

How  
To Voice  
Standards  
At The Piano:  
THE MENU

by Mark Levine

SHER Music Co.

# *endorsements for Mark Levine*

Mark Levine is a wellspring of knowledge on modern jazz piano playing... his brilliant playing is proof that he knows what he's talking about.

– *Mulgrew Miller*

There's a Mark Levine Book called Jazz Theory. It's really just theory that most musical genres function off of. It's fun to get a sense of what's going on with music anyway. I would suggest getting it and doing two pages a day just to study it and learn to read some basic piano, even if you can only pick out one note at a time. I think it's really important for all musicians to have a basic ability to read piano music, it's not like you have to be able to sight read Bach inventions, but just to know where the notes are to pick them out on the piano.

Start by reading two pages, then practice the two pages. The next day recap what you've done and do a page or two more. Work your way through the book and as you work through it you'll notice the way you hear and the way you sing, will automatically start to change. It's like looking at the world and not knowing it's all blurry. You can make your way through and then you get glasses and everything gets clearer and clearer. I think that's really important.

– *Esperanza Spalding*

Mark combines soul and intellect in an easily understandable manner.

– *Jamey Aebersold*

He's a very talented pianist. He's very cognizant of where you're going with the music. We were playing mostly original compositions, and some of my tunes aren't the easiest to play, and he handled them beautifully. He has a very fresh expression when he solos.

– *Harold Land*

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*For Norma & Rosie*

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# *table of contents*

- 1 CHAPTER ONE: The Menu  
*Alice in Wonderland*
- 23 CHAPTER TWO: Applying the Menu  
*You're My Everything*
- 43 CHAPTER THREE: Minimalism  
*Beatrice*
- 53 EPHEMERA
- 55 APPENDIX ONE  
The Melodic Minor scale
- 61 APPENDIX TWO  
Drop2

# chapter one: the menu

There is a reason why jazz harmony is called jazz *theory* instead of jazz *truth*. The only *truth* is in the music itself. Theory is an intellectual dance we do around the music, trying to explain what's happening and why one thing sounds beautiful to some of us, and another sounds terrible.

This book shows my own approach to voicing standard songs composed by masters like Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and so on.

Some voicings could also be considered standard. Two jazz pianists, one in New York the other in Shanghai, will likely play the same left-hand voicing for D-7. Only a few are played often enough to be thought of as “standard”: *left-hand voicings, upper structures, fourth chords, So What chords, stacked thirds, the Kenny Barron Chord*, and so on. You will need to practice all of these chords separately, in every key, to gain the skill you'll need to play them intuitively.

## ***About notation***

The 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> are the same note. 6<sup>th</sup> is notated on major and minor chords, the 13<sup>th</sup> on a dominant chord. The 4<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> are the same note, used about equally. I notate major seventh chords as “C.” Many jazz musicians notate it as CΔ. Take your choice, but be able to understand someone else's choices!

## **ALICE IN WONDERLAND**

“Alice in Wonderland”<sup>1</sup> is a song by Sammy Fain and Bob Hilliard.<sup>2</sup> **FIGURE 1-1** shows a lead sheet of the tune, with the changes that I usually use. Different pianists use different sets of chords in standards, and this may not match the lead sheet of the ones you might have.<sup>3</sup>

Later in this chapter we will break the song up into smaller sections. Bars 1-4, for example, indicates just the melody and chord symbol. Bars 1-4a indicates the same, plus the addition of the correct chords from the Menu.

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1 I will abbreviate the title of the song as “Alice” in the text.

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3 Listen to Bill Evans' version, on The Complete Village Vanguard Recordings, 1961.

