

Creating Lines - Understanding the Rules

The great pianist and educator Barry Harris has left us with a brilliant and musical approach to creating lines that are authentic to jazz, and bebop in particular. Don't be dismayed if you're not strictly a jazz player, his approach can work wonders for players of all genres. Much like a spoken/written language has **rules**, or syntax, there are 'rules' in music that can help us play/speak in an authentic and meaningful way as well. In Spanish, for example, the adjective is placed after the noun. That means that in English "red guitar" would translate to Spanish as "guitarra roja". That rule is pretty specific and different from English, which means we had better know that rule if we're going to have a shot at speaking Spanish in an authentic, convincing manner.

Our goal musically is to create lines that **clearly outline the sound of the chord** we are improvising over. This is accomplished by having the **chord tones** (notes in the chord) land on the **strong beats** of the bar, which for a Dominant 7 chord means having the 1, 3, 5, and $\flat 7$ of the chord/scale land on beats 1, 2, 3, or 4, as opposed to landing on the 'and' of the beat. This occurs somewhat naturally when ascending, starting on the root and ascending gives us chord tones on every beat. However, the numbers are against us when starting on the root **descending**: we get the root on beat 1, but then have the 6th, 4th, and 2nd landing on the beat for the remainder of the bar.

C Dominant Scale - Ascending

C Dominant Scale - Descending

We'll need to do something to affect the rhythmic placement of the notes, and that's where the **RULES** come in. There are 4 rules that Barry Harris teaches and they are all exclusive to **descending lines that start on the beat** (as opposed to the 'and'). Two of these rules are for when you're starting your line on a chord tone and the other two rules are for when you start on a non-chord tone.

Rule 1: When starting on a chord tone add a half step between the 1 and $\flat 7$

C Dominant Scale - Rule 1

We've now got chord tones landing on every beat, which has clearly outlined the sound of the chord. Try playing the above line followed by the C7 chord and you'll hear the chord comes as no surprise after being outlined by the single note line. Mission accomplished, nicely done!

Creating Lines - The 4 Rules of Barry Harris for Dominant Chords

RULE 1
1 START ON A CHORD TONE
 ADD 1/2 STEP BETWEEN 1 AND $b7$

RULE 2
2 START ON A CHORD TONE
 ADD 1/2 STEP BETWEEN 3 - 2, 2 - 1, AND 1 - $b7$

RULE 3
3 START ON A NON CHORD TONE
 NO 1/2 STEPS REQUIRED

RULE 4
4 START ON A NON CHORD TONE
 ADD 1/2 STEPS BETWEEN 2 - 1 AND 1 - $b7$

Rule 1) Start on a chord tone: Add 1/2 step between 1 and $b7$

Example 1: C^7 line starting on G (chord tone), moving down to F ($b7$) with a half-step. Fretboard diagram shows notes G, F, E, D, C, B, A, G.

Example 2: C^7 line starting on G (chord tone), moving down to F ($b7$) with a half-step. Fretboard diagram shows notes G, F, E, D, C, B, A, G.

Rule 2) Start on a chord tone: Add 1/2 steps between 3 - 2, 2 - 1, and 1 - $b7$

Example 1: C^7 line starting on G (chord tone), moving down to F ($b7$) with a half-step. Fretboard diagram shows notes G, F, E, D, C, B, A, G.

Example 2: C^7 line starting on G (chord tone), moving down to F ($b7$) with a half-step. Fretboard diagram shows notes G, F, E, D, C, B, A, G.

Example 3: C^7 line starting on G (chord tone), moving down to F ($b7$) with a half-step. Fretboard diagram shows notes G, F, E, D, C, B, A, G.

Rule 3) Start on a non chord tone: No 1/2 steps required

Example 1: C^7 line starting on F (non-chord tone), moving down to E (chord tone) with a whole step. Fretboard diagram shows notes F, E, D, C, B, A, G.

Example 2: C^7 line starting on F (non-chord tone), moving down to E (chord tone) with a whole step. Fretboard diagram shows notes F, E, D, C, B, A, G.

Example 3: C^7 line starting on F (non-chord tone), moving down to E (chord tone) with a whole step. Fretboard diagram shows notes F, E, D, C, B, A, G.

Rule 4) Start on a non chord tone: Add 1/2 steps between 2 - 1 and 1 - $b7$

Example 1: C^7 line starting on F (non-chord tone), moving down to E (chord tone) with a whole step. Fretboard diagram shows notes F, E, D, C, B, A, G.

Example 2: C^7 line starting on F (non-chord tone), moving down to E (chord tone) with a whole step. Fretboard diagram shows notes F, E, D, C, B, A, G.

Example 3: C^7 line starting on F (non-chord tone), moving down to E (chord tone) with a whole step. Fretboard diagram shows notes F, E, D, C, B, A, G.