of these tunes. For tunes with successive ma7 chords, also practice keeping the chord the same as in Fig 36, for that ma7#4 sound.

- If you're not completely brain-fried by this stage, practice Fig 37 with the above process.

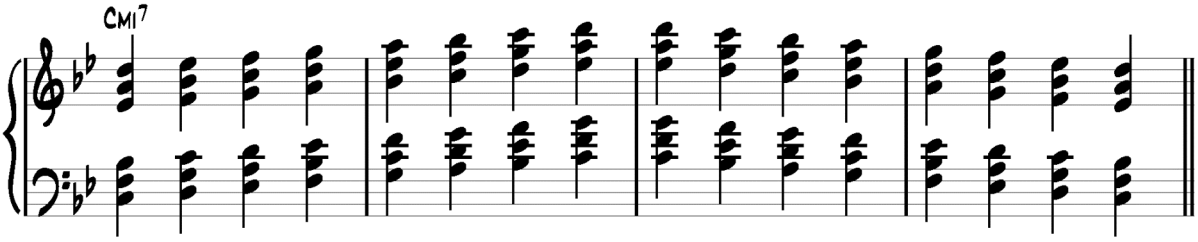
Chapter 3: Quartal Voicings

Tertiary harmony was a large part of Jazz up until the 1950s and 1960s when a new style emerged: quartal harmony based on the interval of a fourth. The precision and rigid structure of tertiary harmony was opened up and replaced by the ambiguity of quartal harmony. However, though it can be ambiguous, quartal harmony is functional and can be economic, as one voicing can have multiple applications. A quartal voicing constructed of C, F and Bb (Fig 38, Left-hand, beat 1) could be interpreted in many ways. It could be a C7, C7sus4, F7sus4, Fm11, Bb, Bbm, Bb7, Eb, Eb7, Ebm, Gbma7b5, Db, D7#9b13, E7#5b9, Gm11, Ab or Am7b5 to name but a few possibilities.

Another appeal of quartal voicings is that they can move freely within a mode and still function appropriately for a single chord. They can also move outside of a tonality and function as parallel structures to harmonise a given melody. All this harmonic flexibility results in an open, spacious sound and colour.

Quartal voicings consist of stacked fourth intervals (perfect or augmented). Any of the voicings in Fig 38 can be used as a Cm7 (or any chord derived from Bb major: D phryg, Ebma7#11, F7, Gm7 or Am7b5). To practice these, play just the left-hand part first, then add the bottom note of the right-hand voicing, then the middle note, and finally all six notes. Transpose and practice in all keys.

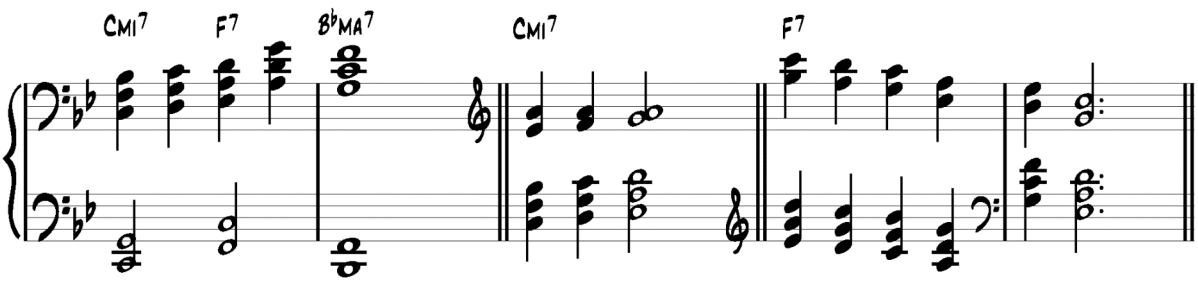
Fig 38



McCoy Tyner, pianist with John Coltrane in the early 1960s, first began playing chords in fourths, along with right-hand pentatonic lines – an identifiable complement and feature of this style of Jazz piano. Chick Corea is also a notable exponent of this style, who lightened the texture and added his own creativity to the mix. Since then a whole legion of pianists has taken cues from these masters. Now to some applications:

Fig 39a demonstrates a possible quartal realisation of a II-V-I progression. Fig 39b shows that when playing a melody note above quartal voicings, the top interval need not be a fourth. Finally, Fig 39c demonstrates that quartal voicings even work over that most tertiary of chords, the dominant seventh.

Fig 39a Fig 39b Fig 39c



Don't dismiss the left-hand in Fig 39a as being too simplistic – very often roots and fifths can be the best complement to a right-hand voicing or improvised line. Remember there are only two sorts of music – good music and bad music. If simple chord structures highlight what needs to be expressed in the tune, use them. Two pianists who express this idea exceptionally well are Keith Jarrett and Michel Camilo, but there are many others. As with all these ideas presented here, don't be afraid to experiment. In doing so, you'll find things you like and develop them into your own playing – in that way you begin to develop your own identity, which is paramount in any musical style.

Anyway, there are many ways of incorporating quartal voicings into II-V-I progressions, so here are some to get you started. You have already encountered some of these ideas back in Chapter 2 (see Fig 27, pg 16). Fig 40a demonstrates a basic two-handed II-V-I, with Fig 40b highlighting a slight variation. You will notice that while II-V-Is can be voiced totally in fourths, often it is the combining of quartal structures with other voicings which can give us the richest variety of colour.

However, the G13 chord in Fig 40a is a wonderful dominant voicing, easily remembered as the bottom note is the b7 and the top note is the root. This chord is very useful for a strong 7th chord sound and 'cuts through' when playing in a combo. Try playing just this voicing shape over a blues.

