

XIX. More Chord-Melody Techniques

A. “Legit” Voice-Leading on Guitar

In my first year at Berklee, one of the main core courses was the “legit”, 4-part, chorale-texture harmony course. I did very well in class, getting very good marks, but I had no idea what any of this stuff sounded like or what I would ever use it for. I was just following the “rules” and passing the tests. Being that I was a guitar player (and not a very good one yet) as opposed to a piano player, I had no way to relate to the harmonies that I was writing out so successfully. So, I concluded that this stuff did not apply to guitar playing anyway. Too many of the notes were way out of range, either too high or low, for the guitar. And the playing of these exercises required classical guitar technique, because they are essentially contrapuntal (i.e. several melodies at the same time). I ended up dropping this course in second year because of this. I bring this up now because I think that many young players, off to music college for the first time, have probably had similar experiences and have made similar assumptions and bad decisions.

It is only recently that I have come to realize how wrong I was. The techniques studied in a legit harmony course are 100% applicable to jazz guitar, as long as the guitar’s range is taken into consideration and the complexities of the counterpoint are carefully controlled and kept to a minimum. In short, as long as the bass and soprano are kept within a practical range for the guitar, it IS possible to play music on the guitar that adheres to all of those subtle, beautiful sounding, voice-leading “rules” found in traditional Classical and Romantic harmony text books. My path back into this type of voice-leading was the Gordon Delamont books (Modern Harmonic Technique, Vols. 1 & 2). I began doing his exercises with the guitar in mind, rather than the piano or an instrumental ensemble. I suggest that when you are ready to study a legit harmony text that you spend some time doing the same.

As a jazz player you will probably spend a good portion of your efforts on the interpretation of other people’s tunes. You will usually be presented with a melody and a set of chord changes. This immediately suggests your soprano part, implies at least the beginnings of the bass part, and suggests some possibilities and limitations on the alto and the tenor parts as well. For the purposes of getting started here we will use the unembellished melody as a pre-composed soprano part, and we will use the chord roots for a simple bass part (i.e. no inversions yet). Our attention will be focused then on molding the *inner voices* into some sort of logical voice-leading. Basically, the outer voices will most probably be leaping fairly often, but the inner voices will be made to move primarily by step, and by common tone.

I will not concern myself too much here with the avoidance of parallel octaves, parallel 5ths, parallel 4ths, hidden octaves, hidden 5ths, etc., or strict classical resolutions of dissonant intervals. You can experiment with that stuff on your own as you work through your own harmony text. Here, I will just be trying to smooth out the inner voices. I will try to avoid leaps in the inner voices as much as possible as well as overlapping parts. The examples are written in Concert pitch (i.e. not transposed for guitar), on the Grande Staff, but are designed to be played on the guitar.

Note: This is very similar to the first chord-melody technique that I suggested in this book, namely the sounding of the melody and the bass notes together. The only differences are that now we will be confining ourselves to 4 voices only, and we will be paying much closer attention to the voice-leading of the 2 inner voices.

• Play all of the following examples that are actually playable. Study the voice-leading involved, especially for the examples on the far right, which is the type of voice-leading being discussed here.

The image shows musical notation for five examples on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The first example is for G7 and C6 chords, with a note in the treble clef and a whole rest in the bass clef. The second example is labeled 'Close-Voiced' and has a note: 'Note: Can't be played on guitar.' The third is 'Drop 2'. The fourth is 'Mel + Bass'. The fifth is 'Mel + Bass Voice-Led'. Each example shows a melody line in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef.

Close-Voiced
 G7 C6 *Note: Can't be played on guitar.* Drop 2 Mel + Bass Mel + Bass Voice-Led

Close-Voiced
 G7 C6 *Note: Can't be played on guitar.* Drop 2 Mel + Bass Mel + Bass Voice-Led

or or

Close-Voiced
 G7 C6 *Note: Can't be played on guitar.* Drop 2 Mel + Bass Mel + Bass Voice-Led

Close-Voiced
 G7 CMaj7 *Note: Can't be played on guitar.* Drop 2 Mel + Bass Mel + Bass Voice-Led

Close-Voiced
 G7 CMaj7 *Note: Can't be played on guitar.* Drop 2 Mel + Bass Mel + Bass Voice-Led