X. Improvising With Chord Tones

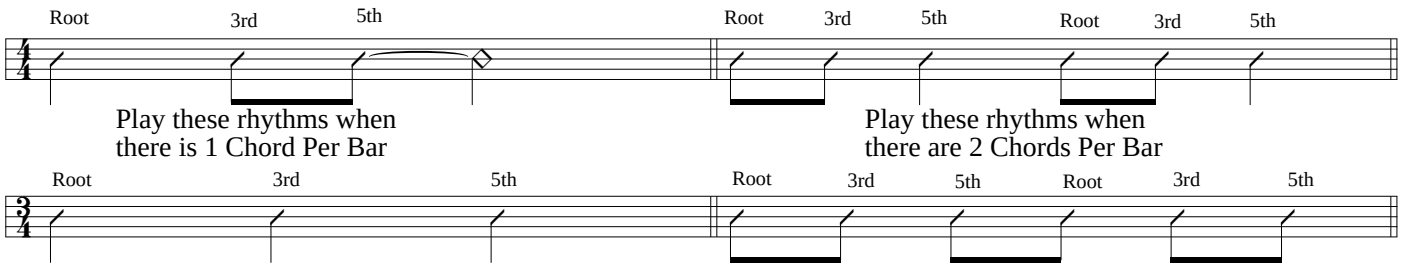
In most academic establishments with jazz programs these days the first concept discussed with regards to deriving melodic material for improvisation is usually the “chord-scale”. There is merit to this approach, especially for guitar players, because the fingering patterns for the scales are usually well known. But in my experience, guitarists who start to learn this way develop some serious blind spots that need to be addressed at sometime. Sometimes this can go on for years and years.

The blind spot that I am speaking of is the relationship of those scales to the chord itself. It’s one thing to know that the C major scale works well over a G7 chord but if you are totally unaware of where the notes that are members of the G7 chord happen to be found within the C major scale you will be missing the point. If you run up and down this scale thinking of it as a C major scale there is a real good chance that you will be emphasizing the note C quite a bit and C is one of the most unstable notes you can choose to emphasize on a G7 chord.

I start my students off improvising with chord tones rather than chord scales for several reasons. The first is historical. I am not a jazz historian by any stretch of the imagination but I think it likely that the earliest pioneers of this music probably started out with a melody that they knew by ear. They found some ways to harmonize these melodies for accompaniment purposes. They then began to embellish the melody by changing its rhythms (syncopation, etc.) and by decorating its pitches with neighboring tones. I’m sure they were aware of the key centers of their compositional choices and probably invented some of their own improvised melodies from the basic scales underlying those keys. They then probably turned their attention to the notes in the chords themselves. Being that most interesting sounding progressions have some amount of chromaticism (notes from outside the key) it is through the exploration of the notes in the chords themselves combined with the notes in the key that the concept of the chord-scale eventually emerged. In my estimation “chord-scales” as such were not spoken of in the jazz community until the 1950’s when Berklee College Of Music was first formed. Berklee was the first academic establishment that actually had a jazz curriculum.

My second reason for starting out with chord tones rather than chord-scales is that so many guitar players have such a hard time with them conceptually, whereas they are a very simple thing to see for most other instrumentalists. Bass players are always arpeggiating chords in their bass lines. Piano players can see the note positions for an arpeggio every time they play a chord voicing. It is only on the guitar where the fingering for an arpeggio is not made obvious from either a scale fingering or from a chord voicing’s fingering.

A. Chord Tone Exercise #1



Play the above pattern through the chord progression of any tune you happen to be working on. Avoid starting the pattern on the 6th string, for now, or it may sound too much like a bass line. Attempt to discover all the possible fingerings available via the process of beginning on each of your 4 fingers and just seeing what fingering seems logical. (see below)

Once you are comfortable with this you can change the order of the notes and the rhythm and try to improvise some simple chord tone melodies. See if you can create some melodies that sound musical using just R, 3 and 5.

Don’t overplay. This IS NOT about running through each arpeggio like a speed demon. It IS NOT about moving your fingers in all sorts of interesting and difficult looking shapes on the fretboard. It IS about learning to play simple singable melodies using just chord tones. Pretend you’re a singer.

Resist the urge to play what you hear, for now, because it is likely that you will hear some really nice sounding things that fall outside of the parameters of this particular exercise. This exercise is designed to help you learn

to hear the chord tones themselves. By doing this sort of thing you will develop a feeling for when you want to play a chord tone and when you want to play something else. You will also develop a feel for where on the fretboard these chord tones are and what fingering makes the best sense to execute them.

Try to invent and develop some sort of a rhythmic theme. Almost anything will sound convincing if the rhythm feels right!

Tip: Look for ways to join one chord's arpeggio into the next smoothly via common tone, step or half step.

Try going down to the 3rd rather than up and also experiment likewise with the 5th.

Also Try:

3 5 R, 5 3 R, etc.

3 5 7, 3 7 5, etc.

5 7 R, 5 R 7, etc.

