



SCOOPY-SAX NEWSLETTER (December, 2011)



Welcome

Welcome to the final newsletter of 2011!

The main focus of this issue is the analysis of Larry McKenna's solo on "My Shining Hour." It offers the opportunity to highlight this master tenor player who is well-known on the Philly jazz scene, but definitely belongs in the Talent Deserving Wider Recognition category. Additionally, it offers the chance to investigate the use of approach notes.

Larry McKenna

Larry has been a long-time resident of Philadelphia and is well-known in that city both as player and educator. Rather than list his biography here, I suggest that you visit the following sites for more information about Larry:

- Larry's website: <http://home.comcast.net/~ljmckenna/site/?/home/>
- All About Jazz biography: <http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/musician.php?id=9272>
- All About Jazz extended interview:
<http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=27388>

These online resources give a well-rounded introduction to Larry and his music.

My Shining Hour

I recently transcribed Larry's solo on "My Shining Hour" from his CD of the same name featuring the music of Harold Arlen:

<http://www.allmusic.com/album/my-shining-hour-larry-mckenna-plays-harold-arlen-r295511>

The solo is available at my website:

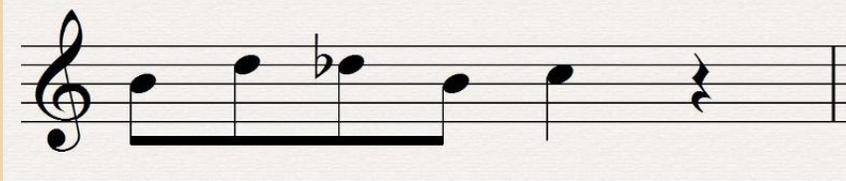
<http://scooby-sax.com/transcriptions.aspx>

In particular, I want to highlight Larry's use of approach notes in his solo and give some additional ideas of how to incorporate approach note techniques in improvisation. Instead of taking a comprehensive view of the topic of approach notes, I intend to focus on just 2 examples in Larry's solo. As we'll see, even though the discussion is restricted to only two examples, several possibilities emerge in applying the examples over different chords, either separately or in combination.

Approach Notes

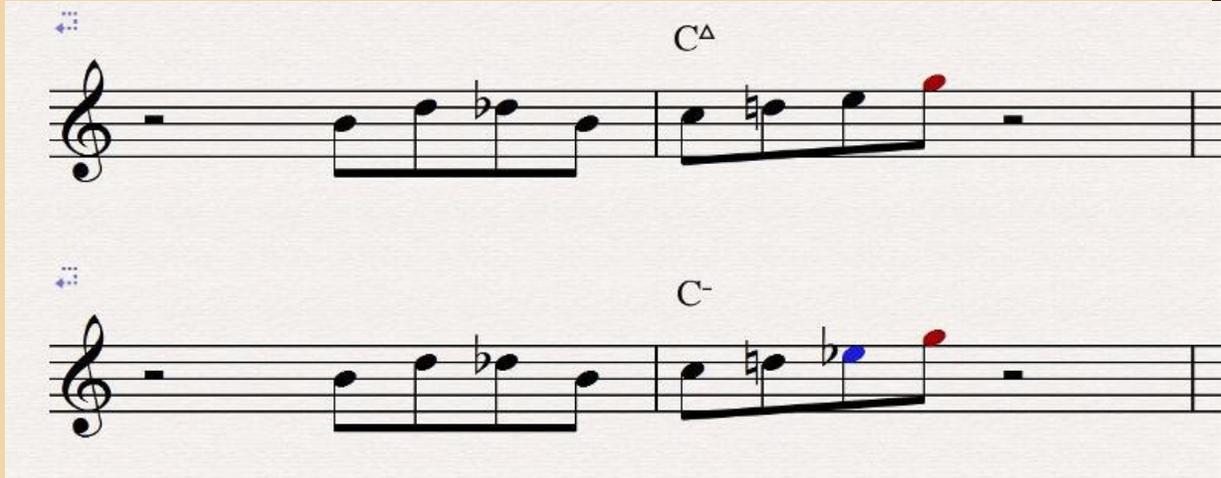
Approach Note Example #1:

The first example is an approach to a chord tone which is essentially two chromatic notes from above and one chromatic note from below (with the chromatic note from below appearing at the beginning and end of the approach sequence):



Larry makes extensive use of this particular approach pattern throughout the solo. I count at least 7 instances of it in his 4 chorus solo. What makes it so interesting though is that Larry uses it in different keys and uses it to approach different chord degrees so that it doesn't sound like the exact pattern being repeated several times. For example, it appears the first time in the break that begins the solo. Larry uses it to approach the third of the ii chord in the second measure of the break. He uses the exact same notes later in the solo, but in those instances he is using it to approach the tonic or the flat9 of a chord. He transposes the pattern in other cases to approach the fifth or the seventh of a chord. While the shape stays the same, the effect of the approach sequence sounds different as it used to target a different scale degree and different chord type.

In order to practice this approach sequence thoroughly, work to target a particular scale degree and chord type. As an example, first target the tonic of a major or minor chord. Here is an example for C major and C minor:



Two musical staves in treble clef. The top staff is labeled C^Δ and the bottom staff is labeled C⁻. Both staves show the same approach sequence: G4, A4, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4. A red notehead is on the final note, D4. In the C⁻ staff, the Bb4 note is highlighted in blue.

Next use the same notes to target the third of a minor chord:



A musical staff in treble clef labeled A⁻. It shows the approach sequence: G4, A4, Bb4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4. A red notehead is on the final note, D4.

Then use the same notes to target the fifth of a major or minor chord:

Two musical staves in treble clef. The first staff is labeled F^Δ and shows a sequence of notes: F4, G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5. The second staff is labeled F^- and shows the same sequence of notes: F4, G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, Eb5, F5. Both staves have a blue chord diagram icon in the top left corner.

Then target the seventh of a dominant or minor 7th chord:

Two musical staves in treble clef. The first staff is labeled D^7 and shows a sequence of notes: D4, E4, F4, G4, Ab4, B4, C5, D5. The second staff is labeled D^{-7} and shows the same sequence of notes: D4, E4, F4, G4, Ab4, B4, Cb5, D5. Both staves have a blue chord diagram icon in the top left corner.

Finally, target the flat9 of a dominant chord:

A single musical staff in treble clef labeled $B^7(b9)$ and E^- . It shows a sequence of notes: B3, C4, D4, Eb4, F4, G4, Ab4, B4, C5, D5, Eb5, F5. The staff has a blue chord diagram icon in the top left corner.

In this way, you are making a little go a long way. A small fragment can be applied to multiple situations and sound a little different each time. Next, practice in all keys so that you can easily target any scale degree of any chord type.

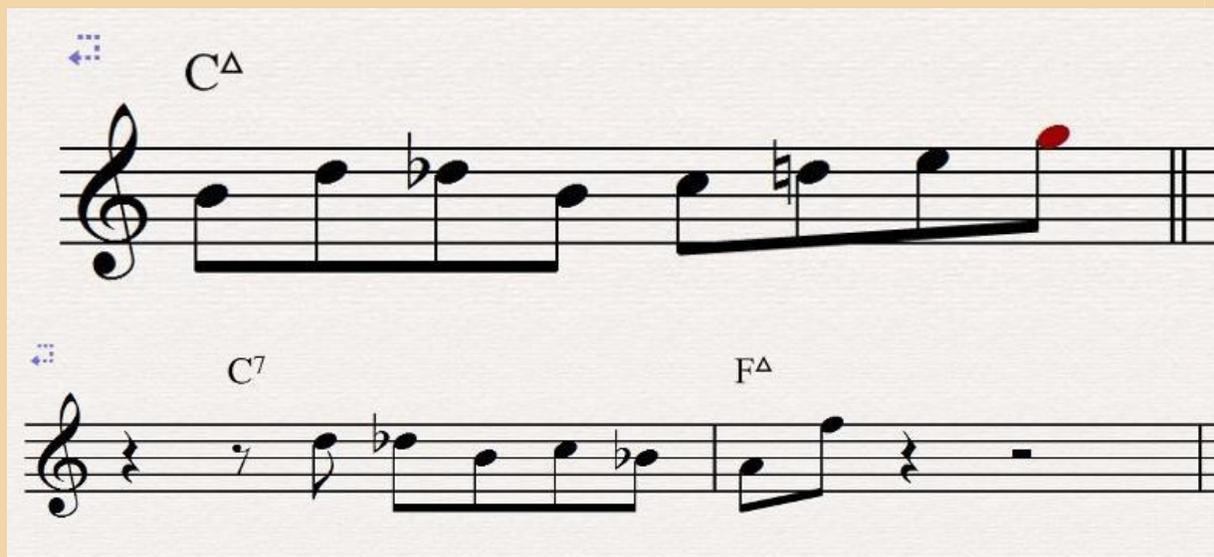
To get even more from this pattern, you can break it down into its constituent parts and practice them individually. As mentioned in the introduction to this pattern, it is essentially 1 chromatic approach from below and two from above. You can practice just the 1 note from below, the two notes from above, combine the 1 from below with 2 from above, 2 from above with one below, etc.

