

Visualization For Jazz Improvisation

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Welcome to Visualization

The practice of visualization is used by people in all types of professions. Athletes visualize themselves performing at their peak before game time, politicians visualize themselves giving great speeches, and surgeons mentally rehearse every aspect of a procedure before operating on a patient.

When you are visualizing, your mind doesn't know that your body is not actually engaging in the real activity. By working directly with your mind, as opposed to first working with your body and then your mind, you are going straight to the source of creativity; in other words, it's much more efficient for the mind to be teaching the body, rather than the body teaching the mind.

As musicians, we can harness the power of visualization to speed up our progress and improve at a faster rate than ever before.

The best part about visualization: you can do it anywhere. No horn, no gadgets. Just you.

Visualization and Music

Ok. So you're soloing over a familiar tune and everything is going great. You're feeling good and then all of a sudden, you hesitate for a moment. You think to yourself, "What chord am I on?" By the time you figure it out, the chord is long gone. When you have to stop and think like that even for a second, your flow is broken.

These lapses of time in mental thought create roadblocks in our creativity. These time lapses could be the time that it takes to know the chord you're on, the right notes to play, or where you are in a tune. They could be seconds long or they could be milliseconds. The point is: wherever these roadblocks are, you will fumble.

Practicing visualization reduces the time it takes to recall elements of a tune or progression. In time, these mental roadblocks will disappear. Then, when you go to the practice room or the bandstand, you'll be armed with the knowledge and confidence needed to play at your best with no hesitation.

Basics of visualization

The dictionary defines visualization as the formation of mental images. In terms of visualizing music, this means three things:

1. Hearing - you hear what you're visualizing in your mind
2. Feeling - you feel as though you're actually playing what you're visualizing in your fingers
3. Seeing - you see in your mind the chord symbols/notes on a staff that relate to what you're visualizing

Anytime you visualize music, you will be engaged in all of these three steps simultaneously. You'll be hearing something in your mind, while you feel it in your fingers, and see it in your mind.

Chapter 1

Visualizing Chord Symbols and Chord Tones

It may take a few days to get comfortable visualizing, but after the initial phase, it will be very easy. To start out, you want to learn how to visualize chord symbols and chord tones. These two skills will provide a solid foundation to access more advanced visualization techniques, such as visualizing language, which will be covered extensively in a later chapter.

To begin visualizing chord symbols and chord tones, use this process:

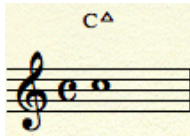
1. Sit somewhere comfortable where you will not be disturbed. Later you will be able to do this anywhere, but right now use all the help you can get.
2. In your mind's eye, see the chord symbol for C Major. Try to keep things as simple as possible, so even for C major seven, just visualize the image below.



3. Congratulations you just visualized! Easy right? Ok enough, celebration we've only just begun. Now see a music staff below the chord symbol



4. Once you can clearly visualize the chord symbol with the staff, add the root of the chord to the picture.



5. Now you are going to add an aural sense to the equation. Hear how you think that root sounds on that C Major chord. Try hearing a piano in your mind playing that pitch. Don't worry about the absolute pitch.
6. Next add a tactile sense. Feel exactly how it would feel to play that note on your instrument. If you play saxophone for instance, at this point you will be seeing the image of the C Major chord symbol above a staff with the note 'C' on it, while you are hearing the note ring in your head, and feeling how it would be like to push the key down with your left middle finger.

If you managed to follow those steps and successfully visualize the chord symbol, the staff, and the root of the chord, you're well on your way to being able to visualize anything.

Chapter 2

Visualizing Progressions

If I asked you to name a iii VI ii V in the key of F#, how quickly could you conjure up the answer? If it takes you more than a millisecond to think through that progression, chances are you're going to have a hell of a time playing over it. Common progressions like iii VI ii Vs must be so ingrained into your brain, that you don't have to put in any thought-effort to recall them. You just know them.

Visualizing these progressions daily will greatly improve your recall of common chord progressions, making it easier to think and play in all keys.

For the following exercises, visualize just the chord symbols. Keep the chord symbol as simple as possible, for instance, do not visualize the "7" in a minor seventh chord or any alterations on dominants. This will help you "see" more quickly in all keys without cluttering the progression in your mind's eye.

The goal is to clearly see in your mind's eye a concise picture of the chord symbols for each progression in all keys. Now, do you see these when you actually improvise? Maybe yes, maybe no. The point is to so thoroughly absorb the progressions into your mind that you know them subconsciously without thinking of them.

