

Melodic Guitar Improvisation

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1 Contents

This e-book comes with a .zip archive containing guided backing tracks. Here is the complete list of the files.

AllChords-Plain.mp3 : complete backing track

AllChords-Guided.mp3 : complete backing track with guiding voice

AllChords-Example.mp3 : short example of a guitar improvisation on the backing track

Am-C-Plain.mp3

Am-C-Guided.mp3

Am-Dm-Plain.mp3

Am-Dm-Guided.mp3

Am-Em-Plain.mp3

Am-Em-Guided.mp3

Am-F-Plain.mp3

Am-F-Guided.mp3

Am-G-Plain.mp3

Am-G-Guided.mp3

The backing tracks in the second group use only the two chords indicated. See below how to use them. "Guided" backing tracks have a recorded voice reading out the name of the chord that is being played.

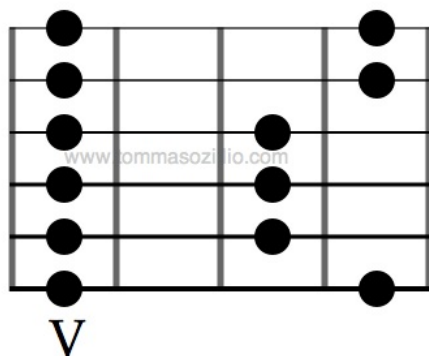
2 Intro

Improvisation is one of the most fun activities a musician can indulge in, but it is also one of the most intimidating for someone who has never done it. In short, we can say that you are improvising whenever you are playing and you do not know what you are going to play next. You are making up music as you go.

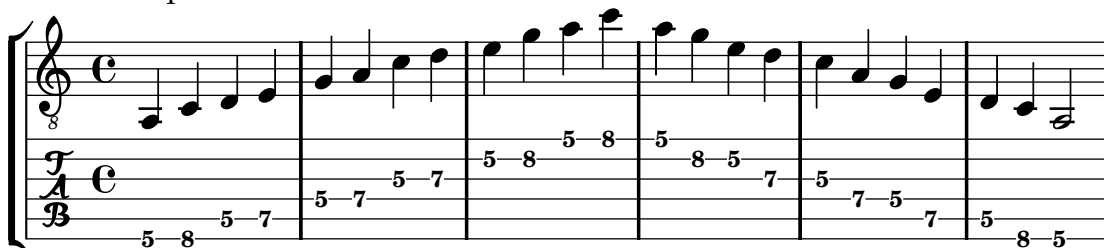
As for everything in music, there are countless different approaches to improvisation. On the other hand, there are some tricks that can improve your skills no matter what your approach is. Here we are going to cover what is called “chord tones soloing”. A good familiarity with this concept is mandatory if you want to be able to play soulfully and melodically.

3 The First Step

Let’s start with something simple. First of all, take your guitar and make sure that it is tuned properly. We want to train your ears too, so it’s important your the guitar is in tune. Let’s learn the following scale:



This scale is called “A minor pentatonic” and starts at the 5th fret. Just play it up and down a couple of times, like this:



As soon as your fingers are familiar with the shape of this scale, play one of the backing tracks included with this e-book, in the meantime play random notes on this scale with your guitar. Yes, you heard me correctly, play random notes. I know it does not make any sense to you, just do it. Seriously, stop reading right now and do it. It is fundamental that you have first-hand experience on that.

Ok, I am assuming that you did it. Do not keep reading if you didn’t do it. I am also going to assume that you were not very satisfied with the results. In this moment that is not important. What *is* important is if there is something we can do to make you sound better. Of course there is, so keep reading.

4 Use chord notes

You may have noticed that when you played random notes over the backing track some of them were good, and other were so-so. The question is: what notes are good? To answer this we will need a bit of music theory (just a tiny tiny bit, so don't be frightened!).

The basic piece of information is that each chord is composed by (at least) three notes. For instance, the C major chord is composed by the C note, the E note and the G note. The A minor chord is made by the A note, the C note, and the E note. There are rules on how to find the notes corresponding to each chord, but we are not going to learn them right now — as you will see below, you will not need them to do what we have to do.

What you DO need to know is that the “right notes” are the ones composing the chord that is playing in that moment. So, if the backing track is playing a C major chord, the right notes are C, E, and G. If it's playing an Am chord, the right notes are A, C, and E.

