

The Barry Harris Approach to Improvised Lines & Harmony: An Introduction

By Fiona Bicket



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Dr. Barry Harris Profile

Dr. Barry Harris is an Internationally renowned jazz pianist, composer and teacher. Dr. Harris is the recipient of an Honorary Doctorate from Northwestern University. He has received the Living Jazz Legacy award from the Mid-Atlantic Arts Association, and an American Jazz Masters Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. In addition, Dr. Harris received the Manhattan Borough President Award for Excellence. This award was given for recognition of his devoted public service and in honor of excellence in the field of music. He received the 1999 Mentor award for his work with youngsters at the Manhattan Country School in NYC.

Dr. Harris began playing jazz in Detroit in the 1940's. Bebop absorbed his attention, particularly the music of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk. With an unrelenting inquiry into the nature of this music and his willingness to communicate it, Barry Harris now inspires and encourages many younger musicians. He's come to be known as the "keeper of the bebop flame".

Dr. Barry Harris receives frequent requests to appear as a guest lecturer by Universities and various musical venues all over the world. His lectures and interactive instrument and vocal workshops focus on the complete aspects of music including improvisation, harmonic movement and theory. His schedule includes lectures in the United States, Holland, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and Japan. When he is not traveling, Dr. Harris holds weekly music workshop sessions in New York City for vocalists, students of piano & other instruments.

About the Author

Ms. Fiona Bicket is a pianist and educator, specializing in music education for young children. She has been a student of Barry Harris and Walter Davis Jr, and was twice a semi-finalist in the Thelonious Monk International Piano Competition.

Fiona Bicket has performed and taught extensively in Australia, her country of origin. She initially met Barry Harris at the now closed Jazz Cultural Theater in New York. She presently attends his weekly workshops in New York.

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Introduction

In his teaching, Dr. Barry Harris emphasizes a return to basics. He rejects the trend toward over-complication found in much modern jazz education. He says “Young people should be taught from where the teachers came from, not from where the teachers are.”

Anyone who learns from Dr. Barry Harris is sure to be touched by a certain simplicity and freedom which stems from his attention to detail. He deals in an uncomplicated and relaxed manner with the musical elements which make up bebop.

He points out two distinct areas of study: chording and soloing. With soloing he teaches scalar and melodic materials which have a very practical application through their rhythmic integrity (Part I).

With chording, he instills an understanding of the sixth chord as the fundamental sound of jazz, along with the associated diminished chords, which allow movement within and between chords (Parts II & III). If you are a novice to jazz harmony, play the sequence of examples over and over to absorb the sound and movement. Then, read the text as a guide to the musical examples.

The third part is the result of a two-step process. First, the basic text was written, and then Dr. Harris commented on it (in italics), and added variations on some of the musical examples.

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Part I – Improvised Lines

Scale runs

In many jazz lines, you may have noticed the importance of an added half-step to allow an eighth note line to “come out right” rhythmically in 4/4 time. In other words, with an added chromatic note or two, a descending scale played in eighth notes; beginning on any degree of the scale will arrive at the first degree of the scale on the beat.

To really get this under the fingers, Barry suggests practicing descending dominant seventh scales in the following way. . .

G7 scale

Example 1-1

. . . and so on, up to the run beginning on the seventh note of the scale.

Example 1-2

You can see that any scale run originating on a chord tone requires one added half-step, positioned between the eighth and seventh degrees of the scale. A scale run starting on a non-chord tone requires either no half-steps, or two. The two are positioned between the ninth and eighth, and the eighth and seventh degrees.

These runs should be practiced first of all on their own, for technical facility and secondly, used in any **V** or **II-V** situation.

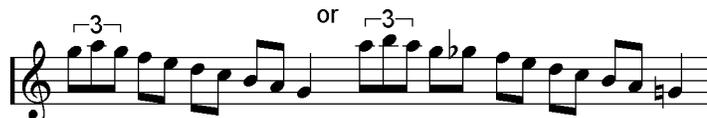
Example 1-3

For major and minor scale runs, the principle is similar, except the first added half-step occurs between the sixth and fifth degrees of the scale, instead of the eighth and seventh.

