



Review of Mark Levine, *The Jazz Theory Book*

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[1] The simplicity of this book's title is at once bold and presumptuous. It is arguably the most thorough and ambitious project to date in its attempt to assemble and explain the myriad of devices that jazz musicians rely upon to adapt the principles of traditional harmony to their improvisational needs. Literally hundreds of well-chosen examples are presented in a systematic and orderly fashion, transcribed from a wide array of recordings, with convincing explanations regarding the harmonic choices made by the performers. Were this volume to have nothing else to offer, which I do not mean to suggest, the transcribed musical excerpts themselves would present an invaluable reference tool for anyone with an interest in jazz theory.

[2] Ironically, one of the most frustrating aspects of the book for me was the author's stated aim in writing it, viz., to provide a practical set of rules and guidelines for improvisers that can be abandoned when mastery has been attained. "Theory," Levine writes, "is the little intellectual dance we do around the music, attempting to come up with rules so we can understand why Charlie Parker and John Coltrane sounded the way they did" (page vii). Or, stated more poetically, "Be aware of what your eyes see and what your hands feel when you play. Do this just as much as you focus your mind on the mental stuff, and you'll get beyond theory—where you just flow with the music. Aim for that state of grace, when you no longer have to think about theory." (page vii). Clearly, theorists are not Levine's intended audience.

[3] Presumably, Levine has written this book as a reference tool for the jazz musician. The format does not directly adapt to classroom use, since no exercises are included and material is not presented in order of progressive difficulty. For example, while the first chapter includes a digestible summary of basic intervals and chords, and chapter 2 introduces some common chord progressions, chapter 3, "Chord/Scale Theory," soon plunges into murky waters. Levine quickly becomes bogged down in discussions of several esoteric chords that are bound to raise objections from experienced jazz musicians and simply lead to confusion among less experienced. The nadir of this chapter for me was a four-page discussion of the $\text{sub}^{\flat}9$ chord, derived from the Phrygian mode. While Levine admits that the chord is a "relatively new sound in jazz harmony" (page 49), such an extended discussion of this chord so early in the book is misleading and perplexing. To put this in perspective, Chapter 10, "The Blues," does not occur until page 219, and basic song form is reserved for chapter 17, beginning on page 383. Attempting to use this book as a text for any level of study would require careful selection and shuffling of material.

[4] Levine has taken great pains to keep all discussions and examples solidly within the jazz realm. Generally, he steers clear of popular and Broadway influences, despite their strong historical ties with the music. Thus, in chapter 1, when choosing representative melodies to correspond with common intervals, Levine selects Thelonious Monk's "Blue Monk" to represent the ascending half-step, and Cedar Walton's "Bolivia" to represent the descending half-step. Surely there are a host of standard tunes (Rogers and Hart's "My Romance" and Victor Young's "Stella by Starlight" come to mind) that are more

memorable and better known both in and out of the jazz world. But Levine takes the title of his book seriously, and however much the materials of jazz may resemble or derive from popular, theater, or classical music, those connections do not concern him.⁽¹⁾

[5] Levine does not waver from his attempt to present a well-documented compendium of procedures and devices that constitute the essence of jazz theory. Unfortunately, what is egregiously lacking is theoretical discussion. There can be no doubt that Levine's primary interest is how to apply the concepts described in improvisational contexts. For this reason, alternative interpretations or explanations of musical phenomena do not interest him.

