

## **A Improvisational Study "Autumn Leaves"**

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Greetings fellow Jazz Guitarist.

I wanted to talk in this article about a few fundamentals about Jazz guitar playing that will branch past the guitar. If you're not a guitarist or pianist then fear not, most of the subjects of this study are more than valid for you. However, if you wish to skip over the sections about chord voicings and comping I don't want to stop/bore you and won't take offense if you don't even give them a second look.

In this study we are going to be looking at methods to improvise over the famous Jazz Standard Autumn Leaves. It was written in 1940 by Joseph Kosma and French Poet Jacques Prevert. It was then taken into English speaking cannon and given English words by the infamous Johnny Mercer, whom most people believe is credited with this piece.

You might be thinking "Autumn Leaves... c'mon man, I can play on that tune". Perhaps you can, in fact maybe you've been playing on it for years. However there are certain aspects of improvisation in Jazz that I hear young people play that makes me wonder if they ever tried to learn a tune in this way that I want to talk to you about today.

The first thing I want to do is have you forget all about whatever you think you know about the changes because mine might be different, more literal. If you learned this out of the old 5<sup>th</sup> Edition Real book then you might want to look at the chord progression I have outlined here as well as the Key that we are going to play the song in. The form of the piece is A (8 bars) A (8 bars) B (8 bars) C (8 bars). It's important to memorize this form just as much as it is to remember the changes and the melody. If you sing the melody to yourself while you practice these changes it will help you make that connection between your ears and instrument, which is perhaps the single most important thing to develop as a musician. The purpose of all of this is to strengthen that connection, through limiting what you can with your instrument so that your fingers can catch up to your ears, or your ears to catch up to your fingers.

Chord progression for *Autumn Leaves* in G minor:

- Staff 1: C<sup>-</sup>7, F7, B<sup>b</sup>Δ7, E<sup>b</sup>Δ7
- Staff 2: A∅, D7(b9), G<sup>-</sup>7, G7(b9)
- Staff 3: D7(b9), G<sup>-</sup>7, G<sup>-</sup>7, A∅
- Staff 4: D7(b9), G<sup>-</sup>7, G7(b9), C<sup>-</sup>7
- Staff 5: F7, B<sup>b</sup>Δ7, E<sup>b</sup>Δ7, A∅
- Staff 6: D7(b9), G<sup>-</sup>7, C7, F<sup>-</sup>7, B<sup>b</sup>7, E<sup>b</sup>Δ7
- Staff 7: A∅, D7(b9), G<sup>-</sup>7, G7(b9)

Memorization of the progression and the melody (which is easy enough for you to pick out of thin air if you have good or even moderate ears) is the first thing you have to do. But note on the lead sheet how I wrote the chords and the *Functional Harmony* on top of the chords. This is the best way to memorize tunes as well as be able to transpose them into different keys if need be. For example, in a later exercise in this study you will start playing *Autumn Leaves* in keys other than G minor in an attempt to really get into the things we're going to talk about today.

Here is the progression written in Functional Harmony

II V I IV III ii V i V/iv ii/III V I IV ii V III iii VI ii V I V ii V i V/iv

these could be considered cycling ii V's or a longer iii VI ii V in the key of bV

Practice this chord progression on your instrument if you are a bassist/pianist/guitarist in terms of voicings that you already know and we can get rolling on some ideas for comping on this most infamous jazz standard.

## Comping Ideas

It's important at the beginning of your comping ideas to think rhythmically first, voicing

second. I like to break the voicing thing into separate ideas as well, but first let's talk rhythm.

To many guitarists and pianists seem to be more into trying to map out cool chord voicings on their instruments. Guitarists are just as guilty if not more than pianists because of the physical limitations of the instrument (only 6 strings and 4 fingers... 5 if you use your thumb hooked around the neck) means that guitarists often times try their best to add in notes that should just be left alone. Especially if it is at the sacrifice of solid rhythmic motives.

Soloists want to hear you behind them playing in the pocket. They don't care nearly as much about how cool that 2<sup>nd</sup> in your voicing was if you played it in a bad spot. Learning to comp rhythmically starts from working on your own with a metronome and playing with 1 purpose, to make the "click" swing.