# CHAPTER 1

FIGURE 1-1

## ALICE IN WONDERLAND

MUSIC BY SAMMY FAIN

LYRIC BY BOB HILLIARD

PIANO

**A** D-7 G7<sup>ALT</sup> C F

G7 E7<sup>ALT</sup> A-7 Eb7

G<sup>SUS</sup> G7<sup>+4</sup><sub>b9</sub> C A7<sup>ALT</sup>

D-7 G<sup>SUS</sup> 1. Bb7<sup>+4</sup> Eb7

2. C A7<sup>ALT</sup> A7<sup>b9</sup> **B** D7 G<sup>SUS</sup>

FINE E7<sup>ALT</sup> A-7 D-7 G7

E-7 F D7 F7

E-7 A7 D-7 Bb7

Ab7<sup>+4</sup> G7<sup>b9</sup> **D.C. AL FINE**

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## THE VOICINGS

*The Menu* shows the available voicings you will need to play “Alice.” Fold down a corner of this page, bookmark it, or photocopy it, as you will be referring back to it regularly.

### THE MENU

#### LEFT-HAND VOICINGS

##### A POSITION

##### B POSITION

**A POSITION:** D-7 (1, 3, 5, 7, 9), G7 (3, 5, 7, 9), C6/9 (6, 8, 9)

**B POSITION:** D-7 (3, 5, 7, 9), G7 (3, 5, 7, 9), C (3, 5, 7, ROOT)

#### SO WHAT CHORDS

**SO WHAT CHORDS:** D-7 (3, 5), Bb (7), D-7 (7), Bb (9)

#### FOURTH CHORDS

**FOURTH CHORDS:** C (ROOT, 5, 7), E-7 (3, 2, 0), D-6 (ROOT, 5), G7 (5, 9), G<sub>sus</sub> (1, 3), G7 (ROOT, 9, 5), G<sub>sus</sub> (9)

#### UPPER STRUCTURES

**UPPER STRUCTURES:** C<sub>7+4</sub> (1, 3, #11), C<sub>7ALT</sub> (ROOT, +9, b13), C<sub>7b9</sub> (b9, 13), C<sub>7b9</sub> (1, 3, +4, 13)

II                                  bVI                                  VI                                  #iv MINOR

#### STACKED 3RDS

#### KENNY BARRON CHORD

#### THE "EVERYTHING" CHORD

**STACKED 3RDS:** D-7 (4)

**KENNY BARRON CHORD:** D-7 (4)

**THE "EVERYTHING" CHORD:** G<sub>7ALT</sub> (ROOT)

### *Left-hand Voicings*

On the first line of The Menu are the *left-hand voicings*.<sup>4</sup> In these voicings, the entire weight of the chord is carried by the left hand, leaving your right hand to either play the melody or improvise.<sup>5</sup> The left-hand voicing played will work with the melody note that is shown in the lead sheet of the tune.

Left-hand Voicings come in two positions: “A” and “B.” If you drop into a jazz club from Chicago to Mexico City, you’ll hear the jazz pianist play both the “A” and “B” positions a lot. You will notice that all six voicings are *rootless*. There is no “D” in the D-7 chord, and no “G” in the G7 chord. There is a “C” in the C major chord, but its not the bottom note, where the root is traditionally found.

Play them several times until you get used to *hearing them* as rootless chords. And practice them in all 12 keys.

All voicings shown below the left-hand voicings are two-handed voicings. Left-hand voicings and two-handed voicings are coequal – they both sound fine, either separately or combined in playing a tune. You can play entire tunes just using left-hand voicings, and they will sound fine. This book gives prominence to two-handed voicings, because the more notes you play, the more colors you have, and they sound fuller.

### *So What chords*

On the second line of The Menu are the *So What Chords*.<sup>6</sup> Bill Evans played this voicing prominently on Miles Davis’ important recording of the song of the same name.<sup>7</sup>

The four chords shown are all the same, with an extra doubled “C” on top in the third and fourth bars. Instead of memorizing them by their positions in a D-7 chord (root - 4<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup>), its much simpler to look at the intervals between the notes. From the bottom up, the intervals are 4<sup>th</sup>- 4<sup>th</sup>- 4<sup>th</sup>- major 3<sup>rd</sup>. That’s much easier than memorizing their position in the chord itself. After practice, your hands will automatically shape themselves to the chord. This type of learning by feel is called *muscle memory*. Practice them around the *Cycle of 5ths*.

