Learn Jazz Vocabulary Easily with Guide Tones

When students learn about a II-V-I progression in jazz and begin soloing within its key, their solos often still don't sound 'jazzy.' This happens because their lines lack harmonic direction—meaning that if the chords were removed, the underlying progression wouldn't be evident in their playing. Soloing 'vertically' means addressing each chord as it appears, which is essential in jazz improvisation. In contrast, rock solos are often more 'horizontal,' staying within the overall key without focusing on each individual chord. (The term 'vertical' comes from visualizing a chord as stacked notes on a page, while 'horizontal' refers to playing across the chords without emphasizing each one.)

The quickest way to develop harmonic direction in your solos—and build a foundation for jazz vocabulary—is to focus on lines that emphasize the movement of *guide tones*. Guide tones are the notes that define a chord's function, specifically the 3rd and 7th. Let's first explore the theory behind guide tones, and then how to incorporate them into your solo lines.

I. Theory of Guide Tones

We will focus on the 3rd and 7th of chords because these notes define a chord's character. The three most common chord types—maj7, dominant 7, and min7—are defined by their relationship between the 3rd and 7th, as shown below:

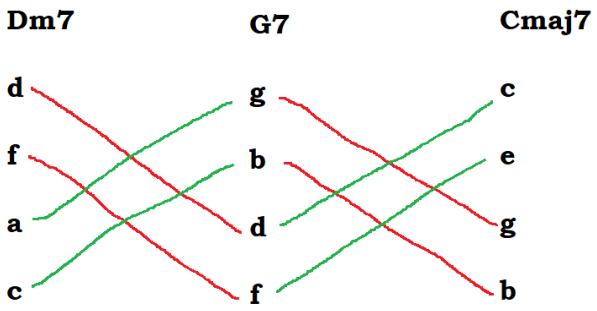
Chord	**3rd**	**7th**
Maj7	3	7
7	3	b7
Min7	b3	b7

We'll avoid focusing on the roots because that role is covered by the bass player. Similarly, the 5th is less interesting, especially when it's a perfect fifth, as it doesn't significantly shape a chord's character. It can even be left out of chord voicings without changing the chord's overall sound. Therefore, our focus is on how the 3rds and 7ths move through chord changes.

The II-V-I is the most common progression in jazz. While the examples here are in the key of C, it's crucial to practice them in all 24 keys (the other 11 major keys and 12 minor keys, adapting the lines as needed). Below are the chord tones for each chord in a II-V-I in C:

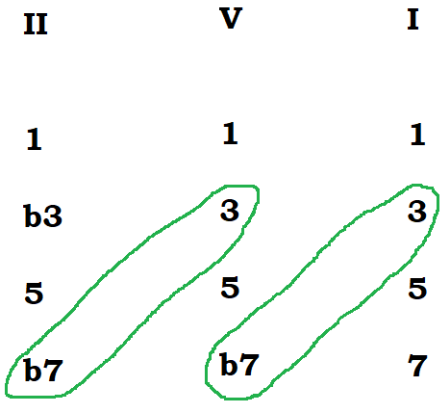
Chord	1	3	5	7
Dm7	d	f	a	c
G7	g	b	d	f
Cmaj7	c	e	g	b

The following diagram highlights which 'voices' (chord tones) remain the same between chords (marked in red) and which ones shift (marked in green).



From Dm7 to G7, only two notes move: **a** to **g**, and **c** to **b**. We focus on the latter, as **c** is the 7th of Dm7, resolving to **b**, the 3rd of G7. Similarly, from G7 to Cmaj7, we are most interested in the **f** moving to **e**, as **f** is the 7th of G7, resolving to **e**, the 3rd of Cmaj7.

In summary, we focus on the movement of the **b7 to the 3rd** in both sets of chord changes, as this transition is key to creating smooth harmonic motion.



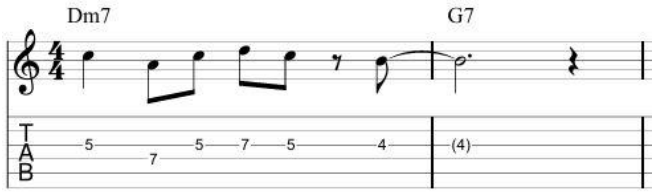
II. Guide Tones Lines

Let's start with a few simple guide tone licks. All the following examples are demonstrated in the following video:

https://youtu.be/oVwT1AwSvq0

Figure 1 shows a simple melodic line that moves above and below the guide tones over the Dm7 G7 chord, which are of course *c* and *b*.