Example 1-4

In addendum 1 and 2, I've transcribed a Barry Harris blues and solo. Notice how he uses added half-steps in bars 7, 10, 15, 16, and 24 of his solo on "Stay Right With It". But clearly, Barry's lines are much more than eighth-note runs with added half-steps. Here are some suggestions he makes for introducing more rhythmic and melodic variety to these runs.

1) Try adding a triplet.



Example 1-5

2) Try *pivoting*. That is, play part of the descending scale run up an octave. You can pivot from any note of a scale run. Play the following exercise, and see which ones sound stronger.



Example 1-6

Some basic motifs

Barry also teaches certain melodic motifs which are commonly used in bebop phrases. These should be played in all keys, and with the following rhythm:



Example 1-7

Note that the turn of direction in these motifs occurs at a certain place. In the case of motif **A**, the note G - the fifth degree of the C scale - is the one which is stated before the downward leap leading to a change of direction. With motif **B**, the F - the fourth - is stated

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Summary

By exploring these materials - the scale runs and melodic motifs with some pivoting and rhythmic variation - you can generate great variety in your lines. The only limit is the depth of your exploration. When in an actual playing situation, some surprisingly fresh ideas can surface.

I've presented only a bare skeleton of Barry's approach to constructing lines. Perhaps you can begin to see how thoughtfully he has penetrated some essential elements of bebop phrasing. But of course it's not possible to convey in one sitting the breadth of his ideas. To really get the feel of his musical ideas, you must attend his classes. Within the atmosphere of one of Barry's workshops, you can really experience that intellectual quickness and heated spirit of play which is the "flame" of the music.

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Addendum 1: Song Example: *Stay Right With It*

Stay Right With It

Barry Harris

♩ = 196

Latin Feel

Transcribed by Fiona Bicket

Musical notation for measures 1-3. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The time signature is 4/4. Measure 1 starts with a B7 chord. The melody in the right hand features eighth and sixteenth notes with accents. The bass line in the left hand consists of eighth notes with accents.

Musical notation for measures 4-6. Measure 4 begins with a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand. Measure 5 features an Eb7 chord. The notation continues with eighth and sixteenth notes and accents in both hands.

Musical notation for measures 7-9. Measure 7 starts with a B7 chord. Measure 8 features a D7 chord. Measure 9 features a Cm7 chord. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes with accents.

Musical notation for measures 10-12. Measure 10 starts with an F7 chord. Measure 11 features a B7 chord. The notation concludes with eighth and sixteenth notes and accents in both hands.

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Addendum 2: Solo Example: *Stay Right With It* (third and fourth choruses)

Third and fourth choruses of the solo

Swing

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Part II - Basic Chord Movement

Few pianists have as fine a sense of movement in chords as Barry Harris. His understanding is based in a deep appreciation of the essential elements of harmony. Under his fingers, those simple truths blossom into a sound rich with spice and variety.

To really grasp Barry's harmonic ideas, it is necessary to have a very thorough knowledge of major and minor sixth chords and diminished seventh chords. I would suggest practicing these in root position and inversions in both closed and open positions. Barry would call them *short* and *long* chords. One way to find the long chord is by swapping the top and bottom notes of a short chord.

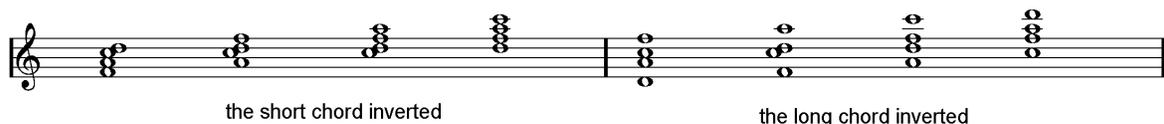
Sixth chords, long and short

For example, see how **F6** short chords in root position and inversion can be lengthened.



Example 2-1

Also, play them like so:



Example 2-2

This should be done with all major and minor sixth chords. Then try the exercise in Example 2-3, which uses long chords and short chords. Continue the pattern until you get back to bar 1, an octave higher. It takes quite a bit of thinking to keep the notes arranged in the same pattern, but you will find some unusual sounds are created in this very logical structure. Play slowly and listen.