As you see, all this thing about playing chord notes is easier said than done. How can you possibly 1) know what chord is playing right now 2) remember the notes of this chord 3) find them on the fretboard and 4) play them, all at the same time? Chances are that before you can do all that, the chord has changed! Yet, good players are doing it all the time, so the real question is: *how* they are doing it?

The secret is to become familiar with every one of these steps *separately* until they become second nature; then performing them all together is not difficult anymore. I have put together an easy system to help you play using chord notes even if you can't (at the moment) do all the required steps in real time. So, here's how we will overcome all the difficulties:

1. You will not have to remember what chord is playing at any given moment, since I prepared for you a “guided” version for each backing track, where I am going to spell what chord is playing each time.
2. You will not need to remember the notes of the chord, or find them on the fretboard since I prepared for you a series of scale diagrams where these notes are highlighted (see the last page of this e-book).
3. The only thing you will have to do is PLAY!

To make the learning process really comfortable for you, I have prepared a series of exercises that you should follow in the order presented here. I know that the first one or two sound really easy to do, but you should do them anyway. They are going to train your brain and fingers to perform movements that will be useful in the next exercises.

Now have a look at the scale diagrams at the end of this e-book. There is one scale diagram for each chord. The notes marked in red are the chord notes of that particular chord. Ignore the green notes for the time being. Now get the backing track “Am-G-Guided.mp3”. As the name says, this backing track has only the two chords Am and G. Each exercise below must be done for at least a full play of the backing track. Do not skimp on the basics, and you'll see that the advanced exercises will be easy.

4.1 Exercises

Exercise 1. When the backing track is on Am, play one Am chord note. When it goes on G, play one G chord note. Rules: You can play ONLY ONE note per chord, and it MUST be a chord note. You have the freedom of choosing which particular chord note you are going to play.

Example:

Am G Am G Am

Exercise 2. Same as before, but now play only “wrong” notes. I want you to hear how the “right” notes are actually more consonant with the chord, and how the “wrong” one sound dissonant. Dissonance is not necessarily bad, but for now we want to avoid it.

Example:

Am G Am G Am

Exercise 3. Same as Exercise 1, but now play TWO different chord notes per chord. Not one, not three, but precisely two. Remember, you can play only “right notes”.

Example:

Am G Am G Am

Exercise 4. Same as the previous exercise, but now you are free to choose if you want to play one, two or more notes per chord. You can play two notes on Am, then three on G, then only one on the next Am, and so on. You are still allowed to use only chord notes, of course.

Example:

Am G Am G Am

8

5

7 5 8 7 5 7 5

The goal of these first exercises is to have you memorize the chord notes for Am and G. It is important to listen to the notes you are playing, so that your ear will start to recognize them. This is not “music” yet, we are just setting things up in order to play more complicate things.

In the following exercises we lift the restriction of playing only chord notes. You can play whatever you want on any chord, and we are going to restrict only one or two notes per melodic phrase.

Exercise 5. *Play short phrases (2-4 notes, not more!), one phrase per chord. The only restriction is that the LAST note of the phrase should be a chord note. The other notes may or may not be a chord note, but the last one has absolutely to be one.*

Example:

Am G Am

8

7-5-7 5-7-5 7-5-7

Exercise 6. *Again play only short phrases (2-4 notes), but this time start all the phrases on Am with an Am chord note, and end them on G with a G chord note.*

Example:

Am G

8

7 5 5 7

This last exercise will teach you how to *connect* two chords. It is important that you do not fall into the habit of playing one phrase per chord, but rather that you try to connect them by playing *through* the chord change. If you begin with a chord note of the first chord and end with a chord note of the second one then your phrase will sound good.

Now repeat all the exercises for all the two-chords backing tracks. When you have done the exercise sequence for all of the backing tracks, repeat it one last time with the “all chords” backing track, that is noticeably more complicated since, as the name says, has all the six chords into it. Doing all the exercises in the order presented here will train your ear and not only your fingers, so that in future, even if you do not know what chords are playing, you will hear if the note you are playing is one of the “right” ones or not. With a bit of experience you will then be able to rely completely on your ear without thinking about chords all the time. So do all the “easy” exercises and you will get results.

4.2 The green notes

The green notes in the scale diagrams are additional notes that are outside of the scale we are considering, but still are part of the chord played. If this last sentence confused you, fear not. Just do again the exercises above and consider the green notes as “right notes”. You will discover some more melodic possibilities using them. Remember that, at the end of the day, the important thing is that you like the music you are able to play, and not if you are doing everything “by the book”.

