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## Jazz Guitar Improvisation: Beginning with Guide-Tones

### Improvisación en guitarra de jazz: comenzando con sonidos-guía

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Daniel Andersen  
[danieljandersen@msn.com](mailto:danieljandersen@msn.com)

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#### Abstract

This article discusses an approach to teaching linear improvisation to beginning jazz guitarists through the function of voice leading in harmonic progressions. The student may gain a clear understanding of improvising melodies by establishing clear visual and aural relationships between the chordal and melodic textures. Three dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord voicings are introduced and applied to a twelve bar blues progression in F major. After learning the rhythm guitar accompaniment, single note guide tones consisting of the flat 7<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> chord tones of each dominant seventh chord are extracted from the chord voicings and applied in a melodic texture following chromatic voice leading principles within the harmonic progression. Musicality within the exercises is increased by the addition of a series of rhythmic variations that are applied to the guide-tone lines. Continuing with the concept, full dominant seventh arpeggios are introduced in order to expand the available note choices as a way to build a solid foundation for improvising within harmonic progressions prior to using diatonic scales.

Key Words: improvisation, voice-leading, guitar, jazz.

#### Resumen

Este artículo aborda la enseñanza de la improvisación melódica para guitarristas noveles a través de la función de la conducción melódica en progresiones armónicas. El estudiante puede mejorar su comprensión de la improvisación melódica a través del establecimiento de relaciones audiovisuales claras entre la textura melódica y la armónica. Se presentan tres conducciones melódicas basadas en acordes de 7<sup>a</sup> de dominante aplicadas a un blues de 12 compases en Fa Mayor. Una vez aprendido el ritmo del acompañamiento, se extraen notas individuales que sirven de guía y que están constituidas por la 7<sup>a</sup> rebajada y la 3<sup>a</sup> de cada acorde de 7<sup>a</sup> de dominante. Estas notas se aplican en una textura melódica que sigue principios de conducción vocal cromática dentro de la progresión armónica. Se mejora la musicalidad dentro de los ejercicios añadiendo una serie de variaciones rítmicas que se aplican a las melodías desarrolladas con las notas-guía. Además, se presentan arpeggios completos sobre acordes de dominante para aumentar el conjunto de notas disponibles como un modo de construir una base sólida para improvisar dentro de progresiones armónicas antes de utilizar escalas diatónicas.

Palabras clave: improvisación, conducción vocal, guitarra, jazz.

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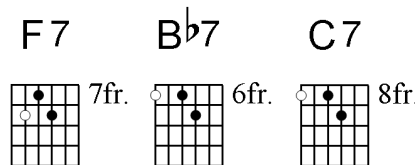
## 1. Overview

In teaching improvisation, there is an abundance of resources available to the student of jazz guitar. In my experience, it is relatively easy to teach guitarists the proper scales or arpeggios that correspond with a chord, have the student play it over a harmonic progression, and still not hear musically-satisfying results. The problem with teaching a student the chord scale relationships is that these scales describe a set of pitches that fit within a given chord, but do not show the functions of harmony and basic voice leading. Teaching the student the function of the chords within a harmonic progression and how to interpret this melodically through the use of guide tones more appropriately introduces improvisation to the beginning jazz guitarist.

A twelve bar blues progression in F major provides a good beginning. Initially, the I-IV-V chords are employed, and once the student becomes comfortable with performing the guide tones on this progression, various ways of embellishing the lines can be introduced as well the addition of more advanced harmonic cycles within the progression.

## 2. Three chord voicings of I-IV-V in F major

A key concept of this approach is that rhythm guitar and lead guitar should be closely related, and that both skills should reinforce each other. Therefore, it is important for the student to execute the rhythm guitar part of the blues progression before improvising melodically. By doing this, the sound of the progression will become familiar along with the visualization of the three note voicings of the dominant seventh chords shown in example 1.



Example 1

These three note voicings contain the root, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and flatted 7<sup>th</sup> of the dominant seventh chords, and offer smooth voice leading (Levine, 2005). Initially, it isn't important to have the student focus on details of the theoretical aspects of chord tones, but rather to perform the progression with a strong sense of rhythm; the theory may be explained later.