[6] The most glaring example of this bias concerns a fundamental concept that permeates Levine's entire book—that of chord and scale equivalency. This view, in essence, assumes that any chord symbol used in jazz implies a full complement of upper extensions (7th, 9th, 11th, and 13th), and accordingly can be reinterpreted as some type of (usually) seven-note scale. For example, the chord symbol Dm7, according to this approach, would imply a possible 9th, 11th, and 13th, and would therefore be seen as equivalent to the Dorian mode. It is an indisputable fact that many jazz musicians share this view, and the expediency and usefulness of this approach is not to be denied.⁽²⁾ But in establishing chord and scale relationships Levine seems to lose sight of the fact that triadic progression is still the underlying harmonic force driving most of the musical examples presented in this book. A statement of such direct simplicity as “the scale and the chord are two forms of the same thing” (page 33) is an exaggeration and grossly misleading. A Cmaj7(9,♯11,13) serving as a tonic chord in the key of C and the same chord serving as the subdominant in the key of G share the same notes, and may both be thought of as verticalizations of the Lydian mode, but they serve two entirely different functions in the diatonic context, and are likely to be treated as such by the improviser. Among other things, one contains the fourth degree of the key, and the other does not. Perhaps Levine has stated the true relationship of scale to mode more accurately when he writes, “The reason jazz musicians think of scales, or modes, when they improvise, is because it's easier than thinking in terms of chords” (page 32). But it may be necessary to think in terms of chords when diatonic function is a significant component of the harmonic motion.

[7] In attempting to build a theory of chord/scale relationships from a modal point of view instead of traditional diatonic function, Levine gets into difficulties immediately. He begins with a “Major Scale Harmony” chart, but does not list chords according to diatonic function. Instead, Levine presents a list of the seven modes associated with the diatonic scale and attempts to assign an appropriate chord to each.⁽³⁾ Placing himself in the untenable position of having to pull all seven notes of each mode into a verticalization, Levin is in trouble on the first chord, since the C chord (the unacknowledged tonic) has an F in it. Levine observes: “There is a note in the scale that is much more dissonant than the other six notes. . . This is a so-called ‘avoid’ note. . . ‘Avoid note’ is not a very good term, because it implies that you shouldn't play the note at all. A better name would be a ‘handle with care’ note” (page 37). Levine goes on to explain that improvisers generally treat the note as a passing tone, but nowhere does he mention the note's tendency to resolve to the third. Nor is there any suggestion that the seven notes of the mode (the “available pool of notes” [page 32]) should be considered in any hierarchical order. Indeed, the very term “avoid note” suggests an embellishing tone, but there is no mention of what is being embellished. Presumably, the members of the tonic triad have no particular importance beyond that of the other notes in the Ionian mode.⁽⁴⁾

[8] The Dorian mode, associated with ii⁷, provides perhaps the most satisfactory chord/scale equivalency among the diatonic chords. Since the chord functions as a predominant, the inclusion of the fourth and seventh of the key, along with the tonic note, does not pose any difficulties when the full complement of notes in the Dorian mode are sounded. Likewise, an egalitarian approach to the seven notes is not problematic, since the chord's predominant function does not call for any strong implications of tension or resolution.

[9] The Mixolydian mode again poses the obstacle of an “avoid note,” the fourth. Here Levine does mention the note's tendency to resolve downward to the third of the chord. What he does not mention is that the fourth is the tonic, and that its absence (and resulting expectation) is fundamental to the tendency toward resolution created by dominant function. Levine's only concern regarding this note is its dissonance, as if dissonance were some generic quality divorced from voice leading: “Don't forget that the context will decide whether or not you play C on a G7 chord. You might specifically want to play something dissonant, or you might want to play the 11th and then resolve it down a half step to the 3rd. . . Remember not to think of dissonance as ‘bad.’ Dissonance is not a pejorative term; it's a musical device you can use when appropriate” (page 41). This may be true, but it does not explain why the note is found in a scale that is purportedly equivalent to the dominant chord. A more reasonable view would hold that the Mixolydian mode does indeed form a loose fit with the dominant chord, with the exception of the fourth note, which is not at all congruent with the upper structures associated with that chord.⁽⁵⁾

[10] A similar problem arises in a discussion of “sus” chords. Initially an abbreviation for suspension, a sus chord is generally

a dominant chord in which one hears the fourth (tonic) in place of the expected third. While the resemblance to the cadential F_4 triad is apparent, sus chords are seldom prepared or resolved as suspensions. On the contrary, the chord often occurs in contexts of minimal harmonic motion, where the chord is liable to remain for eight or more measures, and likely to move to another sus chord.

