



MELODY PRIMER *for jazz guitar*

BY SCOTT MACGREGOR

It's certainly not easy to go from rock player to a jazz musician, but with a good understanding of some basic concepts, the journey can seem less daunting and light will soon shine at the end of the tunnel.

Learning arpeggios and scales is important to jazz improvisation, but you'll be saying very little (in fact, almost nothing at all) until you have a good grasp and understanding of melody. I stress how important it is to learn as many melodies as you can, both jazz and non-jazz. If you have a Real Book, make a habit of learning at least two songs a week; get those sounds in your head.

Jazz melodies often have a dissonant quality to them, therefore, actually listening to jazz is as important as physically playing jazz; the ear needs time to accept certain tones and progressions that aren't standard fare in most forms of music. When I first began to play songs from the Real Book, I was often convinced that I was reading the notes wrong or that I was somehow making a mistake in my playing; certain songs just didn't sound quite right.

As a starting point to get your ear attuned, I recommend listening to Louie Armstrong. Most of the time his vocal melodies are not overly disguised with extra notes and odd phrasings that can confuse a listener or player who's trying to learn by ear. To someone who's just getting into jazz, Armstrong's style will make a lot more sense than avant-garde players like Keith Jarrett or Thelonius Monk.

Before learning to improvise and play jazz melodies, one should have a good handle on simple, garden variety melodies. Try playing note for note along with easy songs like "Mary had a little lamb", "Three blind mice" and "The Canadian national anthem" on your guitar. Once you're able to do that, try changing some of the phrasing or adding extra notes. Start off at about half speed and gradually work your tempo up as well. Try to become as proficient as you can at hearing a melody and being able to replay that melody on your instrument.

Once you have a handle on the simple melodies, try improvising a jazz melody. Take a piece like "All things you are". There are countless renditions of this classic out there. Try listening

to a few different versions and take notice of how each player adds his or her own phrasing and touch. This song is in most Real Books and Fake Books. Whether you use these publications, or you download the track via MP3, make sure you have a reference

at your fingertips to help out if you get stuck.

After you've heard a few renditions of "All things you are" and the tune is stuck in your head, it's time to try a little improvisation. Before playing the melody on your guitar, start off by scat singing or whistling the tune. Taking a few moments to do this will shake you up so you won't be as bound by the mechanics of the guitar going in. It's always important to keep things simple at first and build from there. After you've found your legs, throw in some improvisation. Start with some subtle changes and work your way up. Then change the phrasing a bit; make some notes longer and compensate by making others shorter in order to fill the space of the bar. Try adding in some extra notes where the melody rests and there's not much going on.

Improvising jazz melodies is an essential skill for jazz guitarists. The best method to acquire that skill is to start with the basics and work your way up. Remember to keep it simple and build from there.

Scott MacGregor is an accomplished Vancouver Island guitarist, specializing in all forms of jazz from avant-garde to fusion. He's a graduate of the Musician's Institute of Technology in Los Angeles.