You may "see" them in your mind when you recall them during performance, and you may not, but the important thing is that they are simply *there* when you need them. It's a bit difficult to describe what this actually means, but as you work more and more on the exercises

throughout this book, you'll get a feel for it.

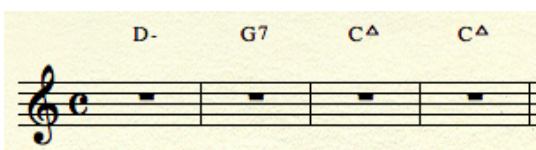
Aim to hear the progressions in your mind as well. Perhaps sit at the piano and play through them to get an idea of what they sound like and try to reproduce those sounds in your mind when visualizing them.

Overtime, practice “seeing” more than one chord at a time. After visualizing one measure, work on seeing two measures in your mind at the same time, then three, then four. Gradually, you'll start to be able to see larger chunks of chords and it will greatly help you know the fundamentals of where chords go.

So now that you know what to do with them, here are 14 progressions to get you going:

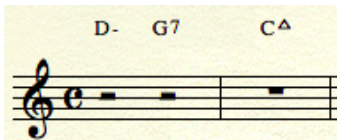
1.) ii V I I

Start with a simple two-five progression, resolving to the tonic for two measures. Visualize the key of C, then move down in half steps until you've visualized the chord symbols in all the keys.



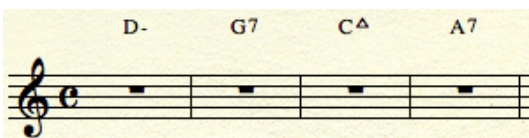
2.) ii V I

Now visualize a one-measure two-five resolving to the tonic for a bar. It should be easy after exercise #1. Continue through all the keys.



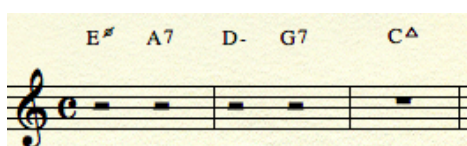
3.) ii V I VI

This exercise is the same as #1, however, now you'll visualize the VI dominant chord symbol in measure 4, returning to the ii chord in measure 1. Repeat each key a few times until you're comfortable with the VI chord moving back to the ii chord. Then move down in half steps until you've gone through all twelve keys.



4.) iii VI ii V I

Visualize a three-six-two-five resolving to it's tonic, for each key.



5.) ii Vs down in whole steps

Visualize the chord symbols of two-fives moving down in whole steps. This is similar to the three-six-two-fives, except instead of resolving, it just keeps going. Start on E- A7, descend in whole steps until you reach E- A7 again, at which point you've done six of the keys. Repeat these six a few times, then move up a half step to F- Bb7 and descend in whole steps until you come back to F- Bb7 to do the other six keys.

E- A7 D- G7 C- F7 B^b- E^b7 A^b- D^b7 F#- B7

F- B^b7 E^b- A^b7 C#- F#7 B- E7 A- D7 G- C7

6.) ii Vs down in Half-Steps

Not only do you want to be super familiar with ii Vs moving down in whole-steps, but half-steps as well.

A- D7 A^b- D^b7 G- C7 F#- B7

5 F- B^b7 E^b- A^b7 D- G7

9 C#- F#7 C- F7 B- E7 B^b- E^b7

7.) Cycle of Dominants

Start on G7 and work your way around the cycle until you arrive back at G7.

The image shows three staves of musical notation in treble clef, each with a common time signature 'C'. The notes on the staves are represented by horizontal lines, indicating the pitch of the chords. Above each staff, the corresponding dominant seventh chord symbols are listed:

- Staff 1: G7, C7, F7, B \flat 7
- Staff 2 (starting at measure 5): E \flat 7, A \flat 7, D \flat 7, F \sharp 7
- Staff 3 (starting at measure 9): B7, E7, A7, D7

8.) Cycle of Dominants, two beats a piece

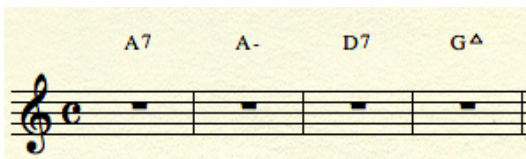
Start on G7 and visualize the chord symbols around the cycle until you come back to G7, but this time each chord lasts two beats instead of four.

The image shows a single staff of musical notation in treble clef, with a common time signature 'C'. The notes on the staff are represented by horizontal lines. Above the staff, the dominant seventh chord symbols are listed for each measure:

G7 C7 F7 B \flat 7 E \flat 7 A \flat 7 D \flat 7 F \sharp 7 B7 E7 A7 D7

9.) ii Dominant 7th, ii V I

You see this progression a lot. The ii Dominant chord changing to a minor ii chord, which begins a ii V, resolving to I. Often the ii7 chord is preceded by it's ii minor chord as well (E- going to A7 for the example below).