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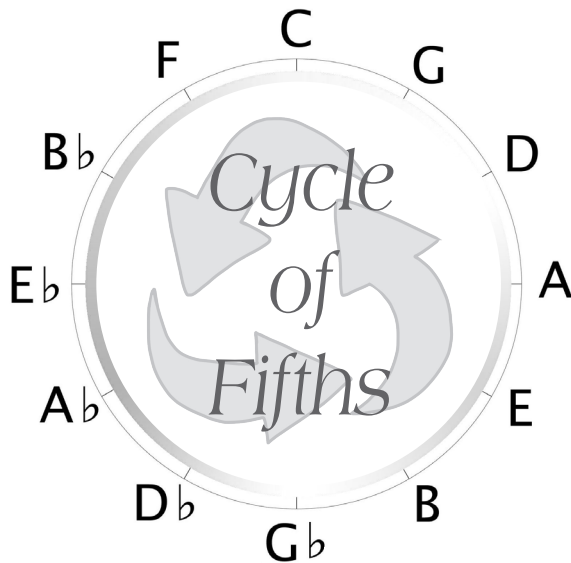
4 Abbreviated as “LHV” in the music.

5 The “B” position of left-hand voicings are shown in the treble clef, but are played by the left hand.

6 Abbreviated as “SW” in the music.

7 Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue*, Columbia Records.

The Cycle of 5ths is shown here:



Jazz musicians use the cycle of 5ths to practice, because it follows the direction of most harmony found in standards and jazz tunes. Unlike classical musicians, we go around the cycle *counterclockwise*.

Look at the roots of a II-V-I progression, D-7, G7, C. D, G, and C,<sup>8</sup> follow each other *counterclockwise* around the cycle. I had a dickens of a time drilling this into my students' heads while teaching for a couple of years at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. They had all learned the cycle *clockwise*. Their usual

reaction was "we already know it clockwise, so why should we learn it *counterclockwise*?"

As an example, the roots of the first few chords of the standard "All The Things You Are" are F-7, Bb-7, Eb7, AbΔ, DbΔ...five chords in a row (F, Bb, Eb, Ab, Db) whose roots follow counterclockwise around the cycle. See **FIGURE 1-3**. So when you are learning a new voicing, practice it *counterclockwise*.

FIGURE 1-3

ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE

JEROME KERN

F-7                      Bb-7                      Eb7                      Ab                      Db

<sup>8</sup> Many jazz musicians notate a major chord as "CΔ." Because "C" can indicate either a C major seventh chord and a C69 chord, I opt for the single letter "C".

# CHAPTER 1

Another tip: don't wiggle your fingers as you go from the same voicing to the next one. *The voicing will feel the same no matter what key you are in.* You may pivot your hand when changing a black key to a white key, but your fingers still retain the same shape. *Muscle memory, or tactile memory* is what lodges in your brain.

Notice that the same voicing can be used on two different chords: D-7 and Bb. D-7 has a "D" in the root and the 5<sup>th</sup> in the melody, as that's the way it is usually played on a D-7 chord. The same voicing also works as a rootless Bb, with "A," the major 7<sup>th</sup> now in the melody.

In the third bar, the added "C" is now the minor 7<sup>th</sup> of a D-7 chord, and in the fourth bar, the extra C is now the 9<sup>th</sup> of the Bb chord. Don't think for a moment that a bass player's note determines whether the chord is intended to be D-7 or Bb. I find that it sounds like either, or both, and your audience won't start throwing things at you, whether or not you're playing with a bass player.

## Fourth Chords

Now look at the third line of *The Menu*. These are the *Fourth Chords*,<sup>9</sup> so called because they are made up entirely of *diatonic fourths*. "*Diatonic*" means "in the key," as all of the chords shown here are in the key of C. Each chord is made up of 4ths, but one of them, between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> notes of the C major scale (F and B in this case), is an *augmented 4<sup>th</sup>*, better known as a *tritone*.<sup>10</sup>

In the *Menu* there are seven fourth chords on this line, some played more often than others. Oddly enough, the root of the chord is usually the top note. The first one shows perfect 4ths extending upward from E, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of a C major chord, to C, the root, on top. If you're playing a song with the root in the melody of a major chord, as the Eb on the first chord in "On Green Dolphin St," or as the C on the first chord of "What's New?" (FIGURE 1-4), this is an ideal voicing.

