

MAKING YOUR LINES SOUND MORE LIKE JAZZ!

BY ALISDAIR MACRAE BIRCH

One of the common questions asked by jazz guitar students is, “How do I make my lines sound more like jazz?” or “Why do my improvised lines sound like I’m playing scales?” I’ve written this article to address this issue and look at a solution.

As musicians our goal is to translate the great lines we hear in our heads onto our instrument, the guitar. To do this we need firstly to hear great lines, learning great lines comes about through submerging oneself in listening to the great players, not necessarily directly copying them but by being inspired by those players. Next we need to work on getting our fingers moving on the fret-board, scales, arpeggios, and other exercises help us develop the facility. Finally we need to translate the great lines we hear and play them on the instrument the split second we hear them.

Jazz guitar students often have great facility but lack the ability to produce inspiring lines. I believe where the weakness lies, is in the inability to realize the improvised line on the fret-board from the lines heard in the head, the connection between the line heard and execution on the fret-board is missing.

Working with students and my own playing, I have noticed we can even fool ourselves (and others) that we are achieving this by singing along with our “improvised lines”. Often the reality is that your fingers are playing automatically, and the split second you play the note, your mind hears it and then your mouth sings it. This can easily be tested, with another guitar player, try to repeating four or five note lines (or longer) between one another, hear the line, sing the line, then play the line, you will probably be surprised or shocked to find how difficult you find it!

So how do we go about narrowing the connection between what we hear and how we realize it on the fret-board. There are two main aspects to solving the problem.

1. “Know” or “Feel” what we are hearing. Firstly we need to know or feel what the notes are in relationship to each other and to the underlying harmony. For example we hear a note say Ab against a G7 Chord and we should know or feel immediately that it’s a minor2 interval (1 fret) above G and it’s also the b9 of the chord. I use the word feel as I have played with a number of musicians who would not necessarily be able to name the relationship, but they can feel and act on the relationship they hear. Knowing the name is an added bonus and allows you to explain it to others.
2. Know where those notes or sounds are on the fret-board. The best guitar players know the fret-board instinctively. They know what the note is going to sound like before it is sounded.

Looking at classic solos we can see that jazz musicians tend to approach the harmonic material in three ways:

HARMONIC GENERALIZATION

The improvised line follows key centers. For instance taking our familiar ii-V-I progression, a phrase is improvised treating the whole harmonic sequence as though it were a I chord. For example in the key of C Major, we play our C Major scale over the entire progression: Dm7, G7, Cmaj7. There are numerous books, which teach us this, and they go further and break the C Major scale down into modes. Essentially a mode is the same scale starting it on a different start note (degree of scale). For example:

D Dorian is the C Major scale starting on D and used to improvise on the Dm7 chord

G Mixolydian is the C Major scale starting on G and used to improvise on the G7 chord

C Ionian is the C Major scale starting on C and used to improvise on the Cmaj7 Chord.

HARMONIC SPECIFIC

The improvised line follows and contours the harmony, relying on resolving thirds, sevenths, ninths or chords appropriately. For instance in a ii-V-I progression, a line is improved which takes account of the ii chord leading to the V chord leading to the I chord. The rest of the article deals with this.

HARMONIC DISREGARD

The improvised line imposes alternate harmony over the existing harmony, often as a result of following a sequence or motif.

Great jazz musicians use all the above methods, moving in and out, weaving an improvised line, which tells a story. They can be harmonically specific, and then deliberately ignore the harmony, returning to harmonic specifics, then disregarding the harmony and so on. However one thing is certain they choose what their line is going to be like, and hence if the rhythm section cut out the line can become more specific, “tipping into” the harmony letting the listener know where they are in the tune.

Inexperienced and beginning improvisers start by playing mainly wrong notes, discover harmonic generalization, and after more careful study progress to harmonic specifics. Standard methods of Jazz teaching often lead the student to never get past the harmonic generalization stage, they learn their scales but their lines still fail to commit themselves to the harmony. How many times have we all heard the phrase “oh they sound like they are just playing scales” this is often the result of a lack in harmonic specifics.

I believe a solution to this problem is creating what I term “ideal lines”, then using these “ideal lines” to create your own improvisations. So let me explain what I mean by an “ideal line”

TOWARDS AN “IDEAL LINE”

Harmony is often conceived as vertical, chords are spelled up or down, and improvisation exercises produced which play the chord tones up and down. However in actuality harmony and melodies are linear and occur over time. Jazz improvisation creates a new melodic line from a given harmonic progression, inventing a new counter melody to the bass line.

The bass player creates a line based on the root progression. The improviser creates a counter line to the bass. So whilst the bass is playing the roots of the chords, the best note for an improviser to play to give the flavor of the harmony is the third of the underlying chord. The two notes played together outline the harmony. For example in the key of C, we have a progression ii-V-I-V/ii, Dm7-G7-Cmaj7-A7 (I am using A7 so that we can repeat the sequence). The guitar plays the half notes (minims) over the suggested bass line

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Dm7 G7 Cmaj7 A7

Now, as stated previously, harmony moves over time so how do we connect these notes to get a smooth flowing line. A study of traditional harmony provides us with the answer, the sevenths of each chord resolves downward to the third of the following chord.