[11] The problem that now arises—if the Mixolydian mode is considered equivalent to the Vsus chord—is that the mode contains an unwanted third. Levine circumvents this difficulty by arguing that the third is not an undesirable note in sus chords: “A persistent myth is that ‘the 4th takes the place of the 3rd in a sus chord.’ This was true at one time, but in the 1960s, a growing acceptance of dissonance led pianists and guitarists to play sus voicings with both the 3rd and the 4th” (page 46). Undeniably, jazz musicians have explored this possibility. The question is how to interpret the resulting chord. If a sus chord is to retain anything of its presumed historical origin, then the absence of the leading tone would seem to be requisite. If jazz theory, in practice, has dispensed with the preparation and resolution of this suspension, what must remain is at least the displacement of the third of the chord. If the third is present, and we indeed have a dominant triad with upper extensions, then it is not clear what justifies pulling the 11th of the chord into the basic structure and calling it a sus chord. If one were to argue that the voicings generally employed in contexts where both the third and fourth are present seem to suggest the sus chord, then it will have to be attributed to intended ambiguity, much as a twentieth-century composer might flirt with the ambiguity between major and minor tonality. There is little to justify the conclusion that sus chords implicitly contain the third, which is available anytime one wishes to include it in the harmonic structure. Again, Levine is avoiding the obvious: The Mixolydian mode is indeed roughly equivalent with a Vsus chord, with the exception of the third, which is completely foreign to the harmony.⁽⁶⁾

[12] The dissonant structures of jazz harmony are bound to invite comment and discussion, and occasionally Levine is drawn into speculations that are poorly reasoned and naive. Conjecturing on a possible voicing of a sus 4 chord that would include both a major third and perfect fourth (perhaps better labeled a dominant chord with an eleventh), Levine observes that the result would be extremely dissonant due to the resulting minor ninth between these notes, failing to comment at all on the fact that the chord also contains both the leading tone and the tonic: “What makes this chord so dissonant is the interval between B and C—a minor 9th—the last dissonant interval.” Levine then makes an unfortunate generalization about the nature of dissonance: “The entire history of Western music can be characterized as the gradual acceptance of dissonant intervals. . . . The minor 9th still sounds pretty dissonant to most ears, but is slowly evolving into a ‘consonant’ interval” (page 47). Even if it were possible to rank intervals according to consonance or dissonance independent of music context (and I do not believe that it is), there still exists a contradiction in Levine’s assertion. The acceptance of dissonance and the propensity to hear what was once considered dissonant as consonant are two different things. If there has been a gradual acceptance of dissonant intervals, then it is because there is an increasing desire for dissonance. If dissonant intervals are slowly evolving into consonant ones, then there cannot be a concomitant gradual acceptance of dissonance. It must be one or the other, not both.

[13] As stated earlier, Levine’s insistence on associating a chord with each of the seven modes so that all of the chord’s upper extensions coincide with the notes in the mode results in some rare and unusual chords. Levine is probably correct in asserting that the Phrygian mode is usually played over sus \flat_9 chords, but beyond that, it is not clear what is to be gained from exploring the relationship. His dozen musical examples make a convincing case for the chord’s existence in the recorded literature, but Levine offers no explanation of the chord’s origins, function, or treatment. He does observe, however, that the notes usually played on the sus \flat_9 chord are the root, \flat_9 , 4th, 5th, and 7th. If this is the case, and the potential minor 3rd and \flat_{13} suggested by the Phrygian are not used as part of the vertical harmony, then where is the alleged equivalence?

[14] Levine’s discussion of the Aeolian mode hints at some admission of the futility in attempting a mode-oriented approach to jazz harmony: “Aeolian chords are rarely specifically called for, and there is some confusion over exactly what constitutes an Aeolian chord and when to play an Aeolian scale” (page 52). He offers a minor \flat_6 chord as the appropriate place for this mode. Not only is this chord rare, it may be nonexistent. The reason is that it is unnecessary, since the notes are better viewed (and explained functionally) as a first-inversion major seventh chord built on the root a major third lower.

