



An Introduction to Improvisation

By Scott Blanchard

In this edition of the Theory Corner, we'll take a look at an excerpt from jazzer Tom Dempsey's book, *Easy Soloing for Jazz Guitar*, available through Alfred Publishing. In this excerpt, Tom will build on your knowledge of arpeggios and improvisation by introducing two new ways to approach your melodic lines: target tones and approach tones. Dempsey's straightforward and well-informed explanations along with systematic examples make this book a great addition to any guitarist's collection; you'll have fun while learning! The book includes a CD so you can easily follow along with all the examples. Read on below!

Intro to Target Tones

Using *target tones* in your improvisation is an effective way to take the skills that you have acquired from your study of arpeggios and start to use them in improvisation. Target tones are notes of the chords that you want to "target" your lines towards, so as to bring out the sound of the chord and bring definition to your lines. One way to begin learning how to use target tones is to target a specific tone of the chord. In the following examples, the chord tone of each target tone is indicated between the standard music notation and TAB.

Chord	Target Note	Chord Tone
Dmin7	F	3
G7	B	3
CMaj7	E	3
CMaj7	G	3

The image shows two examples of target tones. The first example shows a Dmin7 chord with a target note F (3rd), a G7 chord with a target note B (3rd), and a CMaj7 chord with a target note E (3rd). The second example shows a Dmin7 chord with a target note F (3rd), a G7 chord with a target note Bb (7th), and a CMaj7 chord with a target note E (3rd). The notation includes a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a guitar TAB with strings T, A, and B labeled.

Two sets of guitar fretboard diagrams for Dmin7, G7, and CMaj7 chords. The first set shows a standard voicing with fingerings: Dmin7 (1-7, 3-10, 2-9), G7 (3-9, 2-7, 2-9), and CMaj7 (3-9, 2-7, 2-9). The second set shows an alternative voicing: Dmin7 (4-10, 3-9), G7 (1-8, 2-7), and CMaj7 (7-10, 7-9).

Use of Approach Tones

While it is important to play the notes of the chord in your improvisations, it is in developing ways to approach these target tones that the true definition starts to take shape in your lines. *Approach tones* are, simply, tones we use to approach target tones. Approach tones generally come in two types: *diatonic approach tones* and *chromatic approach tones*. Diatonic approach tones are notes that are from the key and are used in stepwise motion (moving from one scale degree to the next, rather than using wide skips) to approach the target tones. Chromatic approach tones are non-diatonic notes that precede the target tone. These are usually found in the form of passing tones that approach the chord tone by stepwise motion. In either case, these approach tones can be played above or below the target tone. The approach tones are highlighted in gray in the examples below.

Diatonic below:

Three measures of music showing diatonic below approach tones for Dmin7, G7, and CMaj7. Approach tones are highlighted in gray. Fingering is shown below the fretboard.

Diatonic above:

Three measures of music showing diatonic above approach tones for Dmin7, G7, and CMaj7. Approach tones are highlighted in gray. Fingering is shown below the fretboard.

Chromatic above:

Musical notation for 'Chromatic above' showing a melodic line and guitar fretboard for Dmin7, G7, and CMaj7 chords. The fretboard shows fingerings: Dmin7 (8-7-6-(6)), G7 (7-6-5-(5)), and CMaj7 (7-6-5-(5)).

Chromatic below:

Musical notation for 'Chromatic below' showing a melodic line and guitar fretboard for Dmin7, G7, and CMaj7 chords. The fretboard shows fingerings: Dmin7 (5-6-7-(7)), G7 (6-7-8-(8)), and CMaj7 (7-8-5-(5)).

Combining Target Tones and Approach Tones

Now, let's see how we can combine target tones and approach tones to create great jazz lines. Each of the following examples uses a different pattern of diatonic and chromatic approach tones.

Diatonic below, diatonic above:

Musical notation for 'Diatonic below, diatonic above' showing a melodic line and guitar fretboard for Dmin7, G7, and CMaj7 chords. The fretboard shows fingerings: Dmin7 (9-8-10-(10)), G7 (7-10-9-(9)), and CMaj7 (7-10-9-(9)).

Diatonic above, diatonic below:

Musical notation for 'Diatonic above, diatonic below' showing a melodic line and guitar fretboard for Dmin7, G7, and CMaj7 chords. The fretboard shows fingerings: Dmin7 (8-5-6-(6)), G7 (5-7-4-(4)), and CMaj7 (7-4-5-(5)).

Diatonic below, diatonic above, chromatic passing:

Diatonic above, diatonic below, chromatic passing:

Conclusion

For more information on improvisation, be sure to check out the Licks and Tricks column in this newsletter, or order Tom Dempsey’s book, *Easy Soloing for Jazz Guitar*, at www.ordermusictoday.com. Another great place to learn more is from the man himself—check out Tom Dempsey’s beginner jazz guitar course “Diatonic Improvisation I,” or Dempsey’s and Amanda Monaco’s beginner jazz guitar course “Basic Blues Progressions and Blues Improvisation.” For even more, look at other beginner jazz guitar lessons such as “Major Scale Patterns and Licks Applied” or “Blues Scale Patterns and Licks,” also taught by Tom Dempsey and Amanda Monaco. For jazz guitarists at the intermediate level, be sure to check out “Modal Improvisation Overview,” “Improvising in the Ionian Mode,” “Improvising in the Dorian Mode,” and “Improvising in the Mixolydian Mode,” all taught by Tom Dempsey and Amanda Monaco. Also, watch Jody Fisher’s and Mark Dziuba’s lessons “Using Target Tones,” “Using Neighbor Tones,” “Emphasizing Dorian Modal Flavor,” “Emphasizing Mixolydian Modal Flavor,” and “Combining Upper and Lower Neighbor Tones.” In addition, don’t miss Larry Marciano’s or Greg Horne’s advanced acoustic guitar course, “Country/Bluegrass Improvisation.”

What?! You don’t play guitar? No worries, we’ve got you covered. Keyboardists should check out the adult refresher lesson “Why Am I Blue: Blues Scales and Progressions,” taught by Leo Marchildon and Andrea Amos.

Happy New Year—be creative, and most importantly have fun!