First Timers Start Here. Five Notes Will Do.

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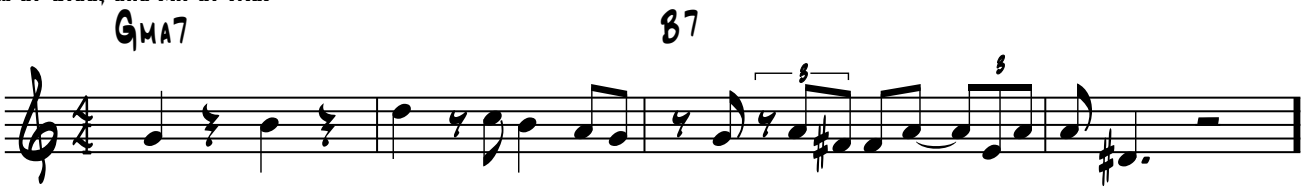
Many methods and teachers provide a harmony, the corresponding "correct" scales, a brief coaching, and then the instruction to go ahead and improvise. Some beginning improvisers are less than comfortable with so few paramenters. This page presents a simple starting point using five notes of a scale and a common jazz rhythm. Subsequent pages guide the development of an improvisational voice based on the melodic fragments presented here.

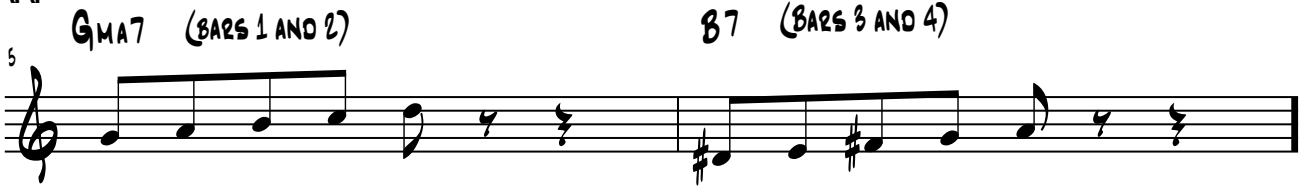
Deciphering chord symbols needn't be a big deal, and while it is true that several scale choices may be possible on any given chord, most great improvisers stick with one scale at a time, at least for a few notes at a time. Exploring a list of scales is useful once you really have control of at least one. Some amazing music has been made with C major.

Check out Vardan Ovsepian playing a phrase of music. The two harmonies are a very common progression from the swing era (and before) and are found in the opening bars of such tunes as Basin Street Blues, Five Foot Two Eyes of Blue, and All of Me.

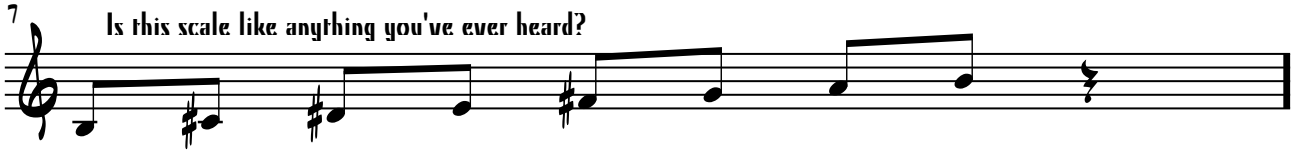


Vardan begins the solo with a root position triad followed by a descent down the first five notes of G major with scale degrees 5 4 3 2 1. Sure, it is simple but yes, this is a real live improvised solo. Listen to the recording. It feels great!

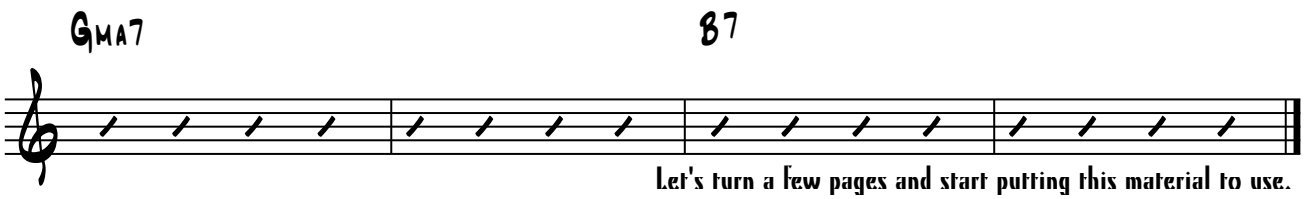
A G major scale is a very common choice when improvisers are playing over a Gma7 (spoken as "G Major Seven") chord. How many different pitches are used in the first two bars? There are 7 notes, but G and B are played twice. There are only 5 pitches used. The same number of pitches is used the next two bars. We needn't use every note of every scale in any given moment.



The notes chosen for Gma7 are straightforward. They are scale degrees 1 through 5. What is going on with the pitches for B7? It doesn't look look good for our scale degree friends 1 2 3 4 5. Improvisers often provide forward motion by balancing clarity with less direct statements, -with less clarity. Remember sharing in conversations where you were given every last detail? -Maybe cool when you really know someone. -Maybe tedious regardless of the relationship. We each enjoy the priviledge of communicating with our own take on how something might be conveyed. The B scale Vardan takes his five notes from is somewhere between B major and G major. The G major scale lingers into the new B harmony and yields a kind of B major scale with a lowered 6th and 7th. We'll come back to the whys and hows of these note choices later. Don't worry, the theory and usage are well-established matters dating back just a bit earlier than Bach. No big secrets here.



How can you apply this knowledge now? What if you can upon this in a big band chart (or elsewhere)?:



Let's turn a few pages and start putting this material to use.