[15] Levine offers two examples of this chord, both unconvincing. The first is from Kenny Barron’s “Sunshower,” where an A minor chord in the first measure sees the addition of both an F and a D in the second. This is labeled A- \flat_6 , with no reference to the D. Levine then admits, “Kenny’s tune also sounds like a I-IV progression in a minor key, so it could alternately be notated A-, D-/A” (page 53). This, indeed, seems the only logical way to view the progression. Levine’s second

example, from Fats Waller's "Ain't Misbehavin'," shows the first three measures of the bridge (in the key of C minor) as one measure apiece of C-, C- \flat 6, and C-6. The chord commonly played in the second measure is A \flat , resulting in a i, VI⁶, i progression in C minor. There hardly seems justifiable reason to introduce an extremely rare vertical structure into the progression when a simple inversion of a diatonic chord will neatly provide the necessary notes.

[16] With the Locrian mode, Levine again finds himself at a loss in providing an appropriate chord. He selects the half-diminished seventh (generally referred to as the minor seventh [\flat 5] by jazz musicians), with the caveat that the resulting \flat 9 is an avoid note. But unlike other modes with avoid notes, this avoid note is the wrong note. Jazz musicians frequently play the 9th on a half-diminished chord, but it is the natural 9th. The scale should contain a major second between the first two notes if it is to provide the notes associated with the half-diminished chord. Levine discusses such a scale (a melodic minor starting on the sixth degree) later on in the book, indicating that over time it has become the scale of choice for a half-diminished chord. But his assertion that "almost all of the early bebop musicians played the Locrian mode on half-diminished chords" (page 69) is misleading. There was no chord/scale theory in the 1940s. The notes chosen by early bebop musicians on this chord may indeed have looked like a Locrian mode (probably because habitual fingering patterns tended to follow the major scale), but surely no one thought of the Locrian scale as equivalent to the half-diminished chord. Voice leading would have rendered the flatted second degree a mere nonharmonic tone.

[17] There is nothing wrong with a scale/chord equivalency theory if it is viewed as an expedient to jazz improvisation. Levine's discussions are useful, practical, and substantiated by copious musical examples. My objection concerns the attempt to use scales or modes as precise substitutes for chords, which often results in altering the chord to fit the mode. Moreover, the implication is that the modes or scales that can be derived from the basic "parent" scales—major, melodic minor, diminished (octatonic), and whole tone—somehow form the basis of a system of harmony. There is very little discussion of functional harmony in this book. Instead, there is an implication that a stable, underlying array of scales lies behind all chordal harmony, as if the scales themselves preceded the chords. When Levine states, for example, "The C7alt chord is derived from the seventh mode of the D \flat melodic minor scale," (page 70), the suggestion is that the scale was in existence before the chord. In fact, jazz musicians were playing C7alt chords (with various names) long before anyone attempted to assemble all of the chord tones in linear form. Nor would analysis of early improvisations on C7alt chords reveal any prototype or early instances of the chord's equivalence to the seventh mode of the melodic minor scale, since early (and later, for that matter) improvisers chose freely from the twelve notes in the chromatic scale and succeeded in achieving the desired chord sound through voice leading.

[18] A chord and scale can be considered equivalent only if all the notes in the scale are played as a vertical structure. This is seldom the case. Piano players rarely include all of the possible extensions in the harmony. The chord symbol C7alt suggests the possible extensions of \flat 9, \sharp 9, \sharp 11, and \flat 13, but it would be unusual to include all of these notes in the same voicing. The real meaning of the symbol is that the piano player should choose from this selection of notes. Likewise, an improviser would probably not wish to include all possible extensions as chord members in a linear passage. Constructing a line based on the altered scale in which all notes are on equal footing (that is, structural to the passage), is a remote possibility, but not a common approach to an altered chord. More likely, at least in straight-ahead or bebop improvisation, notes will be emphasized in hierarchical fashion, with the third and seventh and one or two upper extensions serving as structural tones. Even in more dissonant styles involving improvisations that go "outside" the chord, an egalitarian treatment to all possible upper structures is an unlikely approach.