How I suggest working on this is to select a tempo that you feel comfortable playing in. My suggestion is to put the click on beats 2 and 4 (to simulate the drummer's high hat) and have the metronome set to 72 beats per minute. However, don't feel shy about turning it down if you don't feel you are ready for that tempo. There is no shame... in fact in many cases it's much harder to swing at tempos below 120 than it is at tempos above 200.

With the Metronome try to make it swing by using simple idiomatic rhythmic ideas such as these figures laid out here



Just quarter notes, however with a specific voicing idea this will create the very popular "Freddie Green" style of comping. It's a swing style, dictating every beat with accuracy. This works great with duos, with bass solos and in practice nailing your time. Check out the voicing ideas below.



The Charleston Rhythm is a very swinging rhythm here that I've written out 3 ways. Basically it's a strong beat and then the off beat of the next weak beat. It provides lots of forward motion and is still not cliché, in fact it appears all the time in Jazz from swing bands to modern groups that are recording today. Making this swing is vital and so important. We will combine this with the Freddie Green voicings and you will be swinging for days.



If this was the end of the form going into a new A section this is a way of anticipation of the chord by an 8<sup>th</sup> note. Jazz is about forward motion, it's a unifying aspect of all the subgenre's of the music that there is forward motion somehow. The anticipation strongly of a new chord can really punctuate the harmony and give strong support



Here is just another example of anticipation as we now see a delay using the +1 as a rest then hitting that C minor chord then anticipation through the rest of the idea. Hitting offbeats provides forward motion, but you must hit them with conviction! This might take some practice or you might nail it right away. Either or, the next step really is to break away from constant repeated patterns and start to improvise your rhythms. This takes a lot of concentration, and in a lot of respects it takes just as much as soloing. A lot of teachers seem to brush over the idea of comping and just leave it to the devices of the student, it was such a way with me. I find that it took me a while to get more and more comfortable with comping in trios and quartets, but what you need to do is be able to comp for the melody in your mind first.

Turn that metronome on right now and sing the melody to Autumn Leaves. Don't worry if you can't sing in perfect tuning or anything. But the Melody is now your guide as to when and when not to play a chord. You don't have to vocalize the melody either, have it playing in your head like a backing track, as a guide to when you can let a chord out. Think first with basic chords, no extensions beyond a 9<sup>th</sup>, no sub chords, just what is on the lead sheet for now. If you find yourself losing the melody in your head, or forgetting the melody, or dropping beats with the melody, it's probably because you are...

A – Playing too much

B – Don't have the melody completely memorized, go back and make sure you know it

C – Are trying rhythms that are too complex for this piece at the level you are trying to play at.

You must remember to try and be as musical as possible. Play with intention and conviction, and don't try to be fancy. Think to yourself... if I was soloing right now, would I appreciate the comping that I just played. Make it a yes or no answer... if it's no, then stay calm, take a breath and play again, which is something you should try to do all the time anyway. Pianists, Guitarists and other comping instruments (uh, Vibes?) do not need to blow or expel air to make their instruments speak. So we tend to think in continuous lines or just play because our fingers move... stop doing this right away. Use space, especially when comping. Think about the melody that is going on around you. Work on locking up with the click of the

metronome rather than what voicings to use.

Once you have become comfortable with that tempo, and trying it at other tempos you now might wish to consider adding more depth to your chord voicings. Considering that this originally is intended to be focused towards Guitarists (because I am one) I will not get into Piano voicings because I would be making it up as I go along... but I can and will talk about voicings on the guitar.

## Voicing Ideas – Guitar

This tune is basically dealing with the major cadence in Jazz music, the ii V I in major and minor keys. There is a iii VI ii V I progression in the last section of the tune often times written with the VI and V as tri-tone substitution chords, which is fine and sounds good. However, we as guitarists need to learn how to connect our ii V I cadences smoothly.