10.) Modulation down in whole-steps

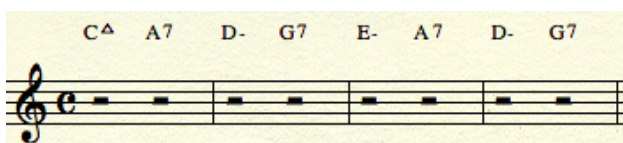
This is similar to ii Vs moving down in whole-steps, but here we resolve to each tonic before proceeding to the next ii V. It happens in countless tunes. Go through the example below and then do the other six keys by starting up a half-step.

Three systems of musical notation, each with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). Each system contains six measures with whole rests. Above the rests are the following chord labels:

- System 1: AΔ, A-, D7, GΔ, G-, C7
- System 2 (labeled '5'): FΔ, F-, B♭7, E♭Δ, E♭, A♭7
- System 3 (labeled '9'): D♭Δ, C♯, F♯7, BΔ, B-, E7

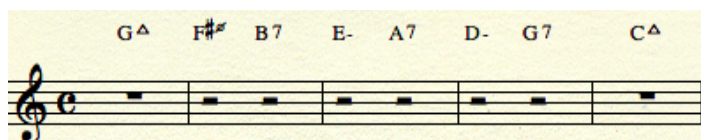
11.) First 4 bars of Rhythm Changes

Because you've visualized two-fives and three-six-two-fives, the first 4 measures to rhythm changes (The chord changes to George Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm*) should be cake. Start in C, then take the progression through all keys.



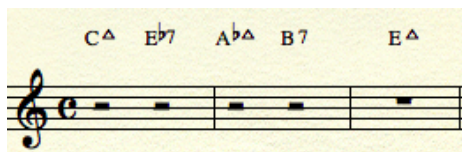
12.) Bird Blues Progression

The first 4 measures to a Bird Blues, resolving to the IV chord in measure 5, is very common. It pops up in Confirmation, Blues for Alice, and tons of other tunes. Start in G, then take it through all the keys.



13.) *Giant Steps* Progression

Everyone seems to think *Giant Steps* is so difficult, when in reality, this progression makes up the bulk of the tune. Visualize the example shown below and then go through the other 3 keys (Starting on Db, D, and Eb).



14.) First 8 bars of *All The Things You Are*

Chunks of tunes you're working on make great visualization exercises. Take a piece of a tune and visualize the chord symbols in all keys. You'll find yourself understanding the chunk of the tune much better than you did before. Here I've illustrated the first 8 measures of "All The Things You Are" for you to take through the keys.

Two musical staves in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The first staff has four measures with chord symbols: F-, B^b, E^b7, and A^bΔ. The second staff has four measures with chord symbols: D^bΔ, G7, C^Δ, and C^Δ. Each measure contains a whole rest.

Chapter 3

Visualizing Chord Tones Over Progressions

If it is difficult for you to name the 6th of a chord in a split second, it is because the various chord tones are not sufficiently ingrained in your mind. Not to worry. The process of visualization will greatly aid in putting chord tones at your fingertips.

Remember, visualization means hearing, feeling, and seeing the notes in your mind.

- See the specific chord tone on the staff under a chord symbol
- Hear what that note sounds like
- Feel, in your mind, your fingers pressing the keys for the chord tone

Chord Tone Exercise #1

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

The image displays three staves of musical notation, each containing four measures. Each measure shows a single note on a staff, representing the root of a major seventh chord. The chords are labeled above each note:

- Staff 1: C^Δ, F^Δ, B^{bΔ}, E^{bΔ}
- Staff 2: A^{bΔ}, D^{bΔ}, F^{#Δ}, B^Δ
- Staff 3: E^Δ, A^Δ, D^Δ, G^Δ

Chord Tone Exercise #2

Visualize the 3rd of every major chord around the cycle (shown below).



More Chord Tone Exercises

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_b, which technically over D_b7 the seventh is C_b. I recommend simplifying these cases as I did in the following 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).