[19] There is no question that Levine's assertions, when taken as practical advice for the performing musician, are solid and well-supported. What is disturbing is his disregard for theoretical concerns, even when those concerns are patent and demand comment or explanation. In a discussion of minor keys, Levine asserts, "the three chords in a [C] minor II-V-I are derived from three different melodic minor scales. . . The notes played over the D half-diminished chord are from the F melodic minor [starting on the sixth degree], the notes played over the G7alt chord are from A \flat melodic minor [starting on the seventh degree], and the notes played over the C-maj chord are from C melodic minor" (pages 75–76). Basically, this is sound advice to the improviser, if a little complex, but more discussion is warranted. Lamenting the difficulty in navigating these chords, Levine suggests "Wouldn't it be great if there were a scale that worked over D half-diminished, G7alt, C-maj, a minor II-V-I? It would be but there isn't one. The harmonic minor scale is often mentioned in theory books as being 'a scale played over a minor II-V-I.' If that were true, you'd hear the great players playing it a lot, but they don't" (page 76). Later in the book, Levine takes up the argument again: "One reason the harmonic minor scale is seldom played in its entirety is that it fits no one particular chord. No matter what chord you play it on, at least one note, if held against the chord, sounds like an 'avoid' note" (page 477). This is bound to occur in a theory that neglects voice leading. Levine has failed to see the

obvious—the harmonic minor scale is the scale of the key to which all three chords belong. Because some of the notes in the scale are tendency tones, they can only work within the context of dominant or predominant harmony. Similarly, the notes that suggest resolution, particularly the tonic, are unlikely structural tones for a passage improvised on the dominant chord. Levine’s observation that jazz musicians “play fragments of [the harmonic minor scale] but very rarely the entire scale [on the II-V-I progression]” (page 476) is not at all surprising. Why should we expect improvisers to include the tonic on the V chord or the leading tone on the ii?

[20] Levine’s understanding of jazz theory appears to be tantamount to a method of jazz improvisation, and that method is formulaic and procedural. Rules are distilled from the study of a vast number of jazz improvisations, chosen from the most respected musicians in the field. But analyses are superficial and do little to elucidate the harmonic activity found in the passages presented. The recurring statement that a particular chord “derives from” a particular scale suggests that improvisers are bound or restricted to that connection. It is ironic that the more harmonically dissonant and innovative jazz styles that are the emphasis of this book should be founded on more restrictive principles than the styles that preceded them. Certainly, Charlie Parker or Lester Young did not consider themselves limited to the scale built on the sixth degree of F melodic minor when playing on a D half-diminished chord.

[21] There is very little mention of function in this book and roman numeral symbols are seldom included. This is unfortunate, since it is undeniable that the prevailing key and a chord’s function in that key strongly influence an improviser’s choices. In one of the few instances in which a song is provided with a complete harmonic analysis, that analysis is so unorthodox that it confuses rather than clarifies understanding. In a discussion of the ii-V-I progression, Levine posits the chords to John Klenner’s “Just Friends” with an analysis that labels each chord as either a ii⁷, a V⁷ or a I. Levine presents the chords in the original key of G major, but fails to include a key signature, and proceeds as if the key were C major. The first four chords, two measures of C, one measure apiece of C^{m7} and F⁷, and two measures of G, are analyzed as I in C major, ii⁷ in B^b, V⁷ in B^b, and I in G major. This inexplicable analysis requires three keys to explain what is obviously a commonplace chord sequence in the key of G major. The analysis that most readily presents itself is a IV followed by iv⁷ (borrowed from the parallel minor), the insertion of the related V⁷ of the C^{m7} as a chord substitution (nonstructural), leading to I. In all, Levine’s analysis of the entire song shows modulations to seven different keys. While there are several instances of secondary function and tonicization in this tune, I am not convinced that it modulates at all. Surely a more concise analysis is possible than the one suggested by Levine.⁽⁷⁾

[22] But analysis is not the focus of this book. The real value of Levine’s study derives from his solid understanding of modal improvisation and his vast knowledge of the recorded jazz literature. Musical examples cover a wide range of jazz history and styles, but rely heavily on a short list of the author’s favorites, which includes Joe Henderson, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Freddie Hubbard, and Mulgrew Miller. Bebop musicians, such as Charlie Parker, Dexter Gordon, Clifford Brown, and Barry Harris, receive little or no mention in this volume. When earlier or traditional jazz musicians are referred to, it is merely for the purpose of pointing out early instances or suggestions of the more advanced harmonic procedures that constitute the focus of this work. Levine never attempts to understand a solo or passage on its own terms, independent of stylistic norms and accepted harmonic practice.