Fig 40a

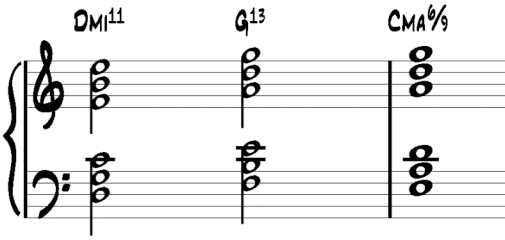
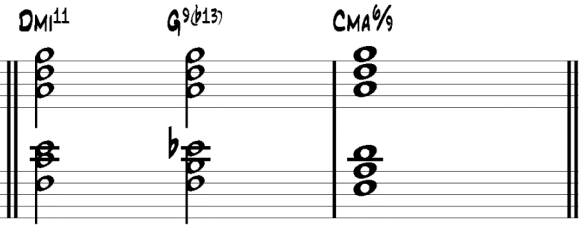
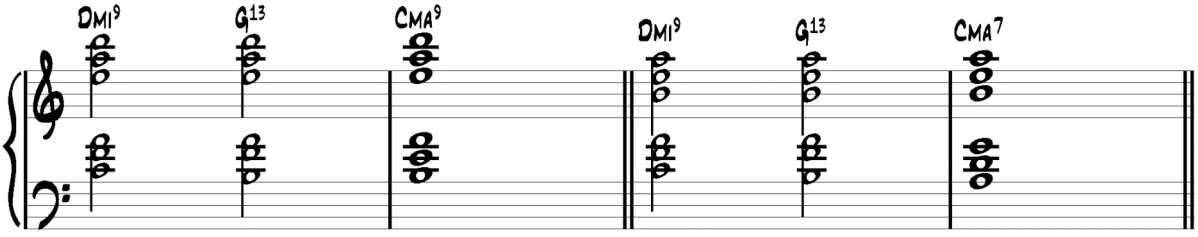


Fig 40b



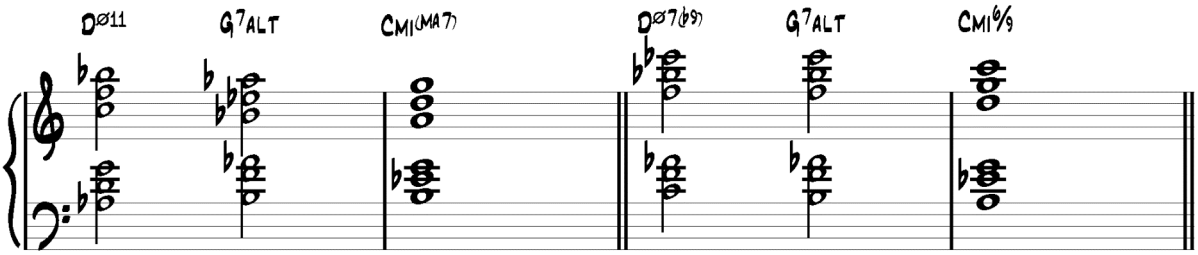
Some further variations:

Fig 41



Minor II-V-Is can also be explored in quartal harmony:

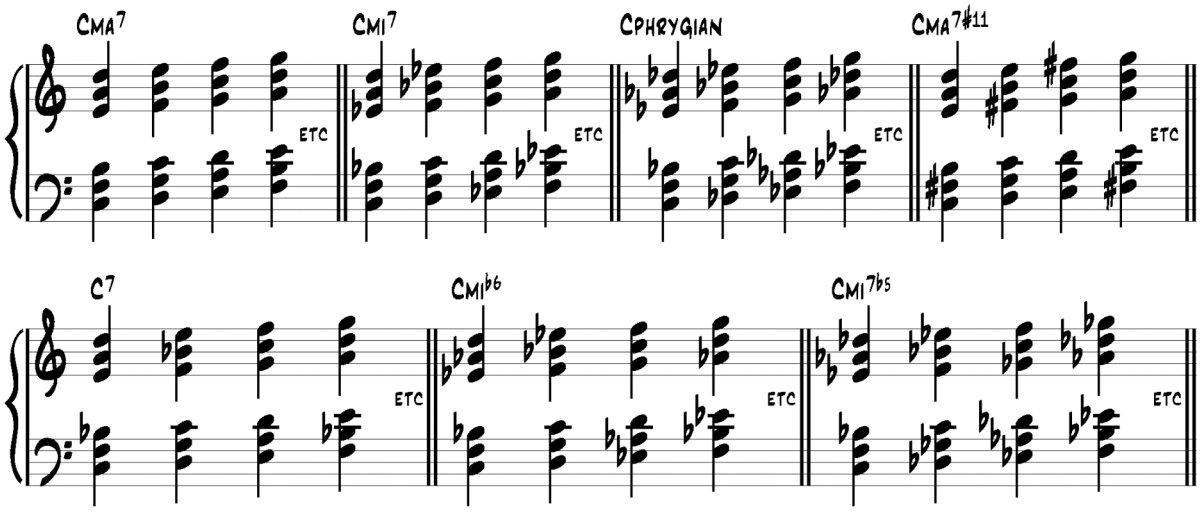
Fig 42



It goes without saying that all these voicings should be practiced around the cycle of fourths, and that the right-hand voicings in the above examples could be used as left-hand chords. However, don't just limit yourself to just the ones here. Quartal harmony demands experimentation so play with various combinations and discover some new ones.