5 How to use the backing tracks

As I said before, one of the problems of all this ideas is that you HAVE to know what chord is playing at any given moment. This usually means that you have to memorize the chord progression of a backing track, and keep count of where you are. To make things easier for you, I prepared all the backing tracks included here in two version: “plain” and “guided”. The plain version is just a standard backing track, while the guided version has a voice added that reads the chords in real time. This way you can keep track of the chords effortlessly.

6 How to use the diagrams

Here are the diagrams for the major and minor chords in the key of A minor. These are all the chords you need to get started. My suggestion is that you print them so that you can see them while you are playing. After doing the exercises for a couple of times, you will see that you can remember them with no effort. You will also discover that your improvisations will start to be more ear-driven rather than finger-driven, meaning that you will start to search for a certain sound and not just play what it is easy to play.

The notes in RED are the chord notes for the chord considered, also called the “right” notes. The notes in GREEN are optional notes that are outside the basic scale we are using, but that work well on some chords. Ignore the green notes the first time you are doing the exercises. When you have completed a first round through all the exercises then come back and add the green notes too. Some of them sound really sweet if played at the right moment (just a bit of experimentation will put you on the right track).

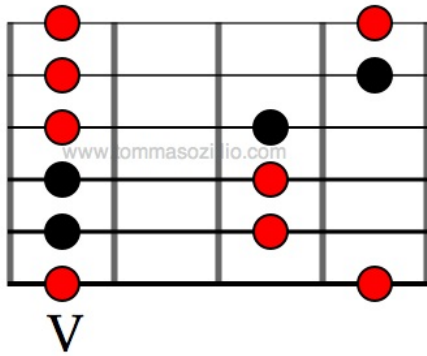
7 In the end

Remember that the important things are:

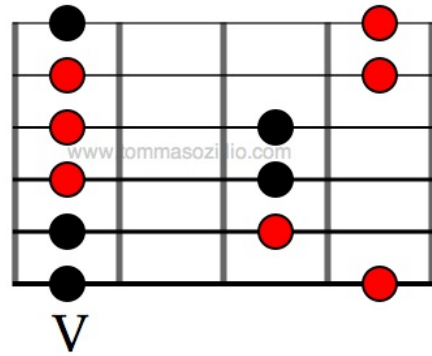
1. Making music
2. Having fun

Take it easy and make baby steps until you can master the concepts that I explained here. You’ll see that if you follow the exercises soloing melodically will become second nature very soon. Enjoy!

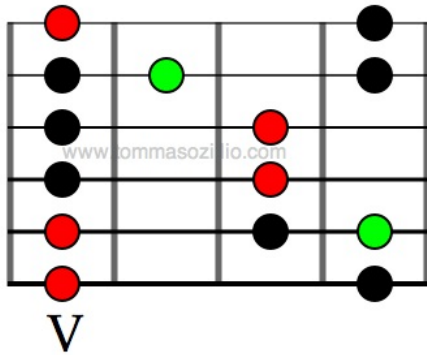
Am



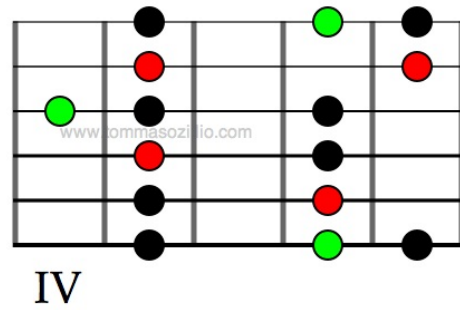
C



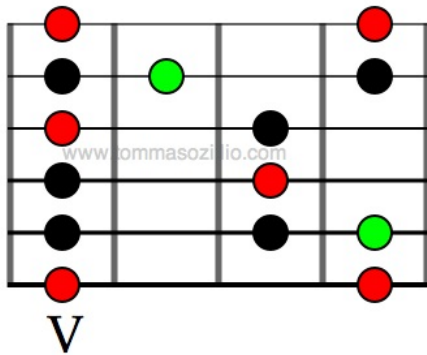
Dm



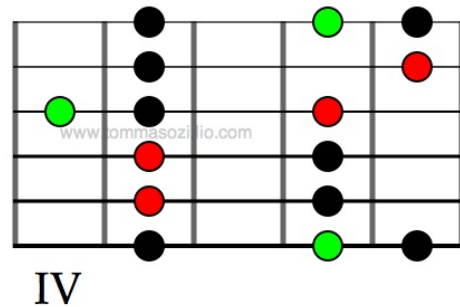
Em



F



G



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