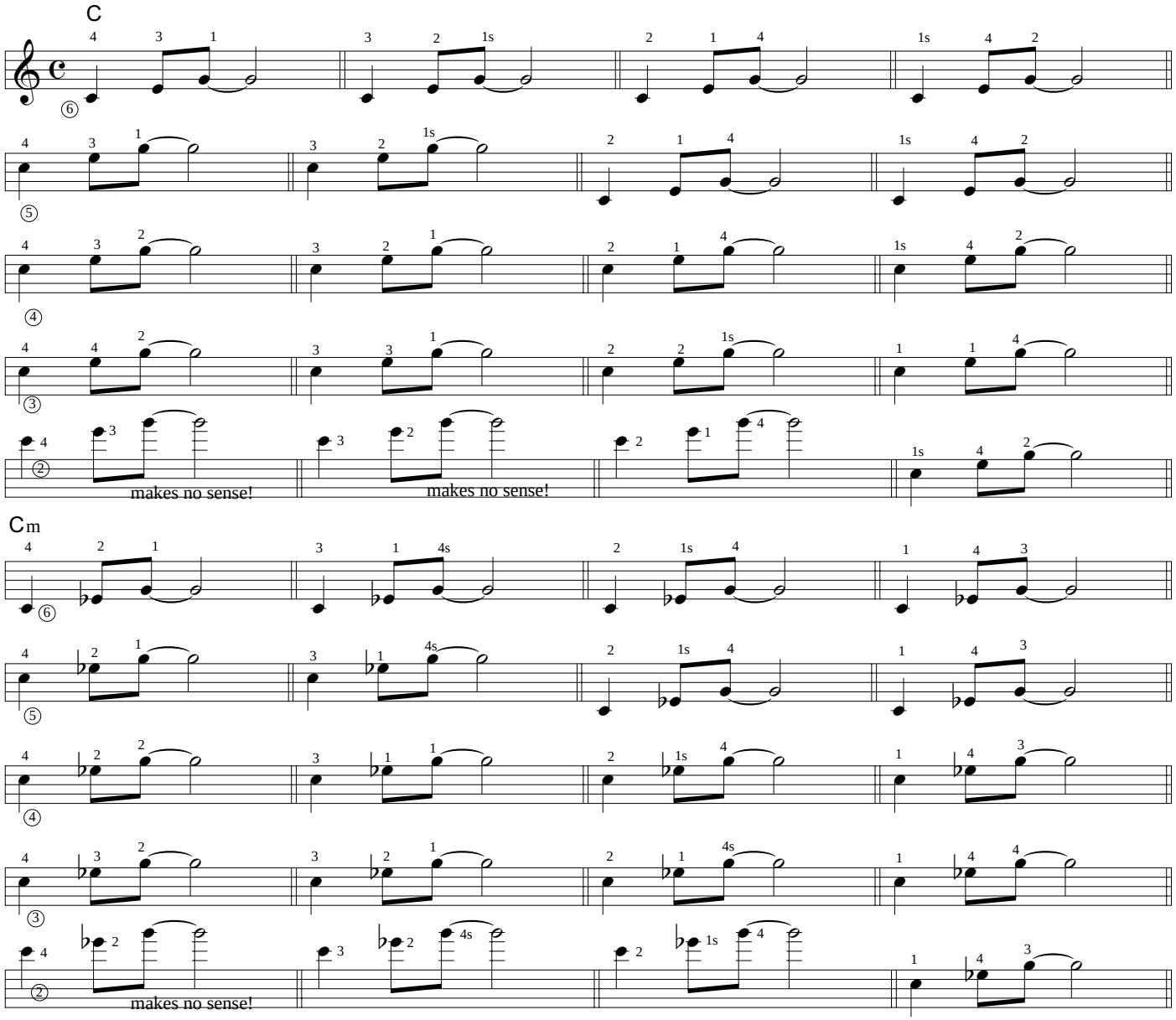
7 R 3, etc.

