

Gene Aitkin
Nat'l. Vocal Jazz Chm.

VOCAL JAZZ

Jazz Playing Piano into Vocal Jazz Ensemble

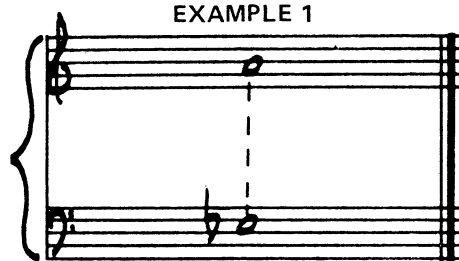
INTRODUCTION

One of the functions of a jazz pianist in the vocal jazz rhythm section is to support the vocal jazz group musically. Sometimes this is difficult because we, as mostly non-rhythm section players or music educators, do not know what to teach or tell the aspiring young jazz pianists . . . especially when it comes to some basic fundamental techniques that would help musically. Mostly our response is just, "play what's on the page." As publishers of vocal jazz literature become more aware of the importance of publishing good rhythm section parts with good piano voicing movement, students are becoming more aware of what a good piano chart is. Add to this some good, sound coaching from the vocal jazz director, and the pianist will add an element of musicianship that is so important to musical performance.

THE PIANISTS LEFT HAND

Perhaps one of the most important concepts that a pianist has to learn is to forget everything they've learned about playing bass notes with the left hand. All the classical and pop literature . . . out the window! The left hand should not duplicate bass notes except in certain instances such as pedal point or special rhythmic or melodic figures. Rule of thumb is . . . DON'T. The basic reason is that the bass player has all the root notes and as such, doesn't need the piano to reinforce the bass notes. The second reason is that if the piano player plays roots with their left hand, the bass player has no freedom to use passing notes without creating undesirable dissonance. The right hand, the older-style chording hand, will at times support the left hand, but will be secondary in nature to the left hand which is now the primary chord hand. The left hand should be capable of voicing all chords in all inversions from the area approximately Eb below

middle C to A above middle C. The right hand will support the left hand in extended voicings, when playing four- to six-note voicings, and for solo playing and accompanying and complimenting the vocal line.



EXAMPLE 1

USE OF THE SUSTAIN PEDAL

What you can't sustain by just holding the piano keys down with your hands . . . don't bother. Use of the sustain to give length to a chord sound, but at the same time sets up sympathetic vibrations in all the other piano strings. The result is that the piano tends to sound muddy. By not using the sustain pedal, it is possible to get a good clean, crisp, piano sound which adds to both the rhythm section and vocal sound. There are times when the use of a sustain pedal in ballads is very effective or when the sustain pedal is used as an effect (such as Richie Bierach uses it by striking a chord and getting a percussive attack, and then depresses the sustain pedal at just the right time after striking the chord to pick up the sympathetic vibrations of the strings). Keeping the sustain pedal depressed when changing chords or keeping the sustain pedal depressed when executing a group of eighth notes with the right hand, are the two most incorrect uses of the sustain pedal.

USE OF SPACE – NOT OVERPLAYING

Next is the use of space . . . in which the piano player does nothing but enjoy not playing . . . perhaps one of the most musical contributions a pianist can make. For some reason, guitarists

and pianists think they have to play all the time, and play every change in order to make a contribution. As an example of overplaying, on one recording of a vocal jazz group, the piano player played the following rhythmic figure on a Dm7 over a period of 4 measures . . . with the sustain pedal depressed, the left hand playing in the bass register, and with a to the eighth notes.

EXAMPLE 2



Back off . . . just lay the chords in there nice . . . no overkill. Better to leave some space for the things to settle.

EXAMPLE 3



Another common problem is playing all the changes that are written in the piano part. Play only the important changes. If there are several changes that happen quickly, chances are that the choir is singing those changes in harmony at that point anyway, and as such, the pianist needs only to support the choir on important accents. For instance,

EXAMPLE 4



Playing all the changes is cumbersome, and gets in the way of the most important concept in jazz . . . TIME.

ACOUSTIC VS. ELECTRIC PIANO

For most playing, an acoustic grand is ideal . . . off to stage-right, with the top open, and the piano players back to the audience.

Some directors prefer an upright acoustic right in front of the choir with the sound board facing the choir. This is fine too, but preference is given to the sound of the grand. Also the control of sound reinforcement for the grand piano is much better away and off to the side of the choir.

