

Melodic structure: the chord tones, motif and sequence

Basic elements

A melody is a series of single pitches, usually in close in range and often suited for the voice to handle. In jazz, most melody notes are *chord tones* (also called *harmonic tones*): notes that coincide with one or more of the notes in the accompanying chord. Chord tones tend to be more prominent and fall on stronger beats. They usually coincide with structural notes (see below) in the melody.

Nonchord tones are also important in melody lines. They often connect chord tones and fall on weaker, less emphasized beats. They can connect chord tones in a *passing* (moving by step in the same direction) or *neighboring* (changing direction by step) manner.

On the following page, the example *Autumn Leaves* uses chord tones and nonchord tones in a typical way. The second measure has a D7 chord in the accompaniment (made up of the notes D F# A C). The melody notes are: C (tied) D E F#. Of those melody notes, only the short quarter note E is a nonchord tone (specifically called a *passing tone* because it is approached and left by step, all in the same direction). Most of the melody notes in *Autumn Leaves* are chord tones.

Foreground structure

A *motif* is a small musical unit, usually no longer than two measures, that has a specific pitch and rhythmic profile that is reused throughout a composition or portion of one.

A *sequence* is the immediate restatement of material at a higher or lower pitch level.

Nearly all melodies, especially those that are the easiest to hum or whistle are made of one or more motifs, each which is sequenced once or several times. Put another way, melodies are often strung together by smaller portions in clear patterns.

The following example of *Autumn Leaves* has a melody made up mainly of two short motifs. Each motif (bracketed and labeled "a" and "b") is sequenced several times.

Background/foundational structure

Often melodies have a simple, if not elegant, background design (sometimes called *guide tones*). This is where certain tones (ones that are rhythmically strong or elongated, and usually chord tones) can be linked to form a simple, "logical" shape that's often stepwise (scale-like) over a long range. This is similar to how one organizes just a few stronger, brighter stars in the night sky into a "logical" constellation shape. These notes are considered structural or foundational within the melody and help all the other "less-significant" notes fit into place.

Autumn Leaves also features this kind of background organization: the circled notes (in the my opinion) are the stronger, more outstanding ones that, when set aside (see the bottom of the chart), form simple descending/ascending/descending scale-like lines.

Look for chord tones, nonchord tones and foreground & background elements in other tunes like *Satin Doll*.

Foreground and background analysis of the melody

AUTUMN LEAVES

JOHNNY MERCER

The foreground structure is comprised of two motifs ("a" and "b") that seem rhythmically related, plus one portion of unique ("new") material. The motifs are manipulated mainly by sequencing.

Musical notation for measures 1-5. Chords above the staff: A-7, D7, G M7, C M7, F#-7(b5). Circled notes are at measures 1, 3, and 5. Brackets below the staff indicate: Motif a (measures 1-3), Motif a seq. (measures 3-5), and Motif a seq. (measures 5-7).

Musical notation for measures 6-11. Chords above the staff: B7, E-, B7, E-. Circled notes are at measures 6, 8, 9, and 10. Brackets below the staff indicate: Motif a seq. (measures 6-8) and Motif b (measures 9-11).

Musical notation for measures 12-17. Chords above the staff: F#-7(b5), B7, E-, G M7, A-7, D7. Circled notes are at measures 12, 14, 15, and 16. Brackets below the staff indicate: (Motif b contd.) (measures 12-14), Motif b seq. (measures 14-15), Motif b seq. (measures 15-16), and Motif b inverted (measures 16-17).

Musical notation for measures 18-23. Chords above the staff: G M7, F#-7(b5), B7, E-7, A7, D-7, G7. Circled notes are at measures 18, 20, 21, and 22. Brackets below the staff indicate: Motif b seq. (measures 18-20) and New, unrelated material (measures 21-23).

Musical notation for measures 24-26. Chords above the staff: F#-7(b5), B7, E-. Circled notes are at measures 24, 25, and 26.

The background structure of the melody more or less forms very simple descending and ascending scale-like structures: below are the circled (stronger, guiding) notes and their respective measure numbers

Measure: 1 3 5 7 9 10 12 14 16 18 20 22 24 (24) 25 26

Musical notation showing the background structure of the melody. Circled notes are at measures 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 25, and 26.