So now we know that our ideal line must contain the third of the chord and the seventh, resolving to the third of the next chord, leading to the seventh of the chord, resolving to the third of the following chord and so on.

Dm⁷ G⁷ Cmaj⁷ A⁷

AN "IDEAL LINE"

If we now add the rest of the chord tones to the line we have an 8-note (quaver) "ideal line":

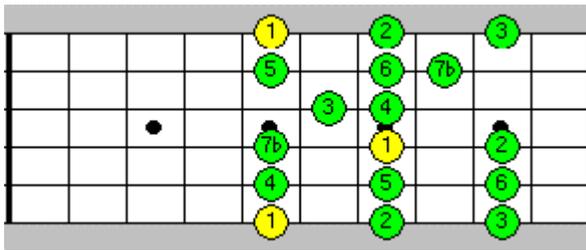
Dm⁷ G⁷ Cmaj⁷ A⁷

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Let me just say at the outset we are just brushing the surface with some of this. So here we go. We will take as our example the progression Dm7-G7-CMaj7-A7.

1. Know the C Major Scale patterns. Here are three C Major Scale patterns you should know. Practice them up and down the neck of the guitar. The numbers designate the degrees of the scale where #1 indicates the root note.

2. Know the A Mixolydian Scale pattern (for improvising on the A7 Chord)



3. Now work with the exercises below. See and hear the relationship between the triads, scale and line. The chord diagrams are not for accompaniment but show the basic triads, which make up the chord. Notice the shape of the triad, the shape of the line, hear the triad, hear the line, attention to this aspect will pay dividends in the future. I have broken the guitar up into four sets of three string, I think this produces “manageable chunks” of guitar, is useful as an exercise and allows one to see the relationships clearly.

Chord diagrams for Dm, G, C, and A are shown above the first system. The notation includes a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a bass line. The guitar part is written on a six-line staff with a T (Treble) line and A/B (Acoustic/Bass) lines. Fingering numbers are provided for each note.

Chord diagrams for Dm, G, C, and A are shown above the second system. The notation includes a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a bass line. The guitar part is written on a six-line staff with a T (Treble) line and A/B (Acoustic/Bass) lines. Fingering numbers are provided for each note.

Chord diagrams for Dm, G, C, and A are shown above the third system. The notation includes a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a bass line. The guitar part is written on a six-line staff with a T (Treble) line and A/B (Acoustic/Bass) lines. Fingering numbers are provided for each note.

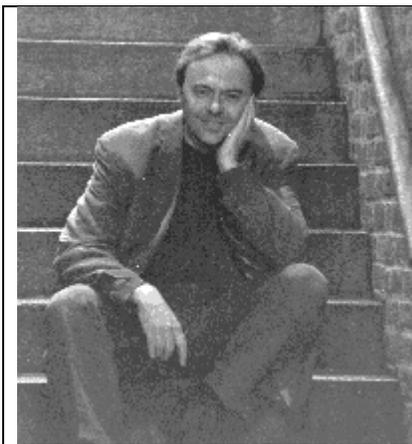
The image shows a musical score for guitar in 4/4 time. It consists of three staves: a treble clef staff, a bass clef staff, and a tablature staff. The treble staff contains a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes. The bass staff contains a bass line with quarter and eighth notes. The tablature staff shows fret numbers (8, 7, 5, 8, 7, 5, 5, 8, 7, 5, 8, 7, 9, 7, 7, 5) corresponding to the notes on the strings. Above the treble staff, four chord diagrams are provided: Dm (7fr), G (5fr), C (5fr), and A (7fr). The key signature has one flat (Bb), and the time signature is 4/4.

I suggest practicing these lines along with a simple backing track, perhaps using PG Music's Band In A Box software. Understanding the basic triadic sound, Root-3-5 of the chord then adding the 7th and how to connect them will go along way to making your lines sound more like Jazz and enable you to contour the harmony.

Remember if you can find (and hear) these notes then you can find all the other notes. For example if you can find the root of the chord it's easy to find the b9th (m2, 1 fret higher), 9th (M2, 2 frets higher), #9 (m3, 3 frets higher) More information on this and other links can be obtained from my web site <http://www.alisdair.com/>

Have Fun, Cheers

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Copyright © 1999 Alisdair MacRae Birch. Alisdair MacRae Birch, is a British jazz guitarist resident in NY. Before specializing in Jazz, Alisdair played African high-life, soca, calypso, zouk, reggae and funk. He has performed through out Europe and West Africa, appeared on TV and radio and played in pit orchestras. He has been fortunate enough to either play, study or meet with some of the best musicians in the business (and they've had a laugh or two over the years!). Pass the tea and bickies!

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