Good voice leading can take place in a few forms

- Melody note moves by 1/2 step
- Melody note moves by a Whole Step
- Melody note does not Change
- Use of Chord inversions or substitutions to create more motion in your harmony

It is very important to know that there are standard chord voicings that all Guitarists must use. Commonly people refer to them as "Drop 2" or "Drop 3" or some other form of "Drop" chord voicings. These are not inaccurate terms, however the theory behind them needs explaining that might through people off. For myself I rather name them as chord tones name them. For example, a typical Root position Drop 2 chord I would call a 1573 because the notes in the chord from lowest pitch to highest are the root, fifth, seventh and third. Make sense? Good.

The two core voicings are **1573** and **1735**. These are the primary chord voicings where jazz guitarists learn shapes to play. These are also primary 2 hand voicings for pianists. Through these there are 3 inversions meaning that a major 7<sup>th</sup> chord with these two groups is 8 separate chords.

An inversion is simply when you change the bass note of the chord and just switch everything around. A Root position 1573 is just that, 1573. 1<sup>st</sup> inversion you put the 3<sup>rd</sup> in the bass and then organize it as such, almost like a graph

The 1573 grouping is a closed voicing on the guitar meaning that all 4 notes are on 4 adjacent strings. This means that it exists on 3 string groupings the 6-3 group the 5-2 group and the 4-1 group. This is very handy giving you a much wider range on the instrument.

1573  
3715  
5713

7315

looking at this from a Text TAB view you come up with these sorts of voicings (lets use F as an example)

Fma7 Group 1

root = 1 3 2 2 X X  
1<sup>st</sup> in = 5 7 3 6  
2n = 8 8 7 9 X X  
3d = 12 12 10 10 X X

Fma7 Group 2

root = X 8 10 9 10 X  
1<sup>st</sup> = X 12 14 10 13 X  
2<sup>nd</sup> = X 3 3 2 4 X  
3<sup>rd</sup> = X 7 7 5 6 X

Fma7 Group 3

root = X X 3 5 5 5  
1<sup>st</sup> = X X 7 9 6 8  
2d = X X 10 10 10 12  
3d = XX 2 2 1 1

Now, these are major 7 voicings. From here what you must do is through your knowledge of Chord Scales is alter each individual voicing to get all the qualities.

For example, the difference between major7 and minor 7 is lowering the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> in the minor chord by a half step (down one fret) Lets look just at group 1 for this

Fmi7 Group 1

root = 1 3 1 1 X X  
1<sup>st</sup> in = 4 6 3 6  
2n = 8 8 6 8 X X  
3d = 11 11 10 10 X X

The other major chord voicing group is based off 1735. This group has only 2 groupings because there is a string skip

The 1735 group has a string skip in it limiting the range (the chords are 6X432 or 5X321) but accommodate extensions better. So both set has their purposes.

Fma7 = 1 X 2 2 1 X

now can you figure out the qualities and inversions from this chord?

3157

5371

7513

## **Freddie Green/Rhythm Guitar**

We've talked about 1573 and 1735 voicings, and earlier in the comping section I talked about the Freddie Green Chord. I'll spare you a history lesson, but just go to wikipedia or google and search for Freddie and you'll get lots of info about him and how he played.

Basically the Green chords are 3 note voicings that consist of just the root, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of a chord, ignoring the 5<sup>th</sup> for the most part (except in some cases aka 1/2 diminished chords) and any extension. This gives you the fundamentals of the chord that ring out and don't lie.

Basically chords look like this

1X22XX = Fma7

1X12XX = F7

1X11XX = Fm7 and Fm7b5

1X00XX Fdim7 (although this is just a frame, you don't want to use open strings, they ring to much in this instance)

X879XX= Fma7

X878XX= F7

X868XX= Fm7 and Fm7b5 (alternate X898XX for m7b5)

X897XX = Diminished

so you see these simple voicings can give you all your ii V and I chords in major and minor. Line these up with the 4 beats to the bar (playing the quarternotes) turned down almost all the way with a pick strumming short, in time down strokes. This is the basics of Freddie's style and it swings like crazy!!