To *really* get inside quartal harmony, take each mode of the major scale and quartalise it. Fig 43 shows the first few chords for each mode starting from C. An interesting note on the Locrian mode (last bar) is that McCoy Tyner often uses this mode as a substitute for dominant harmony based on the same root.

Fig 43



And this is only major scale harmony! Try Jazz Minor (Melodic) harmony as well…

Obviously you won't use all of these voicings, but it is a good exercise to gain an understanding of how quartal chords work and sound (as well as a new way to practice modes). For reference, here are some of the more common constructions written in list form:

Minor Voicings	Dominant Voicings	Major Voicings	Dom sus4 Voicings
1 11 b7 (m11)	9 5 1 (9th)	9 5 1 (ma9)	1 11 b7
9 5 1 (m9)	3 6 9 (13th)	3 6 9 (ma6/9)	5 8 11
11 b7 b3 (m11)	6 9 5 (13th)	6 9 5 (ma6/9)	
5 8 11 (m11)	b7 3 6 (13th)	7 3 6 (ma13)	
6 9 5 (m13)			
b3 6 9 (m6/9)			

These can be combined in various II-V-I permutations – try different quartals in the left and right hand, as well as combining tertiary left-hand voicings with quartals. (Take care with doubled notes, though).

A quick word about the last column – quartal voicings are ideal for dominant sus4 chords, and these shapes are often the best for the purpose, even as just left-hand voicings when soloing.

No discussion of quartal harmony would be complete, of course, without mentioning the complement of pentatonic scales to this structure. While the realm of pentatonic scales and their function lies outside of this resource, nevertheless here are a couple of ideas to whet your appetite for practicing these combinations:

Fig 44 demonstrates a simple pentatonic pattern over a II-V-I progression in Bb.

Fig 44

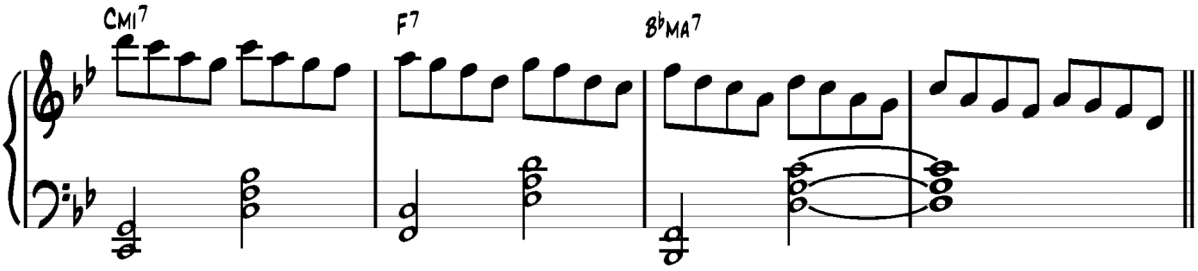
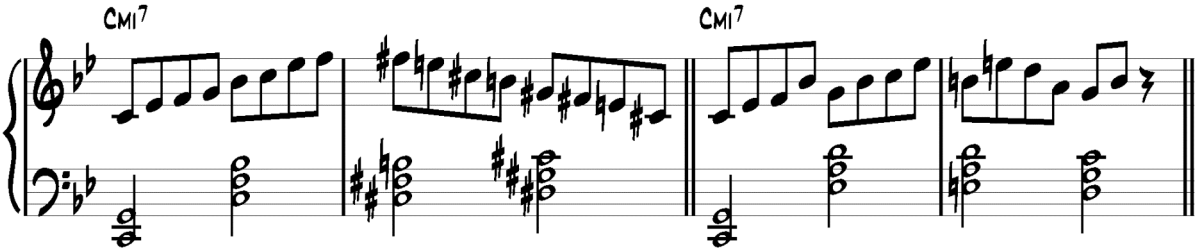


Fig 45 is a good example of how effective quartal harmony and pentatonics are at superimposing outside harmony over a tone centre. Some options include side-slipping by a semitone, or up or down in 3rds (major or minor).

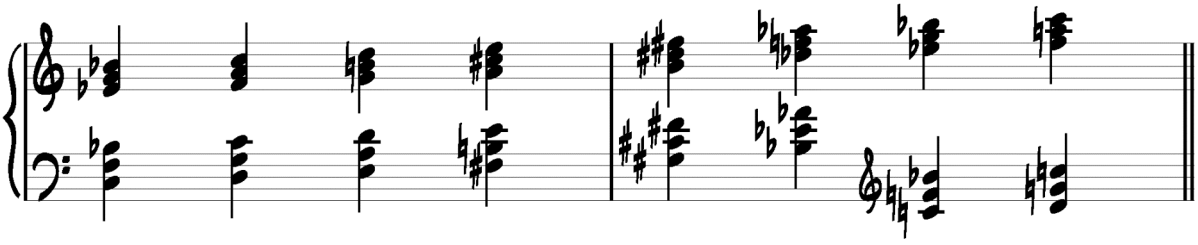
Fig 45



To practice pentatonic / quartal combinations, start with a basic quartal minor voicing, (1 11 b7) in the left hand, and play around the relative major pentatonic with the right. (i.e. over a Cm11 voicing, play Eb major pentatonic). Do this through all keys. We know that this particular voicing could be used for a number of different chords, so also practice other common pentatonics for this chord. For simplicity, limit yourself to the more common combinations of pentatonics. In other words, over a Cm11, play Bb, Eb and F – pentatonics that would normally be played over a minor chord (but will also work in the other common dominant and major applications). In this way, you'll be practicing 'finger' combinations, which will give you the ability to solo effectively over quartals and provide a strong technique to play 'outside' the harmony.