Exercise in long and short chords

Example 2-3

Here's an example of how you might apply this idea to a **II-V-I** situation.

Example 2-4

Diminished chords, long and short

Notice the use of the **Gbdim7**¹ chord for **F7**, to take us back to **Bb6**. This movement from a diminished chord back to a sixth chord is the basis of many harmonic progressions. A thorough understanding of this movement underlies Barry's approach to chording. Practice the diminished sevenths as you have practiced the sixths, in long and short chords.

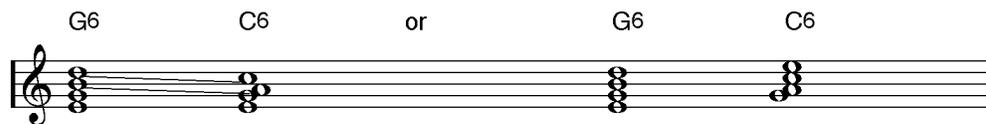
Example 2-5

and

Example 2-6

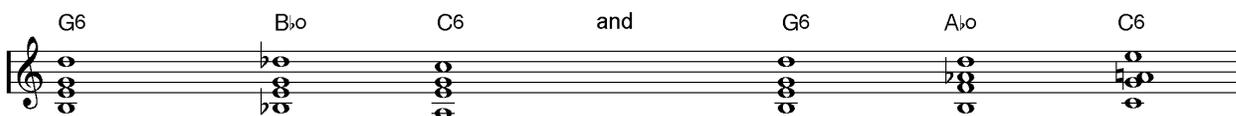
¹ Gbdim, Gbdim7, Gb^o and Gb^o7 all refer to the Gb diminished chord (*Gb, Bbb, Dbb and Fbb*) We've used the abbreviation "dim7" in the text and the symbol *o* in the musical examples. You will find that both variations appear in lead sheets.

Now let's look at a very simple movement from one sixth chord to another via a diminished. This movement is hidden in much of the harmony we play. First of all, move from **G6** to **C6**



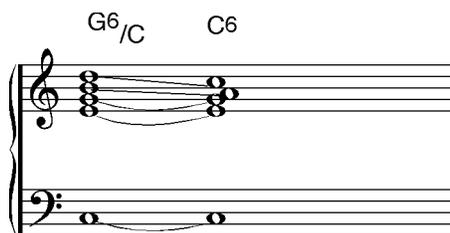
Example 2-7

Now, try these diminished passing chords. I've given these in long chords so you can immediately hear what a lovely, open, logical sound these moves can have.



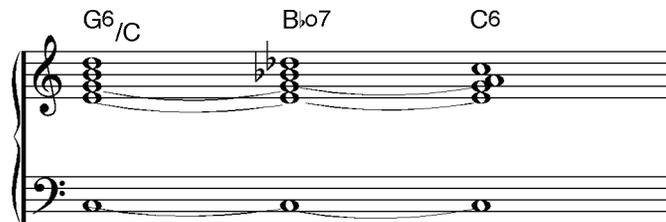
Example 2-8

There are many harmonic situations based on these simple moves. Here are just a few. **C $\text{M}a9$ to C6**. Notice that the upper notes of **C $\text{M}a9$** are in fact the notes of a **G6** chord (E, G, B, D). The notes B and D can be lowered one tone to A and C, thus arriving at C6. Like so:



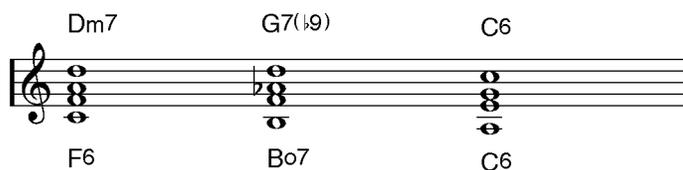
Example 2-9

Now use B $\text{b}dim7$ to connect them.



