

Chapter 7 - Using quotes from popular melodies

Jazz improvisation is playing what you hear in “your mind’s ear,” so some form of ear training is essential. One good way to practice this is to choose simple melodies that you know the sound of well and play them on your guitar without using any written music. Some melodies that might be good for this could include “Happy Birthday,” “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” “This Old Man,” “On Top of Old Smokey,” etc. This may seem silly at first, but give it a try. Pick a song and any note on any string with any finger and see if you can do it. You won’t be able to spontaneously execute complex melodies while improvising if you can’t play simple familiar tunes. If it proves frustrating at first don’t get discouraged. Keep at it and your ability will improve. Other melodies to try might include TV show themes (the theme from “Jeopardy” for example), or from TV or radio commercials and melodies from current pop hits.

Since jazz improvisation is playing what you hear you’ll likely hear familiar melodies popping up in your playing from time to time. Of course you don’t want your solo to be just a string of quotes, but you also don’t want to over edit the spontaneity by being too reluctant to play something that sounds familiar. Often the quotes will be familiar to your listeners and may add a sense of comfort or even a touch of humor.

There are many short quotes that have become important parts of the mainstream jazz vocabulary and we might as well become familiar with some of the more common ones and with how to apply them in actual situations. Many also have variations and combinations that may “disguise” the original source. For now we will concentrate on standards and popular tunes as sources for quotes, saving quotes from bebop tunes and other jazz classics for later.

Ex. 7-1 shows the first two bars of the standard tune “Cry Me A River” by Arthur Hamilton. This fragment has become the model for many phrases commonly used by jazz improvisers. Suggested strings and fingerings are shown.

Ex.7-1

The musical notation for Ex. 7-1 is written on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a common time signature (C). The melody consists of two bars. The first bar contains a half note C4 (finger 1) and a half note G4 (finger 2). The second bar contains a quarter note F4 (finger 3), a quarter note E4 (finger 3), a quarter note D4 (finger 4), and a quarter note C4 (finger 3). The third bar contains a quarter note Bb3 (finger 3) and a quarter note A3 (finger 1). The fourth bar contains a quarter note G3 (finger 1) and a quarter note F3 (finger 1). Chord symbols are placed above the staff: C- above the first bar, Ab/C above the second bar, C-6 above the third bar, and C-7 above the fourth bar. Fingerings are indicated by circled numbers 1 through 5 above the notes. A thick black line is drawn above the notes in the second bar, and a curved line is drawn below the notes in the fourth bar.

This melody is so common that many jazz teachers call it “CMAR” for short. It is rarely played exactly as written in the original song. Ex. 7-2 (on the following page) shows a variation with the rhythm contracted to make it more readily useful. This example also shows an alternate suggestion for strings and fingerings, but this variation can be played using the strings and fingerings shown in ex. 7-1, and vice versa. It is always a good idea to be able to start on different strings and/or fingers.

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Ex.7-2

Ex. 7-3 shows the same line transposed into G minor (fitting G minor chords, E half-diminished chords, C dominant chords, Bb major and augmented major chords, A sus flat nine chords, and F# altered dominant chords), but with a variety of alternate suggested sets of strings and fingerings. Using these fingerings and the ones shown in ex. 7-1 and ex. 7-2 you can play this line in any key anywhere on the fingerboard.

Ex.7-3

Ex. 7-4 shows some rhythmic variations. All of these can be played using all of the fingerings shown before.

Ex.7-4

Ex. 7-5 is a demonstration showing a possible application of the CMAR quote. Since it fits so many chord types it is possible to transpose and use it and its variations over several different chords in an actual progression. This example is based on the first four bars of the Cole Porter standard “What Is This Thing Called Love” (and also Tadd Dameron’s bebop classic “Hot House”). A rhythmic variation is used in the second bar and some notes are added at the end to create a phrase ending. Suggested strings and fingerings are shown.

Ex.7-5