

CHAPTER SIX

Tritone Substitution

Play figure 6-1, the first four bars of Jerome Kern's "All The Things You Are." Now play figure 6-2. What's your reaction to the reharmonization in the third bar? Does it sound more "modern"? Does the progression sound smoother? Do you like it? What you're hearing is *tritone substitution*.

Jazz musicians like to use substitute chords. A substitute chord is just what it sounds like: a chord that substitutes for another chord. The most common type of substitute chord is tritone substitution. Figure 6-3 shows a II-V-I progression in the key of C, immediately followed by the same progression, with a Db7 chord substituting for G7, a tritone substitution. Play both progressions and listen to the difference. Substituting Db7 for G7 makes the bass line chromatic. Bass players love tritone substitution for this reason.

This is how tritone substitution works: Remember from Chapter Two that the two most important notes in seventh chords are the third and the seventh. The interval between the third and seventh of a dominant chord is a tritone (figure 6-4). Since this interval doesn't occur in major seventh or minor seventh chords, its presence *defines* the dominant chord. If you play just the two notes of the tritone, they strongly suggest a V chord, incomplete though it may be. What's so unusual about the tritone is that it's the third and seventh of *two* different dominant seventh chords (figure 6-5). B and F, the third and seventh of G7, are the same notes as Cb and F, the seventh and third of Db7. Because of this, G7 and Db7 can substitute for each other. Incidentally, notes such as B and Cb, which are the same but are spelled differently, are called *enharmonic*.

Figure 6-1

Figure 6-2

Figure 6-3

Figure 6-4

Figure 6-5



Bud Powell

Photo © by Chuck Stewart

The tritone, and the V chord that it is part of, are very unstable and want very much to resolve, as in **figure 6-6**. If you play a tritone ten times in a row before you go to bed tonight (**figure 6-7**), you probably won't be able to fall asleep—you'll have to get up, run to the piano, and resolve it to a I chord (**figure 6-8**). Because the tritone belongs to two dominant seventh chords, you could also resolve it to its *other* I chord (**figure 6-9**).

Figure 6-6

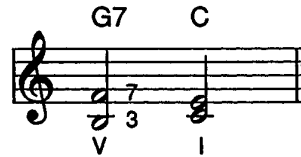


Figure 6-7



Figure 6-8

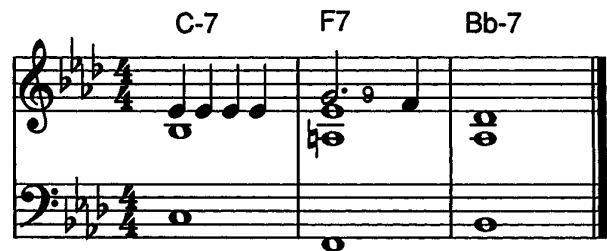


Figure 6-9



B and F, the third and seventh of G7, are also Cb and F, the seventh and third of a Db7 chord. The third and seventh of a V chord always form the interval of a tritone, no matter which note is on top. Remember, this is because the tritone is exactly half an octave, and inverts to another tritone (recall from Chapter One that a tritone inverts to a tritone, 4 and 1/2 plus 4 and 1/2 equal nine). The roots of the G7 and Db7 chords are also a tritone apart.

Figure 6-10



Other than smooth bass motion, another reason to use tritone substitution is that it often makes the melody more interesting. Bars 31-33 of "All The Things You Are" are shown in **figure 6-10**. The melody note on the F7 chord, G, is the ninth of the chord. In **figure 6-11**, B7 substitutes for the original F7 chord, not only making for chromatic bass motion, but also changing the melody note from a ninth to a +5. Reharmonization such as this transforms old standards into tunes that sound fresher and more modern.

Figure 6-11

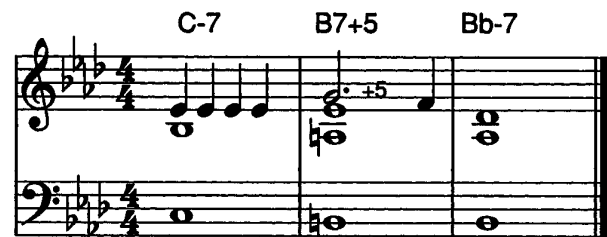


Figure 6-12



The early bebop musicians extended tritone substitution, often preceding the substitute V chord with its II chord. Not only can you substitute Db7 for G7, you can also precede Db7 with Ab-7 to make a II-V progression (figure 6-12). Look back at figures 6-1 and 6-2 to see this idea in action. A7 substitutes for Eb7, and is preceded by E-7 to make a II-V progression—E-7, A7—in figure 6-2. Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, and others used this idea in their original compositions as well as when reharmonizing standards, as shown in figure 6-13, bars 9-10 of Bud's "Dance Of The Infidels."¹

Figure 6-13



The G-7 bar is followed not by the expected C7, which would create a II-V progression, but by Gb7, the tritone substitution of C7. Gb7 is preceded by Db-7, making a II-V, Db-7, Gb7—the II-V tritone substitution of C7.

A cautionary note is necessary here. You can overdo tritone substitution, which can sound terrible if it results in an awkward bass line or clashes with the melody. Don't forget to use your taste as you learn new techniques.

Suggested tunes to work on

Just Friends	All The Things You Are
Tune Up	I Should Care
A Foggy Day	Tea For Two
Yesterdays	Sweet And Lovely

¹ Bud Powell, *The Amazing Bud Powell, Vol. 1*, Blue Note 1503.