



5 Ways To Play Like **KENNY KIRKLAND**

Kenny Kirkland was a true keyboard phenomenon. From his post-bop piano proddings with trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, to his famed, genre-defying keyboard work with Sting and his own small groups, Kirkland's singular sound changed the landscape of modern music. The collective keyboard community was shocked and saddened by his untimely passing in 1998 at the age of 44.

Kenny Kirkland was truly one of my piano heroes. Hearing his

unique harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary on Wynton Marsalis' seminal album *Black Codes from the Underground* was a revelation for me. His playing had historical and technical depth, but also a tremendous wellspring of invention and funkiness to it. Listen closely to Kirkland in action and you'll hear everything from Bud Powell to Bela Bartok to James Brown. Let's look into the rhythmic and harmonic hallmarks of Kenny Kirkland's playing. George Colligan



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. 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

1. Swing.

Kirkland, like most of my favorite jazz pianists, has a unique way of swinging his eighth-notes. My theory is that there's always an implied triplet feel in his playing, even when he plays only eighth- or quarter-notes. Also, some of the eighth-notes are almost ghosted, *i.e.*, more felt than heard. The best way to capture this kind of swing feel is to listen and try to internalize it. A tune like Kirkland's own "Steepian Faith" has passages similar to this example that illustrate his buoyant phrasing.



2. Triplet Feel.

Kirkland might play something like **Ex. 2a**, where he plays two triplet eighth-notes in the right hand, and the chord on the third triplet in the left. He might do this diatonically, pentatonically, or even more chromatically in nature to build tension. **Ex. 2b** is a Kirkland-esque fourth pattern that resembles something you might normally hear a saxophonist or other horn soloist play.

Ex. 2a



Ex. 2b



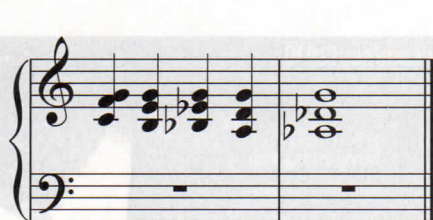
3. Harmony.

If you saw my "5 Ways To Play Like McCoy Tyner" lesson in the June '10 issue, you'll remember that voicings in fourths are a common sound in the modern jazz piano language. But Kirkland uses them in a surprising way—while Tyner might play a voicing with a tritone and a perfect fourth (with the fourth on top), Kirkland will invert it and put the *tritone* on top (**Ex. 3a**). He also might keep the top note constant and move the inner voices (**Ex. 3b**). Kirkland also might play polychords as in **Ex. 3c**, where the $F\sharp/E$ could be played over an $EMaj7\sharp 11$ or an $E7\sharp 11$. The $Edim7/Fdim7$ could be used, believe it or not, over a $G7$ chord. This harmony is derived from the G diminished scale: $G, A\flat, B\flat, B, D\flat, D, E$, and F .

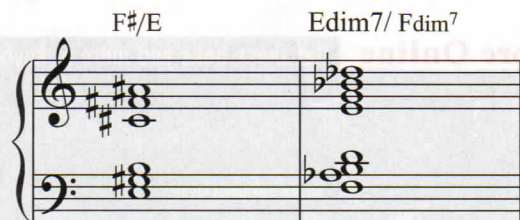
Ex. 3a



Ex. 3b



Ex. 3c

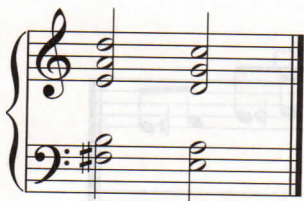


4. Comping.

Again, whether he was comping for Wynton Marsalis, Michael Brecker, or Sting, Kirkland had an outstanding rhythmic feel. **Ex. 4a** is typical of Kirkland's comping with someone like saxophonist Branford Marsalis. Often times, he alternates between two fourth voicings on the same chord. **Ex. 4b** shows how he might play those voicings polyrhythmically to create tension—a Kirkland trademark.

Ex. 4a

D7(sus4)



Ex. 4b

D7(sus4)

Dmaj7



5. Signature Phrases.

Every musician has their own signature phrases which makes their sound identifiable, and Kirkland is no exception. **Ex. 5a** is a typical Kirkland phrase with a bebop shape to it. **Ex. 5b** has a mixture of pentatonics, bebop, and chromaticism. **Ex. 5c** uses that diminished scale again. This is a good one to work through all keys, and to sequence in minor thirds.

Ex. 5a

Cmin



Ex. 5b

Cmin



Ex. 5c

C7(#9)



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Kenny Kirkland playing
"Steepian Faith."



Kenny tearing it up
with Sting on "Been
Down So Long."



George Colligan plays
audio examples of
this lesson.