

Louis Armstrong on Chimes Blues (1923 with Joe 'King' Oliver)

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Chord progression: C, Ab7, C, C7, F, F#o, C, A, D, G, C, C7, F, F#o, C, A, D, G7, C.

Measure numbers: 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21.

Triplet markings: 3, 3, 3, 3.

Analysis

This is the first solo that Louis Armstrong ever recorded, and I suspect he had this one planned out. The obvious clue is that the first eight bars of both choruses are pretty much identical. Another is the perfect structure of those eight bars. We'll probably never know for sure, but either way there is a lot to get out of this solo. The only notes I'm unsure of in this solo are in bar 2 of both choruses; Lil Hardin (on piano) is playing a concert Ab7 chord (bVI) and the recording quality makes it very hard to hear if Armstrong goes with her or not. It doesn't change what I take from this solo though.

The first thing that strikes me is how groovy those repeated eight bars are, and there's a groove that unperpins Armstrong's phrasing. I've marked the implied groove below (I've probably forced this idea on to the 4th bar but it's so clear in the 8th bar):

25

29

This offers us a 4 bar rhythmic template to 'colour in' with improvised pitches. I got this idea of thinking of rhythm before pitch from a famous Dizzy Gillespie quote, and I think it's an approach to improvising that is relevant across any style of jazz.

This rhythmic template is so strong that we could probably apply a 12-tone row (a method of organising all 12 semitones that avoids strongly implying a tonality) and it wouldn't sound that out! The logic of the rhythm is enough to carry the story. But Armstrong is working within the harmonic borders of the blues, and the pitches are consequential (ie, they matter). Here's what we get when we take just the pitches that articulate the groove (we can ignore bar 4 for this):

33 C Ab C

37 F F# C A

This shows a framework built on smooth voice-leading from chord-tone to chord-tone (the tones in a chord). Armstrong's main method for decorating this frame is the use of arpeggios made up of the other chord tones. There's infinite potential for developing practice exercises that incorporate improvisation, rhythmic templates and targeted chord tones (either in this style or others). Here is an example that uses the same groove that Armstrong implies, as well as the same chord tones he uses (highlighted). I have restricted this to just chord tones, but of course Armstrong also uses chromatic and diatonic passing tones (a note in between 2 chord tones) and approach / neighbour tones (notes either side of a chord tone). The second example uses the same targeted chord tones but I've also used some of these other strategies for 'joining the dots'.

41 C Ab⁷ C C⁷

45 F F#^o C A

49 C Ab⁷ C C⁷

53 F F#^o C A