

TETRACHORDS pt1

Hi there - *warning!* - I'm in mad scientist mode so if intervals mean nothing to you, you want to get a handle on them before continuing.

The classic definition of a Tetrachord is a 4 note structure with the span of a 4th. In the key of C that could be any 4 note combo starting on C and ending on F (4th up from C). In jazz a less rigid interpretation is often used and any 4 note structure from the 1st to the 5th can be considered to be loosely a "tetrachord". Some refer to them as 4 note CELLS.

The 'go to' structure is 1 2 3 5. As you can see - it's a Major Triad with a 2nd, it can be used over Major, Major 7ths and unaltered Dominants. This particular pattern was popularized by sax player John Coltrane over his ground breaking Giant Steps chord progression.

Ex.1 shows some positions in C. (the notes = C D E G).

CΔ7

Ex1.

T					
A					
B	8 5 7 5	8 10 7 10	8 10 12 10	3 0 2 0	3 5 2 5

T					
A					
B	10 7 9 8	10 12 9 12	10 12 14 12	5 3 5 3	5 7 5 8

Ex.2 shows an excerpt from Giant Steps using the 1235 Tetrachord (1235 Cell). This approach is great for outlining rapid chord changes particularly ones that jump to unexpected keys. Note that in just 3 bars we've gone from the key of B to G to E^b.

Ex2.

	BΔ7	D7	GΔ7	B ^b 7	E ^b Δ7
T					
A					
B	7 9 6 9	5 7 9 7	5 7 9 7	8 5 7 6	8 6 8 6

Using 1235 as a template we can easily adapt for other chord families. 1 2 ^b3 5 works over Minor and Minor 7ths. 1 ^b2 ^b3 5 would fit over the iii minor (Phrygian). 1 ^b2 ^b3 ^b5 would work over the Half Diminished (Locrian). 1 2 ^b3 ^b5 would work over the Half Diminished natural 2 (Locrian nat2).