

What's Between The Lines

John Coltrane • Giant Steps



In an '80s guitar rag, if memory serves, there's this rad washroom picture of several hard-core Guitar Institute of Technology students. While they're urinating, they've got their axes strapped on backwards. An accompanying article describes how pupils practice in the school's halls and in the cafeteria, too. Saxophonist John Coltrane—an entirely different sort of shredder—was similarly obsessive when it came to practicing. He was known to woodshed in club dressing rooms and even in homes at which he was a dinner guest. Highly curious and spiritual, Coltrane constantly sought new modes of expression, yielding numerous jazz advances: an expansion of the harmonic language, the acceptance of soprano saxophone as a modern improvising instrument, the introduction of non-Western music as a springboard for improvisation, and the validation of free playing (i.e., open-ended improvisation).

Coltrane's first high-profile gig was with the big band of trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie

(1949–1951). During his mid- to late-1950s apprenticeships with trumpeter Miles Davis and pianist Thelonious Monk, Coltrane matured rapidly, and in 1960, he debuted his own advanced quartet, comprised of pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Reggie Workman, and drummer Elvin Jones. That classic quartet performed for six years, recording such seminal pieces as a modal version of Rodgers and Hart's "My Favorite Things" (1960) and the original suite "A Love Supreme" (1964). By the time of his premature death in 1967, Coltrane was widely regarded as a jazz saint. The following transcription will expedite learning Coltrane's "Giant Steps" (1959), which he recorded shortly before forming the classic quartet. In seriously studying jazz, a mastery of this composition is compulsory.

COLTRANE SUBSTITUTIONS

As Coltrane began to feel encumbered with traditional ii-V-I changes, he modified them to suit his sophisticated harmonic

conception. Fig. 1A contains a standard ii-V-I progression in E $\flat$ major, while Fig. 1B features what are known as "Coltrane substitutions." After the ii chord (Fm7) of E $\flat$, a dominant chord a half step higher (F $\sharp$ 7) is played. The F $\sharp$ 7 resolves to Bmaj7, a new I chord. Following that chord, a V7 chord a minor 3rd away (D7) is featured, resolving to its I chord (Gmaj7). Another minor 3rd movement brings the progression to B $\flat$ 7, the original key's V7 chord, which resolves to E $\flat$ maj7, the I chord.

The chord progression of "Giant Steps," based on Coltrane substitutions, may initially seem intimidating. To simplify, consider that all chords belong to one of three equidistant key centers (E $\flat$, G, or B). Harmonically, the first eight measures are more active; there is a downward major 3rd modulation in every bar; in the second eight measures, there is an upward modulation every other bar.

THE MELODIC LANGUAGE

While it may sound incredibly complex, Coltrane's improvisation is based on simple formulae; he tended to outline chords in four-note diatonic groupings: 1-2-3-5, 1-3-5-7, 3-5-7-9, 5-3-2-1, etc. For the E $\flat$ chord, he sometimes employed the E $\flat$ major scale (E $\flat$ -F-G-A $\flat$ -B $\flat$ -C-D). A B $\flat$ bebop scale (B $\flat$ -C-D-E $\flat$ -F-G-A $\flat$ -A) was sometimes featured in the Fm7-B $\flat$ 7 measure. Think of that scale as the major scale with the addition of a lowered 7th. Coltrane used few chromatic alterations in the solo. One example is the E $\flat$ note in the 10th measure of section B1. That note is the $\flat$ 9 of the D7 chord.

To successfully improvise over "Giant Steps" changes, start very simply and slowly (145 bpm or less): follow the form, playing only the chords' roots. Next, play the root, 3rd, and 5th of each chord, and after that, the root, 3rd, 5th, and 7th of each chord. Now you're ready to tackle some of Coltrane's four-note groupings over each chord, such as shown in Fig. 2A, which features the 1-2-3-5 pattern. Then, mix the 1-2-3-5 pattern with an 8 (1)-7-9 pattern on each dominant 7th chord [Fig. 2B]. With the transcription as a guide, select your favorite patterns and practice them with this systematic approach. Eventually, navigating this exciting progression at top speed will become second nature. □

