

## Jazzing Up Your Rock Playing part 1 - Harmony

by [Dennis Winge](#)

### I. Myths about the Relationship between Jazz and Rock

This is the first in a series of articles for rock guitarists who want to be able to use concepts from jazz guitar playing in their own music. First, let's clear up some misconceptions. When I was a kid, I would hear the saying "if you can play jazz, you can play anything." I believed that so I took jazz guitar courses even though no one I knew played jazz and I never listened to it on my own. Fast forward nearly 30 years and I can say 2 things that other teachers may disagree with, but they came from my own experience:

1. If you learn to play jazz, it doesn't mean you can play anything (like a heavy metal guitar solo, for example); it just means you can play everything in a jazzier way.
2. You don't necessarily have to learn jazz standards in order to jazz up your rock playing.

When students come to me and want to jazz up their rock playing, I (and other teachers, I have found out) give those students jazz standards to play. They can really help things like melodic construction, chord vocabulary and voice leading, etc. But if the student is not listening to music like "How High the Moon" then it may not be as motivating to them in the long run.

So if you are a guitarist who wants to learn elements of jazz guitar without having to learn "Satin Doll," this series is for you. In this first part we are going to discuss harmony. It will assume you know how to harmonize a scale, so if you don't please refer to my article [insert link here](#).

### II. Utilizing the Power of Modal Playing

Jazz guitarists can sometimes cringe at the word "mode" when it comes to soloing because key changes happen much more often in jazz than in rock and each chord is typically addressed in a progression when soloing, so modal thinking to a jazzer usually means a tune that has long sections over 1 chord or several chords that are closely related. But that's exactly what happens in rock: there are many sections where the harmony is relatively static and there are usually few if any key changes in the solo section.

But what many rock players miss out on when it comes to chordal playing is that when you see 1 chord for a long period of time, *you may safely access all the other chords in the harmonized scale for that mode*. Let me illustrate.

Suppose we take the very common mode of Dorian and the key is Cm. Dorian is the 2<sup>nd</sup> mode of Bb so the harmonized scale will look the same as Bb Ionian, just starting on Cm:

Cm Dorian

Cmin7	Dmin7	Ebmaj7	F7	Gmin7	Am7b5	Bbmaj7
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This means that when you have an extended vamp over Cm, you may use all of the chords above at any time! A word of caution though: if you use “drop 2” voicings or barre chords that have roots on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> strings, you may clash with the bass player, who won’t be very happy. It would generally be much better to have separation between the bass and the chords as demonstrated in the video that goes along with this article <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70OmA6kCtL0>

I recommend learning all your major 7<sup>th</sup>, dominant 7<sup>th</sup>, minor 7<sup>th</sup>, half-diminished, and diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chords on the upper 4 strings, like these:

Standard tuning  
♩ = 120

	Cmaj7	C7	Cm7	Cm7b5	Cdim7
1					
T	3	3	3	2	2
A	1	1	1	1	1
B	4	3	3	3	2
B	2	2	1	1	1

There are 3 more inversions on these upper set of strings besides the voicings above that you can use as well, so if you are unfamiliar with those, it will be well worth your time to explore them. In the meantime, suppose you two have a groove that goes Cm for 8 bars and then something completely different like Abm. Then you can comp with chords like in example 2:

| Ebmaj7 | Bbmaj7 | Gm7 | F7 | Bbmaj7 | Am7b5 | Gm7 | Dm7 |  
C pedal -----

| Abm7 | Fmin7b5 | Bbm7 | Gbmaj7 | Cbmaj7 | Db7 | Fm7b5 | Ebm7 Fm7b5 |  
Ab pedal -----

I could have written out these voicings exactly as I played them, but the danger there is that you could spend more time working out the voicings than you would simply digesting the fact that you can use any of the chords in the mode of that particular harmonized scale, and the fact that voicings on the upper set of strings don’t clash with bass notes. You may, however, notice that in example 2 on the video, I paid attention to the top note of the voicing so that it was relatively smooth and melodic, not jumping all over the place (i.e. I used “voice leading.”)

For one final example let’s take another very common mode: mixolydian. This vamp is simply over a G7 chord and you can use any of the following chords to comp over it:

G Mixolydian

G7	Am7	Bm7b5	Cmaj7	Dm7	Em7	Fmaj7
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Example 3 is an improvised accompaniment that only uses only voicings for the chords above. Note again that I made highest note sound smooth, and also that I typically resolved from chords with the note “c” in it (i.e. Am7, Dm7, Fmaj7) to chords with the note “b” in it (G7, Em7, Bm7b5). This is the equivalent of doing a G7sus to a G7 which is commonly found in all types of music.

### **III. Summary and Tips for Practicing**

1. Learn your harmonized scales well if you haven't already done so
2. Learn all the voicings on the upper set of strings
3. Pay attention to your voice leading, especially with the highest note
4. Pick two or more random keys and modes and create an extended vamp against which to experiment with the voicings in that particular mode (as illustrated in example 2)
5. Experiment with extensions of the chords (9ths, 11ths, 13ths) which this article did not discuss.

Have fun and let me hear what cool grooves you came up with! :)