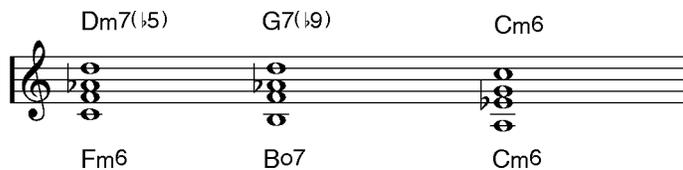
Example 2-10

II-V-I progressions are also made of this type of movement. To see this, we must regard **Dm7 - G7(b9) - C6** as **F6 - Bdim7 - C6**.



Example 2-11

Minor **II-V-I** progressions can also be understood in this way. **Dm7(b5) - G7(b9) - Cm6** is also **Fm6 - Bdim7 - Cm6**



Example 2-12

Using the chords

In the next example, I show simple, open chords that can be used in *comping* (playing accompaniment) behind soloists on the first eight measures of a number of tunes that are based on the harmonic progression of “I Got Rhythm”.

Example 2-13

As another example, take a look at the first changes of “Ain't Misbehavin'” (or “Slow Boat to China,” “Imagination,” and a host of other songs) where the movement is **C6 - C#dim7 - Dm7 (C6 - C#dim7 - F6)**. Below is an eight bar progression similar to the first eight bars of “Ain't Misbehavin'” See how much of it is actually a movement from sixth chord to sixth chord via the diminished. Play this while singing the melody and listen for the logic in the sound of these chords.

Example 2-14

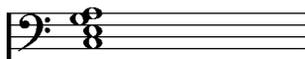
In Part 3, the sixth/diminished relationship will be further explored and applied to movement within a chord.

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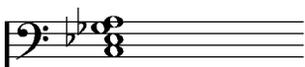
keys.

B.H.: *“The sixth diminished scale should be taught all over the world, in classical music and all others. Here are a couple of other ways of looking at it Put your fingers down on a C6 chord - C, E, G, and A.*



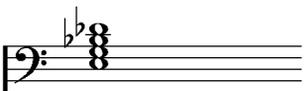
Example 3-4

It's a combination of two things The C and A are from one diminished chord,



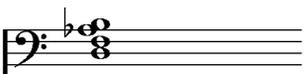
Example 3-5

the E and G are from another diminished chord.



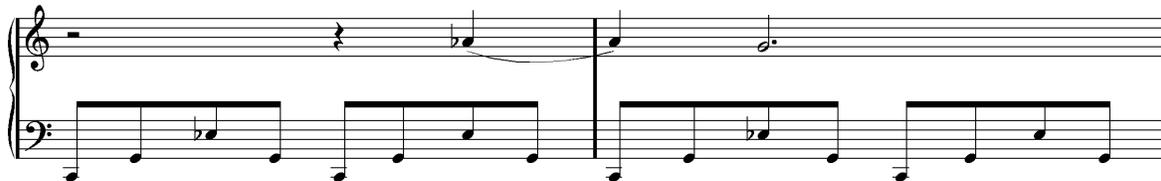
Example 3-6

And there's one additional diminished chord that's not in the C6 chord the D°7.



Example 3-7

Some of the prettiest sounds happen when you play a diminished note like this Ab - over a minor chord. The Ab says 'Move me.' Diminished notes have a way of saying 'Move me somewhere.' ”



Example 3-8

You can begin to see the harmonic implications of the scale by building a chord up in thirds from each degree of the scale. The chord generated off the first degree of the scale is C6.



Example 3-9

And off the second degree, D diminished (D^o). . .

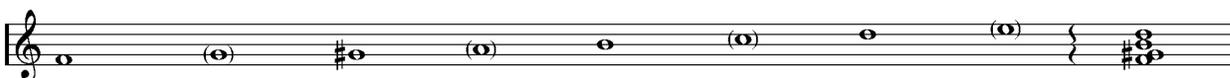


Example 3-10

off the third degree, C6 in first inversion, and off the fourth degree, D^o in first Inversion (or F^o).