In some cases, as in a funk tune, an electric piano may be preferable, but the cleanliness of the acoustic seems to outweigh the mudiness of the electric. An exception to this would be if the

electric piano has been re-vamped and had a "splitter" installed for controlling the tonal quality of the different sections of the keyboard.

COMPING AND SUPPORT OF VOCAL JAZZ FIGURES

Good piano comping will add much to the total effect of the group. The best way to get an idea of good comping, is to listen to what the good jazz pianists are doing behind good jazz soloists. The next time you listen to a recording of Charlie Parker, Cannonball Adderly, Miles Davis, Lee Morgan, etc., listen to the rhythmic inventiveness of the pianist behind the soloists. Another idea is to listen to good big bands like Thad Jones-Mel Lewis, Francy Boland-Kenny Clarke, Woody Herman, etc., and to pay attention to the rhythmic figures the horn sections are playing behind the soloists.

Comping has to convey a musical message, has to relate to what is going on musically, and has to be in good taste. Sometimes the Question and Answer approach can be a help in teaching students simple, fundamental concepts.

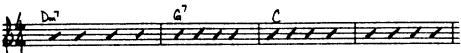
EXAMPLE 5



Much like the old blues vocal form.

Another aspect to consider, although not considered comping in itself, is to listen for certain important rhythmic accent figures in the vocal jazz group that are not written in the piano part. As an example, most piano parts are written:

EXAMPLE 6



This example has no rhythmic cues. There is a good chance the pianists comp figure might directly conflict with the choir, unless the pianist knows what tutti figures are coming ahead in the vocal jazz choir. If the vocal jazz group has a strong short accent on the "and of 4" in the first measure, a long accent on the "+ of 4" in the second measure, and a strong accent of beat "4" in measure 4, then the pianist would write above the piano changes the accents and the length of the accents . . . short or long. The duration of

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the accent figure is important as it will assist the pianist in determining what kind of comp figure to play. Matching accents will also help to make the vocal jazz group sound tighter.

EXAMPLE 7

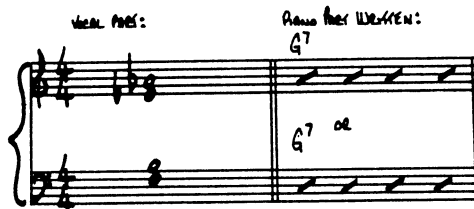


Another problem that is common in comping is the tendency to arpeggiate chords while comping. Again, DON'T, as a rule, unless a particular song calls for this type of playing. Comping is usually accomplished by playing both hands at the same time, or one hand slightly ahead of the other time wise.

ALTERED CHORDS

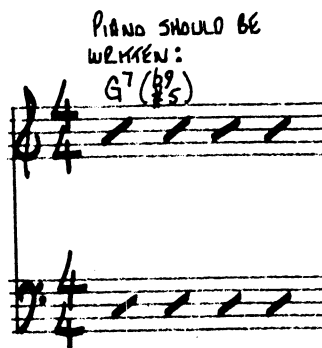
This is an area that needs special attention as this can cause some serious problems when the singers are singing altered changes . . . and the rhythm section is not playing the altered changes, or is playing different altered changes. Again, publishers are becoming more conscious of this important aspect and trying to publish good piano parts, but there are still many charts in which the altered chord information is not printed on the piano or bass part.

EXAMPLE 8



The director or pianist should listen attentively and study their scores very carefully in order to correct any errors. Indicate the correction on the piano part that there is, as an example, a #5 and a b9 present in the chord.

EXAMPLE 9



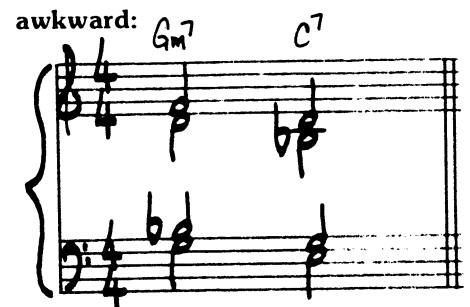
VOICINGS

As with any good jazz playing, pianists should listen to good jazz pianists to get good voicing ideas. In addition to listening to good horn players and jazz combos for solo and comping ideas, pianists need to listen to good keyboard players like, Keith Jarrett, Bill Evans, Victor Feldman, Wynton Kelly, Hal Galper, Jim McNeely, etc. to name a few. Spend time transcribing and memorizing piano solos. This will do much to give the pianist good basic fundamentals.

