

Fun With Runs

By Ted Rosenthal

Right-hand runs are an important element of the jazz pianist's arsenal. They were an integral part of the style of swing and early bop pianists. Teddy Wilson, Earl Hines, Nat Cole, Oscar Peterson, and Billy Taylor all use a sparkling array of right-hand runs. Duke Ellington's runs were idiomatic to him, and were part of his own personal vocabulary. The master of dazzling right-hand runs, of course, was Art Tatum. Even post bebop and modern jazz pianists find effective uses for them. A vocabulary of right-hand runs can be found in almost all jazz pianists' repertoires.

Runs can be used in a variety of ways, filigree and decorative embellishment being among the most common. But runs can also be used to form the "meat" of an improvised phrase. In this way the run can function as a beginning, middle, or end of

a longer improvised phrase. This will often create a dramatic effect, "turning up the heat" in the solo. Runs are a fun component of jazz piano playing and should always sound effortless and dazzling.

What exactly is a right-hand run? It is a group of notes—usually four, five, or six—that form a pattern to race down or up the keyboard outlining a certain jazz harmony or harmonic progression. It is important to note that the number of notes in these runs is not arbitrary. A three-note run would often sound like a standard arpeggio. Similarly, if a run uses seven notes in each descending or ascending pattern, it might sound like a scale.

Another fun (and

helpful) point is that one run will often work over a variety of jazz harmonies. In this way you get a lot of "bang for your buck" in each run that you master. The more thorough your understanding of jazz harmony, of course, the more places you will find to make these runs work. Each run should be practiced in as many keys as fit your hand. This will usually be determined by fingering and, more specifically, be limited by the thumb falling on a black key. But whatever fits your hand and sounds



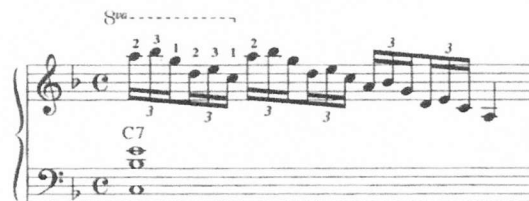
Example 1: A six-note descending run



Example 2: The six-note run, transposed



Example 3: The six-note run, with a standard progression



Example 4: The six-note run, pivoting over the thumb



Example 5: The six-note run, "doubling back"

effortless, no matter what the fingering, should be kept in your arsenal.

The fingering for these runs is different than traditional classical fingering. Most of the runs use only the first three fingers. Even in four-note runs, it is more common and idiomatic to use a fingering such as 3-1-3-1, instead of 4-3-2-1. Limiting the fingers on each pattern gives the run more snap and rhythmic control.

Runs are often learned in "grab-bag" fashion, meaning that a specific run is learned from a specific pianist. Here, I have tried to present runs in a more systematic approach in the hope that a better understanding of the mechanics of runs will allow you to achieve a wider vocabulary of runs, more variation, and your own personal bag of tricks. Nonetheless, many of the right-hand runs I present come largely out of the swing styles of Teddy Wilson and Art Tatum.

Although they are almost scale-like, six-note runs are very effective. Example 1 shows a common six-note descending run over a C dominant 7 harmony. It is scale-like (mixolydian) and omits only the fourth degree (F). This run can be easily transposed to G, D, A, E, Eb, Ab, and Db. Example 2 shows a simple modification of this run on Bb7. C dominant 7 is V7 in the key of F, making it is possible to adapt the first run to an entire ii-V-I progression (see example 3).

Rather than playing straight down the keyboard, pivoting the hand over the thumb adds an easy and interesting variation (see example 4, on C7). This pivot is a common device in many right-hand runs.

Doubling back to create a four-note grouping is another exciting variation. Example 5 demonstrates this figuration as well as an important harmonic concept, the tritone relation. Tritone substitutions are usually used on dominant chords because they share common guide tones (thirds and sevenths). In example 5, the run is still a six-note C dominant run, but it is being played over a Gb altered dominant harmony (altered fifths and ninths). C and Gb are a tritone apart, and C7 and Gb7 share the same guide

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tones (E and Bb). Try this run over C7 and Gb7. You may begin to see how a single run can be used over a number of different harmonies. In this case, you can extrapolate that a dominant run will usually work (and perhaps sound even more colorful) over a dominant harmony a tritone away.

Changing the top note of the original run to the major seventh provides a useful permutation, which is shown in D in "pivot" form in example 6. When a run works over a tonic major chord, it often works well over other diatonic chords in that key. Example 7 shows the same run in the key of A. Notice how the diatonic harmonies in that key, especially, ii-Bm7, V-E7sus, and vi-f#m9, all fit the run.

