

5 Ways To Play Like Herbie Hancock

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by George Colligan



Our February 1983 cover photo of Herbie Hancock, by Neil Zlozower.

When you think of modern jazz piano, Herbie Hancock might be the first name that comes to mind. While many know Hancock from crossover hits like “Chameleon” and “Rockit,” his influence crosses all stylistic boundaries. He began his piano career performing Mozart with the Chicago Symphony at age 11. It wasn’t until a friend introduced him to pianists George Shearing and Oscar Peterson that he became interested in jazz. Hancock soon became in demand as an accompanist throughout the 1960s, appearing on many classic Blue Note recordings. He was also one of the first jazz artists to use the Rhodes electric piano and synthesizers, not to mention vocoders and “keytars.” Regardless of the style he plays, Hancock’s playing has certain trademarks. Here are five of them.

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1. Harmony

Hancock is widely admired for his adventurous chord voicings, but the foundations of his style are actually rather conventional.



Ex. 1a is a typical left hand *Cmin7* voicing that Hancock might solo over.



The *Cmin7* and *F13b9* are *tertian*, or built on thirds, while the *Dbmaj7* to *Dmaj7* in **Ex. 1b** are *quartal*, or built on fourths.

Cmaj/D or *Amin7/D* *Ebmaj/F* or *Cmin7/F*

The image shows two chords in a grand staff. The first chord is *Cmaj/D* or *Amin7/D*, consisting of a C major triad (C, E, G) with a D bass note. The second chord is *Ebmaj/F* or *Cmin7/F*, consisting of an E-flat major triad (E-flat, G, B-flat) with an F bass note.

The voicings in **Ex. 1c** are much like those in Hancock’s seminal tune “Maiden Voyage.” These can be thought of as chords with a bass note and a triad based on the flat seventh, which imparts a suspended kind of sound. However, musicians close to Hancock say that he typically thinks of the correlating *minor* sound here: For example, *D7* or *Dsus* would be approached as *Am7* over *D*.

Gdim7/maj7 *Ebmin* *C7#9b9*

The image shows three chords in a grand staff. The first chord is *Gdim7/maj7* (G diminished seventh over G), the second is *Ebmin* (E-flat minor), and the third is *C7#9b9* (C dominant seventh with sharp 9 and flat 9).

Finally, **Ex. 1d** illustrates more dissonant Hancock voicings which are essentially *polychords*.

2. Blues

I often think of Hancock as a highly creative blues musician, because there always seems to be an inherent blues component to his playing.

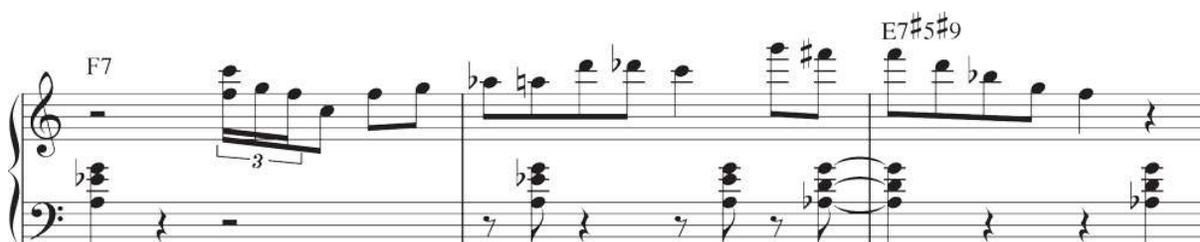
Bb7

The image shows a single line of music in a grand staff. It begins with a *Bb7* chord. The melody consists of several notes, some marked with an 'x' (likely indicating a bent note or a specific articulation), and ends with a whole note rest.



The first examples **Ex. 2a**, **2b**, and **2c** are all reflective of his study of Oscar Peterson.

These ideas have a rolling kind of sound, as if to imitate a human voice or a horn.