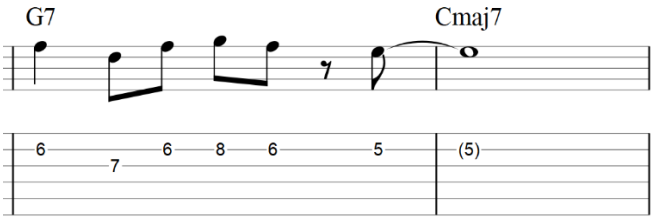
Figure 1



Notice that the line uses the guide tones in a way that may not be obvious to the casual listener, but is *highly structurally intentional*. All of the following lines are like this.

Using the same melodic contour, the next line highlights the *f* to *e* guide tones of the G7 to Cmaj7.

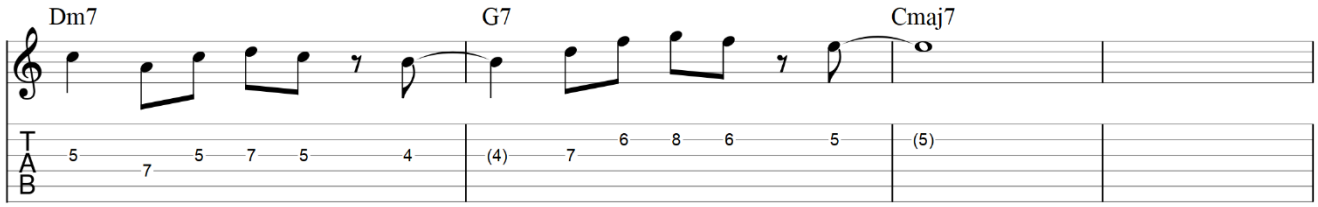
Figure 2



Figures 1 and 2 are a great place to get started making your own guide tone lines. You can start with the first guide tone, vary the melodic direction down or up without straying too far, and then be ready to resolve to the next guide tone on or just before the next bar. (You may also employ 'delayed resolution,' which is used later in the article, but for now, move to the next guide tone on the '1' of the new bar, or anticipate it by an 8th note.)

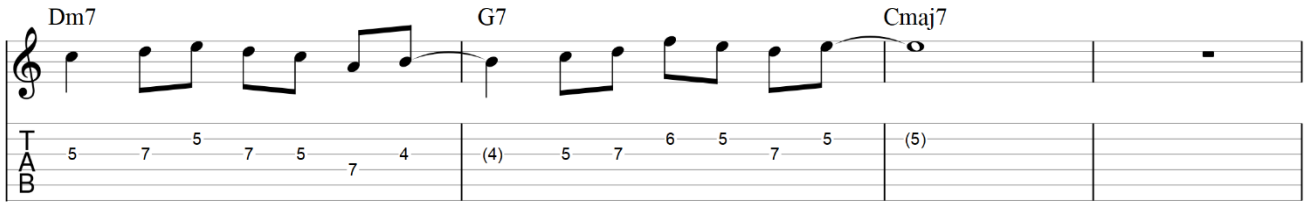
To combine both lines together, play Figure 3.

Figure 3



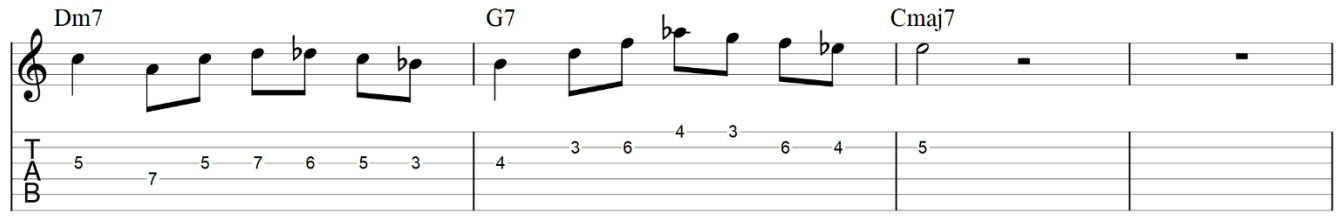
In the next line, Figure 4 shows how, reversing direction from the previous example, we can first ascend and then descend.