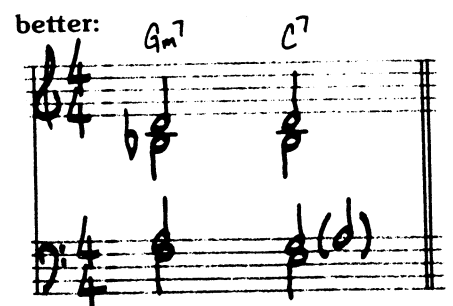
Due to the limited amount of space, I will suggest some ideas in the area of voicings. However, a more important question that Dan Haerle deals with quite well in his books, is where is the chord coming from, and where is it going. Smooth, good voice leading is one major component of good piano playing.

As an example the ii7-V7 progression in Eb major.

EXAMPLE 10



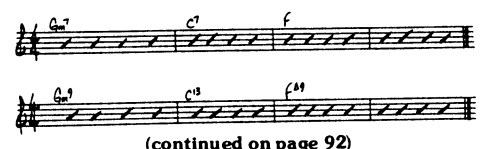
EXAMPLE 11



Notice how the voice leading plays an important part of the smoothness of the progression.

Most chords appear in charts or fake books without any extensions or color tones. You need to add these on your own . . . the use of colors is part of the jazz language. As an example:

EXAMPLE 12



(continued on page 92)

JAZZ PIANO

(Continued from page 15)

As a rule, avoid playing the 13th in the minor chord, and the 11th in dominant chords unless you are sure of what the chord voicings are in the vocal part. These two notes in their respective chords tend to change more than any other.

If the pianist builds a Dm11 or a G13 from the root, they'll have more notes than they can handle and make it sound good. Thus the pianist must prioritize notes. The root, which is usually played by the bass can be left

voiced correctly, get a good sound when built on the 3rd or 7th, and minor chords get a good sound when built on the 3rd or 9th.

EXAMPLE 13



However, these voicings by themselves mean nothing until they can

PRIORITY	POSITION IN CHORD	REASON	EXCEPTION
1	3rd	to determine tonality	when playing suspensions when
2	7th	to determine if the chord has a major or dominant function.	no 3rd is used, or blues chords
3	9th, 11th, or 13th (or alterations)	to add color and begin use of 4, 5, & 6 note voicings.	when both major and minor thirds are used at the same time
4	Any notes that will add to the color of the chord (5th, root, or those not used in priority 3		

out, unless it serves a dissonance function. The fifth of the chord is the next note to leave out, unless it serves an altered function. This leaves only a few notes left . . . which we can prioritize again.

Putting these ideas into practice, let's take a dominant 7th and a minor 7th chord. Dominant 7th chords, when

be led properly. Let's take the ii7-V7 in the key of Eb.

EXAMPLE 14



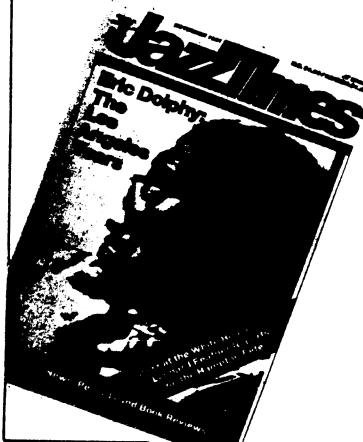
Notice although these are all different numbers signifying the scale number (you must know your scales), there is only one note to change between the two chords. Try it!

Now transpose these voicings to every key. Notice how some of the voicings sound good, while others, because of the register of the piano in which they're voiced, don't sound so good. You and your pianist now can figure out a different ii-v voicing. Look at a piece of music and circle the ii-v's . . . a lot of them are there. Even if there are only dominants, you can (and in most cases, should) put in the ii7 chord before each V7. This procedure tends to make the dominant sound much stronger. Below are some recommended voicings, only now you can see why, although they are good voicings, they are only part of the answer. The chord before and the chord after are just as important for good voice leading. Try not to move the hand a great distance when changing chords in a progression. On MAJOR and MINOR chords, notice that the 3rd and the 7th form either a Perfect 4th or a Perfect 5th. On the DOMINANT chord, the 3rd and 7th form a tri-tone either way. HALF-DIMINISHED chords are mostly built on the 4th or b5th of the scale tone, while on DIMINISHED chords one of the diminished 7th chords notes is left out and replaced with a note a major second higher . . . a tri-tone interval is recommended between the bottom two notes. On QUARTAL voicings, perfect 4ths are usually kept in the lower voices, but a third can be added at the top. Finally, extensions of chords and their alteration usually belong in the upper part of the voicing . . . a good place to begin (note below voicings). As the theoretical knowledge and aural senses develop, some good

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voicings can be constructed using the extensions or their alterations in the lower part of the chord.