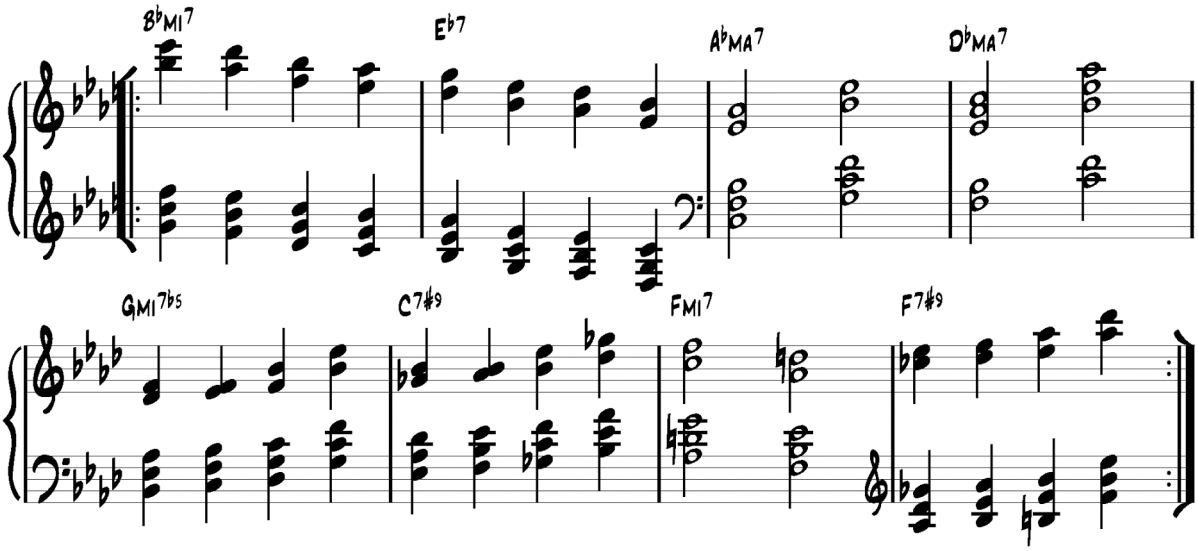
Another great way of getting outside the harmony is shown with the pattern in Fig 46, consisting of triads on top of the fourths, ascending a whole-tone scale. Try making this into a rhythmic pattern by arpeggiating the triads. A very useful and distinctive sequence, which can be used just about anywhere and is very reminiscent of Herbie Hancock.

Fig 46



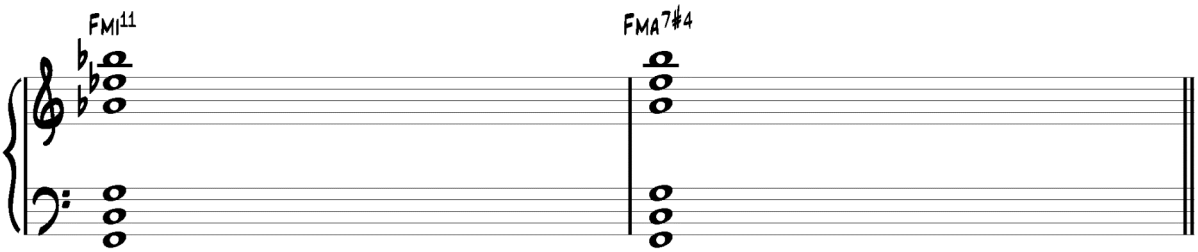
Here is a simple chord progression, voiced for a comping situation (rhythm excluded). Notice the variations on the minor and dominant chords (from which can be seen the usefulness of the exercise in Fig 43).

Fig 47



Finally, before we leave this section on stacked voicings, the next example shows a great voicing of stacked fifths. The min11 chord is commonly known as the “Kenny Barron” chord and works well over minor 7th harmonies, especially as a final chord. It is easy to construct and remember, as it is just the left and right hand playing stacked fifths separated by a semitone. Next to this is a variation suitable for major 7th harmonies. Practice these in all keys.

Fig 48

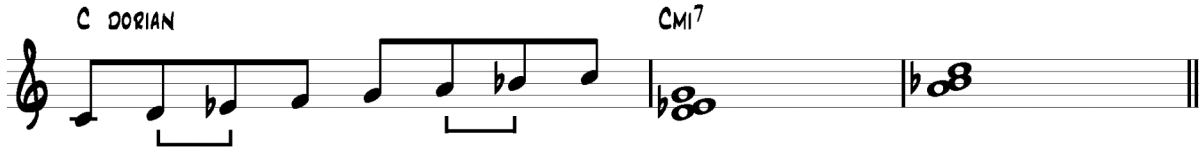


Chapter Four: Cluster Chords

Also known as modal fragments, these three-notes chords are very useful for creating great tension and colour due to the presence of a minor 2nd interval. They are also good when combined with other left-hand voicings, as will be seen.