Ex. 2d is typical of a passage where Hancock might combine more sophisticated elements while still adding his usual bluesy inflection.

3. Comping and Reharmonization



In his early career, Hancock was in high demand as a sideman because of his sensitive accompaniment. He's known for an incredible sense of touch on the piano, and for *listening* while he comps, so he can interact with a soloist's ideas while leaving space and creating drama. Sometimes, he'll fill out a chord with what we call an *upper structure*, which is a triad that gives us the alterations of a seventh chord. The $Eb7\#11$ chord in **Ex. 3a** is expanded by using an F triad, which is a triad based on the second or ninth of the Eb chord. Note that this voicing could also be used for an $A7\#9\#5$ chord.

Bb7

Musical notation for Example 3b, showing a piano accompaniment for a Bb7 chord. The right hand plays a series of chords and the left hand plays a rhythmic pattern.

The phrase in **Ex. 3b** is something that Hancock might play on a Clavinet, using a percussive attack between the right and left hands to get a Stevie Wonder-esque sound.

Emin7b5 Emin11 E7sus4 E7#5#9

Musical notation for Example 3c, showing four chords: Emin7b5, Emin11, E7sus4, and E7#5#9. Each chord is shown in a separate measure with a bass note of E.

Ex. 3c illustrates Hancock's re-harmonization techniques, using *E* as the bass note.

4. Lines and Shapes

Hancock has an amazing sense of linear improvisation, at times reminiscent of bebop pianists such as Bud Powell and Wynton Kelly.

Fmin7

Musical notation for Example 4a, showing a melodic line for Fmin7. The line features a triplet of eighth notes and a triplet of sixteenth notes.

Ex. 4a illustrates just that type of melodic line.

Cmin

Musical notation for Example 4b, showing a melodic line for Cmin. The line features a series of eighth notes and a final quarter note.

Ex. 4b demonstrates another typical phrase used by Hancock.

Ex. 4c shows a diminished scale over C7b9 chords. The first measure shows the scale ascending and then descending. The second and third measures show the scale with a slash in the bass line, indicating a continuation or a specific rhythmic pattern.

Ex. 4c is our old friend the diminished scale, which Hancock uses quite frequently. This scale is useful because of its symmetrical nature, which makes it ripe for developing your own patterns.

5. Rhythmic and Thematic Development

Hancock has an amazing sense of rhythmic variety in his playing.

Ex. 5a shows rhythmic patterns over Fmin7 and Abminmaj7 chords. The first line shows a sequence of triplets over Fmin7. The second line shows a sequence of triplets over Abminmaj7.

He's able to do things like playing four-note groups of triplets, as in **Ex. 5a**, all the way through a chord sequence without getting lost.

Ex. 5b shows a five-over-four rhythm over Gdim/maj7/Fdim7 chords. The notation shows a complex rhythmic pattern across two staves.

He's also known for playing strong rhythms across the bar line, such as the *Gdim/maj7/Fdim7* in **Ex. 5b**. This is essentially a five-over-four rhythm.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef. The first staff begins with a $B\flat$ min7 chord and continues with a sequence of notes and chords, including $A\flat$ min11/ $D\flat$. The second staff repeats the initial $B\flat$ min7 chord and the $A\flat$ min11/ $D\flat$ chord. The notation includes various rhythmic values and accidentals, illustrating the triadic linear device with octaves.

Ex. 5c illustrates Hancock's use of the *triadic linear* device combined with octaves, using repeated passages that help build tension.



Pianist, composer, and educator **George Colligan** has worked with Cassandra Wilson, Buster Williams, Don Byron, Ravi Coltrane, and many others. Most recently, he joined drummer Jack DeJohnette's new quintet. Colligan has appeared on over 100 CDs, 19 of them as a leader. His latest release is *Come Together* on the Sunnyside label. Colligan is Assistant Professor of Jazz Piano at the University of Manitoba. Find out more at georgecolligan.com. - Jon Regen

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[NB: audio file on url]