

*Jazz Guitar Soloing:*  
**The Cellular Approach**

*by*  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	iii
<b>Chapter 1 – Cycles and II-V Sequences</b> .....	1
Fast-moving dominant cycles .....	1
“Root to root” cycles .....	3
“3rd to 3rd” cycles .....	7
“3rd to 5th” cycles .....	13
“3rd to root” cycles .....	17
Fast-moving cycle connections in a nutshell .....	19
A sample chorus on a jazz standard featuring extensive use of fast-moving dominant cycles .....	25
Quick II-V whole-step sequences .....	26
“Root to root” patterns adapted to II-V whole-step sequences .....	26
“3rd to 3rd” patterns adapted to II-V whole-step sequences .....	33
“3rd to 5th” patterns adapted to II-V whole-step sequences .....	37
“3rd to root” patterns adapted to II-V whole-step sequences .....	42
Supplemental cells for fast-moving dominant cycles and II-V whole-step sequences .....	43
Chromatic II-V sequences .....	49
<b>Chapter 2 – Turnarounds</b> .....	62
Standard turnarounds .....	62
Adapting II-V whole-step sequences to standard turnarounds .....	64
Editing and phrasing the standard turnarounds .....	71
Turnarounds using the #I diminished .....	73
Turnarounds using the #II diminished .....	74
Turnarounds that use IV to #IV diminished .....	76
Turnarounds that use IV to IV minor .....	77
Turnarounds that use an augmented sixth chord .....	79
Turnarounds that descend chromatically to the II chord .....	81
The classic “Dameron turnaround” .....	84
The “C.T.A.” turnaround .....	91
Coltrane’s “Giant Steps” changes .....	93
<b>Chapter 3 – Longer II-V Progressions</b> .....	96
Unaltered long II-V changes .....	96
Long II-V changes using tritone substitution .....	110
Long II-V changes using minor 3rd substitution .....	122
Combining long II-V changes on the Rhythm changes bridge .....	128

<b>Chapter 4 — “Outside” and “Free” Playing</b> .....	135
“Side-slipping” .....	137
Extended or consecutive side-slipping up or down chromatically .....	144
Sequencing up and down in whole-steps .....	145
Sequencing down and up in minor thirds .....	146
Sequencing down and up in major thirds .....	148
Sequencing up in 4ths .....	161
Sequencing in tritones .....	161
Some interval combinations .....	163
<b>Chapter 5 — More “Outside” Lines: “All Purpose Licks”</b> <b>—including Chromatic Intervals, Serial Tone Rows, and 23rd Chords</b> .....	165
Chromatic interval studies .....	167
Serial tone-rows part 1 — non whole-tone intervals moving in whole tones .....	171
Serial tone-rows part 2 — consecutive 4ths and 5ths .....	175
Serial tone-rows part 3 — 23rd chords .....	179

## Introduction

Like my previous book *Line Games*, this book is a collection of things to practice on the guitar that will help develop the vocabulary of jazz improvisation while simultaneously developing and maintaining single-note technique. This time, however, the focus will mainly be on “cellular” improvisation, which is using very short melodic cells strung together into longer lines. Once we get to the place where we’re using strings of cells for “outside” and “free” playing we will move beyond the cellular concept and on into some other approaches. I have included many lines and phrases transcribed from the recordings of several master guitarists (and occasionally saxophonists, trumpeters, and pianists as well) to demonstrate the validity of the concepts behind the exercises given.

To use this book you should have some basic knowledge of standard music notation and the ability to find notes anywhere on the guitar. When strings and fingerings are shown the strings are the numbers inside small circles (above the staff), while the fingers are numbers without circles (below the staff). It’s standard guitar fingering, with 1 being the index, 2 the middle, 3 the ring, and 4 the “pinky”. When there’s a straight line between repeated finger numbers, that finger slides along the string it’s on to the next note. When there’s a bracket below repeated finger numbers, that finger rolls to an adjacent string on the same fret to play the next note. If the roll is to a higher pitched string the roll starts on the finger tip and rolls over to the side of the finger. If the roll is to a lower pitched string the roll starts on the side of the finger and rolls over to the finger tip. Occasionally the notes on the same fret will be on non-adjacent strings, but the technique will be the same. All the fingerings are suggestions only, so if something else works better for you, by all means feel free.

