

# Patterns

by Eric T. Johnson

In a Lee Konitz masterclass I attended in the mid-80's the great alto sax modernist stated simply that his goal as an improviser was to avoid playing patterns. Such general comments are, I think, intended to make the listener think, rather than accept as a rule. Patterns are by definition the development of ideas. Composition and improvisation are also defined simply as the development of ideas. Tell Bach or Coltrane not to incorporate patterns!

What Konitz wants to avoid is predictability, and patterns at their most mundane are predictable. But they engage as well. My four year old daughter is currently fascinated by patterns. Recognizing them gives her a feeling of control and comprehension. We need repetition, but too much becomes monotony.

Many of the patterns I present here were inspired by listening to the guitarist Ben Monder, who happens to have recorded a trio record with none else but Lee Konitz . These patterns open the ear to different intervallic combinations. For the guitarist they pose some problems in terms of fingerings and picking patterns - challenges that I offer some solutions to but that can be approached in different ways.

I try to avoid barres of any kind. Barres are useful and sometimes necessary when playing linearly, but they can also lead to an unmusical overlapping of notes. Using my suggested left hand fingerings will take some getting used to but eventually should give your playing a more vocal or horn-like quality.

My picking suggestions combine alternate picking with "sweep" picking. These picking patterns become somewhat intuitive with practice but at first are quite challenging. In determining the best picking patterns I look ahead to see where consecutive down or up strokes are possible. Compromises must be made but usually there is one best pattern (just as there is usually one best distinguishing tone - see *Distinguishing Tones*). When perfected, playing the pattern should feel very fluid. You'll probably see a change taking place in your picking technique as a result.

It is the player's responsibility to use patterns artfully. Ideally one's sense of taste will deter one's improvisation from sliding into repeated motifs.

Ways to play patterns but to avoid excessive predictability:

- randomly repeat notes, thus throwing off the pattern.
- displace notes by an octave.
- play 4 note patters in triplets and three note groupings in 8ths or 16ths.
- vary the rhythm within the pattern.

A note about pentatonic patterns - The first interval of a standard pentatonic scale is literally a 3rd, but diatonically it is a 2nd (the distance between adjacent notes in a scale). When I apply a pattern to a scale I am thinking in terms of diatonic intervals, not literal intervals.