

## Learning to Play Changes

Here is a straight forward, “old school” method for learning to improvise through chord changes. It will train your ears and hands to target harmonically important notes. It involves a disciplined method of practicing with restrictions. At first, you only have three notes to choose from on each chord. Gradually, more options are added until you have 9 or 10 notes of the chromatic scale available on each chord. I’ll go through it in 5 steps. These steps should be mastered sequentially. That means – don’t go on to the next step until you have a degree of freedom and accuracy with the current step. This method works best on tunes that have lots of cycle of 5ths motion, II-V-Is, turnarounds, etc., – the harmonic language of jazz standards. I like to start students out on a tune like All the Things You Are. This method is about learning where the important notes are located on your instrument and developing your ear to hear the voice-leading\* possibilities in the harmony. Take it slow!

1. Improvise through the tune using only the notes of the basic triad (1,3,5) of each chord (3 possible notes). No need to play all 3 notes on each chord – just make melodies.
2. Improvise through the tune using the notes of the basic triad (1,3,5) of each chord, and a chromatic approach note one half step below (6 possible notes). Play with delaying the resolutions of the approach notes.
3. Improvise through the tune using the notes of the basic triad (1,3,5) of each chord, and a diatonic approach note a step above (6 possible notes). The diatonic approach note will sometimes be a whole step above, or sometimes a half step above. Let your ear guide you to the one that sounds best.
4. Improvise through the tune using the notes of the basic triad (1,3,5) of each chord, a chromatic approach note one half step below, and a diatonic approach note a step above. This will yield 9 possible notes on a major triad, but only 8 notes on a minor triad. (This is step 2 and 3 combined.)
5. Finally – if the root motion is down a perfect 5<sup>th</sup> to the next chord, add the 7<sup>th</sup> of the chord, but be sure to resolve it down a step to the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the following chord. This is added to the possibilities available in number 4, so the total number of possible notes goes up to 10 on a dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord!

### Example

Chord: C-7	Root	Third	Fifth	Seventh	—> Third of F7
1.	C	E <sup>b</sup>	G		
2.	C B	E <sup>b</sup> D	G F <sup>#</sup>		
3.	D C	F E <sup>b</sup>	A G		
4.	D C B	F E <sup>b</sup> D	A G F <sup>#</sup>		
5.	D C B	F E <sup>b</sup> D	A G F <sup>#</sup>	B <sup>b</sup>	—> A

\* I recommend working through the first 3 chapters of Mick Goodrick’s *Almanac of Guitar Voice-Leading* before you start this method, to make sure you know how to voice-lead the diatonic triads in major, melodic minor and harmonic minor scales.