



GUIDELINES FOR CREATING SOLO ARRANGEMENTS

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March 2009 (reprint from 2002)

1. Learn the melody on the top two or three strings, in a linear fashion.
2. Learn the basic chord sequence. Arpeggiate each chord if possible.
3. Decide which key best suits your arrangement and transpose if necessary. The chosen key could be the original one (often with flats), or a more "guitarist friendly" key, such as E, A, G, C etc. The latter keys often open up the possibility of utilising the open strings of the guitar.
4. Start composing, by putting chords and melody together. A few things to bear in mind are:
 - a) Every note of the melody need not have a chord. Too many chords for the sake of it can sound messy. Look for movement – within the chord and throughout the arrangement. Experiment also with connecting bass lines and runs. If you can't find a chord to support a melody note/phrase, then just play single notes! This will create space and therefore contrast and interest.
 - b) Try to avoid full –on six string chords, unless you are playing the notes as arpeggios. Smaller is better for solo arrangements, so go for 3 or four note chords and don't be afraid to leave out the 5th of the chord for example. The important notes are the root, 3rd and 7th of any chord. Try to make the melody note stronger than the bass and inner notes of the chord, to help convey the sense that the parts are independent.
 - c) Experiment with different chord types that support the melody, starting with the obvious. Jazz arrangements hardly ever use bog-standard major and minor chords, so look to replace these with minor and major 6ths, 7ths, 9ths and dominant chords with 9ths, 11ths, 13ths etc. Often the melody note will be a chord extension e.g. a 9th or an alteration e.g. #5, b9, so the chord type has already been determined for you. The more chord types with their inversions that you have in your repertoire, and the more permutations of the major and minor II V I cadences you have learned, the more chances you have of creating an arrangement with pleasing harmonies. Remember that in particular dominant 7th chords can support each note of the chromatic scale (see Simon Newton's article in the February 1999 SJGS newsletter), so experimentation is the order of the day! There are no rights and wrongs, only preferences.
 - d) Use substitute chords to enhance the harmony
Detailed "rules" covering chord substitutions is beyond the scope of this article. However, the most common substitution to consider is the ubiquitous b5 or tritone substitution, where the V chord in a II V I progression is replaced by a dominant chord whose root is an interval of b5 away from the root of the V chord. So if you have a II V I progression which reads Am7 – D7 – G Maj7, you would replace the D7 with an Ab7. As well as altering the harmony, this gives a nice chromatic run from the II chord to the I chord. Remember though that the melody dictates the chord, so a substitution may work for one melody, but not another. Terry Cole covered the basic rules of substitution in his article in the October 1997 SJGS Newsletter.

e) Other Techniques

To add interest to the arrangement, consider techniques such as: -

- Harmonising lines in 3rds, 4ths, 6ths.
- The use of artificial and natural harmonics- especially for intros and endings.
- Contrary motion
- Walking bass
- Pedal tones
 - Slides, bends, hammer-ons, pull-offs. (Yes, even in jazz arrangements – think of Django!)
- Melody note followed by arpeggio
- Changing key for the last chord of the tune e.g. if the tune ends on F Maj7, change it to F#Maj13

5. Listen to recorded arrangements of the tune you are working on to get some ideas. This doesn't have to be another guitar arrangement. Pianists use voicings that guitarists find difficult to transfer to the guitar, but some of these voicings are manageable with a bit of a stretch (e.g. Johnny Smith - Moonlight in Vermont) and it's worth checking out a few.

6. Finger style vs. Plectrum

Joe Pass used fingers, as does Martin Taylor, Tuck Andres and Neil Stacey. Barney Kessel used a plectrum, Wes used his thumb. There is no right or wrong way, whatever suits. Using fingers enables a more pianistic approach, gives a softer sound and is more flexible, but plectrum allows faster and maybe smoother single lines.

7. Form

Once you have a rough arrangement of the tune down, start to experiment with intros and endings. Your arrangement should tell a story- all good stories have an intro, main body and an ending. The usual form for jazz standard is AABA. A simple form for your arrangement could therefore be:

INTRO – A A B A B A – OUTRO.

If this only takes a couple of minutes to perform, you may wish to do the whole thing twice - INTRO-A A B A - A A B A - OUTRO, but beware of too much repetition as this can become boring for the listener. It would be best to try and alter the harmony or shift the key centre for the second time around to maintain interest, or even consider a sequence of single note soloing or a faster swinging version of the same tune. Contrast and interest are what you are after.

8. Transcribing

Try to get your arrangement down on paper or record it. There is nothing worse than coming up with some cool ideas and then promptly forgetting them! What you will find is that your arrangements will evolve over time and you will be constantly looking for and finding new ideas and enhancements as your arranging technique improves.

9. Finally, none of your ideas will be 'wrong' as long as they are musical. To quote jazz guitar guru Jim Mullen "if it sounds right, it is right".