

In Jazz Harmony, Simpler is Better

by Bob Hinz

A common mistake that jazz musicians (pianists, in particular), educators, composers, publishers, and arrangers make is in their teaching, learning, and understanding of chord symbols is in confusing the harmonic embellishment of a chord with the basic chord itself. In many instances, a more complicated chord symbol (or series of chord symbols) is presented in a chart when a much simpler and clearer version would suffice. A result of this process is that the chord changes become much more difficult to learn because the student is presented with excess and unnecessary information. For example, take the following chord progression:

Bb13 Bb7#5 | Bbm7/Eb Eb7b9 |

This is taken exactly as is from “*Lover Come Back to Me*” found in Dick Hyman’s book *Professional Chord Changes and Substitutions for 100 Tunes Every Musician Should Know* (kind of a long title, don’t you think?).

Normally, a piano player looking at this (and attempting to learn it) would have an easier time if he or she recognized the simplicity of the basic chords here:

Bb7 | Eb7 |

That’s it. The alterations and extensions: 13 (G) in the first chord, #5 (F# or Gb) in the second chord, the 5th of the third chord (F in Bbm7/Eb) and the b9 (E) in the fourth chord all result from a descending chromatic line that is begun from the G (the 13th) in Bb13. However when you are writing a chart or trying to memorize a tune, simplicity is always the way to go. That’s not to say that there will not be times when you might want to reveal a melodic line through the use of your chord symbol, and this is often done. Sometimes it is even necessary, given the way the melody moves. For example if a melody moves from a 9th to a b9th, it is necessary to reflect this movement in the chord symbol. Otherwise you’ll have a nasty clash between the chord and the melody that the chord supports.

However in most cases, as in the case above, the changes are used to reflect a line that may be quite nice, but is only one possibility among many. Such lines should be realized *by the chord player* as he approaches the basic chords, and not the arranger (unless it is an integral part of the arrangement). Additionally, keeping each chord simpler helps to reveal its harmonic function more clearly. The outline—in this case the applied dominant to V7 (Bb7) and then the V7 (Eb7)—becomes clearer without the excess and superfluous part of the chord symbol.