### 3. Play the guide tones of each chord voicing

“Guide-tones are those chord tones which are responsible for creating a chords essential harmonic (vertical) quality or sonority. They are also the unstable tones of the chord, meaning that they often suggest a desire to move or resolve” (Crook, 1991). Once the rhythm accompaniment is thoroughly established, two sets of guide tones (3rds and 7ths) may be extracted from the three voicings of F7, B $\flat$ 7, and C7.

Example 2 consists of three staves of music, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb). The first staff contains three measures: the first measure has an F7 chord (7th fret), the second measure has a Bb7 chord (6th fret), and the third measure has an F7 chord (7th fret). The second staff contains two measures: the first measure has a Bb7 chord (6th fret) and the second measure has an F7 chord (7th fret). The third staff contains three measures: the first measure has a C7 chord (8th fret), the second measure has an F7 chord (7th fret), and the third measure has a C7 chord (8th fret). Each chord is accompanied by a fretboard diagram showing the string layout and finger positions.

Example 2

In example 3, the notes of the third string may be eliminated, leaving the A, or third of the F7, the Ab (flat 7<sup>th</sup>) of Bb7, and Bb (flat 7<sup>th</sup> of C7). The Xs indicate where the roots of each chord are located. It is important for the student to recognize the similarity of the chord voicings to the guide tone lines visually and aurally, and that the three pitches are easily fingered and are related by half steps.

Example 3 shows three chord voicings with their guide tones. Above each chord name is a guitar fretboard diagram showing the chord shape and the fret number (8fr., 7fr., 6fr.). Below each diagram is the name of the guide tone: flat 7th for C7, 3rd for F7, and flat 7th for Bb7. Below these are three musical staves in treble clef, each showing a single note corresponding to the guide tone: Bb for C7, Ab for F7, and G for Bb7. Below the staves are the fingerings: 4th finger for C7, 3rd finger for F7, and 2nd finger for Bb7.

Example 3

While keeping the original three voicings in mind, and using the simple fingerings of Bb, A, and Ab, the guide tone lines are extracted.

Example 4 shows three chord voicings with their guide tones. Above each chord name is a guitar fretboard diagram showing the chord shape and the fret number (8fr., 5fr., 8fr., 6fr.). Below each diagram is the name of the guide tone: 3rd for C7, flat 7th for F7, and 3rd for Bb7. Below these are three musical staves in treble clef, each showing a single note corresponding to the guide tone: A for C7, Ab for F7, and G for Bb7. Below the staves are the fingerings: 4th or 1st for C7, 4th finger for F7, and 3rd finger for Bb7.

Example 4

Similar to example 3, example 4 shows the guide tones E, Eb, and D which are exposed after the notes of the fourth string are eliminated. In the case of the C7 chord, an alternate fingering is shown in order to facilitate staying in the fifth position of the guitar in addition to shifting positions between the E and Eb pitches. For examples 3 and 4, the student should be able to play each voicing while singing the guide tone lines.

Example 5 consists of three lines of guitar chord voicings and their corresponding guide tones. Each line contains four chords. The first line shows F7 (7fr), B<sup>b</sup>7 (6fr), F7 (7fr), and F7 (7fr). The second line shows B<sup>b</sup>7 (6fr), B<sup>b</sup>7 (6fr), F7 (7fr), and F7 (7fr). The third line shows C7 (8fr), C7 (8fr), F7 (7fr), and F7 (7fr). Each chord is accompanied by a guitar fretboard diagram and a musical staff showing the guide tones (3rd and 7th) on the fourth string.

Example 5

In example 5, the guide tones located on the fourth string are employed. The teacher should perform the accompaniment as the student plays the guide tones of example 5 as written. In order to reinforce the relationship between the voicings and the guide tone lines, the student and teacher should alternate roles. The same process is used in the performance of example 6, where the guide tones located on the third string are used. At this point, the exercise may seem very simple and mechanical, but is a necessary foundation for the student to use the guide tones effectively and in a more creative manner.

Chord diagrams and melodic line for Example 6:

- Chord 1: F7 (8fr.)
- Chord 2: B $\flat$ 7 (6fr.)
- Chord 3: F7 (8fr.)
- Chord 4: F7 (8fr.)
- Chord 5: B $\flat$ 7 (6fr.)
- Chord 6: B $\flat$ 7 (6fr.)
- Chord 7: F7 (8fr.)
- Chord 8: F7 (8fr.)
- Chord 9: C7 (8fr.)
- Chord 10: C7 (5fr.)
- Chord 11: C7 (8fr.)
- Chord 12: C7 (5fr.)
- Chord 13: F7 (8fr.)
- Chord 14: F7 (8fr.)