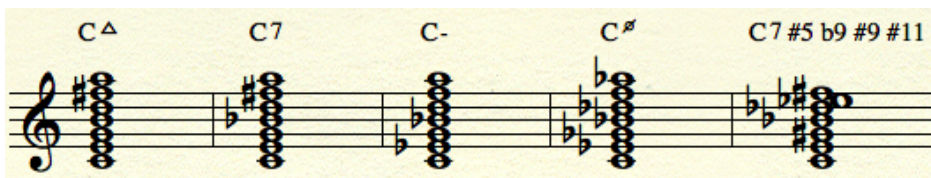
Here's an example of visualizing the #5 over dominant seventh chords around the cycle.



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 to run through are:

- Major
- Dominant
- Minor
- Half-Diminished
- Altered Dominant

Here's all the chord tones for those qualities in the key of C. Notice over major and dominant I raise the 11th (#11), as it is a more consonant sound.



Chapter 4

Visualizing Language Over Progressions

Once you spend ample time visualizing chord progressions and chord tones, you're ready to start to visualizing language. This doesn't mean you stop visualizing progressions and chord tones, it simply means you can add visualizing language to your queue. It's actually quite easy and fun.

We talk a lot about ingraining language. A piece of jazz language is a melodic idea that you transcribed from the jazz tradition, hopefully from one of your own personal heroes. It's vital to have an array of ideas at your fingertips for any given harmonic situation. And these ideas should be so ingrained that you can easily make them your own with little effort.

If you truly "own" a piece of language, you can add to it, contract it, combine it with other pieces of language, alter it harmonically, modify it rhythmically, and do a whole lot more things with it, in the moment. But that's only if you truly own it. Visualization can speed up the process of ingraining language to the point where all of this is possible for you.

Learning to visualize an entire line is similar in process to visualizing one note.

Essentially, you want to feel as though you're playing the line on your instrument. You want to hear the notes in your mind and feel how it would feel to have your fingers press the keys. The main difference is: you don't necessarily need to see the notes written out on a staff in your mind because when you get to visualizing language instead of single notes, the material is much more difficult to notate accurately.

If it helps you to see the notes in your mind on the staff, feel free to use it to your benefit. However, the primary concerns when visualizing language are:

- To hear the sound of the line in your head
- To feel the physical sensation of playing in your the line in your mind

It may help you to see the chord symbol in your mind as well. Whether you see these things when you truly improvise doesn't matter. You need to know intuitively that a piece of language just “works” in a certain spot because you can hear it in context. When you get to this level, you achieve freedom with the line and it has the capability to morph into something completely new and different in the moment.

Sometimes tackling an entire line is overwhelming. To start out, break the line up into manageable parts. You can then put these pieces back together once you're comfortable with each. After doing this for a while, you'll easily be able to visualize longer lines.

Once you break up the line if need be, it's extremely important to understand how the line, or a piece of the line for that matter, relates to the sound that you're playing over. Aim to know exactly what chord you are playing over when you practice the piece of language and be aware of what chord tones you're on.

This will help you understand the sound, construction, and flexibility of the line. Of course lines can be applied to many different harmonic situations, but it helps to have a basis for where to start a line harmonically.

So, when you take the line in your mind through all keys chromatically, yes that's the next step, be aware of each chord and chord tone. Go really slowly and strive for perfection. Repeat each key until everything is fluid and without any mental strain. Remember, it should be as easy as visualizing one note.

You can do all this right before going to bed. If it helps you, write out the lines you want to visualize (just write them in one key) and place them on your night stand as a reminder. Each night, spend five or ten minutes running through them. They'll marinate in your head as you dream and get ingrained on a subconscious level.

Or better yet, tape them to a nearby wall next to your bed and every time you look at them, take one of the lines through the keys in your mind. This seemingly simple tactic is so powerful. Anything you want to learn, just post it in front of your face. It's that easy.

To recap how to visualize language:

- Hear the line exactly as it sounds in your mind
- In your mind, feel how your fingers would feel as they press the keys of your instrument
- Break up the line into manageable parts and take them chromatically or through the cycle to go through all keys
- Stay aware of each chord you are on and each chord tone; optionally see these in your mind if it helps.
- Be precise and go slowly

Chapter 5

Visualizing Musical Success

Once you've explored the benefits of visualizing chord tones and progressions, don't stop there. The technique of visualization can be used to positively affect every aspect of your playing and performance. Below are four more ideas for using this technique to improve your total musicianship.

Visualizing your sound

As a musician, your sound is one of the most important aspects of your playing. Whether you play classical trumpet, folk guitar, or jazz piano, your sound is the first thing that reaches a listener; and it's the one aspect of your musicianship that can speak directly to the emotions of the listener.

However, contrary to what most people think, your sound does not come from the mouthpiece you use, the instrument model you play on, or the etudes that you study. Yes, these factors can influence your sound, but the origins of the sound you produce run much deeper.