[23] The issues touched upon in this review only hint at the vast amount of material in this book. Particularly insightful are the chapters on reharmonization, which contain myriad suggestions for chord substitution, tapping the vast repository of knowledge that Levine has acquired in his career as a jazz pianist. Interlaced throughout the book, Levine gives practical advice on practicing and developing improvisational skills, while evident throughout is his genuine love for the music and his vast listening and performing experience. If one’s interest in jazz theory leans toward procedures and methods, this book fits the bill perfectly. Although those with an interest in theoretical explanations will not find their wishes gratified by this volume, they will nevertheless find in it an invaluable cache of information regarding some of the most significant harmonic procedures of jazz theory.

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Footnotes

1. Because the standard American song repertory plays such a significant role in recorded jazz history, many of Levine's examples are, by necessity, representative of that genre. But discussions of harmonic interpretation focus on either selected recorded versions or recommended chordal accompaniments. Little mention is made of original versions of songs.

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2. Among the most thorough approaches to chord/scale theory are David Baker, *Jazz Improvisation: A Comprehensive Study for All Players* (Chicago: Maher, 1969; rev. ed. Van Nuys, Cal.: Alfred Publications, 1988); Yusef Lateef, *Repository of Scales and Melodic Patterns* (Amherst, Mass.: Fana Music, 1981); Dan Haerle *Scales for Jazz Improvisation* (Miami, Fla.: Columbia Pictures Publications, 1975); Jerry Coker *Complete Method for Jazz Improvisation* (Miami, Fla.: Columbia Pictures Publications, 1980); and George Russell *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization for Improvisation for all Instruments* (New York: Concept Publishing, 1971). A concise and accurate reference tool for scale and chord relationships in jazz can be found in Jamey Aebersold *Jazz Aids Handbook* (New Albany, Ind.: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 1982.)

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3. A less severe approach would be to assign each successive diatonic function to the corresponding mode, such as can be found in Dan Haerle *The Jazz Language* (Miami, Fla.: Warner Brothers Publications 1980), with the understanding that every note in the mode will not necessarily belong to the associated chord. Haerle observes: "To use the modes effectively in composition or improvisation, it is essential to understand which tones (if any) are dissonant and need to resolve" (page 11).

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4. In *Jazz Aids Handbook*, Aebersold suggests ten scales that might be played over a major chord, including such unlikely choices as the diminished (octatonic) scale and the sixth mode of the harmonic minor (Aebersold, page 9). In this approach, the recommended scales are obviously not suggested as exact horizontal representations of a major triad with upper extensions, but as linear constructions that contain nonharmonic tones in addition to chord tones.

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5. For a discussion of how jazz musicians employ melodic chromaticism to render modes more suitable to the implied chord see David Baker *How to Play Bebop* (Van Nuys, Cal.: Alfred Publications, 1987).

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6. This construction is discussed in Richard Sorce *Music Theory for the Music Professional* (New York: Ardsley House, 1995) pages 387–88. Not only does Sorce argue convincingly that the sus4 symbol must imply the exclusion of the 3rd—he insists that a full dominant 11th chord cannot exist, since there would be a conflict in function between the 3rd and the 4th. In other words, a chord cannot contain both a leading tone and the resolution of that leading tone. "Since it is not possible to eliminate the 11th in an 11th chord, the factor to be omitted in the major-minor 7th, perfect 11th (V^{11}) is the 3rd" (page 387). If Sorce is correct, which I believe he is, the only alternatives when analyzing a vertical structure that contains both of these notes are to either interpret one of them as a nonharmonic tone, or view the structure as polytonal.

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7. This song, with its most commonly played jazz chords, can be found in *The New Real Book, Volume 3* (Petaluma, Cal.: Sher Music, 1995), page 194.

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