Improvising Within Specific Formats

Here's what we know so far about incorporating melodic-based improvisation into a chord progression (a series of chord changes):

- Apply an arpeggio (ascending or descending) to a specific chord, or a fraction of that arpeggio
  - Even if the chord is only a 7th chord, apply a 9th chord arpeggio (or fraction) to it
- If two or more chords belong to the same key, apply any notes from that key's scale as you move through the chords within that key
- Use a mixture of scales and arpeggios
- Use chromatic half steps to connect (via "passing tones") scalar notes
- Use riffs/motifs with interesting rhythms to give lines more long-range cohesion

What these techniques have yet to take into account is the form of the song in question. Since so many songs have predictable formats, one can plan a sort of path they will follow as they improvise through a song. This will lend more cohesion to the lines being built.

Because certain formats have certain chords in predictable and accentuated places (think of a blues, where the IV chord shows up conspicuously in the 5th measure), one can plan to do something conspicuous and climactic when that chord arrives. If the form of the song (like in a typical blues) is going to have the IV chord at a certain point along the way, one can build up to it (like a swelling drum roll), and then do something outstanding (like a cymbal crashing after a swelling drum roll) that coincides with the outstanding arrival of that IV chord.

In Charlie Parker's "Cool Blues" below, the 5th bar arrives at the Eb7 (IV) chord as expected– right where the 2nd phrase begins (very conspicuous). A soloist can anticipate this and start building up the improvisation in the 3rd and 4th bars

OK, so what constitutes a "build up" or "arriving with a bang"? Of course there is more that one way to answer those questions, but a simple inroad to this process could consist of the following:

- Start: gently in the first couple of bars, with not too many notes, using slower note values and perhaps being in a lower register
- Build up: start playing more notes (more rapidly) and initiate an ascent (start going higher)
- Arrival: set a particular high note as a goal and make sure to reach it right on the downbeat of the 5th measure (when that IV chord arrives)

Setting place-marking goals like this within a medium or larger format can help a player stay focused while improvising and give a sense of structure to someone's playing (as opposed to the opposite, which can sound unfocused or undirected–like what some people call "noodling").