Example 3-11



Example 3-12

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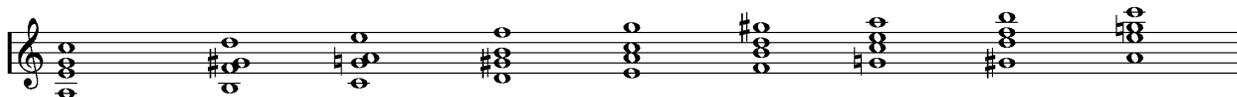
Chord Scale

Carry on up the scale, generating chords off each degree of the scale. You will notice that only two chords are created - **C6** and **D^o**. Also do this with C minor sixth diminished scale. You will find that the chords generated are **Cm6** and **D^o**. Now, play the whole chord scale in “short chords.”



Example 3-13

To hear this a little more clearly, play it also in “long” chords, by swapping the top and bottom notes of each chord.



Example 3-14

Another way to show it - go up the scale switching short and long.



Example 3-15



Example 3-16

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As you can see, what we have here is a way of moving away from a sixth chord and back to the same sixth chord via the associated diminished. See how Barry uses this in the first one and a half bars of his tune “Father Flanagan”, where he moves from Bbm6 to C^o and back using the Bb minor sixth diminished scale.

Example 3-17 shows a musical progression in 4/4 time. The first bar is labeled Bbm6. The second bar is labeled Co. The third bar is labeled Bbm6/D_b. The notation consists of a treble and bass clef with a key signature of three flats and a 4/4 time signature. The bass line features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, while the treble line features a melodic line with some grace notes.

Example 3-17

Now look at this usage of the C major sixth diminished scale to embellish a C6 chord.

Example 3-18 shows a musical progression in 4/4 time. The first bar is a C6 chord. The second bar is a C6 chord with a diminished scale line. The third bar is a C6 chord. The notation consists of a treble and bass clef with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. The bass line features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, while the treble line features a melodic line with some grace notes.

Example 3-18

The above example shows how the diminished notes of the scale can be used to create melodic movement within the chord.

B.H.: *“It’s so pretty. She uses contrary motion. She could also have played this using parallel motion”*

Example 3-19 shows a musical progression in 4/4 time. The first bar is a C6 chord. The second bar is a C6 chord with a diminished scale line. The third bar is a C6 chord. The notation consists of a treble and bass clef with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. The bass line features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, while the treble line features a melodic line with some grace notes.

Example 3-19

B.H.: "In the following example the A and C (from the C6 chord) are held and the G, E, and A move up one degree of the C diminished sixth scale, then back. Next, the voices move up two degrees, then back. In the last example shown, they move up three degrees. You could extend this movement further. You could also move from the Am7 to the D7, as Fiona shows in her next example."

Example 3-20

The usage of this scale is not confined to **IMa** or **Im** situations, however. For example, the C major sixth diminished scale can be used for the chord Am7. Here I've used the scale for movement in an **Am7** chord as it moves to **D7**

Example 3-21

Practice Suggestion

You can practice this type of movement by playing the chord scale, but in each chord raise and then resolve one or two of the notes involved. For example, here is the C minor sixth diminished chord scale with the top note raised and then resolved.

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Example 3-22

Try raising and resolving one or two of the other notes in the chord, and see what interesting sounds can be created. For example, moving the note second from the bottom would give you this:



Example 3-23

Try applying some of these sounds to a **II – V** situation. The C minor sixth diminished scale can be used for **Am7(b5)**.

B.H.: “Try this: move the pattern down one whole step at a time, ending with a run up the keyboard. (See Example 3-24) How to execute this run? Divide it between the hands. At first, play it in “clumps.” Then, when you play it as a run, the hands stay in shape, but rotate a little, to separate the clumps into absolutely even notes.

Play in hand positions . . . I am a firm believer in not playing with your fingers. A notewise procedure gets you in trouble.”



Example 3-24

Summary

There are many ways of exploring and applying these scales. Above all, let your ear guide you; but never be afraid to let your intellect, governed by the logic of this harmonic material, take you into new areas. Many of the questions I've heard uttered in Barry's workshops –“What if we did it backwards?” or “in contrary motion?” “How about moving the left hand instead of the right?” - reflect the playfulness which can be at work in this kind of harmonic exploration.

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