

MELODIC DEVELOPMENT - TENSION & RELEASE

Creating beautiful melodies has been a long sought-after goal of all musicians of all ages. Creating these melodies spontaneously is the art of the improviser.

The ultimate goal of the musician is to communicate to the listener.

Once you have mastered some of the various scales and have begun using a variety of rhythmic ideas you may begin feeling very limited melodically. When the chord/scales change every measure or two there is a certain built-in harmonic motion that keeps the piece alive - to a point. Improvising on one scale for four or eight measures or even longer requires the musician to emphasize melody and rhythm because the harmony is static. More advanced players can also utilize harmonic devices in their playing (chord superimposition or altered scales), but the novice will usually have only melody and rhythm from which to build meaningful solos.

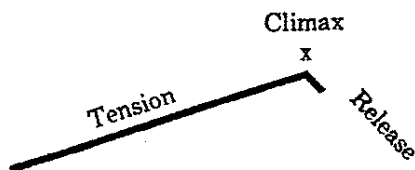
Melodies of all musics - jazz, classical, folk, pop, rock have a common thread which seems to appeal to the listener as well as the performer; and that thread is the proper utilization of TENSION and RELEASE.

To live is to improvise. To improvise is to live.

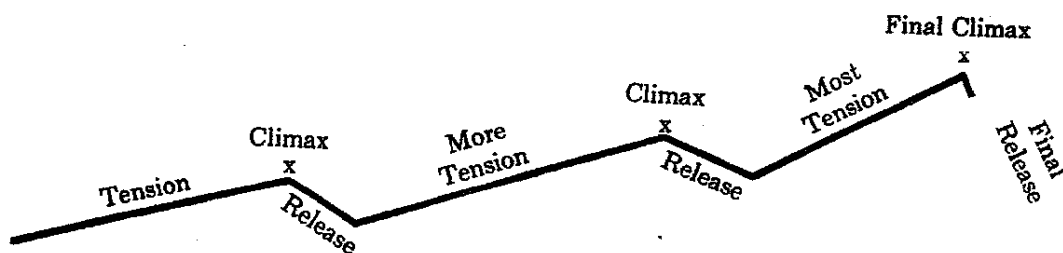
Tension is that which builds intensity and excitement. In music, tension can be achieved through the manipulation of volume, direction of the melodic line, range (tessitura), intervals (wide intervals), value of notes (whole-notes moving to half-notes to quarter-notes to eighth-notes, etc.), silence - movement - silence, repetition (of almost anything), contrast (especially sudden contrast), or any combination of these elements. Release is the natural relaxation of tension and must follow any climax. Tension can be quickly released by downward motion. If tension is allowed to go on too long it has a tendency to evolve into boredom. Players have to be constantly aware of how they are building their solo.

It is logical to construct solos in four and eight bar phrases. Most good improvisors like to think in long, flowing, lyrical lines as opposed to short, unrelated, fragmented phrases. Short, choppy phrases initially create tension; but if allowed to continue without proper development will wear thin, and an undesired type of release results. Strive for continuity of thought throughout your entire solo. *Playing musical phrases should eventually be as easy as speaking with a friend. Strive for playing the same melodies you hear in your mind. Sing with the play-a-long recording.*

As your solo gains momentum, you should direct the flow of your melodic line toward a natural climax and then immediately taper off (release), drawing your solo to a close. What I have just described would look graphically like this:



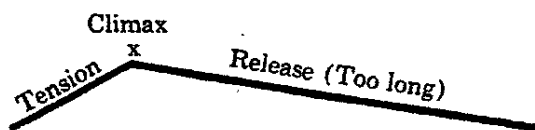
Truly mature improvisors can construct melodies with tension/release sections back-to-back for a desired over-all effect looking like this:



Many beginning improvisors play solos which lack contrasts. Too much sameness has a dulling effect on the listener and produces a line like this:



A good beginning, coupled with a poor ending, may look like this:



A long final release numbs the listener and completely negates the tension produced in the early stages of the solo.

When utilizing more than one climax per solo it is best to make each successive climax more dramatic than the previous one. This is usually done gently, little by little. This will achieve an over-all feeling of increased tension leading to the final release, which should be of much shorter duration than the approach to the climax.

The melodic line curves drawn here can represent one chorus or several, depending on the imagination and ability of the soloist. Beginners should force themselves to construct ideas lasting four and eight measures. Flowing lines are achieved by blending one phrase into the next.

All improvisors should keep in mind the traditional musical sequence of events: **Statement of theme (motif), development of theme, climax, and release (relaxation of tension).**

Statement » Development of Theme » Climax » Release

I have often thought most good jazz solos were constructed of 50% emotion and 50% intellect. Solos which leave lasting impressions have just the right amount of emotion coupled with intelligent over-all design. It's easy to sing in this manner. We have to learn how to do it with our instrument.

I can think of no better way to learn to improvise melodically than listening to the masters and trying to emulate their playing concepts. How can we expect anyone to listen to us if we don't earnestly listen to those already doing it?

A few of my favorite jazz soloists who have the ability to construct meaningful melodies **consistently** are Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Wes Montgomery, Freddie Hubbard, Erroll Garner, Herbie Hancock, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Clifford Brown, Dizzy Gillespie, Roy Haynes, and Elvin Jones. This list is short. There are many, many more.

ELEMENTS WHICH PRODUCE TENSION

INCREASED VOLUME
ASCENDING LINES
EMPHASIS ON PASSING TONES (non-chord/scale tones)
EXTREME REGISTER OF INSTRUMENT
WIDE INTERVALS (especially ascending)
REPETITION (of almost anything)
ALTERNATING DIRECTIONS
JAGGED ARTICULATIONS (flutter tongue, stab the reed, over-blow)
NON-CHORD TONES (4ths, 6ths, 7ths, & 9ths)
DRAMATIC DEVICES (swoops, glissandos, shakes, trills, etc.)
DISSONANT HARMONY

ELEMENTS WHICH PRODUCE RELEASE (RELAXATION)

DECREASED VOLUME
DESCENDING LINES
NOTES OF LONGER DURATION (quarter-notes, half-notes, whole-notes)
REST (space)
SMOOTHNESS (legato)
EMPHASIS ON CHORD TONES (root, 3rd, or 5th)
SILENCE

In the hands of a mature improviser, any of these elements can create tension or release. For instance, players could begin their melodic line in the high register very softly and gradually increase the volume as they work their way down to the lower register. Upon reaching the bottom they will have caused a climax to occur.

Ultimately, players should know in advance where they want their line to go and, with proper usage, the various elements will help them best achieve their goal. The **individual** is the manipulator of all the elements. **Listening and emulating** can be the finest teacher.

For further study of melodic development and time, I recommend *Improvising Jazz* and *How To Practice Jazz* by Jerry Coker, *Jazz Improvisation* by David Baker and *Patterns for Jazz* by J. Coker, J. Greene, J. Casale, and G. Campbell.

Close your eyes while you improvise. Often this will stimulate your creative flow.
Humor can do the same thing.