

Jazz Theory: The Magic of Guide Tones

by Dennis Winge

So many students ask me how to solo on jazz chord changes. At the root of functional jazz harmony lies the II-V-I progression. This means, the chords built off the second, fifth and first notes of a given key. Two examples are:

Key	II-V-I
C major	Dm7- G7-Cmaj7
E minor	F#m7b5 – B7 – Emin7

The reason this progression is so pleasing is that it sets up tension and release. The II chord sets up tension, which is escalated by the V chord, which is then resolved to the I chord. We instinctively hear the I chord as the key of rest, and the two other chords wanting to resolve to it.

Leading Tone

How you can use this information is to understand how to use this tension and release to your advantage when constructing improvised or composed melodies. First, let's take the II-V portion. The most basic kernel of information you need to know is that the most dramatic movement occurs between the root and the 7th scale degree. To explain this, let's take the key of C from above.

Dmin7 = d, f, a, c

G7 = g, b, d, f

So we see that two notes are the same for both chords (d and f), and two notes move (a moves to g and c moves to b). In comparing the two moving parts, the first one (a to g) doesn't add a lot of tension, because it goes to the 5th of the key, which by itself is not a very tense note. In other words, if you play the notes c and g at the same time, it will sound very pleasant or 'consonant,' so focusing on that movement from a to g will not really help you gain the effect of tension and release, because in moving to g you are already settling on a note that is low-tension in the key of C at a time (i.e. while the G7 is happening) when you want to produce tension.

The second one, the c to b, produces a lot of tension. If you play a C major scale and stop on the note b, your ear is just craving to hear the next note c. It's as if you've been led to the edge of a precipice and need more ground under your feet. This 7th note in any major scale (not just C) is called the "leading tone" because it leads you back to the tonic, (or note 1, the root of the key.)

The leading tone is a half-step below the root, or in a major scale, the seventh scale degree. You can use this one note as a way to add tension, delay resolution, or outline

the harmony of a progression. In a II V I progression the kernel of the harmonic motion is the 7th of the II chord (ex: key of C it would be the “c” of a Dm7 chord) to the 3rd of the V chord (i.e. “b” of the G7) chord.

This is a powerful tool; you can use this simple “tonic” to “leading tone” movement as in example 1.

① D-7 G7 CΔ7

② D-7₃ G7 CΔ7

③ Bø E7 A-

④ D-7 G7 CΔ7

⑤ D-7 G7 CΔ7

⑥ D-7 G7 CΔ7

⑦ D-7 G7 CΔ7

Or do tonic, leading tone, then back again, as in example 2.

Stretch this idea out, contract it, expand it, play around with it on all II V progressions. Take it on “Autumn Leaves” and play around with the leading tone on the minor II V I’s as well, as in example 3.

Guide Tones

Now let’s take the V to I.

G7 = g, b, d, f

Cmaj7 = c, e, g, b

Again we see that there are two common notes, (g and b) and of the other two movements, one of them (d to c) is not very dramatic because d, although more of a tense note than c, is not a very tense note in general. In other words, if you play a C chord and add a d note to it, which makes a Cadd9, it's quite pleasant.

By contrast if you play a C chord and then play an f note an octave up from there, it'll sound quite out of place. In short, f to e is the real tension-to-resolution kernel when going from the V to the I.

The Guide Tones are the 3rd and 7th of each chord. This is an expansion of the 'leading tone' example above, because now we add the full movement of each chord. (ex: "f" and "c" of Dm7 go to "f" and "b" to G7 go to "e" and "b" of Cmaj7.) Notice the overall movement is "f" to "f" to "e" and "c" to "b" to "b" – so a different part moves at a different time.

The simple guide tones are illustrated in example 4.

Here is a sample line in example 5.

Or delay the resolution as in example 6.

Or anticipate the changes as in example 7.

Using the guide tones, you can outline the harmony easily, even without accompaniment. Try this technique through an entire section or tune.

Experiment with this concept of 1-to-7 over the II-V and 4-to-3 over the V-I. It is the essence of the harmonic function of the II-V-I which is the foundation of all jazz chord progressions.