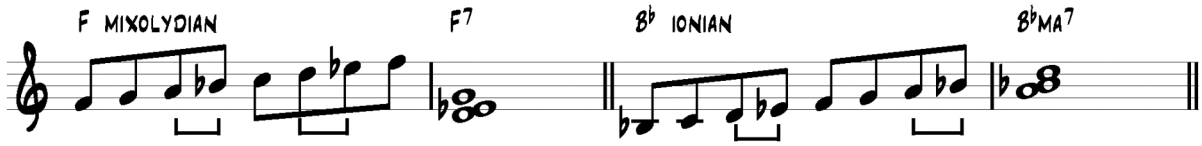
The basic chord consists of a minor 2nd with a major 3rd on top. The first thing to do is to find where those minor 2nd intervals occur naturally in our various scales. If we look at Fig 49, we can see that there are two such intervals in a dorian minor, giving us two useable voicings for a minor chord, the first highlighting the ninth (and minor third) and the second (slightly more obscure as a minor chord) highlighting the natural 6.

Fig 49



We can do the same with the Mixolydian and Ionian modes, but in this case, only one chord is useable in each scale due to the need to avoid the fourth.

Fig 50



However, using the Lydian scale gives us another chord possibility for a maj 7th (Fig 51a). For minor harmony, take the first minor chord we discovered (Fig 49 – C minor), and use it for the modes of C *melodic* minor, in this case Am7b5 and B7alt (as well as Dsusb9, Ebma7#5 and F7#11). In other words, play the 2nd, 3rd and 5th of the parent melodic minor scale. (Fig 51b).

Fig 51a

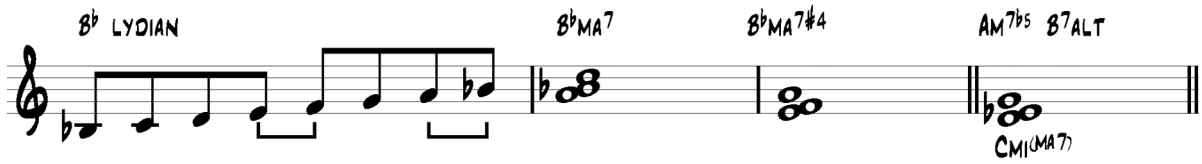
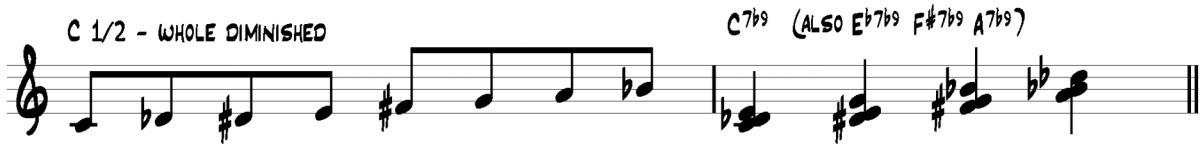


Fig 51b

Diminished harmony presents us with a few options, due to the way that everything repeats at the interval of a minor 3rd. Fig 52 shows a C ½ step – whole step diminished scale and the chords that can be derived. Note that in this case, the chords consist of a minor 2nd and a *minor* 3rd.

Fig 52



Practice

As with previous voicings, applying these to II-V-I progressions is the best way to start, and then practicing them in the context of various tunes. Fig 53a demonstrates a possible combination for major II-V-Is and Fig 53b does the same for minor progressions. These voicings should be practiced for the left *and* right hands.

Fig 53a

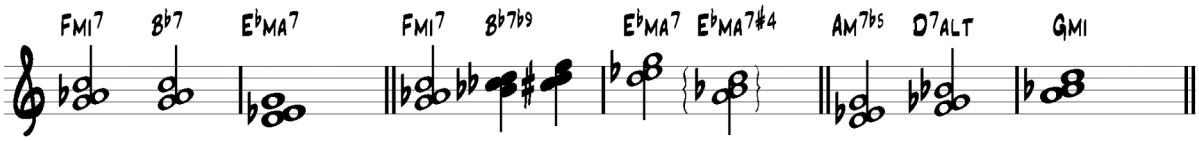


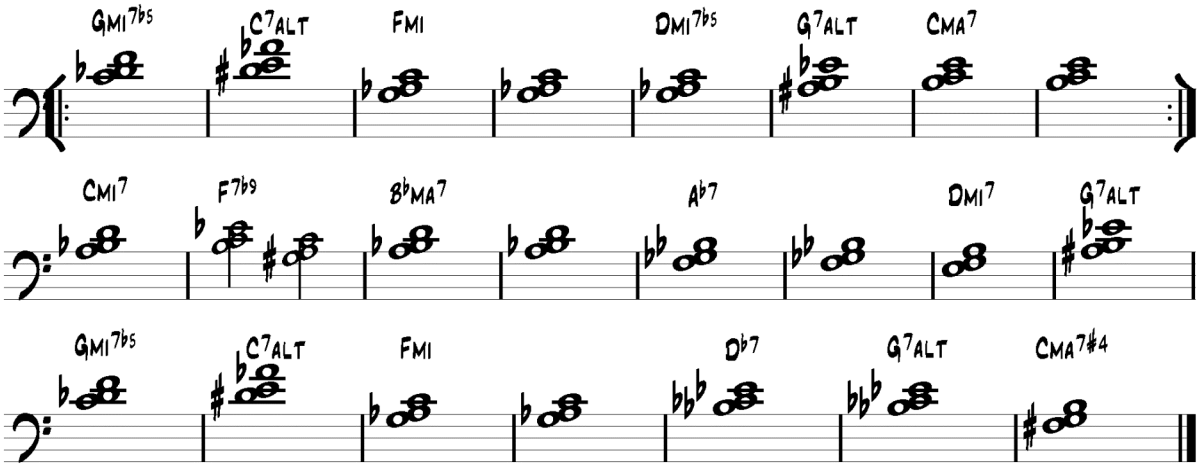
Fig 53b

To summarise, here is a list of commonly used cluster chords and their scale degrees:

Chord	Mode	Combination
Minor	Dorian (or min-maj)	2-3-5 (6-7-2)
Dominant	Mixolydian	6-7-2
Dominant b9	½ - w diminished	1-2-4, 3-4-5, 5-6-8 etc
Major	Ionian	7-1-3
	Lydian	4-5-7
Minor 7b5	Locrian or Locrian #9	4-5-7
Dominant #5, #9	Altered	3-4-6

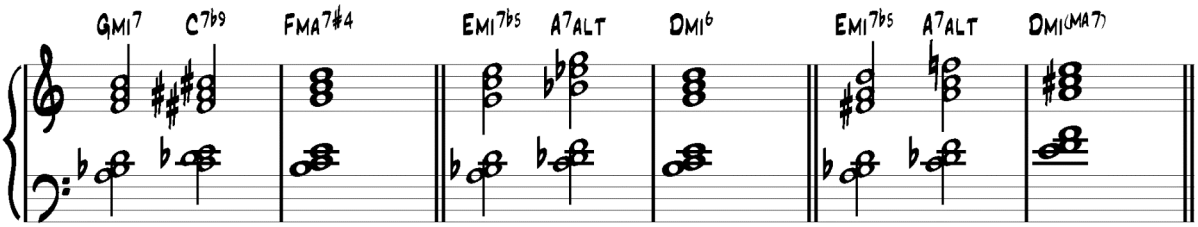
Here are these chords applied to the changes of “What Is This Thing Called Love?”

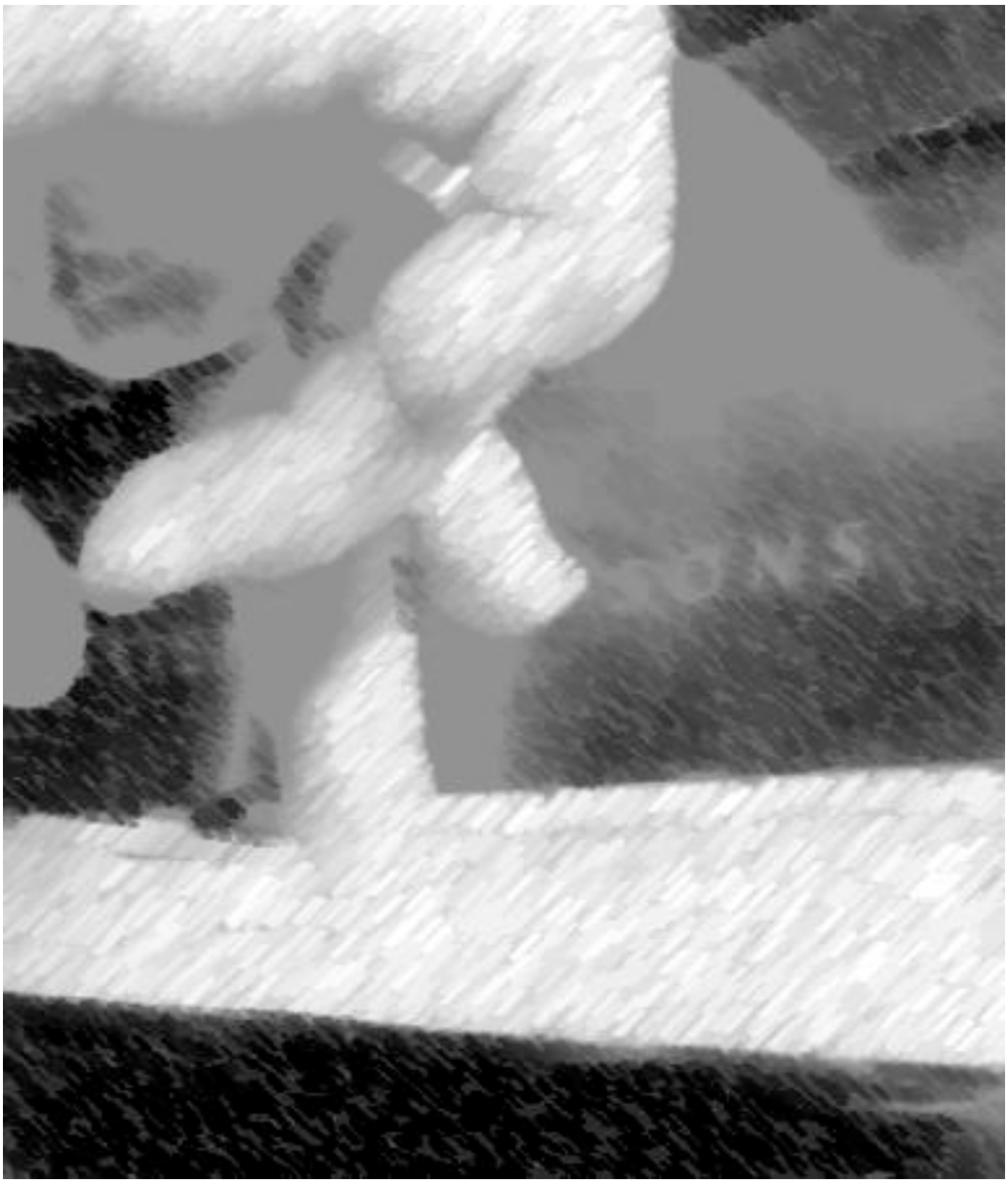
Fig 54



Finally, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, cluster chords work well in conjunction with other voicings. In fact, cluster chords combined with simple triads produce great-sounding chords. Here are a few to get you started, but don’t be afraid to experiment with other triads and see what you come up with.

