

X. Improvising With Chord-Tones

In most academic establishments with jazz programs, the first concept often discussed, with regards to deriving melodic material for improvisation, is often the "chord-scale". There is merit to this approach, especially for young guitar players, because the fingering patterns for scales are usually well known. But in my experience, guitarists who start to learn this way develop some serious blind spots that will need to be addressed eventually. Sometimes this can go on for years and years.

The main blind spot that I am speaking of is the relationship of those scales to the chord itself. It's one thing to know that the C major scale works well over a G7 chord, but if you are totally unaware of where the notes that are members of the G7 chord happen to be found within the C major scale, you may be missing the point. If you run up and down this scale thinking of it as a C major scale, there is a very good chance that you will be emphasizing the note C quite a bit, and C is one of the most difficult notes to use well on a G7 chord.

I start my students off improvising with chord-tones rather than chord-scales for a few reasons. I am not a jazz musicologist by any stretch, but I think it likely that the earliest pioneers of this music probably started out with a melody that they knew by ear. They also had some ways to harmonize these melodies. They then began to embellish the melody by changing its rhythms, and by decorating its pitches with neighbour tones. I'm sure they were aware of keys, and probably made some of their embellishments out of the basic scales underlying the key of the tune. As far as note-choice goes, when a progression consists of chords that are mostly diatonic to a single key, using the major or minor scale of that key for melodic improvisation can be a fruitful thing to do. But there are very few such progressions in the jazz repertoire. Most progressions have chords that contain notes that are chromatic in the key, and may involve modulation between several different keys. The earliest jazz players then probably turned their attention to the notes in the chords themselves. By playing off of the various chord degrees (in harmony with the melody), the polyphonic supporting counter-melody style of New Orleans-style jazz came into being. It is through the exploration of the notes in the chords themselves, combined with the notes in the key, that the concept of the "chord-scale relationship" emerged. In my estimation, "chord-scales", as such, were not spoken of in the jazz community until the 1950's when George Russell released his book, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*. Soon after that, Berklee College Of Music was first formed. Berklee was the first post-secondary academic establishment, I know of, that actually had a jazz curriculum, and chord-scales were a big part of their curriculum.

Another reason for starting out with chord-tones, rather than chord-scales, is that so many guitar players have such a hard time with them, whereas they are a very simple thing for most other instrumentalists. Bass players are always arpeggiating chords in their bass lines. Piano players can see the fingerings for an arpeggio every time they play a chord voicing. It's only on the guitar where the fingering of an arpeggio is not obvious from either a scale fingering, or from a chord voicing. And we have so many arpeggio fingerings to choose from.

A. Chord-Tone Exercise #1

Root 3rd 5th Root 3rd 5th Root 3rd 5th

Play these rhythms when there is 1 Chord Per Bar

Root 3rd 5th Root 3rd 5th

Play these rhythms when there are 2 Chords Per Bar

Play the above pattern over the chord progression of any tune you're working on. Avoid starting the pattern on the 6th string, for now, or it may sound too much like a bass line. Learn all possible fingerings (see next page), and look for logical ways to join the fingering of one arp into the next.

Once you are comfortable with this, you can change the order of the notes and the rhythm and try to improvise some simple chord-tone melodies. I.e. See if you can create some melodies that sound musical using just the R, 3 and 5 of each chord.

Don't overplay. This IS NOT about speed. It IS NOT about all sorts of difficult looking shapes on the fret-board. It IS about learning to play simple melodies, using just chord-tones. For now, resist the urge to "play what you hear". It is likely that you will "hear" some really nice sounding things that fall outside of the param-

eters of this particular exercise. The exercise is designed to gain awareness of the chord-tones. By doing this work you'll develop a feeling for when to play a chord-tone, and for when to play something else. You will also develop a feel for where on the fretboard these sounds are, and for which fingerings make the best sense. Try to invent, and develop, some sort of a rhythmic theme. Almost anything will sound convincing if the rhythm feels right!

Tip: Look for ways to join one chord's tones into the next chord's tones smoothly, via common tone, step, or half-step.

Try going down to the 3rd, rather than up, and also experiment likewise with the 5th.

Now, try the basic exercise with:

3 5 R, 5 3 R, etc.

3 5 7, 3 7 5, etc.

5 7 R, 5 R 7, etc.

7 R 3, etc.

Summary: Learn to improvise a decent melody on any tune using just 1 3 5 and 7 of each chord.

Pay special attention to how the 3rd, on one chord, often leads by step or common tone into the 7th, on the next chord, and visa versa.

Here are the most likely fingerings for the 4 basic triad types, starting on each finger, on each string:

C

Cm