It's the concept of sound in your mind, the sound you hear in your head, that determines what is going to come out of your instrument.

Even before you work on long tones or any other sound exercises, "your sound" is already determined in your mind. The recordings that you've listened to, the players that you've admired, the concerts you attend all contribute to a mental picture of the sound that you're going to produce on

your instrument. If you're not happy with the sound you have right now, instead of looking at external sources, study the sound inside of your mind.

Start by visualizing your ideal sound on your instrument. Put on a recording of your favorite player, someone that you wish you sounded like. As you're listening to the recording, close your eyes and imagine that it's you that is playing; visualize what it would feel like to produce that incredible sound and ingrain it into your mind. The next time you pick up your instrument, recall this sound and feeling and I guarantee that your sound will have a new energy to it.

Visualizing to overcome barriers

We all have areas in our playing that give us trouble and certain aspects of our performance that we wish were better. Maybe you are struggling with finger technique or you're having a hard time producing an articulation. Or you find yourself thinking: "If I only had a screaming high range I would be able to..."

Many times, without our even knowing it, these troublesome areas of our playing are defined in our mind as "hard." Before we even play a single note on our instrument, we create this mental barrier that immediately stops our progress. We become tense, our breathing becomes labored, and we lock up mentally foreseeing this difficult task that we must endure.

Instead of going in everyday expecting an uphill battle, try something different. Envision those difficult techniques not as sources of fear and dread, but as being effortless and easy.

Start with a calm and relaxed breath, releasing any tension in your body. Now in your mind's eye visualize yourself sitting down at your instrument or picking up your horn. Take a deep full breath as you would while playing your instrument and assume the position as if you were about to play a note.

In your mind, visualize yourself effortlessly performing that previously difficult finger technique and easily producing those impossible high notes. Feel the ease in your body and hear the sound of those notes clearly in your mind. If you are a wind player, blow the air forward as if you were actually playing your horn. Or, if you are a pianist, drummer, or bass player, bring your hands up and imagine that you are plucking a string, striking a key, or hitting a cymbal as you focus on that visualization of effortlessness.

By doing this simple visualization exercise, you can facilitate a surprisingly positive change in your playing. Now this is not to say that achieving these techniques won't take any practice or time to develop, but removing a negative mental barrier can be the difference between attaining your goals and endlessly struggling with a difficult technique.

Visualizing to correct poor practice habits

Sometimes the hardest days as musicians are when our practice is just not going well. Those days in the practice room where nothing seems to be working and the simple act of getting through an etude is turned into a painful struggle.

Before you bash your instrument against the wall and storm out of the room

screaming in frustration, take a second to put things into perspective. It's inevitable that once in a while we'll all have days like this and learning to overcome them can turn a frustrating day into a productive session.

When you do encounter days like this, put everything down and get out of the practice room for awhile. Go outside, take a load off, and close your eyes. Try to remember the last time that you played when everything felt great, where playing was effortless and fun. Now focus on exactly what made it this way:

- How did it physically feel to play that way?
- What did it feel like as you were breathing?
- Recall the calm, confident mental state that you were in.
- What key words or concepts were you thinking about as you played this way?
- Remember the ease with which the notes were coming out and the excitement you felt.

Now with those ideas firmly planted in your mind and body, come back to the practice room. Imagine that you are entering the room for the first time that day. With those memories fresh in your mind, return to your instrument and instead of frustration and tension, aim for relaxation and focus.

Visualizing effortless performance

Performance can be an exciting and rewarding experience. And, as we all know, it can also be one fraught with nerves and trepidation. The situations

that we perform in as musicians run the gamut from casual backyard parties to nerve-racking auditions. Regardless of the atmosphere, our goal is to be calm and confident in any performance that we give.

However, this is a hard task to achieve, especially when the stakes are high. This is where visualization can be priceless. Before any performance that you might have use the technique of visualization to mentally create a great performance. As with the other exercises discussed above, follow the same techniques: picture yourself on stage, take a calm and confident breath, and hear the focused sound of your first note all the way to the final note.

Each step of the way visualize effortless playing and a calm and focused state of mind. When the performance time arrives and you feel some nervousness creep in, recall that visualized state of success and go in with confidence. The same concept applies to an improvised performance. Visualize your sound, your articulation, hear the melodies and chords to the tunes on your set list, and picture yourself playing creatively over those familiar tunes.

Visualization can transform your performance, but remember that the best bet for a solid performance stems from the confidence of hours and hours of practice. Whether you are performing in a concert hall, playing standards in a club, or putting in time in the practice room, use the techniques described above to visualize your peak performance.