Fig 55





Chapter Five: On the gig…

So you've successfully navigated this far through the booklet. Armed with your knowledge of chords and voicings, how do you use them on the gig? With so many choices at your disposal, how do you know which one to use and when? It can seem a little daunting…

Unfortunately there is no secret formula to this – your choice of voicings should be to your own individual taste, as well as being able to complement what else is happening around you on the bandstand. In fact, one could say that there are three elements that are essential to being a good 'comper' (whether accompanying yourself or others).

They are:

1. A good ear. This should be obvious, but you need to be able to hear and respond to the music around you. Developing your ear is a crucial exercise and can be achieved by listening (listening *well* and to a *lot* of music). Listen to as wide a range of jazz artists as possible – not just pianists (and even not just jazz either!). Transcribing tunes and solos is also essential to this skill, as well as ear training – recognising intervals, scales chords etc.

2. Creativity. Don't just settle on the easy or familiar chord voicings. Expand your thinking by trying something new. Practice each new voicing until it becomes second nature. Take risks on the gig – excite your own playing by attempting voicings you haven't tried before, and don't worry about failure – mistakes are a part of the jazz process. This whole creativity idea is extremely important and is, (as was mentioned at the beginning of this resource) the point of this book, encouraging you to make your own discoveries in harmony and voicings. The best way to achieve that is by mode-mapping, which is knowing your modes and scales so well that you know *instantly* where each note is and can construct voicings on-the-fly. The piano is the ideal instrument for this as it is so visual. You should be able to see where the notes of a particular scale are anywhere on the keyboard.

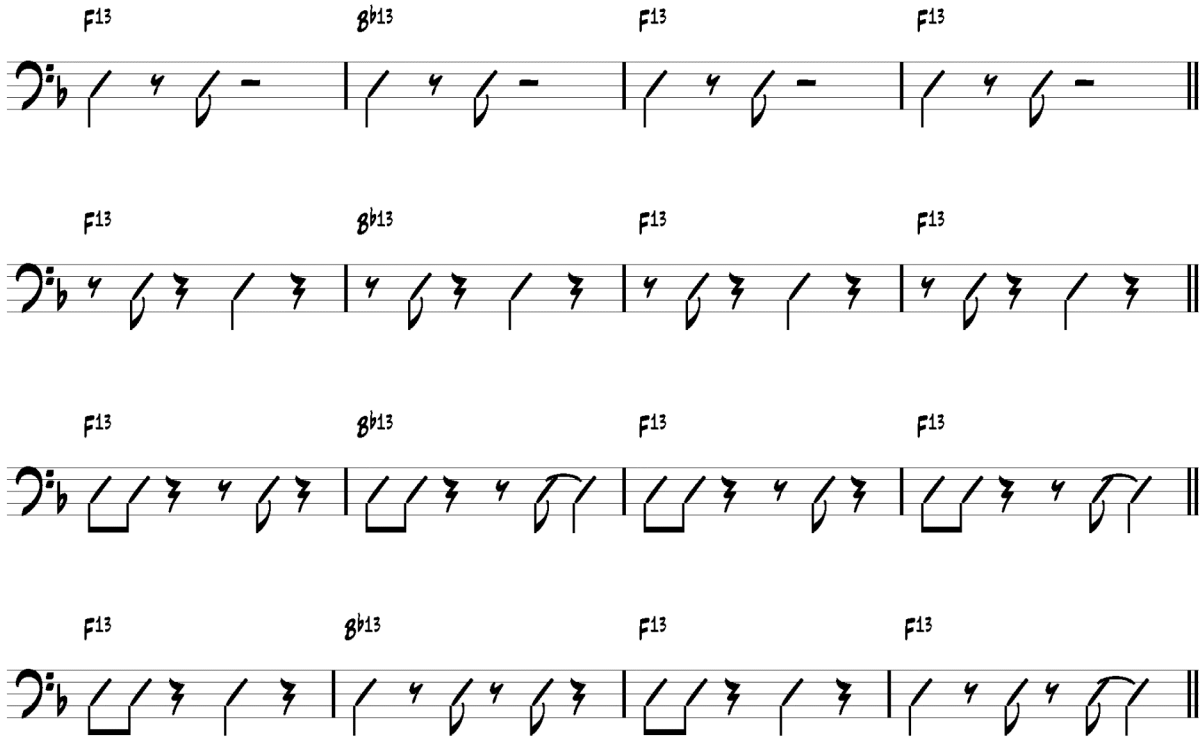
3. Rhythm. 'It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing'. Having good rhythm even if your soloing skills aren't that good, will always get you a gig. Rhythm is the foundation of music, and needs to be developed as much as your theory knowledge. Again, listening to a lot of music is important, as well as metronome practice (especially counting the click on the 2 and 4 when practicing swing). Play-along recordings or Band-In-A-Box accompaniment are also good for timing skills. (A more recent item of Mac software entitled "MyJazzBand" is a cheaper alternative to BIAB, but sounds good and reads BIAB files). Listen to a range of jazz pianists and notice their use of rhythm in their chords. Your goal is to internalise the rhythm – so that it becomes a 'feel' thing more than a 'count'.

Even though an effective swing comping style is developed through the above methods (which takes time), over the page are some exercises to also help develop effective comping.

