

November 9th, 2010

## How to Put Chord Tones At Your Fingertips

By Forrest



A reader writes:

I play trumpet and improvise fairly well, but mainly play by ear. How can I learn the chord tones and use them effectively to construct my solos? For example, it takes a long time for me to name the 6th of a chord. I've tried several books to find a good method to achieve this. It seems as though there are so many things to learn! I begin something then I go to another. The result is very poor. Can you help me?

### **Slim down your focus**

Yes, I can help you because I've experienced that exact problem. Being able to conjure chord tones in a flash is essential to improvising at your peak, but let me start by saying, you're right, it does feel like there is so much to learn and it can be overwhelming to say the least! Stop buying instructional books on jazz improvisation.

Not to say there aren't wonderful books written on how to improvise. I even recommend quite a few on this site. However, I can tell you from experience, in general, the more books I accumulated, the more overwhelmed I felt, and the less I focused on the truly important aspects of learning how to improvise jazz: absorbing the music of the greats, developing my ear, and playing what I hear.

Narrow your focus and increase your depth. This is the way to learn this music.

### **Visualizing chord tones for instant recall**

The reason it is difficult to name the 6th of a chord for you is because the chord tones are not sufficiently ingrained in your mind. No worries. The process of visualization will greatly aid in putting chord tones at your fingertips. Review this article on [Visualization for jazz improvisation](#) I wrote back in April. Follow the advice in that article to get started. Remember, visualization means seeing, hearing, and feeling the notes in your mind. Then do the following exercise:

Visualize the root of every major seventh chord around the [circle of fifths](#) aka “the cycle” (shown below).



Next, visualize the 3rd of every major chord around the cycle (shown below).



After the 3rd, continue by visualizing the 5th, then 7th, then the 9th, then the #11, and finally the 13th, all over the cycle just as in the previous examples. Do this for at least a week, everyday for 20 minutes before moving on. **DO NOT BE IN A HURRY.** The more solid this first group of exercises is, the easier all your future visualization will be.

Once you’ve got the chord tones solid on major, move to dominant seventh chords. If you did the majors well, then this should be really easy, as it’s just one note different (the flatted seventh) to get to a dominant quality (shown below). And yes, I never think of things like C<sup>b</sup>, which technically over D<sup>b</sup>7 the seventh is C<sup>b</sup>. I recommend simplifying these cases as I did in this example.



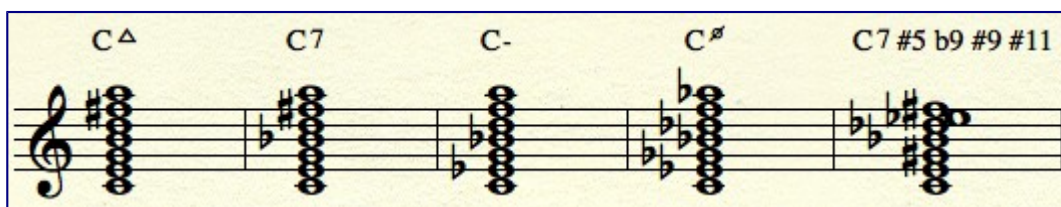
After dominant, do minor seventh chords in the same manner all the way from root to 13th.

Once you've gotten minor in your head, do half-diminished.

And then finally go through the various alterations on a dominant chord. This includes: b9, #9, #5 (same as b6 or b13th), #4 (same as b5 or #11). Take a look at this [article on alterations](#) for some more in depth advice down that alley. Here's an example of visualizing the #5 over dominant seventh chords around the cycle.



To recap, you'll be visualizing each chord tone (1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13) one at a time, from a given chord quality around the cycle. Then, proceed to the next quality. The five chord qualities are: [Major](#), [Dominant](#), [Minor](#), [Half-Diminished](#), and [Altered](#). Here's all the chord tones for those qualities in the key of C. Notice over major and dominant I raise the 11th, as it is a more consonant sound.



## Chord tones over tunes

After visualizing chord tones over the cycle, try visualizing pairs of chord tones over a tune. I like to start with a blues for pretty much anything. Start with an easy pair like root and 3rd, and

gradually progress to something more difficult like #5 and b9 as shown below.



After you've visualized through all these exercises, play through them on your instrument paying close attention to how each chord tone sounds against the harmony. Once you feel pretty comfortable playing them on a blues, apply the same thinking to a tune you are working on. First visualize single chord tones, then pairs, then play single chord tones and pairs through the tune.

### **Ingraining chord tones is a journey**

Take your time working through this stuff, as you can never know it well enough. Strive for daily perfection of small tasks. In this way, each day you will get closer to the multi-level goal: being able to instantly name any chord tone over any chord, knowing what that sound is in your mind, and knowing where the fingering to produce that sound is on your instrument.