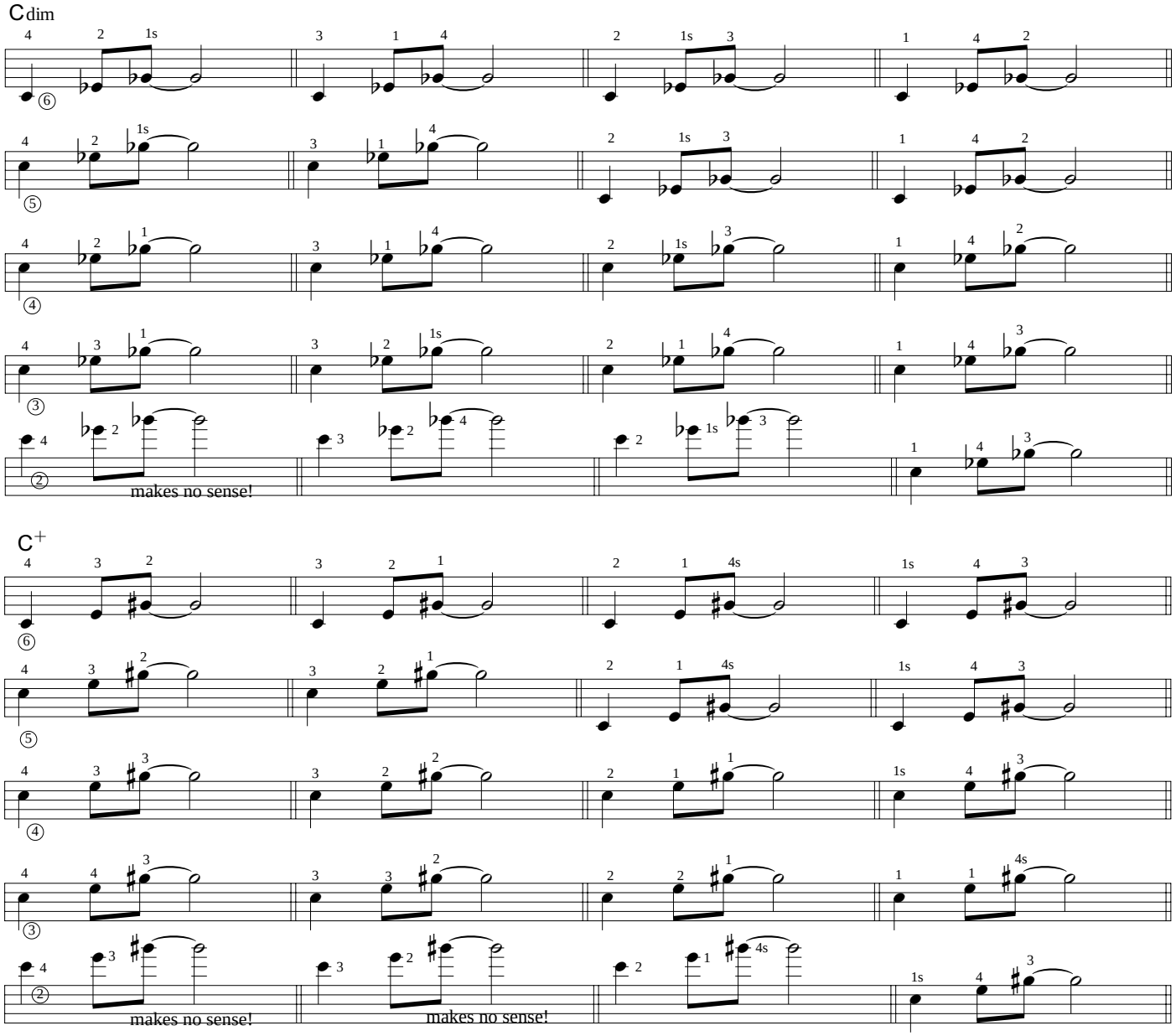
Summary: Learn to improvise a decent chord tone melody on any tune.

Try this pattern with running eighth notes in 4/4 time: 3 5 1 7 > 3 5 1 7

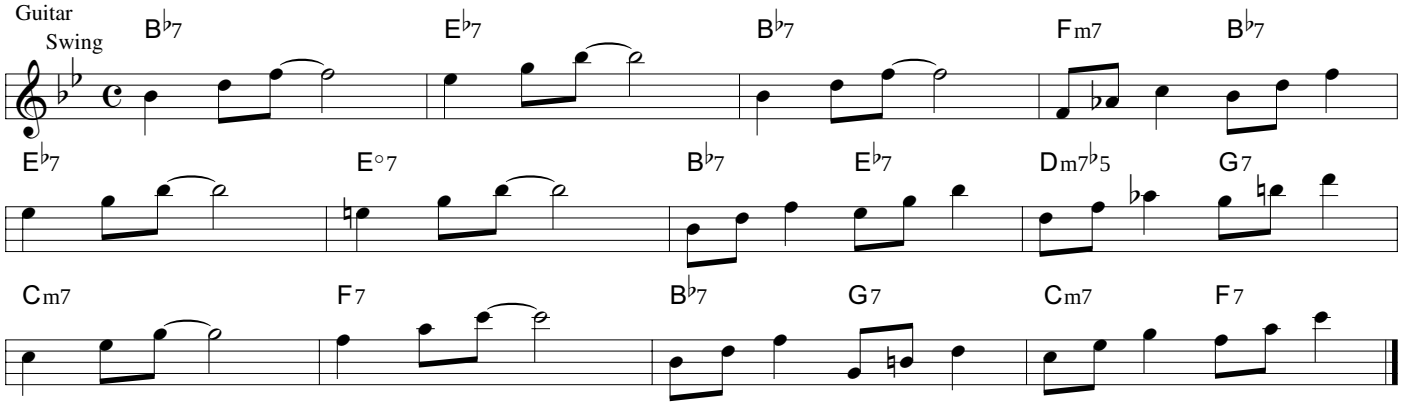
Pay special attention to how the 3rd on one chord often leads into the 7th on the next and visa versa.

Here are the most likely fingerings for the 4 basic triad types starting on each finger on each string:

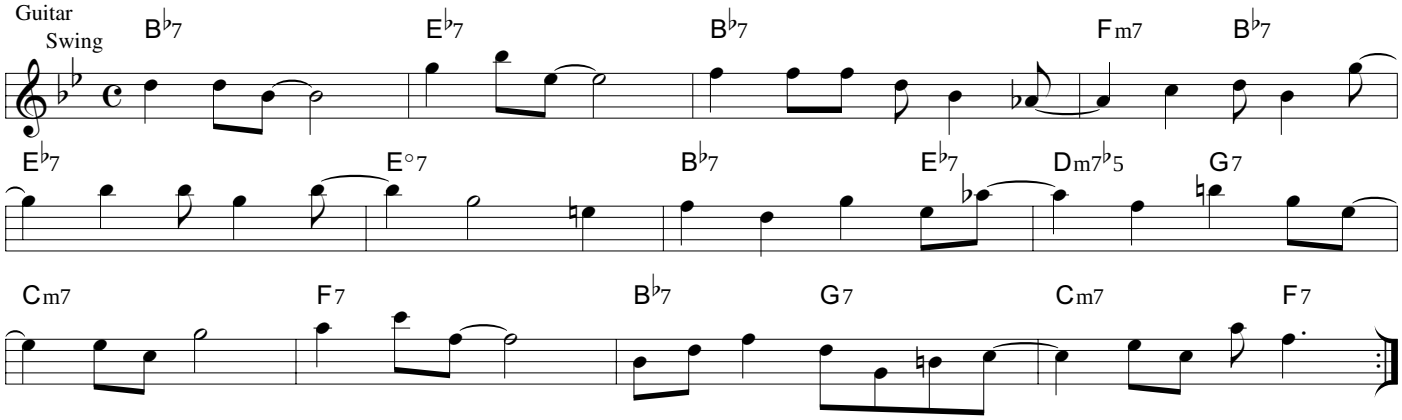




Here's an example of one way to work out Chord Tone Exercise #1 over a B♭ blues progression. Notice how the last note of each arpeggio (the 5th) goes to the closest Root of the next chord except for just a few instances. The fingering is up to you:

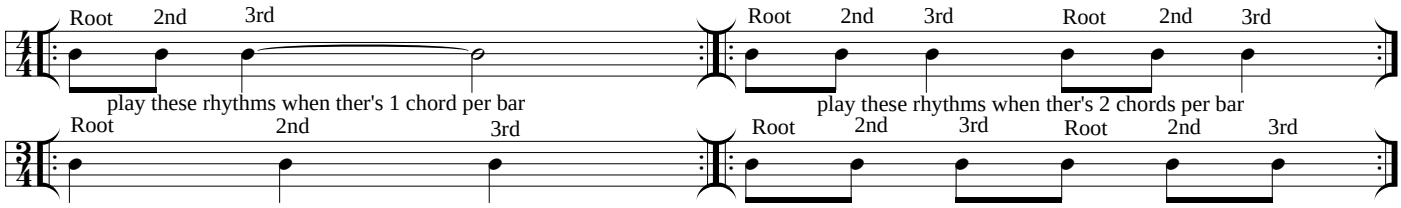


Here's an example of a melody I might improvise using these same exact note groupings.



Get in the habit of playing through Chord Tone Exercise #1 on EVERY new tune you are learning! Definitely go through each of the chord progressions presented in this book and apply this and the following exercise!

B. Passing Tone Exercise #1



Try also:
3 2 1
3 4 5
5 4 3
5 6 7
and
7 6 3

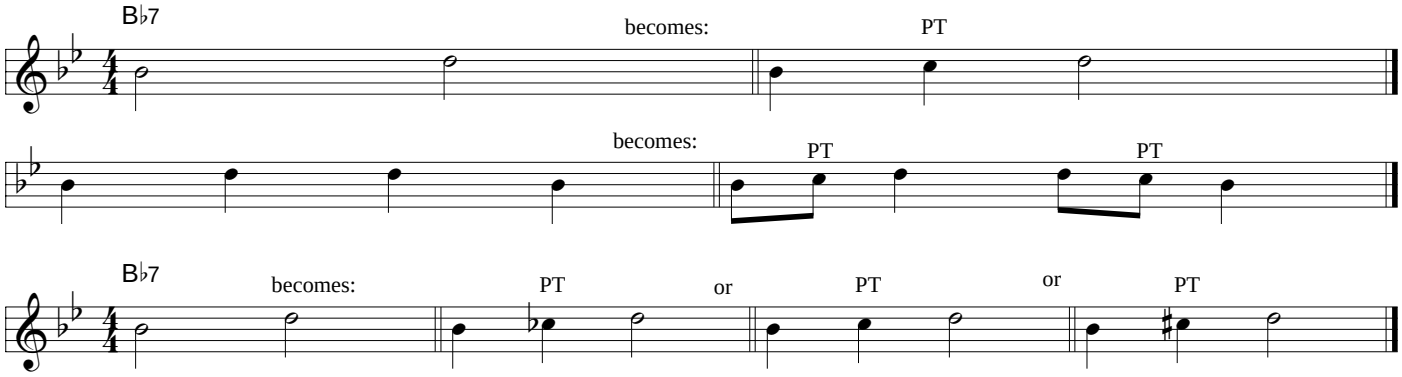
Once you know where the notes of a chord lie on the fretboard and you are comfortable with how they sound it is then time to start looking at the non chord tones. At first we will "just" use our ears and try to find a note in between each of the chord tones that we like the sound of and we will make mental notes of what the other choices also sound like. For more ideas as to how to choose the non chord tones see the chapter: Chord Scales Via Modal Theory (Part 2) - Determining A Chord-Scale Via Horizontal Considerations.

First off we will look at the gap between the root and the 3rd of a dominant seventh chord. Let's use our Blues In B♭ progression again.

The root of B♭7 is the note B♭. Its 3rd is the note D. What kind of 2nd sounds good to you? I.e. What kind of C sounds good to you? The choices are C♭ (♭2), C♮ (2) or C♯ (♯2). Listen to these notes as "passing tones". I.e. use them to pass from B♭ to D or visa versa.

Passing tones are decorative notes that are used to join two notes that are a 3rd or more apart in a step wise fashion. Passing tones are always played on weaker metrical positions than the notes they are joining together. For now, we will be confining our passing tones to the "weak" beats. In 4/4 time beats 2 and 4 are said to be weaker than beats 1 and 3 which are often called the "strong" beats. We might use a passing tone on beat 2 when it joins up a note on beat 1 to a note on beat 3. We might use a passing tone on beat 4 when it joins up a note on beat 3 to a note on beat 1 of the next bar. Also, between any two downbeats the upbeats are considered to be weaker. More on this idea of strong beats and weak beats later in the chapter titled Melodic Uses Of The

Non Chord Tones.