Static comping

This means a repeating left-hand rhythm, to create more of a steady, driving effect. Here are a few examples of that over the first bars of a blues:

Fig 56

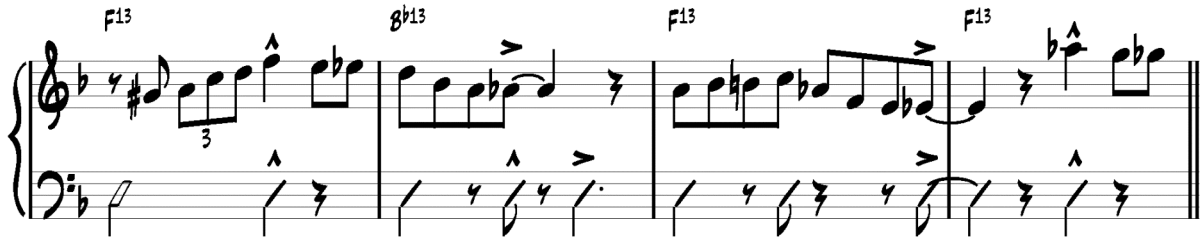


Obviously these are starting points only. You should experiment with combining rhythms in a tune as well as alternating the patterns with long or short notes.

Accent Comping

This style of comping strengthens the rhythm of the melody or solo by giving more force to the accents. Listening to big band recordings where one section plays hits while the other plays a soli creates a good understanding of this style.

Fig 57



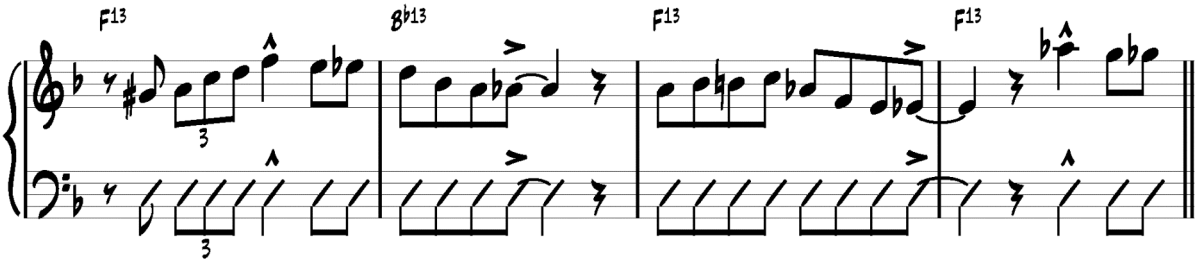
Block Style Comping

The whole block chord approach is something that hasn't been dealt with in this resource, but it is a very valid and useful style of playing. The reader is encouraged to check out *The Jazz Piano Book* by Mark Levine[1], for a thorough grounding in this

[1] Ibid. pp. 179-206

style. In terms of actual comping, though, block style is more of an effect but combined with other comping styles is a nice addition and can add a lot of power to a melody or solo. Bill Evans often used left-hand voicings in this style to highlight a phrase. Take care with this, it can sound very derivative and it is also easy for the left hand to overpower the right. Practice this style slowly to achieve a good balance.

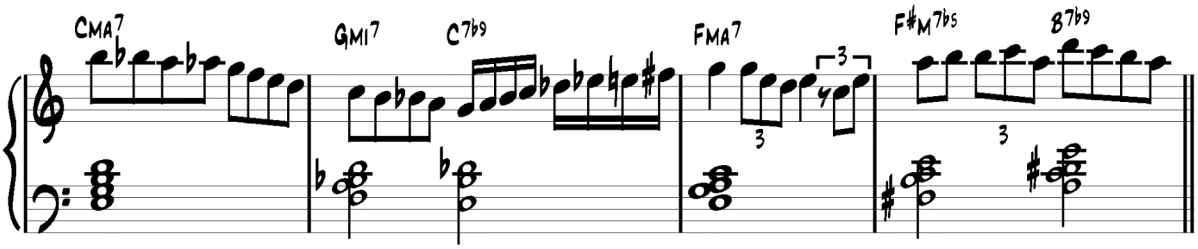
Fig 58



Pad Comping

This is basically just sustaining each chord until the next change and creates a smooth, relaxed feel. Especially effective in ballads, the other comping styles mentioned can also be combined with this.

Fig 59



There are many other considerations to be taken into account when comping, especially who or what you are comping behind. For example, accompanying a singer requires a different sensitivity and harmonic support than a horn player. We haven't even touched upon Latin or funk styles, which require rules of their own. Once more, do as much listening as you can.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this resource has in some way achieved what it set out to do – that is, to give you some tools and guidelines into jazz voicings not merely as an end in themselves, but to whet your appetite into exploring your own voicings and harmony. That is, after all, one of the beauties of improvisation, and a way to create your own 'voice' in jazz. Take the time also to explore the many excellent publications on jazz piano, some of which are listed on the following page. Happy comping…

Bibliography

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- *'Elements Of Jazz'*, Leigh Jackson
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- *'Chording Techniques For Jazz Piano'*, James T. Whitley, Studio P/R, Inc.
- *'Mastering Quartal Harmony And Voicings'*, Andy LaVerne, 'Keyboard' Magazine, May 1997
- *'Master Class'*, Andy LaVerne, 'Keyboard' Magazine, December 1997
- Quartal Piano Voicings (PDF) http://cla.calpoly.edu/~prinzler/sitefiles/instructional_materials.html
- *'Left Hand Comping'*, Per Danielsson, http://www.melbay.com/creativekeyboard/apr04/comping.html
- *'The Real Book - Sixth Edition'*, Hal Leonard Corporation ISBN 0-634-06038-4

Appendix 1. Four-note Minor II-V-I Voicings