To give an idea of the possibilities, consider approaching the tonic of a C major chord in several ways:



Again, use these smaller approach note sequences to target different scale degrees on different types of chords.

All of the previous examples have placed the approach note sequence in anticipation of the targeted note being on beat 1. Experiment with placing the approach notes on different beats. Here are just two possibilities:



By targeting different chord tones, using different numbers of approach notes, applying the approaches to different chord types and varying the rhythmic placement, you have enough material from just this one pattern to keep you quite busy in the woodshed!

Approach Note Example #2:

The second approach note sequence can be viewed as complementary to the first sequence we examined. The first sequence was essentially one chromatic from below with 2 chromatic notes from above. This sequence is essentially 1 chromatic from above and 2 from below:



Rather than list all of the possibilities, explore some of the same ideas we applied to the first pattern. Target different scale degrees, use different chord types, use rhythmic displacement, etc. to create your own lines.

Combinations of the 2 approach sequences

Once you have learned the 2 approach sequences individually, look for ways to combine them to make a longer line. Here are just two possibilities:



Additional resources for approach notes

As mentioned before, this discussion of Larry's use of approach notes is not intended to be an exhaustive study of the topic. For those looking for more resources on the topic of approach notes, I have the following suggestions:

- Charlie Banacos

I was lucky to have studied via correspondence with the great Charlie Banacos. Charlie had a very analytical approach and always thoroughly examined all the possible permutations of an idea. His presentation of chromatic and diatonic approach notes to chord tones is the most complete that I have seen. Although Charlie unfortunately passed away in 2009, his daughter is still offering correspondence lessons using Charlie's original materials.

More information is available from this website:

<http://www.charliebanacos.com/>

- Jerry Bergonzi

This great tenor saxophonist has written a series of excellent improvisation books entitled the Inside Improvisation Series. The series currently has 7 volumes, each dedicated to a particular idea. Volume 6 is called "Developing a Jazz Language" and contains a thorough discussion of approach note techniques.

<http://www.jerrybergonzi.com/books.htm>

- Steve Neff

Saxophonist Steve Neff offers video lessons and printed books through his website:

<http://www.neffmusic.com/>

He has several videos dedicated to approach note techniques as well a book containing approach note ideas in all major and minor keys.

Updates to the website

In addition to Larry McKenna's solo on "My Shining Hour", I added the following solos to the website since the last Newsletter:

Ronnie Cuber's solo on "All of Me"

Wardell Gray's solo on "Pennies From Heaven"

Vincent Herring's solo on "Jessica's Day"

I try to add at least one new solo per month.

I hope you enjoyed this issue of the Scooby-Sax Newsletter and that you have plenty of material to practice now! Your comments and questions are always welcome. Send me an email at scooby@scooby-sax.com to let me know what you thought of this issue, suggestions for future issues, etc.

Sincerely,

Jeff Rzepiela

www.scooby-sax.com