Figure 4



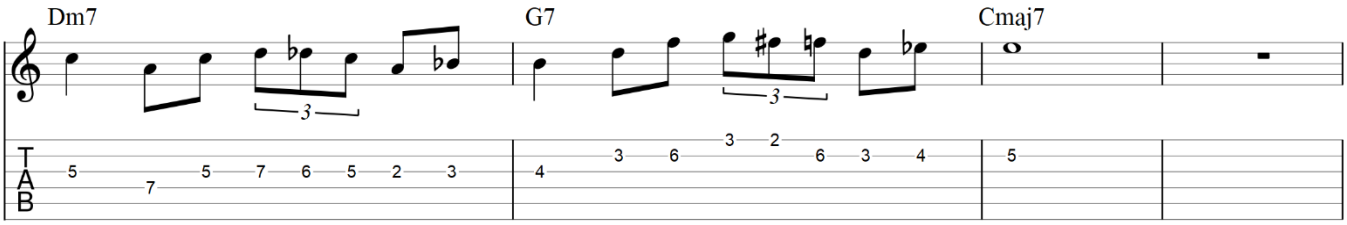
So far we have used only notes in the key of C to connect the guide tones, but there is no reason why we can't employ accidentals as well, which Figure 5 shows.

Figure 5



Notice that the *b* note was *enclosed* by it's upper and lower neighbors, *c* and *bb*. This is a very common device in jazz, and it even happens again in the next bar where the *f* and the *eb* enclose the target guide tone of *e.*

Figure 6



Chromatics are a really great way to spice up your lines. It's like the food pyramid: the chord tones are your main staples and take up the lower and largest portion of the pyramid, followed by scale tones, which of course are the remaining notes of the scale besides chord tones. At the top in the 'use sparingly' portion are the notes you may not want to overdo it on, but that sure sound sweet, or spicy.

Figure 7

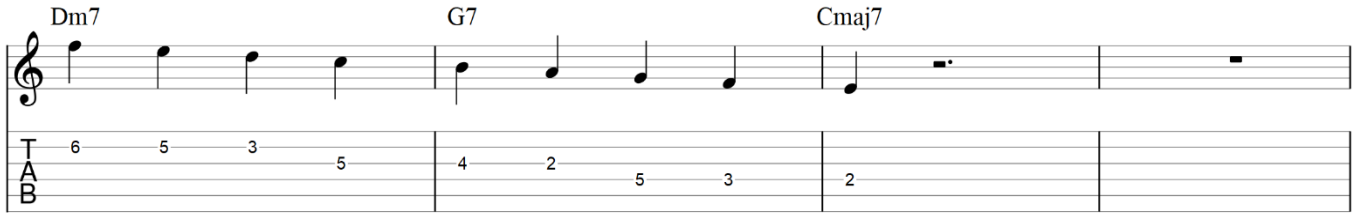
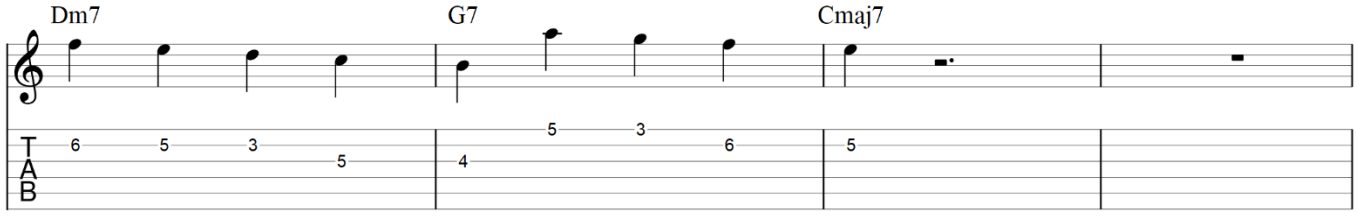


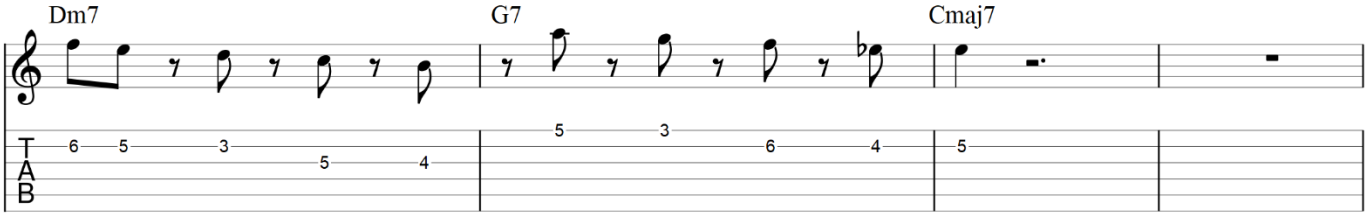
Figure 7 provides a descend melodic line by starting on the 3rd of the II chord. This is one of the basic outlines used to make lines that employ guide tones, and even though it may seem a bit bland there is a lot you can do with it, particularly if you modulate up an octave as Figure 8 illustrates.

