

The Use of Non-Harmonic Tones in Jazz

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Jazz musicians often use non-harmonic tones as a means to increase the chromaticism in their improvised melodic phrases. Other jazz educators often refer to these chromatic notes as approach/target notes and enclosures, among other things. Jerry Bergonzi dedicates a chapter of the sixth volume of his *Inside Improvisation* book series (“Developing a Jazz Language”) to this topic. In that chapter, he goes into far greater detail than I do here, and it is well worth continuing your study of non-harmonic tones in Bergonzi’s book.

Non-harmonic tones can be used in a variety of rhythmic ways. They work especially well as pickup gestures to a phrase, but also sound very good played right on the downbeat. Experiment with how you place these notes and find approaches that appeal to your ear.

What I describe below are a handful of basic uses of non-harmonic tones. Each exercise should be learned in all 12 keys, first at any tempo that you can successfully execute them through the entire practical range of your instrument. Beyond that, you should work for speed, maintaining accuracy as you increase tempo. While I don’t include typical jazz articulation, you should perform these with that articulation with a swing feel when appropriate.

Exercise #1 – Chromatic Lower Neighbors

In this exercise, we add a chromatic lower neighbor tone to each note of the C major triad.



Exercise #2 – Diatonic Upper Neighbors

In this exercise, we add a diatonic (in the scale) upper neighbor tone to each note of the C major triad. Note that we “skip” chord tones on the descending part of the exercise. If we do not incorporate skips, the line is too scalar in nature.



Exercise #3 – Combination #1

In this exercise, we combine the diatonic upper neighbor and chromatic lower neighbors from the first two exercises. We “skip” again on the descending part of the exercise.



Exercise #4a and 4b – Combinations #2 and #3

These are also combination exercises. Note that we “skip” on the descending part of the first of these two exercises only.



Exercise #5 – Combination #4

I call this exercise the “Hank Mobley” exercise, because he plays this early in his solo on “Remember” from his *Soul Station* recording. This one has a lot of rhythmic flexibility. I present it here as a sort of pickup-oriented rhythm, but try it also with the first note squarely on beat one. I generally only play this as a descending line.



Exercises #6-10 – Minor

Once you learn all of these exercises in all 12 major keys, do them again in all 12 minor keys. They all work exactly the same as in major, except that we lower the third and sixth notes to accommodate the minor tonality. To save space, I present Exercise #3 here in minor. Make the same modifications to all of the other exercises.



Beyond.....

There are seemingly infinite permutations of the non-harmonic tone principle. Some things you may consider working on after the original ten exercises may include:

1. Applying the non-harmonic tones to all of the extensions of chords.
2. Working toward greater chromaticism. For example, you might try different combinations of chromatic tones. Bergonzi's book illustrates a lot of these more chromatic options.
3. Apply non-harmonic tones to scales, as in the example below, which is a scale in thirds with an added lower neighbor.
4. Be creative and experiment to find combinations that you really like.