Example 6

The next step is to add rhythmic variations to both examples 5 and 6 where the student is strictly limited to the guide tones, but attempts to improvise rhythmically. The student should be at a comfort level with the pitches that allows the focus on playing with rhythmic strength using accents in a swing feel. In addition to improvising rhythmically, the teacher may prompt the student to use one continuous rhythmic pattern for each chorus as in example 7. The purpose for this is to enable the student to make strong, clear rhythmic statements, rather than busy, frantic rhythms in a haphazard manner.

Example 7 shows a sequence of chords and their corresponding melodic lines. The chords are: F7, B<sup>b</sup>7, F7, F7, B<sup>b</sup>7, B<sup>b</sup>7, F7, F7, C7, C7, F7, F7. Each chord is accompanied by a fretboard diagram showing the positions of the 3rd and 7th frets (guide tones). The melodic lines are written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B<sup>b</sup> major/C minor).

Example 7

This pattern may be altered by anticipating each chord tone by an eighth note, as shown in example 8. By introducing the concept of anticipating a harmonic change by an eighth note, the student has an easy and effective way of implying the harmony of a chord progression which will begin to give the student a sense of being in command of the harmony.



F7 8fr.    B $\flat$ 7 6fr.    F7 8fr.    F7 8fr.

B $\flat$ 7 6fr.    B $\flat$ 7 6fr.    F7 8fr.    F7 8fr.

C7 8fr.    C7 5fr.    C7 8fr.    C7 5fr.    F7 8fr.    F7 8fr.

Example 8

Other rhythmic variations may be used as well:

1.    2.    3.    4.    5. etc...

Example 9

In example 9, each rhythm may be used for an entire chorus, or in combination. Rhythms 1 and 5 may be anticipated by an either eighth or quarter note.

#### 4. Improvise using the dominant 7<sup>th</sup> arpeggios in the 5<sup>th</sup> position

The diagram shows four guitar chord voicings in the 5th position: C7 (5fr.), F7 (5fr.), F7 (5fr.), and B<sup>b</sup>7 (6fr.). Below the chords is a melodic line on a treble clef staff. Brackets indicate intervals: '3rd to 7th' for the first two chords, '7th to 3rd' for the last two chords, and '3rd to 7th' for the overall span of the first two chords and '3rd to 7th' for the overall span of the last two chords.

Example 10

During this next section, the student will begin to use dominant seventh arpeggios for the purpose of building melodic lines that emphasize the guide tone relationships. As with the previous guide tone examples, the three arpeggio fingerings lie in the fifth position and should be compared to the chord voicings.

Example 11.

In example 12, the harmony is outlined in by the use of corresponding arpeggios. The guide tone line occurs as an eighth note anticipation of each chord change followed by the descending arpeggio pattern. According to guitarist Garrison Fewell (2005) “an easy way to hear how a guide-tone line works to highlight the harmony is to play arpeggios connected by the guide-tones resolving at the point where the chords change.” The student should practice each fingering of the F7, Bb7, and C7 arpeggios until they are comfortable and memorized before playing example 12. The teacher and the student may write out a few of their own variations of this exercise, but it is important for the teacher and student to balance this with spending time improvising, and attempting to connect these arpeggios with the guide tones.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for guitar. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a guitar tablature staff with fret numbers. Above the first system are three chord diagrams: F7 (5fr.), B<sup>b</sup>7 (6fr.), and F7 (5fr.). Above the second system are two chord diagrams: B<sup>b</sup>7 (6fr.) and F7 (5fr.). Above the third system are two chord diagrams: C7 (5fr.) and F7 (5fr.).

Example 12

## 5. Conclusions

By using this approach, the student will be able to relate simple chord shapes, and the function of the harmony to building melodic lines in an incremental manner rather than blindly assigning a scale to a corresponding chord. Future applications of this process lead to a more informed use of full diatonic scales such as the Mixolydian mode, as well chromatic melodic

embellishments. This concept is intended to be expanded by using more complex harmonic progressions in both major and minor keys based on actual compositions of the standard jazz repertory, and through the introduction of new chord voicings in different string-sets and positions of the guitar to increase the available note range of the improvised melodies and general familiarity of the guitar fingerboard.

## References

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