Figure 8



And now let's throw in another common jazz element, *syncopation,* to make it sound more hip, as Figure 9 shows.

Figure 9



Notice that the line resolves to the guide tone *b* on the G7 on the "and of 4" of the previous bar, while the *e*, the 3rd of the Cmaj7 chord, resolves on the "1." Balancing anticipation and no-anticipation is a good way to rhythmically mix things up.

Figure 10

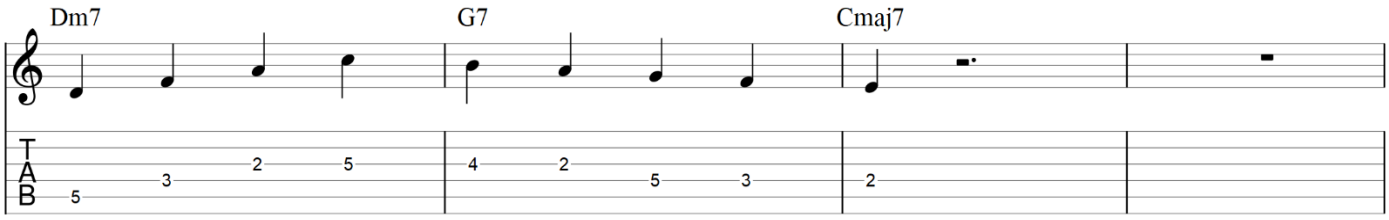


Figure 10 shows how we can start on the root of the II chord and ascend to make a nice guide tone line.

Figure 11

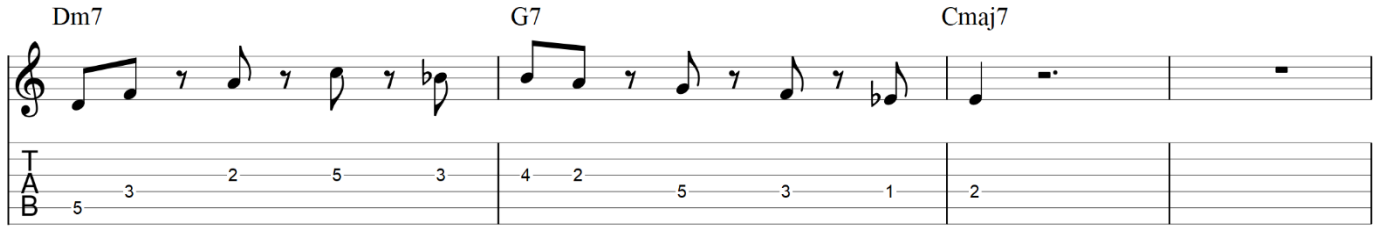
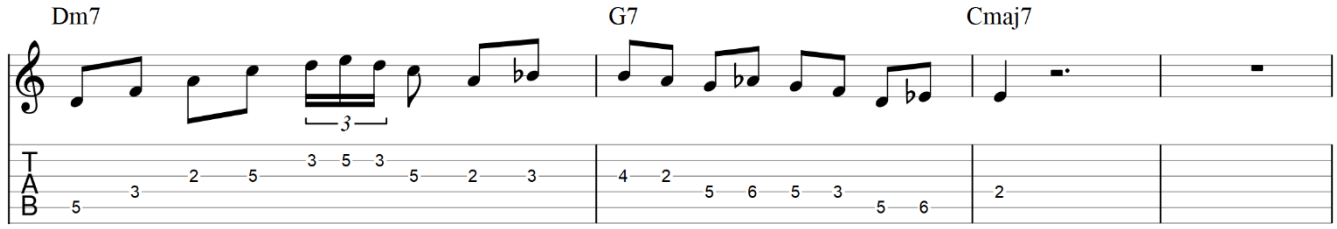


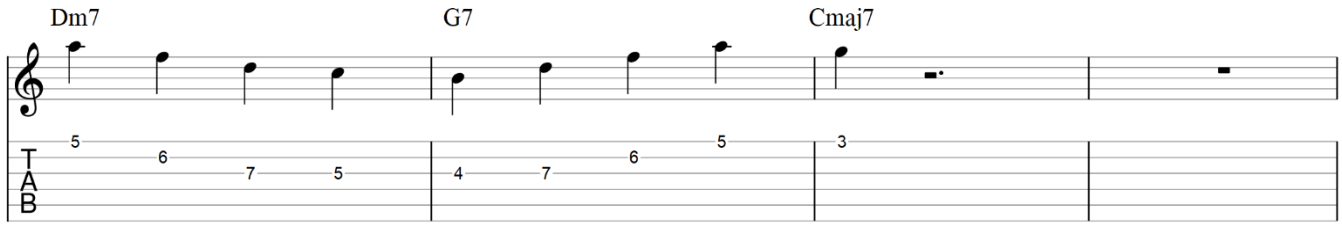
Figure 11 gives the same general direction with enclosure of both target notes, *b* on the G7 and *e* on the Cmaj7 and also some rhythmic syncopation. How about we add some chromatics and triplets?

