



Go Fourth!

BY GEORGE COLLIGAN

DURING MY FIRST YEAR IN COLLEGE, A FELLOW STUDENT SHOWED ME FOURTH voicings on the piano. These are commonly used by jazz pianists like McCoy Tyner, Herbie Hancock, and Chick Corea. This was a revelation for me, as I'd been hearing them on recordings for ages, and suddenly I could see on the keyboard just how they were constructed. "Oh, that's the sound," I exclaimed. Fourth voicings can be integrated into many styles of modern music, and often work well on instruments from piano to Rhodes to Hammond organ. Here are some fundamentals for getting fourths into your ears and hands.

McCoy Tyner's name is almost synonymous with the creative use of fourths in jazz.



Get Medieval

"There was a period in the Middle Ages around the 13th century, when parallel fourths and fifths were considered consonant and resolved, while thirds were considered dissonant and unresolved. Now we tend to think the exact opposite," explains **George Colligan**, who has worked with Cassandra Wilson, Buster Williams, and Ravi Coltrane. Most recently, he joined drummer Jack DeJohnette's new quintet and released *Pride and Joy* as a leader on the Piloo label. Colligan is also Assistant Professor in Jazz Studies at Portland State University.



Audio clips of all these chord voicings and exercises.

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1. Fourth Basics

A fourth refers to an interval (distance) between two notes. A **half-step** is the interval between *F* and *F#*, for example. A **perfect fourth** is five half-steps between two notes, which, from *F*, would be *Bb*, as shown in **Ex. 1a**. An **augmented fourth** is six half steps, so in this case, *F* to *B* as in **Ex. 1b**. Fourths alone have a “suspended” sound (**Ex. 1c**), and perfect fourths impart a solid quality when you stack them as in **Ex. 1d**. What’s interesting is that once you start adding augmented fourths (**Exs. 1e** and **1f**), they take on a more unresolved quality. Whether you have perfect or augmented fourths, you can move these voicings around to create new key centers within your solos.

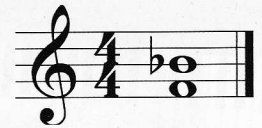
Ex. 1a.



Ex. 1b.



Ex. 1c.



Ex. 1d.



Ex. 1e.



Ex. 1f.



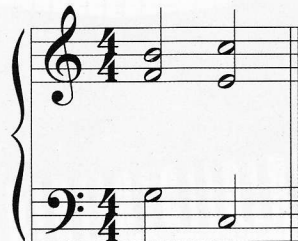
2. Function and Resolution

Let’s examine the functional application of fourths. In **Ex. 2a** the perfect fourth resolves to the third. In **Ex. 2b** the augmented fourth (*F* and *B*) function as the seventh and third of a *G7* chord, which then resolves to a *C* chord. The cool thing about stacked perfect fourths in jazz (as well as in impressionistic music from composers like Debussy and Ravel), is that stacked fourths are not “functioning” rigidly—they’re just sounds which can be moved (**Ex. 2c**). Each chord has a color, and as long as you like the color, you can bend the rules at will.

Ex. 2a.



Ex. 2b.



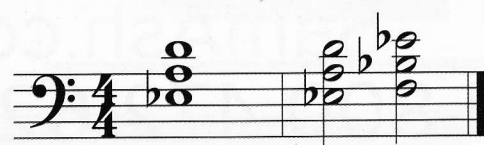
Ex. 2c.



3. Favorite Fourth Voicings

Measure 1 of **Ex. 3a** has both an augmented fourth and a perfect fourth. This is the go-to left hand voicing for an *F7* chord. It contains the flat seventh, the third, and the 13th. What’s great about this voicing is that if you put a *B* in the bass, it becomes a *B7#9* chord. Furthermore, if you put a *C* in the bass the chord becomes a *Cmin13*. The next bar contains two voicings with perfect fourths, which can add a sense of flow to the left hand. **Ex. 3b** is also an example of moving left-hand chords that could be used over *Cmin7* or *F7*. **Ex. 3c** is what jazz pianist Mark Levine calls the “So What” voicing, referring to the famous tune by Miles Davis. It’s a great minor seventh chord voicing consisting of three fourths plus a major third. This voicing contains, from the bottom up, the root, 11th, seventh, third, and fifth, and sounds great when moved in whole steps. **Ex. 3d** is a fourths sequence typical of what jazz pianists the 1960s might have played.

Ex. 3a.



Ex. 3b.



Ex. 3c.

Ex. 3d.

4. Progression Practice

Ex. 4a shows my go-to fourth voicing for *ii7-V7-Imaj7* progressions. Notice that the first chord is a “So What” voicing with the root played by the left pinky. The second chord is built on fourths from the flat seventh of the chord—all perfect except for the augmented fourth much like we saw in Ex. 2b. The third chord is also a “So What” voicing, this time built on the third of the chord. Try chanting to yourself, “So What from the root, fourths from the seventh, So What from the third” to remember this useful sequence. **Ex. 4b** is an example of using an upper structure to create an altered dominant sound. In this case, you have the root, third, and flat seventh in the left hand, and you have perfect fourths from the sharp ninth of the chord in the right hand which gives you a great voicing for a *C7#9#5* chord.

Ex. 4a.

Dmin7 G13 Cmaj13

Ex. 4b.

C7#9#5

5. Solo Lines

Exs. 5a through **5d** all illustrate right-hand lines using fourths. Just like fourth-based chords, right-hand lines containing fourths are very moveable, while they often create dissonance, they have a built in structure which gives them weight and a strong sonic identity. Try creating your own lines, move them up and down by whole-steps, half-steps, and other interval combinations. The sky's the limit with fourths!

Ex. 5a.

Ex. 5b.

Ex. 5c.

Ex. 5d.