

5 Ways To Play Like MCCOY TYNER

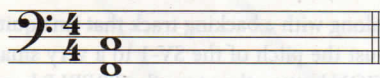
When I was first learning jazz piano, McCoy Tyner's style had a big influence on my playing. Years later, during a set with saxophonist Gary Bartz at a jazz club in Washington, DC, I was doing my best McCoy emulation when McCoy Tyner himself strolled right past my piano! After the set, he was extremely complimentary of my playing, which made me feel great. Later, I asked him, "How do you feel that so many pianists have copied your style?" He replied, "I consider it a compliment." Just then, an eavesdropping friend sung her best "air McCoy" impression: "Fifth, fourth . . . fifth, fourth, fourth." Tyner smiled at her and replied, "There's a lot more to it than *that*!" To play like McCoy, it's important to understand a few basic building blocks of his immediately identifiable piano sound. George Colligan



1. Fifths in the Left Hand.

One of McCoy's signature sounds is playing fifths in his left hand, usually the root and fifth of whatever the designated chord is. In **Ex. 1**, we're voicing an *F7* chord in this way by simply playing *F* and *C* in the left hand. Much of the music Tyner played with John Coltrane was modal or pedal-point based. Playing the root and fifth in the lower register solidifies the harmony, and can also set up a dialogue with the drummer.

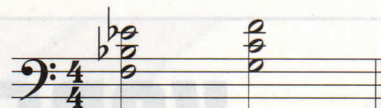
Ex. 1 *F7*



2. Perfect Fourths in the Left Hand.

We tend to think of Western harmony in terms of thirds, but during the Middle Ages in Europe, thirds were thought of as *dissonant*. Intervals of fourths and fifths were considered resolutions. An added advantage of playing the perfect fourth in the left hand is that it gives a grounded, "home base" quality to the harmony. In other words, fourths sound *solid*. Tyner often plays two perfect fourths based on the root, as in **Ex. 2**, where an *F7* chord is voiced using the notes *F*, *Bb*, and *Eb*, or he might play one with the root on top (for example, *F7* as *G*, *C*, and *F*).

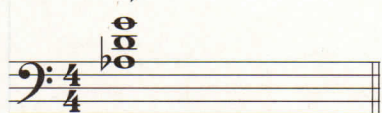
Ex. 2 *F7*



3. Augmented and Perfect Fourths in the Left Hand.

These voicings have more tension due to their use of the *tritone* interval: a sharp fourth. Tyner will often shift from this voicing to our previous voicing and back. So, for a $B\flat 7$ chord, he might play $A\flat$, D , and G as in **Ex. 3a**, then he'll shift to $B\flat$, $E\flat$, and $A\flat$ as in **Ex. 3b**. In "Blues on the Corner," he plays F , B , and E against a $B\flat 7$ chord, (**Ex. 3c**), which is quite dissonant. Tyner is a master of tension and release, and **Ex. 3d** shows how Tyner combined perfect and augmented voicings on his version of the Antonio Carlos Jobim classic "Wave," from the album *Supertrios*.

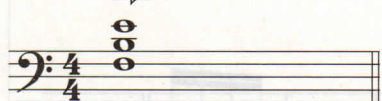
Ex. 3a $B\flat 7$



Ex. 3b



Ex. 3c $B\flat 7$



Ex. 3d Cm



4. Chromatic Playing and Two-Handed Comping.

"Planing" refers to intervals that remain intact as they move around. In **Ex. 4a**, we're planing a series of left-hand fourth voicings. *Diatonic* planing stays in the current harmonic key or mode, as in the Dorian mode of **Ex. 4b**, and *chromatic* planing moves without regard to the key center, as in **Ex. 4c**. Tyner sometimes keeps the same left-hand voicing intact, moving it relative to a home key, until he resolves it. Also notice that **4b** and **4c** use combinations of fourths and thirds to make smooth voicings across *both* hands. Listen to John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* for examples in context.

Ex. 4a



Ex. 4b Cm
Dorian Mode



Ex. 4c Cm Dm Em $F\sharp m$ $G\sharp m$ $B\flat m$



5. Using the Pentatonic Scale.

We often hear five-note or *pentatonic* scales (**Ex. 5a**) in Asian and African music. Tyner uses his unique improvisational sense to manipulate them in this example from his song "Blues on the Corner" (**Ex. 5b**). Often when a chord is dominant, Tyner will play a minor pentatonic based on the fifth of the chord. But he might also play a minor pentatonic based on the root of the dominant chord, then go off in another direction (**Ex. 5c**).

Ex. 5a Minor Pentatonic Scale



Ex. 5b

E \flat 7



Ex. 5c

B \flat 7



George Colligan is a pianist and composer who 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. Jon Regen

More Online Get these links and more at keyboardmag.com/june2010



Audio examples of these lessons on our site!



Find out where McCoy Tyner's playing live.



Hear McCoy use these techniques on a killer solo rendition of "Giant Steps."