

Improvisation with Fingerstyle Guitar

To compose something decent, you not only need the goodwill of the muse but also at least some insight into harmony and compositional techniques. As improvising is 'instant composing' you will definitely need all these tools. During this series of lessons on improvisation I will always start with a short practical example, analyse it and then give some examples of what we can do with this idea.

So let's start with this one:

Concept - Arpeggiation With Rhythmic Diversity

♩ = 80
Em7

T
A
B

P P M I M A A P M I P I M I M

Here the right hand fingers hold the chord form (Em7) while the Left Hand fingers play a picking pattern. For now, since this is meant to be a simple exercise, the bass note (the open low E) is played on the first beat of each measure to have a marking point. As we get more skill and confidence we will add more bass movement.

The fingers of the left hand are, in essence, fooling around in the chord form, which leads to more independence and certainty (well, after some experimenting). The finger indications (p - thumb, i - index, m - middle and a - ring) are only suggestions. You should feel free to execute them differently.

Advantage

You are always sure the notes will fit into the harmony of the piece as the improvised melody is derived totally from the chord notes.

Some Chord Theory

After a while, only playing over Em7 chords would become quite boring. That's why we will use Chord Extensions, notes past the 7th degree, namely the 9th, 11th or 13th, which could also be thought as 2nd, 4th and 6th. Adding these extensions, which are built by stacking triads on top of the original Em triad, is a standard practice of jazz musicians and is quite essential to developing the skills to improvise. Diatonic scale of Em:

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------|---|----|----|---|---|----|----|---|----|-----|----|----|----|
| | E | F# | G | A | B | C# | D | E | F# | G | A | B | C# |
| Degrees | 1 | 2 | b3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | b7 | 8 | 9 | b10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |

Em7 consists of 1, b3, 5, b7 -- E, G, B, D.

Chord extensions of Em7 might be:

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------------|---|----|---|----|----|----|---|----|----|----|----|---|----|---|----|
| Em9: | 1 | b3 | 5 | b7 | 9 | E | G | B | D | F# | | | | | |
| Em11: | 1 | b3 | 5 | b7 | 9 | 11 | E | G | B | D | F# | A | | | |
| Em13: | 1 | b3 | 5 | b7 | 9 | 11 | E | 13 | E | G | B | D | F# | A | C# |
| Em7/11: | 1 | b3 | 5 | b7 | 11 | E | G | B | D | A | | | | | |
| Em (9/11): | 1 | b3 | 5 | 9 | 11 | E | G | B | F# | A | | | | | |

It would be impossible to execute all the notes from an Em13 chord

on the guitar, since it only has six strings and the chord has seven notes. As the 1, 3 and 7 are essential notes to determine the chord family, you might omit the 5, 6 or 9 position.

Now, let's experiment on a two-chord progression, the chords being Em7 and Cmaj7.

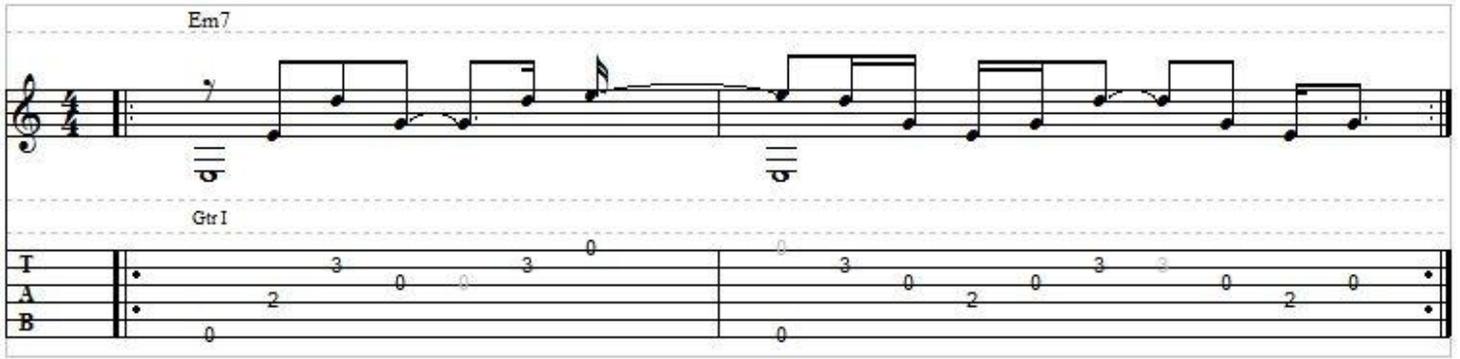
Chord extensions of Cmaj7 might be:

| | | | | | | |
|----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cmaj9: | C | E | G | B | D | |
| Cadd9: | C | E | G | D | | |
| C6/9: | C | E | G | A | D | |
| Cmaj7/6: | C | E | G | A | B | |
| Cmaj13: | C | E | G | B | D | A |

Both chords and some of their extended forms are played all over the neck, but are still played off of the chord shapes. I specifically picked these chord shapes for this exercise because of their simplicity as well as their fresh, lush sound. Open and fretted notes are mixed which can lead to some beautiful colourful results. So, let's try this, shall we?

Here we've added improvisation to the Em7 1st position form using the Cmaj7 1st position form.

Here's a more realistic version of the basic Em7 without improvising any changes:



Em7

Gtr I

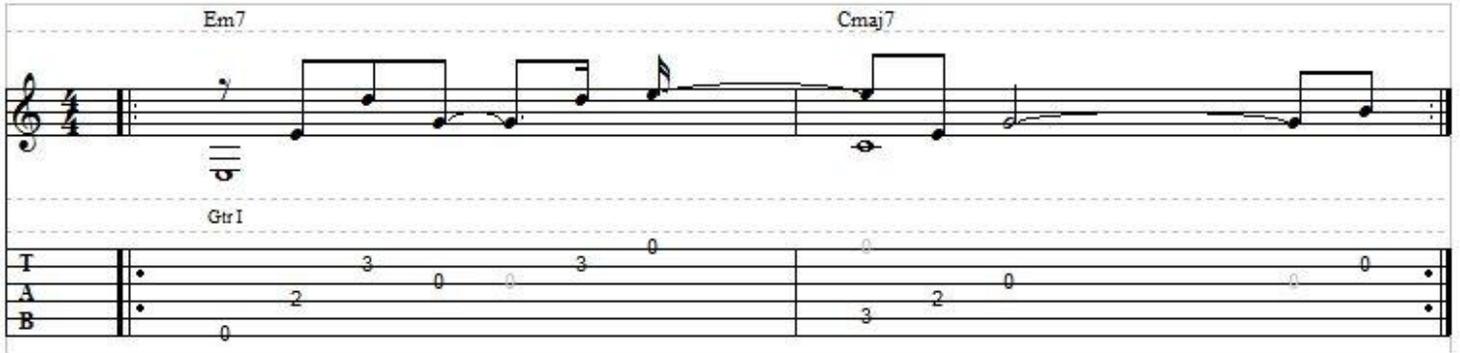
T

A

B

Detailed description: This block contains a musical score for guitar improvisation. The top staff is a treble clef in 4/4 time, labeled 'Em7'. It features a melodic line starting with a quarter rest, followed by eighth and quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The bottom staff is a guitar staff labeled 'Gtr I' with strings T, A, B. The fretboard shows fingerings: T (3, 0, 3, 0), A (2, 0, 0, 3), and B (0, 0, 3, 0) for the first measure, and T (0, 3, 0, 2), A (0, 3, 0, 2), and B (0, 2, 0, 2) for the second measure.

Here's a more realistic version of the Em7 - Cmaj7 from further above:



Em7

Cmaj7

Gtr I

T

A

B

Detailed description: This block contains a musical score for guitar improvisation. The top staff is a treble clef in 4/4 time, labeled 'Em7' and 'Cmaj7'. It features a melodic line starting with a quarter rest, followed by eighth and quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The bottom staff is a guitar staff labeled 'Gtr I' with strings T, A, B. The fretboard shows fingerings: T (3, 0, 3, 0) for the first measure, and T (0, 3, 0, 0), A (2, 0, 0, 0), and B (3, 2, 0, 0) for the second measure.



Video Reference: Much more material is covered in our Fingerstyle 101 DVD. Please refer to Chapter 3 "Improvisation" on the DVD for additional information.