Some thoughts on HOW to practice in order to get the maximum benefit from the exercises:

First of all, it’s a good idea to break things down and practice small amounts with focus on the fine details, and don’t worry that it seems there’s too much you’re not getting to. Patience is key. If you chip away on bite-size pieces they will eventually accumulate into a vast amount of useful material. Take your time and make sure you hear *all* the notes intended and *only* the notes intended, and evenly in time. Don’t worry about the other patterns you’re not getting to yet. There will be plenty of other days for those.

**Randy Vincent**

## Chapter 1 – Cycles and II-V Sequences

Let's explore "cellular" improvisation as a concept in itself. Actually, almost any long line of notes could be sliced up into short melodic cells which can be used separately and re-combined into other long lines. When jazz musicians refer to melodic cells, they are most commonly four-note cells. Hal Galper in his great book *Forward Motion* defines a cell as a four-note group with at least three of the notes being chord tones. Jerry Bergonzi uses a similar concept. Most of the cells we'll use in this book will fit that description, although later there will be some other types as well.

Four-note cells are not only useful for re-combining into long lines over a given chord, but are especially useful for improvising lines over very fast-moving changes. Four-note cells played as eighth-notes only last for only two beats, so changes that last for only two beats each are perfect for some cellular work-outs. These could include fast-moving cycles, quick II-V sequences, various turnarounds, "Coltrane changes" (as in "Giant Steps") and more. Let's get started with some fast-moving dominant cycles.

### Fast-moving dominant cycles

A dominant cycle is a progression of all dominant 7th type chords moving counter-clockwise around the circle of fifths (each new root being down-a-fifth or up-a-fourth from the previous root). The bridge of "Rhythm Changes" is a dominant cycle, but the chords last for two whole measures each, or eight beats apiece. Right now we want to check out changes lasting only two beats each, so we'll specify them as "fast-moving" dominant cycles.

*Some actual examples of fast-moving dominant cycles*

Play Ex.1-1, from a recording of an improvised solo by Joe Pass.

Notice that each cell begins on the root of each chord. The first three chords use an ascending sequence, the root, 2nd, 3rd, and 5th of each chord. This pattern is very common and will be identified as the 1-2-3-5 cell from now on. The Ab7 chord uses a descending pattern going right down the scale (1-b7-6-5). The Db7 chord has the same descending scale notes, but the order has been changed to make a nice phrase ending (1-5-6-b7). In the first three chords the three chord tones are root, 3rd, and 5th, with one passing tone, the 2nd. In the descending patterns the three chord tones are root, b7th, and 5th, with one passing note, the 6th.

Cells that start on the root and end on the 5th lead to the root of each following chord, so they can form sequences that go "root to root".

Now check out ex.1-2, from a little later in the same solo.

## “Root to root” cycles

### “Root to root” cycles – one bar sequences

Ex.1-6 shows a “root to root” cycle using one ascending 1-2-3-5 cell followed by one descending 1-b7-6-5 cell, forming a one measure pattern that sequences down the fingerboard along the first two strings. Only the first two bars are shown. Continue the exercise as far down as practical.

8va C<sup>7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup>7 E<sup>b</sup>7 A<sup>b</sup>7 (etc.)

2 4 1 4 2 1 - 1 4 2 4 1 4 2 1 - 1 4 2

Ex.1-7 shows the same kind of cycle located on the second and third strings.

8va G<sup>7</sup> C<sup>7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup>7 E<sup>b</sup>7 (etc.)

1 3 1 4 2 1 - 1 3 1 3 1 4 2 1 - 1 3 1

Ex.1-8 shows the same kind of cycle located on the third and fourth strings. Notice that the fingering is the same as the fingering used in 1-6.