Figure 12



There is really no limit to the amount of embellishments you can make to the general contour of basic guide tones lines, and how you do so allows your personality to express itself within the overall structure, which is not meant to be confining.

Figure 13



Figures 7, 10 and 13 give us the 3 most common starting points of melodic guide tone lines which are, respectively:

1. starting on the 3rd of II and descending
2. starting on the root of II and ascending
3. starting on the 5th of II and descending

Figure 14

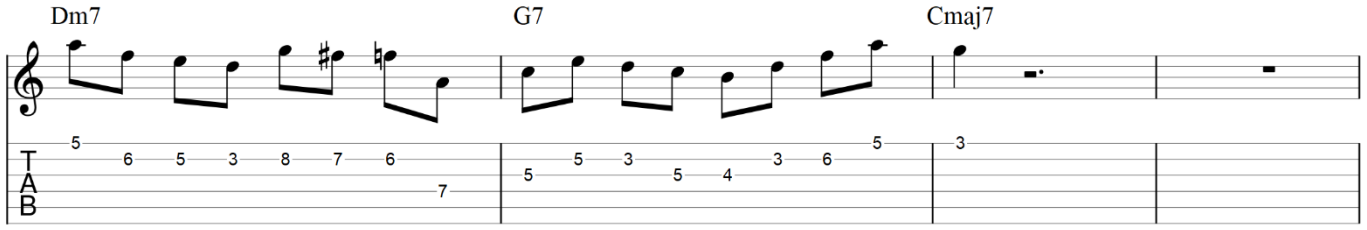
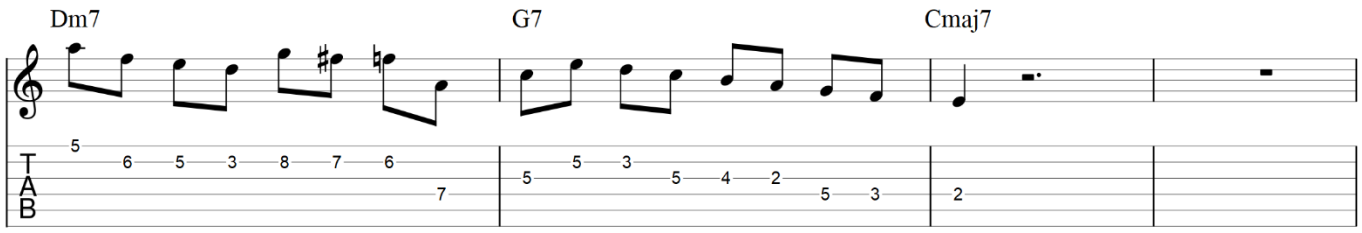


Figure 14 easily turns an otherwise bland quarter-note passage into a swinging 8th note line, complete with chromatics and delayed resolution, where we don't hear the b note, the 3rd of the G7 chord, until the 3rd beat of the bar.

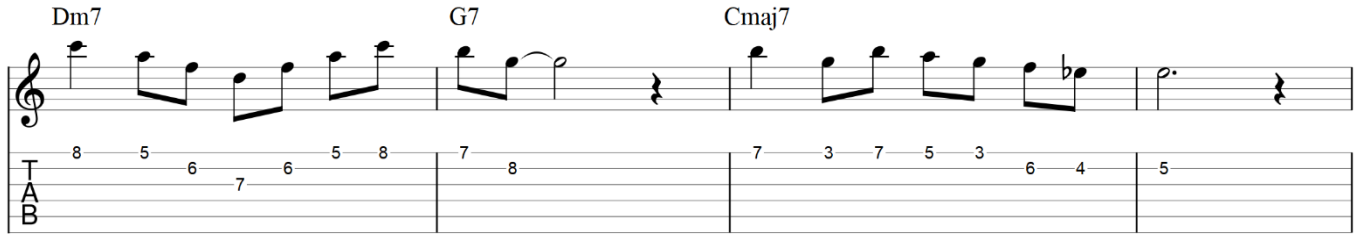
You may notice that Figures 13 and 14 do not resolve to the 3rd of Cmaj7. This is just a variation and not an integral part of the shape of the line. You can always resolved to any chord and these are not meant to be prescriptive. The next example shows how we could easily resolve to the 3rd of the I chord.