"ON GREEN DOLPHIN ST"      FIGURE 1-4      "WHAT'S NEW?"

Chords shown: Eb, G7, C

9 Abbreviated as "4ths," in the music, not to be confused with "4<sup>th</sup>," a note in a chord.

10 An ancient musical term, denoting an interval made up of three whole-steps.

***Back to the The Menu, Fourth Chords line***

Notice that there is a “5” next to G in this chord, as G is the 5<sup>th</sup> in a C major chord.

*Fourth chords* are so spread out that omitting the note on top creates a good voicing for a C major chord with the 5<sup>th</sup> in the melody: only four notes, but a very full sounding chord.

The third and fourth chords on the *Fourth Chords* line are the same voicing, because they will work on two different chords, D-6 and G7. Notice that on the D-6 version either the root on top or the 5<sup>th</sup> on top works. On the G7 version, either the 5<sup>th</sup> on top or the 9<sup>th</sup> on top works. (Remember, there is a tritone in these voicings, between F and B, but it is still a *diatonic* fourth.) And again, don’t worry about the bass player. When you’re playing with one, if he or she plays either the G or D in the bass, it won’t make any difference. Bass players don’t play the roots of chords all the time.

In the fifth bar of the *fourth chords* is a *sus chord*. This chord is associated with Carole King, Stevie Wonder and others in pop music of the 1960 and 1970s, but was first popularized in jazz by Herbie Hancock on his classic song “Maiden Voyage”<sup>11</sup> in the 1960s. This is an unusual voicing for a sus chord, made up entirely of 4ths, with the 13<sup>th</sup> in the melody. It can also be played as a four-note chord, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> in the melody. Just omit the top note.

Note also that this “sus” chord has a B, the major 3<sup>rd</sup> of the Gsus chord. It is a well-known myth that “the 4<sup>th</sup> takes the place of the 3<sup>rd</sup> in a sus chord,” or “don’t ever play a major 3<sup>rd</sup> in a sus chord!” If you doubt that, listen to Herbie Hancock playing an Ebsus chord on the bridge of *Maiden Voyage*, with G, the 3<sup>rd</sup>, on the top of the voicing.

In the sixth bar of the *fourth chords* is a six-note chord, G7, a voicing often played as the first chord in a blues. Because this chord voicing has six notes, any of the top three notes: G (the root), D (the 5<sup>th</sup>), or A (the 9<sup>th</sup>) can serve as the melody. So the chord can be played as a four- five- or six-note chord.

The 4<sup>th</sup> voicing in the last bar on the *fourth chord* line is the same as the voicing for Gsus in the fifth bar, but with an additional 4<sup>th</sup> on top: A, the 9<sup>th</sup> of the chord.

***Upper Structures***

Now look at the line of The Menu called *Upper Structures*.<sup>12</sup> These came into prominence in jazz piano back in the 1950s, as played by Bill Evans and Wynton Kelly<sup>13</sup>. They consist of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, or *tritone* of a dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord, with a triad

11 Herbie Hancock, *Maiden Voyage*, Blue Note Records, 1965.

12 Abbreviated as US in the music.

13 On Miles Davis’ “*Someday My Prince Will Come*,” Columbia Records.

superimposed on top. They are played on dominant chords with alterations<sup>14</sup> that is, dominant chords with at least one alteration (b9, +9, +4, or b13), often with more than one. Upper structures are kind of backwards: the most delicate and unstable interval, the *tritone*, is on the bottom, while the strongest and most robust chord, a major triad, is on the top. The overtone series can play havoc with this instability, which you must pay attention to when problems arise (more on this below).