To save space, I used quarter-notes in the left hand to illustrate some of the different harmonic possibilities for a single right-hand run, but the left-hand harmonies in example 7 do not have to be played literally as quarter notes. (This



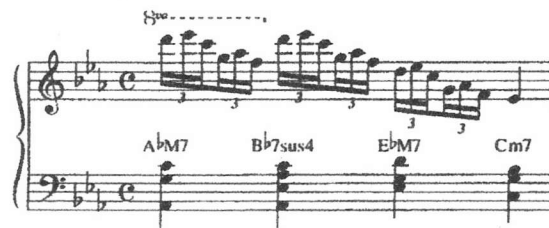
Example 6: The six-note run, top note changed to major 7th



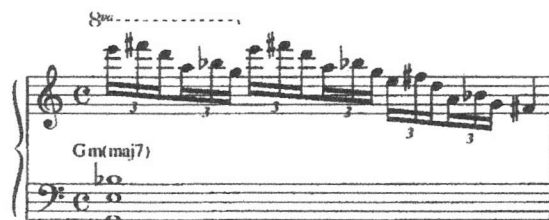
Example 7: The run from example 6, transposed to A



Example 8: The six-note run with minor 3rd, pivot form



Example 9: The run (example 8), over diatonic harmonies



Example 10: The run with minor 3rd, major 7th, pivot form



Example 11: The six-note run over five types of harmonies

will also apply to examples 9, 11, 13, and 15.) If you find that the left-hand voicings encompassing a tenth are too wide, try using just root and seventh, or root, third, and seventh.

Varying the original run (example 1) to include the minor third is shown in "pivot" form on Fm7 in example 8. A minor seventh chord often functions as a iim7 diatonic chord. So if you think of this Fm7 run as being ii minor in the key of Eb, you could try this run on Eb and some of its other associated diatonic harmonies (see example 9).

An extremely useful permutation of the run is to use the minor third in combination with the major seventh, shown in "pivot" form in example 10. This intervallic combination outlines the melodic minor scale, one of the most prevalent sounds in modern jazz harmony. The modes of the melodic minor scale can be used to outline many of the most often-used chords in jazz. Therefore, when a run outlines the melodic minor scale, it will be extremely useful in many harmonic situations.

Example 11 shows the five most commonly used harmonies associated with the melodic minor scale through the use of the six-note run in "double back" formation. The five types of harmonies in example 11—minor-major 7th (tonic minor); dominant 7th (unaltered); altered dominant 7th (altered fifths and ninths); half-diminished (minor 7th b5); and major 7th (augmented fifth)—are used over and over again in jazz harmony. When you master a run that fits the melodic minor scale, you will find a surprising number of uses for it in many harmonic situations—truly a lot of "bang for the (practice) buck."

A six-note run can also be turned into two distinct triad pairs (6 notes = two triads). This provides a different and exciting shape of the run, further de-emphasizing its scale-like quality. Example 12 shows the original run (from example 1), only now the same notes are grouped into two triads—G-minor on beat three, and A-minor on beat four. Although this

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run fits C7, it also contains six of seven notes of the G melodic minor scale, missing only the F#. We can again infer the G melodic minor scale and its associated harmonies. This run will also be quite effective over G-minor, Gb7alt, E half diminished, and BbM7 (see example 13).

Example 14 shows another dazzling configuration of the six-note run grouped into triads (f# and e) over an A7 harmony. If you study the pitches of this run, you will notice it is also related to the E melodic minor scale, missing only D#. This run, therefore, can also be used over E-Minor, Eb7alt, C# half diminished, and GM6 (see example 15).

A solid understanding of jazz harmony is vital to apply and expand on these right-hand runs. For further reading on the use of the melodic minor scale, tritone substitutions, and other jazz harmonic concepts, Mark Levine's *The Jazz Piano Book* and *The Jazz Theory Book* are fine resources. On the subject of using two triads to outline jazz harmonies, Walt Weiskopf has written an excellent book, *Intervallic Improvisation*. In his *Piano & Keyboard* article, "A Jazz Pianist's Tricks" (March/April, 1998), Shelton Berg displays a varied sampling of right-hand runs, many of which derive from the classical repertoire. Also of interest is Ricardo Scivales's book, *The Right-Hand According to Tatum*.

In an earlier *Piano & Keyboard* article ("What Do Jazz Pianists



Example 12: The six-note run turned into two triads



Example 13: The run from example 12, over other harmonies



Example 14: The run from example 12, transposed, reconfigured



Example 15: The run from example 14, over other harmonies

Practice?" November/December, 1996), I stated that the jazz pianist is part pianist and part composer. When learning and working on runs, the pianist should also work like a composer, and pursue an almost limitless amount of variation on each run. Look for alternative rhythmic groupings; change one or more pitch relations; add passing tones; explore harmonic possibilities; and use different lead-ins or resolutions of the runs. Also experiment with inversion and retrograde—whatever goes down must (or can) come up! These are ways to keep the runs fresh, and the creative juices flowing. ✦