Now, look at how each chord is altered from a Major 7 to create the qualities, remember this here is vital to remember

MAJOR 7 = 1, 3, 5, 7

MINOR 7 = 1 b3, 5, b7

DOMINANT = 1, 3, 5, b7

1/2 DIMINISHED = 1, b3, b5, b7

DIMINIAHDED = 1, b3, b5, bb7 (or 6)

This can take a lot of practice and memorization. But you need to work on it over time. Quite often times you don't run into very many 3<sup>rd</sup> inversion chord voicings for example, you'll



At this point I would not worry so much about adding fancy chord sounds. We're not talking about big chords, with lots of extensions in them yet. Perhaps as you feel more comfortable with them then sure it would be time to create some voicings with some 2nds in them or some nice altered dominant sounds. For our purposes, we're going to keep it simple for now. We want some solid comping ideas with good, accurately played voicings and with a solid, steady and consistent time feel. Comping is about groove not about how hip your chords are, those are nice things to have (hip voicings I mean) but they can really get in the way of a good listenable performance.

With the Guitar, I find when voicings contain more than 4 notes then they start to get cluttered, muddy or not as clean and crisp as I would want them to be. So often times I stick to 3 and 4 note voicings. However, an interesting skill to acquire is to be able to play just the guide tones to a chord (the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>) to spell out the nuts and bolts of a tune's progression. Guide tones can be played on two adjacent strings. This in and of itself can be a great comping tool, spelling out the harmony clearly without confusion. But this is also about mapping out the guitar with what I like to call *Guitar Cartography*. To know where the music actually lies on the neck, especially when we're discussing clear, accurate and correct use of melody and harmony to create something that sounds like jazz.

C-7      F7      B $\flat$  $\Delta$ 7      E $\flat$  $\Delta$ 7      A $\emptyset$       D7( $\flat$ 9)      G-7      G7( $\flat$ 9)

Keep going down the neck for each system to find the guide tones in this combination

	C-7	F7	B $\flat$ $\Delta$ 7	E $\flat$ $\Delta$ 7	A $\emptyset$	D7( $\flat$ 9)	G-7	G7( $\flat$ 9)
TAB	11 11	11 10	10 10	10 8	8 8	8 7	6 6	7 6
TAB	4 3	4 2	3 2	3 0	1 0	5 4	3 3	4 3
TAB	1 1	1 0	5 5	5 3	3 3	3 2	1 1	2 1

With now the ability to play these guide tones by themselves, perhaps the addition of another note for the chord is a good idea. We can select from any notes that make up the chord, the Root, the 5<sup>th</sup>... up into the extensions of the chord, 9<sup>th</sup>, the 11<sup>th</sup>, the 13<sup>th</sup>. Dominant chords in this progression can be dressed up quite nicely with altered 9ths and 11ths. With this you can experiment with chord voicings in a manner that is not coming from the "grip" method of doing things. You could place the extension in the low part of the chord, or high in the melody part of it. However, you must trust your ear and instinct. If you don't like the sound of a voicing you come up with in this manner, then don't use it. Do not try to convince yourself that it is cool if you don't believe it is. Try it, play it for a little while and if you don't like it, leave it alone. Come back to it maybe the next time you sit down to practice, if you still don't like it then that is perfectly fine. My experience with it has been that I try a chord and let it grow on me for a few days and if by the end I still am not sure about it, then I leave it by the road and don't trouble myself with it.

## **Improvisation**

Now we get to the part where anyone who doesn't play guitar comes back to the game. I say "Welcome back!" and I'm glad you stuck around through all that chord stuff.

What I want to focus on here in the improvisation section is to eliminate the need that young people feel for "Chord Scale Relationship" playing. While having the theory of it down, and knowing the scales, it really seems to me that it breeds players running up and down scale thesaurus books trying to get all the notes they know that are right in a given chord out into the air for all to hear. While there certainly are amazing players out there who have mastered this approach to improvisation, it seems to me that there is an easier way to approach playing on chord progressions such as the one we have to work with here today. We are going to work with some limitations on how we can improvise on this tune and from there, we will add more and more options that you can work on allowing you to reach more and more possibilities in your playing. However, I want to make it clear what our goals are.