Fig. 1A ii-V-I Progression

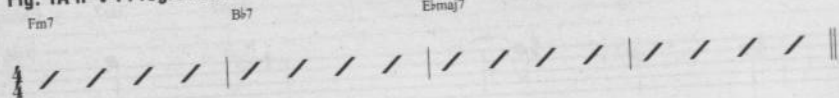


Fig. 1B ii-V-I Progression with Coltrane Substitutions

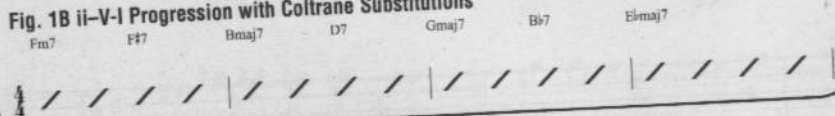


Fig. 2A

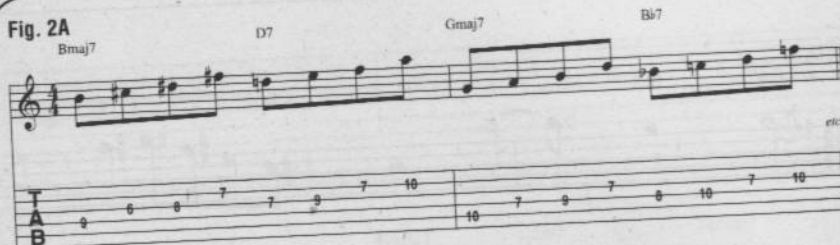


Fig. 2B



GIANT STEPS

As Recorded by John Coltrane
(From the Atlantic Recording GIANT STEPS)

Transcribed by Adam Perlmutter

By John Coltrane

A Head

Fast Swing ♩ = 290 (♩ = ♩³)

*Gtr. 1 **Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 B♭7 E♭maj7 Am7 D7

mf

TAB: 7 7 9 10 8 9 7

*Tenor sax arr. for gtr.
**Chord symbols reflect basic harmony.

Gmaj7 B♭7 E♭maj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 B♭7 E♭maj7

7 8 10 6 9 10 8 8

Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7 Bmaj7 4th time, to Coda ⊕ 1. Fm7 B♭7 E♭maj7

9 7 7 8 8 7 7 8 8 11

C#m7 F#7 2. Fm7 B♭7 E♭maj7 C#m7 F#7

(11) 7 7 7 8 8 11 11 9 9 12 11 9

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B1 Saxophone Solo

Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

B2

Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

Giant Steps

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

Fretboard diagram for the first system: 7 8 7 7 10 9 8 | 8 10 8 11 9 11 9 11 | 11 8 11 10 9 10 | 10 7 8 10 10 7 10

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

Fretboard diagram for the second system: 8 9 8 8 | 7 10 9 8 7 10 7 9 | 7 9 7 10 8 10 7 6 | 6 7

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

Fretboard diagram for the third system: 6 7 9 6 7 8 6 9 | 10 7 8 10 8 10 7 10 | 8 8 | 11 9 9 12 11 9 11 9

B3 Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

Fretboard diagram for the fourth system: 11 8 11 7 9 7 10 | 8 7 9 8 10 11 10 8 | 11 8 10 11 13 10 12 10 | 9 13 12 12 9 11 12 11

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

Fretboard diagram for the fifth system: 12 10 12 13 13 11 13 | 12 13 10 12 12 9 11 9 11 | 9 11 9 11 8 | 6 7 8 9 10 8

Giant Steps

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

The first system of music for 'Giant Steps' features a melodic line in the treble clef and a corresponding fretboard diagram below. The key signature has two flats (Bb and Eb). The fretboard diagram shows fingerings for the notes: 11 9 8, 10 8 10, 8 11, 7 8 9 10, 10 8, 7 7 10 7 8, 7 9, 10, 8 9 8, 9 11 9 11 8.

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

The second system continues the melodic line. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: 9 11, 8 11 11 8 9, 13, 12 10, 13 12 10, 13 11 10, 13 11 13, 10 13, 13.

B4 Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

The third system is marked with a box containing 'B4'. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: 9 9, 8 7 9, 7 10, 8 7, 9 10, 10 11 10 8, 11 8 10 11 13, 10 12, 10, 9 13 12, 8 12, 7 9 10.

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

The fourth system continues the melodic line. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: 8 10, 7 8, 9 8, 7 10, 9 8, 11 8, 11 9 11, 8 11, 11 10 9 8, 10 8 7, 10.

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

The fifth system concludes the melodic line. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings: 9 8, 7 10 8 7 10, 9 10 7, 7 10, 9, 7 7 8 7, 11 9 9 12 11 9.