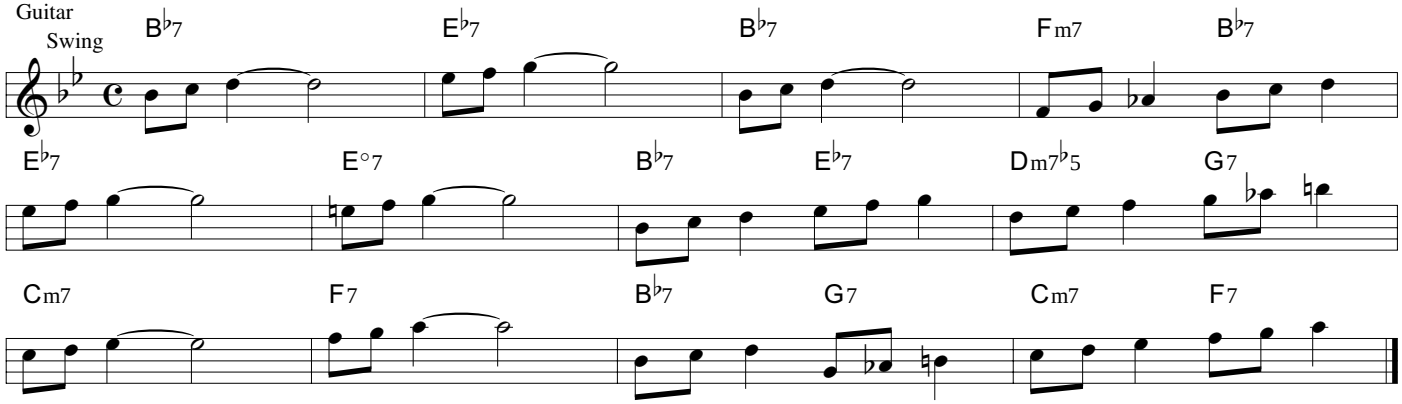
If you're like most people when you hear a B♭7 chord out of the blue, with no other chords sounded before it to establish a "key" feeling, you will most likely prefer the sound of the C♮ to the other two choices above. The other two (C♭ and C♯) definitely have their uses also and you experiment with them but the C♮ sounds much more "normal" in this particular instance to most people. More on why this might be so in Chapter XIV - B: Chord Scales Via Modal Theory (Part 2) - B. Determining A Chord Scale Via Horizontal Considerations.

In our Blues In B♭ progression pretty much every chord will sound best, to most people, with a major 2nd interval as our passing tone choice between the Root and the 3rd. There are a few exceptions though.

The E°7 in bar 6 will probably sound best with an F♮ passing tone between its chord tones E and G. Try F♯ too. It sounds fine. It might sound even better to you than the F♮ does. F♮ is a little bit more "inside" the key of B♭ however.

The Dm7♭5 chord will probably sound best with an E♭ between its chord tones D and F. This is because E♭ is in the key and E♮ is not.

Both the G7 chords in this progression will probably sound with best A♭ between its chord tones G and B♮. This is because A♭ was a chord tone of the chord immediately preceding (Dm7♭5 and/or B♭7) the G7. Try the other choices (A♮ and A♯) too. They are both right inside the key of B♭. Note A♯ is enharmonically equivalent to B♭.



Try this same exercise going backwards (3, 2, 1).

Try to improvise over this progression using each chord's scale degree 2 mostly as a passing tone. If you accidentally play S2 (chord-scale degree 2) on a strong beat every once in a while nobody will beat you up but try to use it as a passing tone (on weak beats joining the other two strong chord tones together) for the most part.

Now let's look at the gap between the 3rd and the 5th of each chord. What kind of 4th degree makes sense?

On B♭7 between D and F you will probably hear that E♭ is the most straightforward choice. E♮ is not in the key and E♭ is.

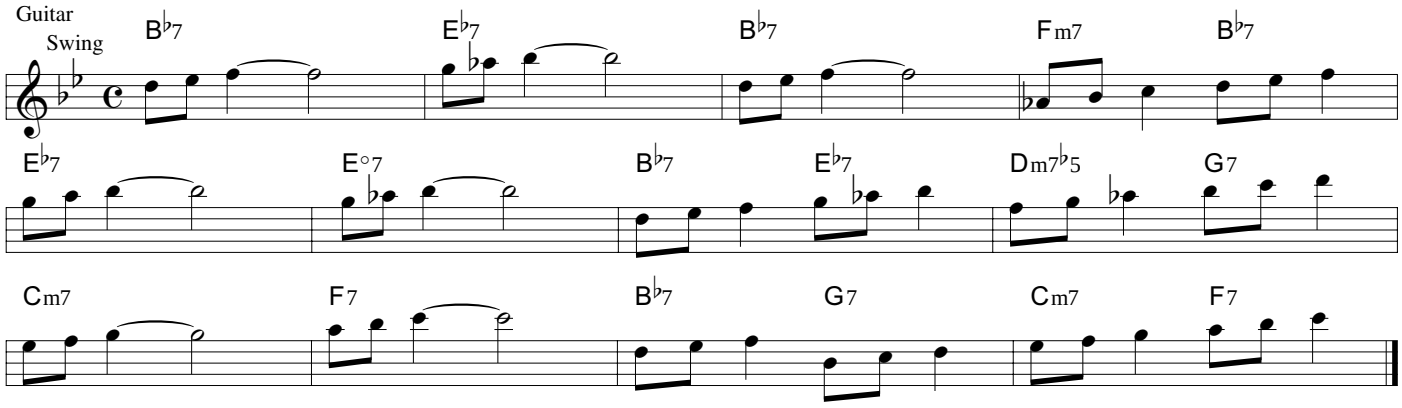
On E♭7 you might hear A♮ as the stronger choice between G and B♭. You might hear A♭ though. A♮ is the 7th degree (aka the "leading tone") of the B♭ major scale. A♭ is a member of the B♭7 chord immediately preceding the all the E♭7 chords.

