

## Guide Tone Paths

Guide tone paths are very important in building good melodies when improvising. Guide tones are often color tones like 3<sup>rds</sup> or 7<sup>ths</sup>, but they may be other chord tones, altered tones and extensions of the basic chords. They are generally the notes that identify the real nature of the harmony and provide a smooth flow through the harmonic progression. As jazz players, we often think of the vertical structures of the various chords in a progression. But, music does not move vertically, it moves horizontally! Guide tones are the hooks on which you hang your melody. The melodic curve may move up or down and all around the guide tones, but they are what creates a strong forward motion!

3<sup>rds</sup> and 7<sup>ths</sup> are the color tones that define the quality of most chords. In a progression down a 5<sup>th</sup>, the resolution of the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> is really what causes the chord to progress to the next chord. However, in a guide tone path, we could choose to remain on a common tone as the chord changes to make the harmony less obvious. Guide tone paths through harmony are like trails through a forest. They may run somewhat parallel to each other, but they will often intersect and allow the melodic motion to either ascend or descend from a common point.

Guide tone paths can become even more interesting when the choice of notes involves extensions or alterations in chords. For example, in the progression Bb-7 to Eb7, the guide tones could be either Ab to G (7<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup>) or they could move from Ab to A natural (7<sup>th</sup> to #11<sup>th</sup>). Here's how to work with guide tones: Pick any tone in a chord and, as you move through the chord progression, either stay on a common tone in the following chord or move only a half step up or down. If you move more than a half step, you will not hear the smoothest connection of the two chords. Half-step resolutions of any type, when moving from chord to chord, are just as strong as a traditional V-I cadence. Here is an example:

A musical staff in treble clef showing a chord progression: F-7, Bb-7, Eb7, Ab<sup>Δ</sup>, Bb<sup>Δ</sup>, G7, C<sup>Δ</sup>. Below the staff, the notes of the guide tones (3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>) are indicated for each chord: 3, 7, 3, 7, #11, 1, 5.

In the preceding example, there are a lot of common tones repeated. This might be an interesting effect creating a certain amount of suspense, but the notes are mostly basic color tones. The #11<sup>th</sup> is an extension of the chord. Here is an example of a guide tone path through the same progression with more extensions and alterations:

A musical staff in treble clef showing a chord progression with extensions: F-7, Bb-7, Eb<sup>+11</sup>, Ab<sup>Δ</sup>, Bb<sup>Δ</sup>, G<sup>+9</sup>, C<sup>Δ</sup>. Below the staff, the notes of the guide tones (3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>) are indicated for each chord: 9, 7, #11, 9, 13, #9, 7.

In the preceding progression, the guide tone path could have started on F, G, Ab, Bb, C, D or Eb. So, there could be several different guide tone paths through the progression. Practice creating different guide tone paths on a simple chord progression to discover the possibilities. On dominant chords, especially, consider all the altered tones and extensions as possible notes to choose. Then, begin to improvise, staying very close to the guide tones, at first. Practice singing the guide tones (in your head) while you improvise around them. Eventually, you may find yourself hearing the guide tone paths without working them out first.