First, look at the Roman numeral underneath each chord: the first chord, played on a C7+4, has a II underneath it. That is because the *root* of the triad, D, is a major second above the *root* of the notated chord (C7+4). Hence “II.” Roman numerals differentiate between different upper structure chords.

In addition, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> on the bottom of the voicing can be reversed, putting the 7<sup>th</sup> on the bottom and the 3<sup>rd</sup> on top.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, because triads can be played in three different positions – root position, first inversion, and second inversion – any of the three notes of the triad can be used as a melody note. **FIGURE 1-5** shows a C7+4 chord with five choices to harmonize a melody note. Either the 13<sup>th</sup>, +4, 9<sup>th</sup>, or 13<sup>th</sup> can be in the melody. See how the left hand *tritone* is reversed, first with the 3<sup>rd</sup> on the bottom, then the 7<sup>th</sup>, as the chord rises on your piano. Both left hand and right hand need to be fairly close together for *upper structures* to sound good.

**FIGURE 1-5** UPPER STRUCTURE CHORD “II” IN VARIOUS POSITIONS

The figure shows five measures of music in 4/4 time. Each measure has a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. Above each treble staff is the chord symbol C7+4. The treble staff contains a single note representing a melody note: 13TH, +4TH, 9TH, +4TH, and 13TH. The bass staff contains a single note representing a tritone: b9, b9, b9, b9, and b9. Below each bass staff is a Roman numeral II. The vertical distance between the melody note and the tritone note is consistently small, illustrating the 'close together' voicing mentioned in the text.

Notice also that the space between your hands is kept small, never more than a 4<sup>th</sup>, because if it increases by anything more than that, the chord will sound somewhat empty. In addition, if the melody note is played high on the piano (as it is in the last bar on the line), it needs to be doubled, to avoid a tinny, “music box” effect, and to get a fuller sound (see fifth bar of Figure 1-5). So a pianist has five different choices to use these voicings with a melody note on a dominant chord with a +4.

14 Not to be confused with the “alt” chord.

15 Shown as both in Figure 1-5.

In The Menu, note that the *upper structure* voicing in the last bar has a *lower case*<sup>16</sup> Roman numeral below it, because it has an F# *minor* triad on top.

### *A Few Other Voicings*

The last line of The Menu shows three different voicings: *Stacked 3rds*, the *Kenny Barron chord*, and the *Everything chord*.

*Stacked 3rds* is just that: Play the root of a minor 7<sup>th</sup> chord in your left hand and add 3<sup>rd</sup>s above it, all white notes because D-7 is in the key of C. The top note is “G,” the 4<sup>th</sup> of a D-7 chord. This chord is often played on a minor 7<sup>th</sup> chord with the 4<sup>th</sup> in the melody. Remember, the fourth and eleventh are interchangeable terms: they both mean the same note.

The *Kenny Barron chord*<sup>17</sup> is another option to play on a minor 7<sup>th</sup> chord with the 4<sup>th</sup> in the melody, but is much more spread out. Rather than memorize each note’s position in the D-7 chord (root, 5<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>), look at your hands as you play this chord. Both your left and right hands are playing two perfect 5ths, with a half-step between your thumbs. When learning to find this chord, aim your left hand little finger at the root, your right hand little finger at the 4<sup>th</sup>, and the other notes will fall naturally on the correct notes in the middle. Again, *muscle memory*.

The *Everything chord* in the very last bar of The Menu contains all seven notes in the *altered scale*, and is played on an *alt chord*<sup>18</sup> with the root in the melody.

## VOICING “ALICE IN WONDERLAND”

Now look at **FIGURE 1-6**, another view of “Alice.” One additional item has been added to the lead sheet of “Alice” shown in *Figure 1-1*. To the right of each melody note is a number denoting its place in the chord (root, 9<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and so on).

16 “iv minor” instead of “IV.”

17 After the great pianist Kenny Barron.

18 The alt chord and alt scale are built off of the 7<sup>th</sup> mode from the *melodic minor* scale, a type of scale and harmony very different from the major scale, and explored more fully in Appendix I.