

Beginner's Guide to Improvisation

Lesson 1

So, you've learned how to read music and have a few pieces under your belt. Perhaps now you'd like to jam with friends, get creative by yourself or just get a better grip on harmony - whatever brings you to explore improvisation, there is nothing better for a learning musician than getting stuck into harmony in an exciting way!

Functional Harmony

At the very root of understanding improvisation lies our good friend, functional harmony. Functional harmony describes how within any key, different chords serve different purposes to ferry you around a chord progression and melody.

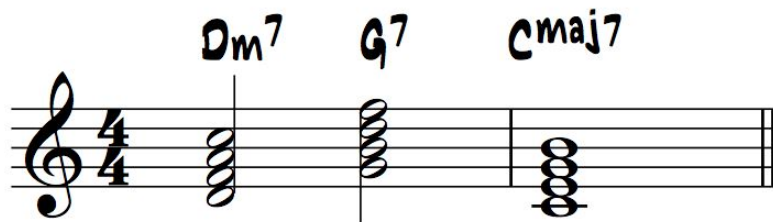
Let's think in C major. Each note can be considered as a "scale degree", either numerically or as named:

Note	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
Number	1	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	1
Name	Tonic C	Supertonic	Mediant	Subdominant	Dominant	Submediant	Subtonic	Tonic

We are going to focus on a progression called a TWO - FIVE - ONE (otherwise known as the jazz version of a perfect cadence).

In C major, a two - five - one (ii - V7 - Imaj7) is made up of:
D minor 7 (Dm7) - G dominant 7 (G7) - C major 7 (Cmaj7)

This is how you would write the chord progression, along with the chords in first inversion (played with the root note at the bottom of the chord):



There are many things to learn about the wonders of a perfect cadence, but, in essence, a dominant chord (such as G7, in this instance), always wants to RESOLVE to the note A FIFTH BELOW (C major, in this example). This chord progression is the magical key to understanding

every element of improvisation using functional harmony, so take a good look at it and get ready to get creative!