MORE ABOUT CONTEMPORARY VOICINGS

Replacing tertian harmony and employing quartal type harmony is one way of creating more contemporary voicings. As an example, quartal harmony (built on a scale note in perfect fourths) in major can be built on the 3rd, 6th, and 7th scale degrees. Likewise, in minor, quartal harmony can be built on the 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, and 6th scale degrees. At or near the top of the quartal harmony voicings, diatonic thirds can be used. However, the three lower notes are usually built in perfect fourths. Again, for many, this is a fresh sound . . . but isolated, doesn't mean a great deal until the chord can be led into . . . and out of . . . smoothly and musically. Polychords, stacking two different chords one on top of the other, is another contemporary voicing approach. Due to the limited space in this article, polychords will be addressed in a future article.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

Listed below are a few recommended books that every pianist and jazz educator should know about. Most of these books can be purchased through the local music dealer.

Jazz/Rock Voicings by Dan Haerle, Studio PR/
Columbia Pictures

The Jazz Language by Dan Haerle, Studio PR/
Columbia Pictures

The Contemporary Pianist, Vol. I & II by Bill Dobbins,
GAMT Music Press

Guide For The Modern Jazz Rhythm Section by
Steve Houghton, Barnhouse

Piano Voicings by Aebersold/Tracy

Gene Aitken, Director of the Jazz Studies Program at the University of Northern Colorado, is one of the most exciting, energetic clinicians available today. His enthusiasm never fails to captivate both performers and audiences.

Gene has extensive background as a professional musician, including appearances with performers such as Vicki Carr, Accidentals II, Four Freshmen and Henry Mancini. He has taught in Seattle and Renton, Washington, and Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon, where he was manager of the Eugene Symphony and administrative consultant to the Oregon Arts Commission. Active in numerous professional and community organizations, he currently serves a National Vocal Jazz Chairman for the National Association of Jazz Educators and is widely sought after as a clinician in both classical and jazz fields.

During the past two years, the UNC jazz Studies Program has won fifteen Down Beat Awards, a Big Band Magazine citation for the New Recording of the Month (March, 1980), funding support for special projects from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Colorado Council on the Arts and Humanities, plus invitations to appear as featured performers in a number of major festivals and music educators conventions across the nation.

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Here in Chicago we are all extremely pleased with the wonderful job you folks at NAJE are doing. Please keep helping jazz to stay alive and well all over the U.S.A.

Richard J. Daniels
President
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"Donation"

Gentlemen enclosed small donation to the Kenton Memorial Fund. I will continue to donate what and when I can. Stan certainly was part of my life musically. Thankfully, through his records he will always be with me.

It seems only musicians will know of his contribution to Big Band Jazz. Hopefully, in the future, the world will know!

Keep up the good work.

J J McCafferty

"Thank You"

Dear Sirs:

I would like to thank all of those who are members of the NAJE and the American Federation of Musicians for my free jazz camp scholarship. Having won this award gives me a sense of achievement that motivates me to strive even more in music. Your having awards of this type shows an interest in today's youth that should be commended.

Thanks again.

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A FEW BASIC TWO-HAND PIANO VOICINGS

MAJOR	MINOR	DOMINANT	HALF-DIMINISHED	DIMINISHED
9 6	9 9	5 6	b6 b5	6 7
7 3	7 5	9 3	3 4	4 b3
6 9	5 3	b7 9	b7 b3	1 1
3 7	3 7	3 b7	b5 7	b5 b5
			4 b5	
QUARTAL (major)		QUARTAL (minor)		SUSPENSIONS (SUS.)
(1) (5)		(5) (3)		9 4
5 9		3 b7		b7 9
9 6		b7 4		6 b7
6 3		4 1		4 6
3 7		1 5		