- To Play musically and with intent, confidence and a good sense of swing
- To not have to think about chord scale theory and instead think of simple ways to make the music actually sound like Jazz
- To let the music speak, to not sound like endless rambling
- To focus on time, melody and creating interesting lines and playing as "pattern free" as we can manage.

## **Approach 1**

We will limit our improvisational Vocabulary in Approach One to two chord tones. Both the Triad and the 4 note 7<sup>th</sup> chord for each of the written chords as well as accessing the Tri-tone substitutions of the F7 and D7(b9) chords.

So these are the notes we can improvise with



No chromatic playing is allowed unless it exists in the relationship of the chord tones of the basic triads and 7<sup>th</sup> chords. Do not play extensions on these chords, only the 4 notes that are in them. However, with the 2 Dominant chords giving you their related Tri-Tone substitutions then you have 8 notes to work with on each of these areas of the tunes.

Also in Approach 1, we will limit ourselves conceptually to playing rhythmically **around the “shape” of the melody of the tune** as well as try to play our own melody, “off” the original melody of the tune we’re playing.

This is a great general approach to the beginning of any improvisation on any tune. The Melodic statement should help to dictate the course of your improvisation rather than just feeding off the chord progression. If we ignore the melody of the tune then what is the point of even bothering with the melody? Would it not just be us playing over a chord progression? What about that beautiful, simple diatonic melody? The Melody can give you such inspiration to create an excellently constructed solo that makes perfect sense. Use that melody as your first idea, revisit it, turn it around, play it in different keys. Even a melody as simple as Autumn leaves can give you a lot to work with. It's a nearly perfectly constructed melody that has an obvious beginning, climax and ending... which is what any solo should have.

As you progress through approach 1 begin to change your rhythms and start to explore other rhythms. Here are some ideas.

- Play the melodic rhythm in retrograde (backwards)
- Displace, anticipate and omit parts of the melodic rhythm
- Play strings of 8<sup>th</sup> notes but not play long cascading lines yet.
- Play an entire section in just quarter notes or quarter rests!

As we learn to play interesting lines with these guide lines you're going to find some truths forming in your playing.

Truth One: By leaving space and counting your rhythms in your head, playing entire 8 bar

sections in quarter notes or using the melody's shape you will notice your swing feel and time begin to improve.

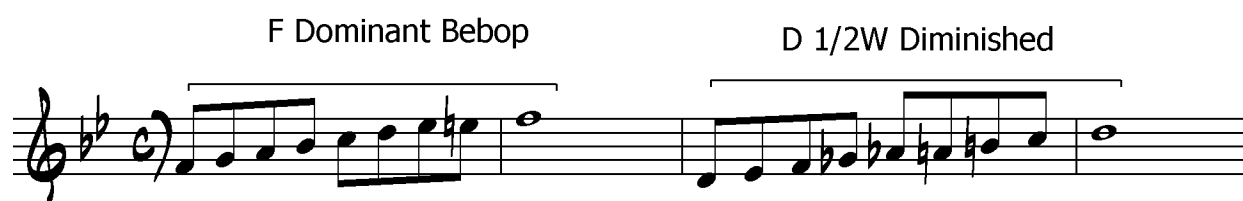
Truth Two: Your improvisation will have a very coherent, specific direction to it teaching you to build solos instead of running changes from the downbeat of your 1<sup>st</sup> chorus.

Truth Three: The Lines you construct using just the basic chord tones will actually have melodic weight and give a listener something to grab onto before you break out into more complex melodic/harmonic ideas.

## Approach Two

In approach two we take all the elements of our first approach and add some new guidelines

- On the V7 chord in the major cadence, add the liberty of the Dominant Bebop scale
- On the V7b9 chord in the minor cadence, add the liberty of the 1/2W Diminished Scale



- Begin to vary and break away from the melody more as you progress. Think of this as if it is your 2<sup>nd</sup> chorus, you are building your solo

After 32 bars of playing off the melody it is time to start to change up your language. Adding these two melodic possibilities really can drastically open up your playing. We step away from just using chord tones on the Dominant chords to adding in idiomatic scales. Scales all too often are overused or perhaps overlooked by jazz musicians who are beginning to improvise. Many schools and teachers shove hand-outs to their students *enmasse* filled with chord scale relationship theory. Right now we are going to “throw you a bone” but please, on the other chords you need to stick to your guns with the triads and 7<sup>th</sup> chords only and still avoiding arpeggios.

