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PLAY REALLY, REALLY FAST

by Andy LaVerne

When you think of jazz pianists who can *burn*, the names Art Tatum, Bud Powell, Oscar Peterson, Phineas Newborn Jr., Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, Michel Camilo, Joey Calderazzo, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Geoff Keezer, and Eldar all come to mind. Covering many styles and generations, they all have one thing in common: They can play *fast* and *clean*. There's no question of rhythmic clarity when they're flying through a set of changes. Every note is perfectly placed and articulated.

If you want to play fast effectively, and effortlessly, countless hours of concentrated practice is essential. But what to practice? Technical exercises by Czerny and Hanon, as well as accelerated four-octave scales, certainly help build chops and endurance. But that type of practice won't be much help when you're called upon to rip through a set of changes

at a breakneck tempo. For that you need to amass a backlog of jazz vocabulary that you can call upon at a moment's notice. That is not to imply that you need to be on autopilot. On the contrary – having a strong vocabulary will enhance your ideas, and enable you to quickly negotiate a set of changes without running out of notes.

As you can see from the examples, you need the technical prowess as well as enough good notes to fill the harmonic space. At faster tempos, start to feel a longer pulse – first just concentrate on feeling beats 1 and 3, then just beat 1 of each measure. Additionally, the faster you play, the less swing there is, until the notes gradually become even. When playing fast, relax the hand, use more wrist motion, and play with a lighter touch. Practice hard and unleash your inner speed demon! 

Hear what Andy's teaching on recordings by these outstanding artists:

Michel Camilo:
Spirit of the Moment
(Telarc)



Miles Davis:
Four & More
(Sony)



Phineas Newborn, Jr.:
The Great Jazz Piano of Phineas Newborn, Jr.
(Original Jazz Classics/Contemporary Records)



Ex. 1. To play fast, start slow. This quarter-note line over the changes of the first four bars of "Lover Man" is a good place to start. The line is composed of chord tones, passing tones, and one chromatic tone, the #11 in the final measure. In situations like this, rootless voicings played on the first beat of the measure are common and sound good. Experiment with placing them on different beats, and play them with both long and short rhythmic values. Use a metronome set at 60 beats per minute and gradually increase the tempo. When you get it up to 120bpm, move on to the next example.

Ex. 2. You can take the same phrase and halve the note value (quarter to eighth). As you can see, each chord gets two beats now, instead of four. Start your metronome at 90bpm. Gradually tick that up to 145bpm, then move on to Example 3.

Ex. 3. To get back to our original harmonic rhythm and still play eighth-notes, we need more notes. The second and fourth measures introduce a new melodic component, which fills the space with scale tones arranged as an enclosure of the third, which resolves down to the root. Start the metronome at 110bpm, and gradually take it up to 150.

Musical notation for Example 3, showing a piano accompaniment with a harmonic rhythm of eighth notes. The piece is in 4/4 time and features four measures with chords Dm7, G7, Gm7, and C7. The melody consists of eighth notes, with the second and fourth measures featuring an enclosure of the third scale degree.

Ex. 4. Using the same principle, we now move to sixteenth-notes. Once again, the harmonic rhythm is cut in half. Start the metronome at 80bpm. In small increments, increase the tempo to 100. Now you're playing *fas!* Keep up the momentum and move on to the next example.

Musical notation for Example 4, showing a piano accompaniment with a harmonic rhythm of sixteenth notes. The piece is in 4/4 time and features four measures with chords Dm7, G7, Gm7, and C7. The melody consists of sixteenth notes.

Ex. 5. Again, to get us back to our original harmonic rhythm while playing sixteenth-notes, we need more notes! Measure 5a shows another bop-oriented phrase to play over these changes, still two beats apiece. Set your metronome with a quarter note at 80bpm and gradually move up to 100. Next try this similar phrase in 5b, with the addition of an ascending arpeggio. Again, start the metronome at 80bpm and move up to 100.

Musical notation for Example 5, showing two variations (a and b) of a piano accompaniment with a harmonic rhythm of sixteenth notes. The piece is in 4/4 time and features four measures with chords Dm7, G7, Gm7, and C7. Variation a shows a bop-oriented phrase, and variation b shows a similar phrase with an ascending arpeggio.

Ex. 6. By combining all the melodic elements you've been practicing, you now have enough notes to play a continuous sixteenth-note line through the original harmonic rhythm. Start at 70bpm and gradually increase until you've reached your personal limit.

Musical notation for Example 6, showing a piano accompaniment with a harmonic rhythm of sixteenth notes. The piece is in 4/4 time and features four measures with chords Dm7, G7, Gm7, and C7. The melody is a continuous sixteenth-note line.