D<sup>7</sup> G<sup>7</sup> C<sup>7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup>7 (etc.)

2 4 1 4 2 1 - 1 4 2 4 1 4 2 1 - 1 4 2

The fingerboard shapes and fingerings from 1-8 can be used to play the exercise on the remaining string groups.

### “Root to root” cycles – two bar sequences

Ex.1-9 shows a “root to root” cycle using two ascending 1-2-3-5 cells followed by two descending 1-b7-6-5 cells, forming a two measure pattern that sequences down the fingerboard along the first three strings. Only the first two and a half bars are shown. Continue the exercise as far down as practical.

8va G<sup>7</sup> C<sup>7</sup> F<sup>7</sup> B<sup>b</sup>7 E<sup>b</sup>7 A<sup>b</sup>7 (etc.)

1 3 1 4 2 4 1 4 2 1 - 1 4 2 1 - 1 3 1 3 1 4 2

*Combining the fingerings down and across the fingerboard*

Ex.1-100 combines the fingerings to play the II-V whole-step sequence down the strings and across the fingerboard.

1 3 4 3 1 4 3 1 3 1 2 1 4 2 1 3 1 3 4 4 2 4 3 1

4 1 2 2 4 2 1 4 1 3 4 3 1 4 3 1 4 1 2 1 4 2 1 4

1 3 4 3 1 4 3 1 4 1 2 1 4 2 1 4 1 3 4 3 1 4 3 1 - 1

*Reversing the directions of the root-oriented cells*

The whole-step sequences we've done so far use an ascending 1-2-b3-5 cell on each II chord and a descending 1-b7-6-5 cell on each V chord. Now let's reverse the directions and use a descending 1-b7-6-5 cell on each II chord and an ascending 1-2-3-5 cell on each V chord. Since there is no b3rd in the II chord cells, the pattern can also be used for one bar sequences on fast-moving dominant cycles.

Ex.1-101 shows the reversed direction sequence on the first two strings.

4 2 1 4 2 4 1 4 - 4

Ex.1-102 shows the reversed direction sequence on the second and third strings.

4 2 1 3 1 3 1 4 - 4

Use the fingering from Ex.1-101 to play the sequence on the remaining sets of two consecutive strings.

*An example using the Bb minor pentatonic scale*

As you recall, the Dameron turnaround can be analyzed as a phrygian progression. Since the Bb minor pentatonic scale is a subset of the Bb phrygian mode, it can be used over the last three chords of a Dameron turnaround in Bb major.

Ex.2-123 follows a 3-5-7-9 cell on Bbmaj7 with a descending Bb minor pentatonic sequence that forms cells that will fit any of the harmonic variations of the Dameron turnaround.

B<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    D<sup>b</sup>    G<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    C<sup>b</sup>    B<sup>b</sup>    (etc.)

*Dameron turnarounds using the bIIIdom7 chord*

Ex.2-124 uses an octave-displaced 1-3-5-b7 arpeggio to outline Db7.

B<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    D<sup>b7</sup>    G<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    C<sup>b</sup>    B<sup>b</sup>    (etc.)

Ex.2-125 is basically the same line starting an octave higher and using octave-displacement on the Gbmaj7 cell.

B<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    D<sup>b7</sup>    G<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    C<sup>b</sup>    B<sup>b</sup>    (etc.)

Ex.2-126 uses octave-displaced arpeggios on the first three chords and a 7-1-3-5 cell for the Cbmaj7.

B<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    D<sup>b7</sup>    G<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    C<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    B<sup>b</sup>    (etc.)

Ex.2-127 re-introduces the old “5-to-3” device in Gb major to outline Db7 to Gbmaj7.

B<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    D<sup>b7</sup>    G<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    C<sup>b</sup>    B<sup>b</sup>    (etc.)

Ex.2-128 does the same with some octave-displacements and a permutation.

B<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    D<sup>b7</sup>    G<sup>b</sup>MA<sup>7</sup>    C<sup>b</sup>    B<sup>b</sup>    (etc.)