Break away from the melody now. If we look at Approach to as a 2<sup>nd</sup> chorus, the melody should be strongly stated. However, don't completely ignore it. Hint at it, quote at it sometimes in your 2<sup>nd</sup> chorus, but your 2<sup>nd</sup> time through the form should be the beginnings of “okay, where do we go now?” thought process. At this point now your dominant chords are becoming more chromatic creating more forward motion into the tonic chords and creating more interest.

Rhythmically 8<sup>th</sup> notes now are starting to become a good idea. However, don't start running and chasing the changes. It's not time for chops yet, save them. A few bars of 8<sup>th</sup> notes,

some triplets. Don't fear letting a bar or even two bars go by in silence, you should always embrace musical silence. Get ideas from your rhythm section as to how to proceed or just continue with how you are going. Always remember though, Jazz is conversational music, never ignore anyone on the stand with you, use their creativity to give you ideas.

### Approach 3

Now we're getting into the meat of the solo. We again are adding new ideas into the fold.

- Your Dominant chords are now fair game. Whatever chord scale relationships or chord substitutions you favor are now allowed to be used. Diminished, Wholetone, Melodic Minor, Altered Dominants etc.
- Your Tonic chords are periods of rest however now explore their extensions. Lydian, Lydian Augmented, Melodic Minor vs Natural Minor vs Harmonic Minor.
- Begin to employ melodic sequences.
- If you have the chops, it's time to "double time" or play 16<sup>th</sup> at around the Bridge or last 8 bars, leading to a climax in your 4<sup>th</sup> chorus.

Now that everything is moving along we must address the idea of Tension and Release more closely. The key to this is the Dominant V chords. I've given you the most liberties with these, but now any restrictions placed are out the window. These bars are completely up for grabs. Use whatever you **hear clearly** and accurately and play with lots of confidence on them. 8<sup>th</sup> note lines are now a lot of what you should be working with here, and in that respect symmetrical scales will lay very nicely here. Use them in sequences, broken up, don't just run scales from root to root, move around try things, **take some risks!**

The other opening is on the tonic chords. This is not just to rest your line but to play over the phrase and into the next one. This helps to create longer lines that flow as if you are playing 8 bar phrases and not 4 bar phrases of Major vs Minor. With using new ideas over the tonic chords we can create one long line over an entire 8 bar section.

Starting to employ sequences is a good way to take your solo to different levels. At this point, on a tune with such a static harmony to start to "take it out". There are lots of ways to do this.

1235 patterns to creat tension based off different roots that are related in some way to the chord



Dominant chords are supposed to have non-harmonic tensions on them, and therefore when I hear someone use a diminished scale in bar 6 of the tune I don't consider it out. Using sequences on the ii chords does. Use digital patterns (1235 for example) or use pentatonic scales and side step them (moving them by half steps) until they resolve to the next chord. There are a lot of pentatonic relationships that happen in the music. You can use chord subs as well moving them within the key that exists to create interest. Taking ideas and moving them up through the key or moving them completely up new intervals (play 1235 and then play it up a minor 3<sup>rd</sup> and you will get lots of outside tensions for example, this is a fairly common thing to do).

### **Other Ideas to Try**

- Play anything you want but make he changes playing Half notes, Quarter Notes only. This will improve your time feel significantly
  - Ignore the ii and IV chords in the A section and just play V V I I (of III) and V V i to create more tension and release!
  - Never forget Blues. Especially using it as a point of rest at the end of phrases, for example using a G minor blues scale over the Gminor7 bars.
  - Chromatic ideas. Playing Chromatically between chord tones creates interest and forward motion. Playing the b7 of a minor chord and moving down by ½ steps to the 5<sup>th</sup> is a common sound in jazz, same with 5 to b3, b3 to 1 so on and so forth.
- Experiment