

Left Hand Comping

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A general trend among young jazz piano students is the lack of skill regarding left hand comping. Often students are concentrating so much on the right hand improvisation that proper attention to the left hand is ignored. Needless to say, learning to improvise and use the jazz language is complex and time consuming but it's also important to play the piano pianistically, which requires both hands.

In order to become a complete jazz pianist the practicing should include aspects such as, left hand comping, articulation, balance between hands, rhythmic perfection, harmonic development etc. Use the same approach as you would when practicing classical piano. For example, it's impossible to sound good on a Bach piece if you don't bring out the themes and play the piece with technical perfection. A balance between the hands is a must in order to make such piece sound good. If you never have studied classic you should start today.

Like anything else in Jazz, listen to the masters and learn from them. The next solo you transcribe, transcribe both the improvised lines and the left hand comping. By doing that you will become more aware of the balance between the two hands.

This article will introduce a couple of concepts that are helpful in order to make better use of the left hand. It will also give your practicing a direction and eventually the left hand will become an integrated part of your jazz playing.

1. Static Comping

By doing a repeated rhythm in the left hand you can create an extremely steady and driving force under you soloing. It's important to keep the rhythm steady and controlled in order to get the full effect of this style of comping. Below are two different rhythms that works well as static comping. By alternate the pattern with long or short notes you can create a variety of feels within the same rhythm.

Pattern 1.

F 13 B^b13 F 13 F 13

Pattern 2.

F 13 B^b13 F 13 F 13

The example on the following page alternate these two rhythms. When you practice, stay on each rhythm for a while until you get comfortable with them.

F13 B \flat 13 F13 F13
 B \flat 13 B \flat 13 F13 D7(\flat 9)
 Gm7 C9 F13 D7(#9) Gm7 C7

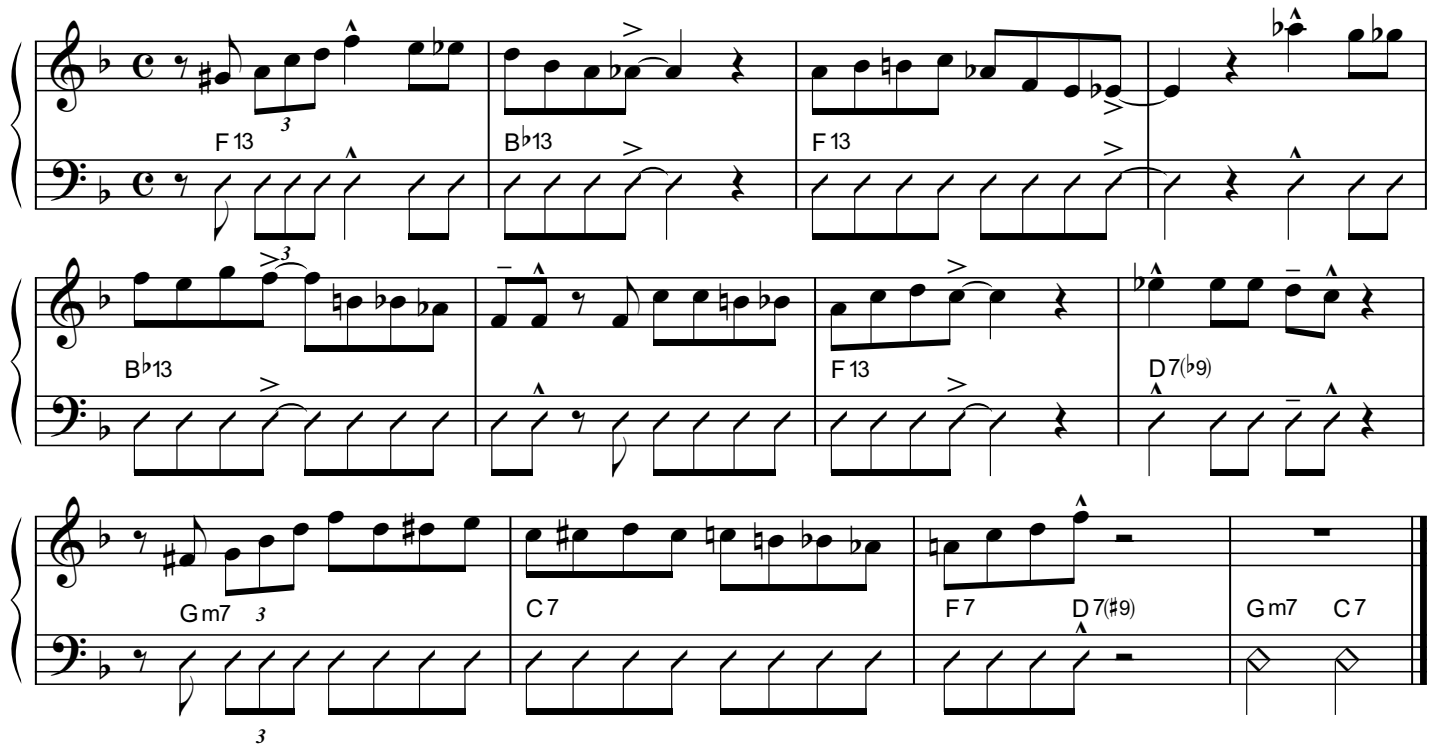
2. Accent Comping.

The goal with this way of comping is to strengthen the rhythm in the melody by putting more force on the accents. It helps to think of it as a big band with the brass section playing hits while the saxes are playing a soli (check out Thad Jones/Mel Lewis band).

F13 B \flat 13 F13 F13
 B \flat 13 B \flat 13 F13 D7(\flat 9) Gm7
 Gm7 C9 F13 D7(#9) Gm7 C7

3. Block Style Comping


This is perhaps more of an effect than actual comping. However, together with the other styles it is a nice addition and a powerful tool to use. Try to phrase the chords like the melody. Also make sure that the left hand does not over power the right hand. Practice this way of comping slowly to make sure you find a good balance between the hands.



Musical score for Block Style Comping, showing three systems of piano accompaniment. The right hand plays a melodic line with various ornaments and accents, while the left hand provides a steady bass line with chords. The chords are: F13, Bb13, F13, Bb13, F13, D7(b9), Gm7, C7, F7, D7(#9), Gm7, C7.

4. Pad Comping.

This way of comping creates a smooth and relaxed feel. Its main purpose is to supply a more constant sound of the harmony by using nice left hand voicings and let them sustain more than the static way of comping. This works great especially in ballads. All the other techniques that are mentioned in this article can also be mixed into this comping style.



Musical score for Pad Comping, showing two systems of piano accompaniment. The right hand plays a melodic line with various ornaments and accents, while the left hand provides a steady bass line with chords. The chords are: CMaj7, Gm7, C7(b9), FMaj7, F#m7(b5), B7(b9), Em9, A7(b9), Dm9, G7(b9), CMaj7, G#13, CMaj7.