Figure 15



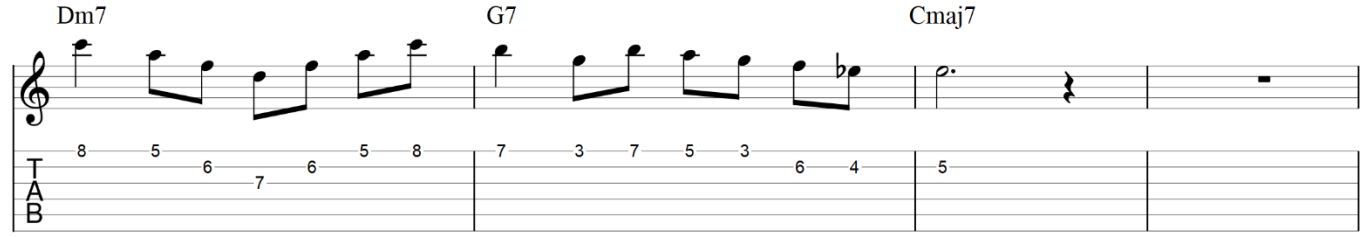
The next example starts on the guide of the II chord and descends and then ascends by arpeggiating the entire chord before moving to the guide tone of the V chord. Then the line stays at that *b* note at the beginning of the first bar of the I chord before resolving to the 3rd.

Figure 16



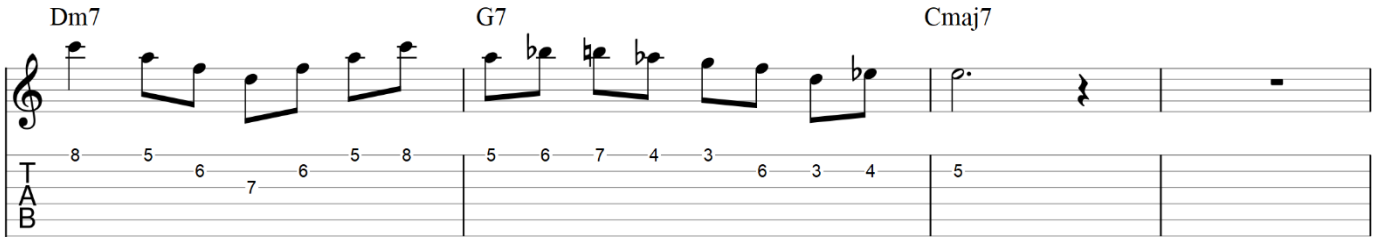
If we put all that together in 1 single line we have the following:

Figure 17



Now let's throw in some chromatics on the V chord:

Figure 18



On the V chord, it is common to use the b9 and #9, which would be the notes *ab* and *bb* respectively to a G7 chord. Figure 19 highlights these with rhythmic syncopation.

Figure 19

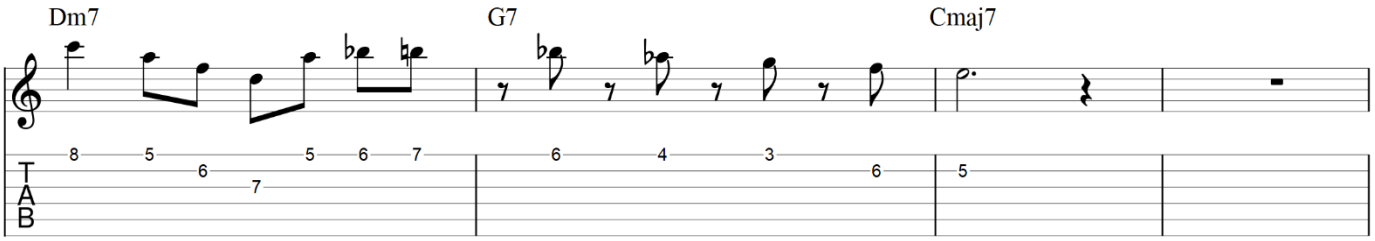
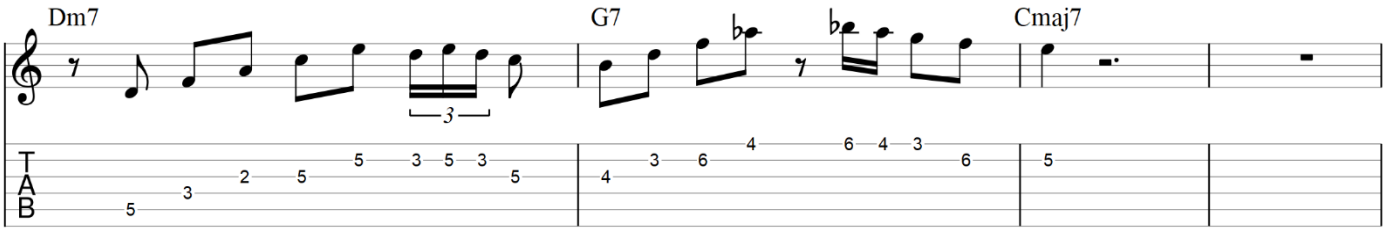