Giant Steps

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

B5 Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Ebmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

Giant Steps

B6

Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

B7

Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

Giant Steps

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

0 7 10 9 8 11 9 | 0 8 10 9 11 9 11 | 9 11 9 11 8 9 11 | 10 12 13 10 12 10 12 10

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

13 12 10 13 12 10 | 9 10 12 12 10 | 9 12 9 11 | 11 9 9 12 11 11

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

11 8 11 9 | 10 7 8 10 10 7 10 | 8 8 10 8 8 11 | 9 10 11

B8 Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

(11) 8 10 8 | 8 7 8 7 6 10 | 9 8 11 8 8 11 | 9 7 10 7 9

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

7 9 7 10 7 10 9 | 8 10 8 11 9 11 9 11 | 9 11 9 11 13 9 | 12 13 12 10 13 12 10 13 11

Giant Steps

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

The first system of music for 'Giant Steps' consists of a treble clef staff and a guitar fretboard diagram below it. The staff contains a melodic line with various accidentals (flats and sharps) and rests. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings for the corresponding notes, with numbers 10, 11, 12, and 13 indicating specific frets.

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

The second system of music continues the melodic line. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings for the notes, with numbers 9, 10, 11, and 12 indicating specific frets.

B9 Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

The third system of music includes a section marked 'B9' in a box. The melodic line continues with a triplet of eighth notes. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings for the notes, with numbers 9, 10, 11, and 12 indicating specific frets.

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

The fourth system of music continues the melodic line. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings for the notes, with numbers 9, 10, 11, and 12 indicating specific frets.

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

The fifth system of music concludes the piece. The melodic line ends with a triplet of eighth notes. The fretboard diagram shows fingerings for the notes, with numbers 9, 10, 11, and 12 indicating specific frets.

Giant Steps

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

B10 Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

Giant Steps

B11

Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

The first system of guitar notation for 'Giant Steps' (B11) consists of a treble clef staff and a six-string bass staff. The treble staff contains a melodic line with various chords indicated above it: Bmaj7, D7, Gmaj7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, Am7, and D7. The bass staff contains a fretboard diagram with numbers 11, 9, 10, 12, 13, 12, 10, 13, 11, 11, 8, 9, 10, 0, 11, 8, 0, 8, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 9.

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

The second system of guitar notation for 'Giant Steps' (B11) continues the melodic and bass lines. The treble staff shows chords: Gmaj7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, F#7, Bmaj7, Fm7, and Bb7. The bass staff continues the fretboard diagram with numbers: 7, 8, 7, 10, 9, 0, 8, 10, 0, 11, 11, 9, 7, 6, 7, 8, 6, 8, 9, 10, 9, 12, 11, 10, 9, 0.

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

The third system of guitar notation for 'Giant Steps' (B11) continues the melodic and bass lines. The treble staff shows chords: Ebmaj7, Am7, D7, Gmaj7, C#m7, and F#7. The bass staff continues the fretboard diagram with numbers: 10, 8, 7, 10, 8, 10, 7, 10, 9, 0, 8, 0, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 9, 7, 7, 10, 10, 8, 10, 10, 7, and a 1/2 note indicated above the final 10.

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

The fourth system of guitar notation for 'Giant Steps' (B11) continues the melodic and bass lines. The treble staff shows chords: Bmaj7, Fm7, Bb7, Ebmaj7, C#m7, and F#7. The bass staff continues the fretboard diagram with numbers: 9, 11, 11, 8, 8, 9, 10, 10, 7, 8, 10, 10, 7, 10, 0, 10, 7, 10, 0, 10, 8, 11, 8, 9, 11, 9, 8, 9.

C Piano Solo

Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 61

The fifth system of guitar notation for 'Giant Steps' (B11) continues the melodic and bass lines. The treble staff shows chords: Bmaj7, D7, Gmaj7, Bb7, and Ebmaj7, followed by a measure with the number 61. The bass staff continues the fretboard diagram with numbers: 9, 11, 8, 11, 7, 10, 9, 10, 7, 9, 11, 10, and a V-shaped symbol below the staff.

Giant Steps

D1 Saxophone Solo

Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

D2

Bmaj7 D7 Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Am7 D7

Giant Steps

Gmaj7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 F#7 Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7

Ebmaj7 Am7 D7 Gmaj7 C#m7 F#7

*D.C. al Coda
(take repeat)*

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 C#m7 F#7

⊕ Coda

Free time

Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7