

Anchor Points

There are many kinds of musical anchor points – the bass player drives towards the root of each new chord; the drummer may play the hi-hat on 2 and 4; the form of the tune pulls us together towards its sections; and so on. As an improviser, you have a unique opportunity to create your own anchor points in the melody – they are simply held notes.

Heavy Anchors

Held notes – that sounds like an answer that's a little too simple. Why do held notes so often seem boring or heavy? OK, since you asked ...

Held notes are less effective when they are played:

1. Because you can't think of a better note to play (listeners can actually pick up on that, believe it or not).
2. With little expression or feeling.
3. In predictable spots (new chord, beat 1, exact end of chorus, etc.).
4. With little surrounding rhythmic contrast.

In these cases, held notes have less taste and are more filling (sorry about that ...) – but it doesn't need to be that way.

Firm, Lightweight Anchors

By reversing the four situations above, you can create musical anchor points that are interesting and more beautiful. Items 1 and 2 above are pretty self-evident. But items 3 and 4 need more thought. The keys here are *color* and *contrast*. If you surprise the listener a bit (but not yourself!) on where you play a held note, you're off to a good start. Then use contrast to your advantage by inserting a long note in the midst of faster notes for rhythmic contrast.

Good locations for held notes are often the rhythmic color spots – beats 2 and 4, offbeat 8ths, and triplet locations (2nd and 3rd triplet positions of quarter-note or 8th-note triplets). Try these out with some of the easier Practice Page tunes and see how much interest it can add to your solos!

As you find that golden spot for a held note, remember that you can repeat the note once or twice (in an interesting rhythm spot), embellish it (trill, turn, grace note, etc.) or add other expression.

Notes held at the right time and in the right way become firm but lightweight anchor points in your melodic line, and your listeners will hear them that way.