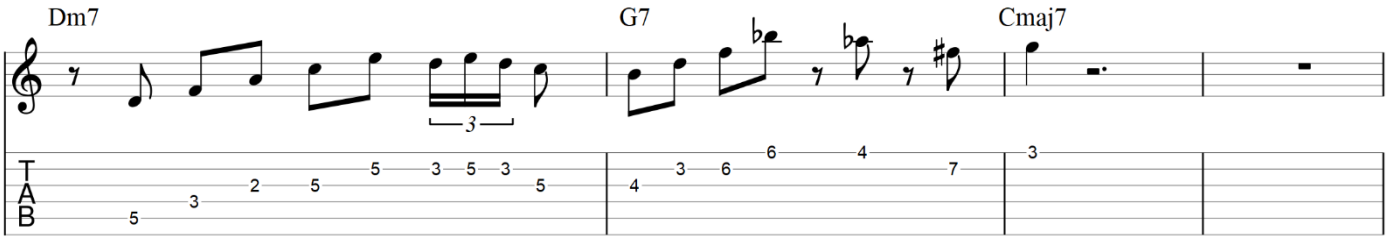
Figure 20 is another variation on Figure 10, where a) the first note is not on the downbeat of the bar, b) triplets are used for ornamentation, and c) the b9 and #9 are used on the V chord.

Figure 20



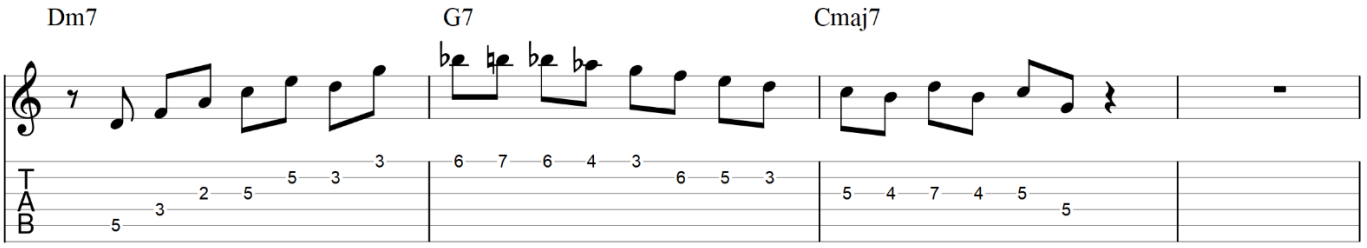
The next example is a slight variation using enclosure to the 5th of the I chord.

Figure 21



The following example's first note over the V chord is #9, and the line resolves to the root of the I chord at the start of bar 3, with some embellishment thereafter.

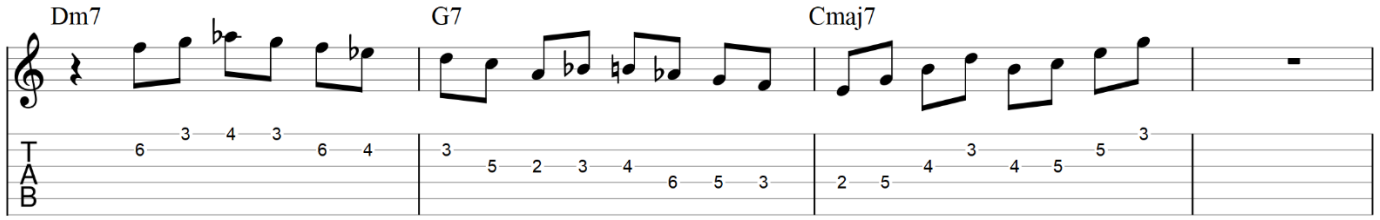
Figure 22



The following figure uses the b5 (the *ab* note) on the II chord, chromatics on the V chord, and an arpeggiated embellishment on the I chord. This last bar shows how well constructed lines set up *momentum* from one chord to another, and makes it easy to continue ideas with extended lines.