IN GENERAL: The non chord tones used to embellish a chord should be notes taken from within the key of the progression.

This is not a RULE. This scheme is broken all the time and for many reasons.

You HAVE to use your EARS.

The choices that I have made for S4 in the following example of Passing Tone Exercise #1 (3 4 5) are my own. Try using the other choices. See what they sound like. Note on minor chords S♭4 makes a particularly poor choice because it is enharmonically equivalent to a major third.



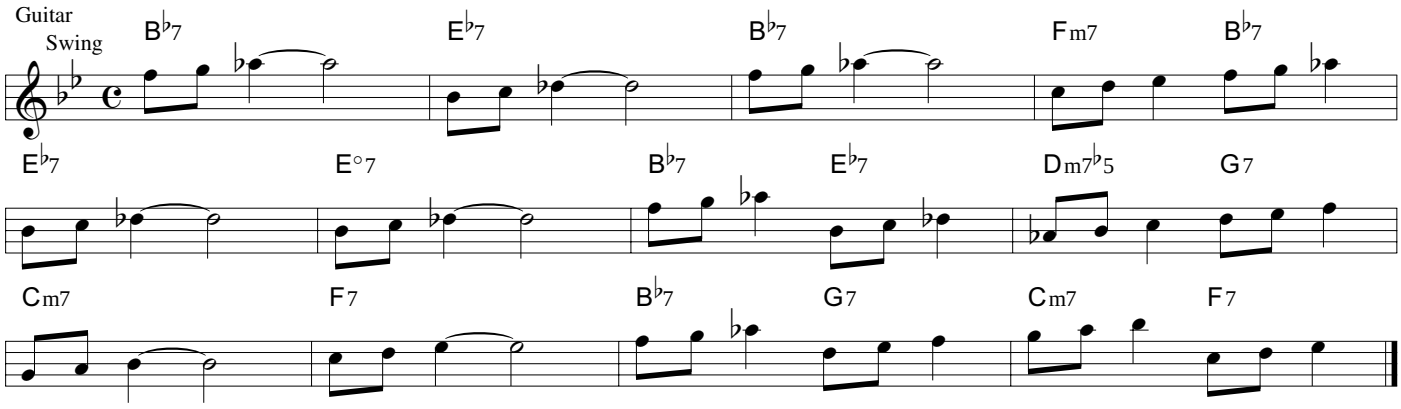
Try the same exercise backwards (5 4 3).

Try improvising over this progression using only chord tones plus S4 as an occasional passing tone.

Try improvising over this progression using only chord tones plus S4 and S2 as an occasional passing tone.

Now let's look at the gap between the 5th and the 7th of each chord. What kind of 6th degree makes sense?

Use your ears. This is how I hear the passing tones for our blues, today, in the mood I'm now.



Try the same exercise backwards (7 6 5).

Try improvising over this progression using only chord tones plus S6 as an occasional passing tone.

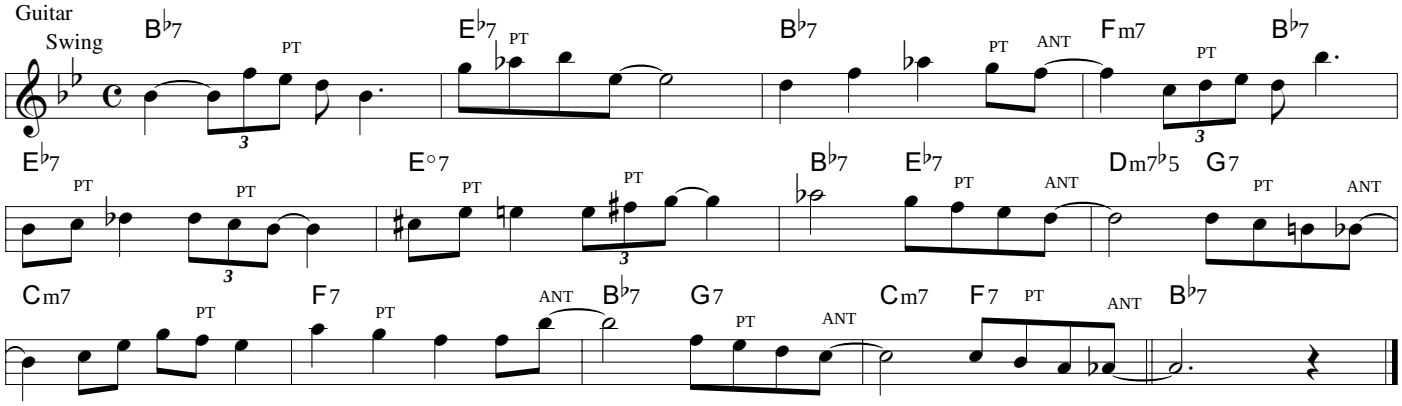
Try improvising over this progression using only chord tones plus S6, S4 and S3 as an occasional passing tone. If you haven't noticed, that's an entire 7 note scale!