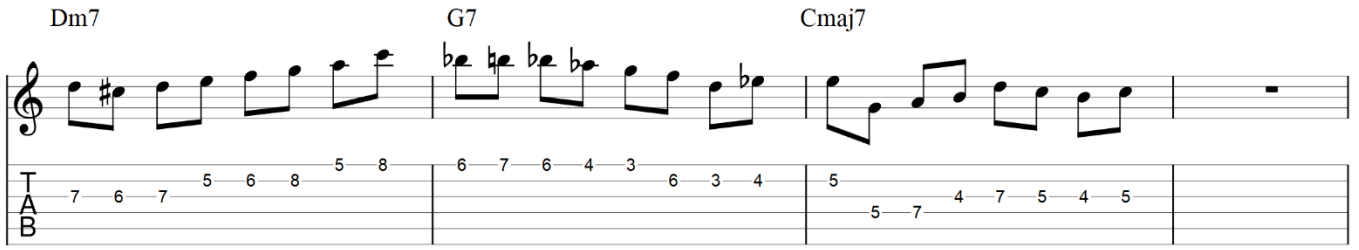
Figure 23 doesn't resolve to the 3rd of the G7, but rather the 5th, and then continues the downward movement to the guide of the Cmaj7 chord before reverse directin.

Figure 23



"Do-ti-do" is a way of saying a root, then natural 7th, then root again of any chord, and it's an easy way (along with "re-ti-do") to start a line off with nice momentum. This is exactly what happens in Figure 24.

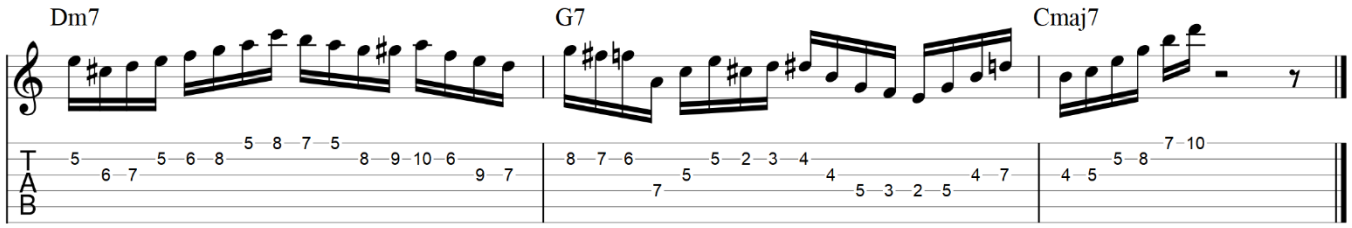
Figure 24



So far, all of our examples have been 8th note based, but there is nothing to say that guide tone lines can't be found within 16th note lines. Several things to notice about Figure 25, besides the obvious fact that it's based in 16th notes are:

- The guide tones *c* to *b* are actually played two whole beats early, i.e. on the last 16th of beat to the first one of beat 3 in bar. This is not a problem because of the momentum that the rest of the line maintains; it doesn't in any way take away from the forward motion and the harmonic outline of the chords.
- The guide tones *f* to *e* also come earlier than the expected last part of bar 2 into the first part of bar 3. In fact, they are found in bar 2 at the last 16th of beat 3 in bar 2 and on the first 16th of beat 4. Once again, the forward motion carries the line and the harmony is still well outlined.
- The line begins with "re-ti-do" to Dm and thus sets up great momentum.
- The chromatics c# and d in the last two 16th notes of beat 2, bar 2, lead to the #5 of the G7 chord. This is a change from the usual natural 5th we have been resolving to and gives the chord even more tension before it resolves to the tonic.

Figure 25



III. Conclusion

Mastering the movement of guide tones is key to creating harmonic direction in jazz solos. By focusing on the 3rds and 7ths in each chord, you can outline chord progressions even without accompaniment, giving your lines *harmonic direction*. Start with simple lines connecting guide tones, then add embellishments like chromatics, syncopation, and enclosures to bring personality and depth to your playing. Practice these lines and concepts in all keys and you will expand your vocabulary, allowing you to express yourself with intention and clarity in virtually any jazz setting.

About the author: Dennis Winge is a pro guitarist with 10 albums as a leader and is head teacher at Guitar Lessons Ithaca.