Here is an example of our B♭ Blues with a melody that uses only chord tones and simple passing tones.

I've used a jazz, rhythmic syncopation technique known as the "Anticipation" (ANT) in a few spots.
The anticipation is a device, used in the melody at the point of a change in harmony, whereby a note belonging to the upcoming chord is struck slightly earlier than expected.

For example:
The last F♮ of bar 3 should be thought of as being an anticipation of the 1st beat of bar 4. It will be heard as relating to the Fm7 chord rather than the B♭7 chord of bar 3.

Anticipations are rarely "pushed" much further than a 1/4 note ahead of the change of harmony. Usually they only involve an 1/8 note push, as I have done below.

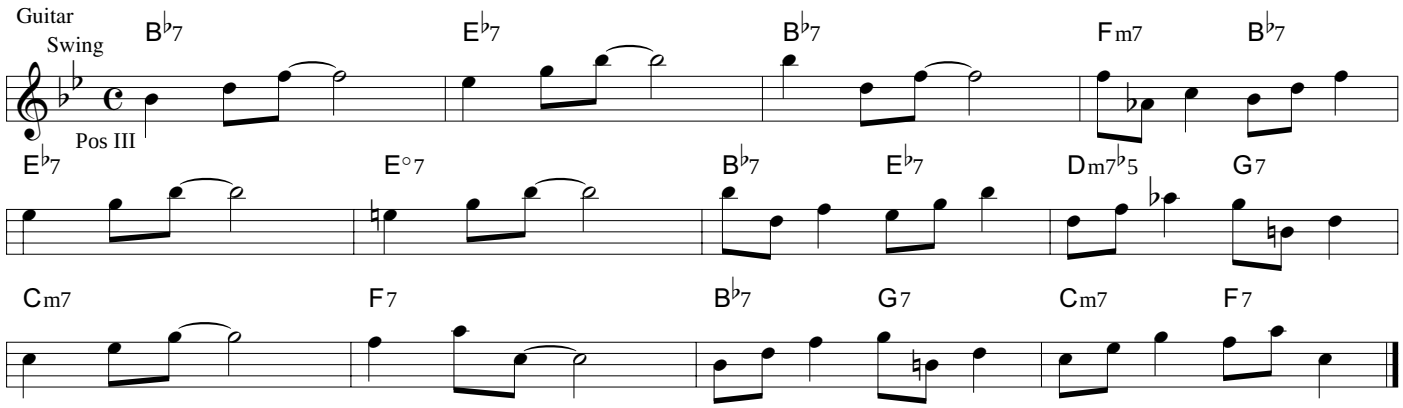


C. Other Similar Exercises

1. Chord Tone Exercise ♯2

This is the same as C. T. Ex. ♯1 except that we will further limit ourselves by imposing a range on the exercise. We will start with the range of a single octave between Concert B♭ below Middle C and the B♭ an octave above. For the most part we will still try to always go up the arpeggio but there will be many times when we will need to down (rather than up) from the root to the 3rd or from the 3rd to the 5th, etc. We will also force ourselves to stay in Position III.

Here it is worked out over our B♭ blues progression again.



Notice how all the chords seem to join together more smoothly with less leaping.

Repeat with all the various possible permutations (3, 5, 7 - 5, 7, 1 - etc.)

Practice improvising chord tone melodies within this single octave.

Try it within any octave. Eg. F to F.

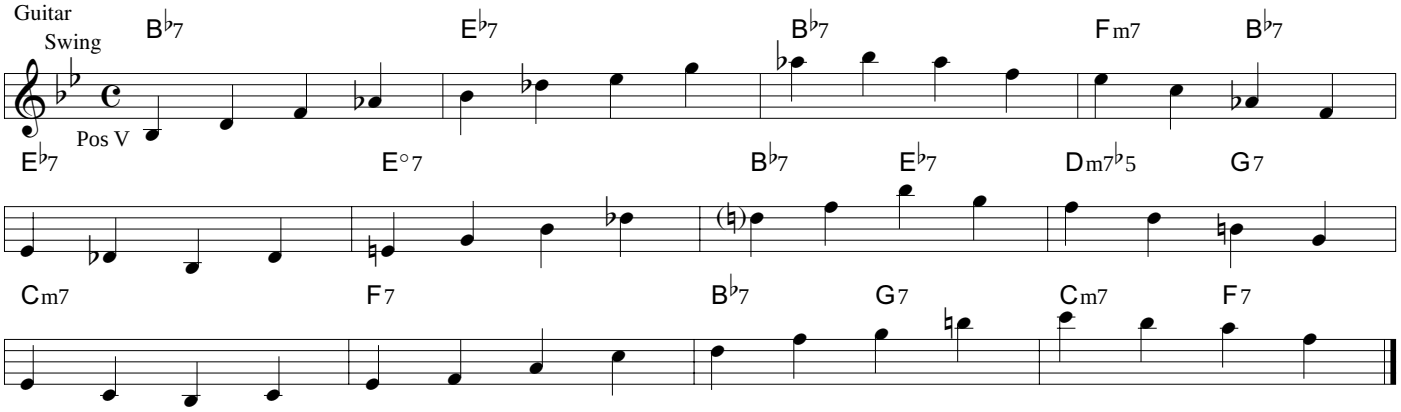
Try the passing tone exercises within a single octave.

Try all of these exercises within a single position. Eg. Position VII. Etc.

2. Chord Tone Linking Exercise ♯1

Here we will simply be running up and down each chord using quarter notes and at the point of a chord change we will use notes from the new chord. We will start with a low range of our low A♭ and a high limit of our C♯ a minor 9th above concert Middle C. This is the range encompassed by Position V. We will also keep our fingerings within Position V. When we reach the limit of our range we will simply change direction and continue.

Here's our blues again:



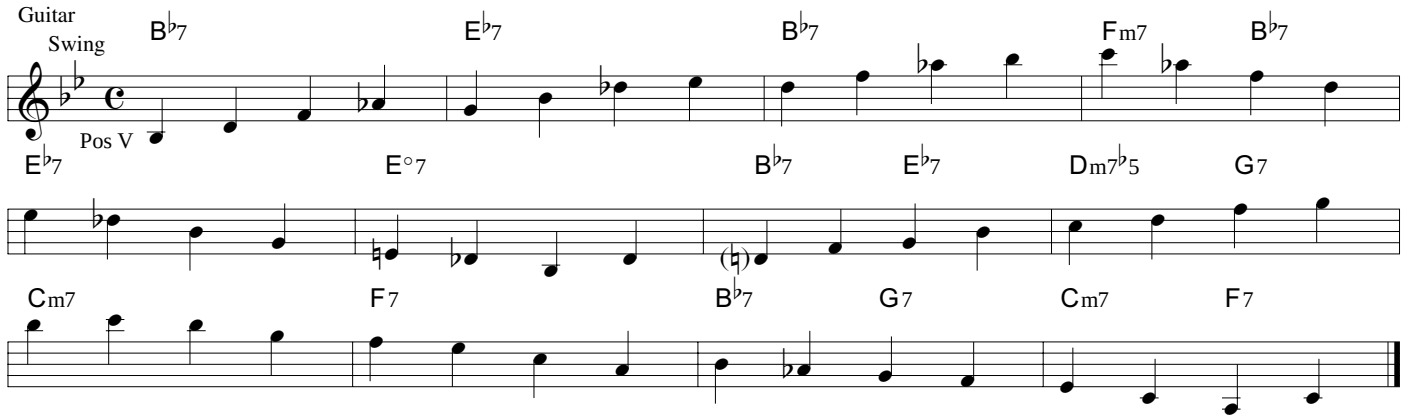
If we were to continue back to the top of the form the next note would be D on the B♭7 chord. Continue.

The above example ignores some very strong voice leading tendencies built into the progression at at least one spot.

For example:

The last A♭ of bar 1 has a much stronger tendency to resolve by half step into the note G on the E♭7 chord than it does to go to the B♭.

Try the above exercise again but this time, at the point of a chord change, move to the nearest chord tone of the new chord even if it means a temporary change in direction. If a choice exists between rising up a half step to the root of a chord or falling down a half step to its flatted 7th degree choose the root.



If we were to continue back to the top of the form the next note would be D on the B♭7 chord. Continue.

Try the same exercise in several different positions.

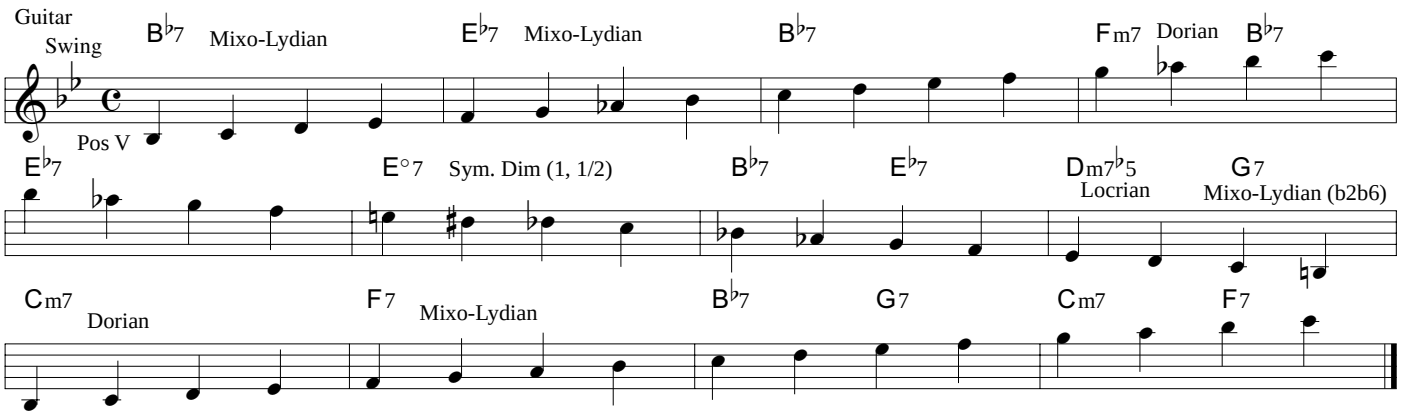
Try the same exercise within the range of an octave.

Try the same exercise on 1 string at a time so that the range of the string becomes the range limitation for the exercise.

Try the same exercises using other rhythmic values. (eighth notes, triplets, etc.)

3. Scale Linking Exercise #1

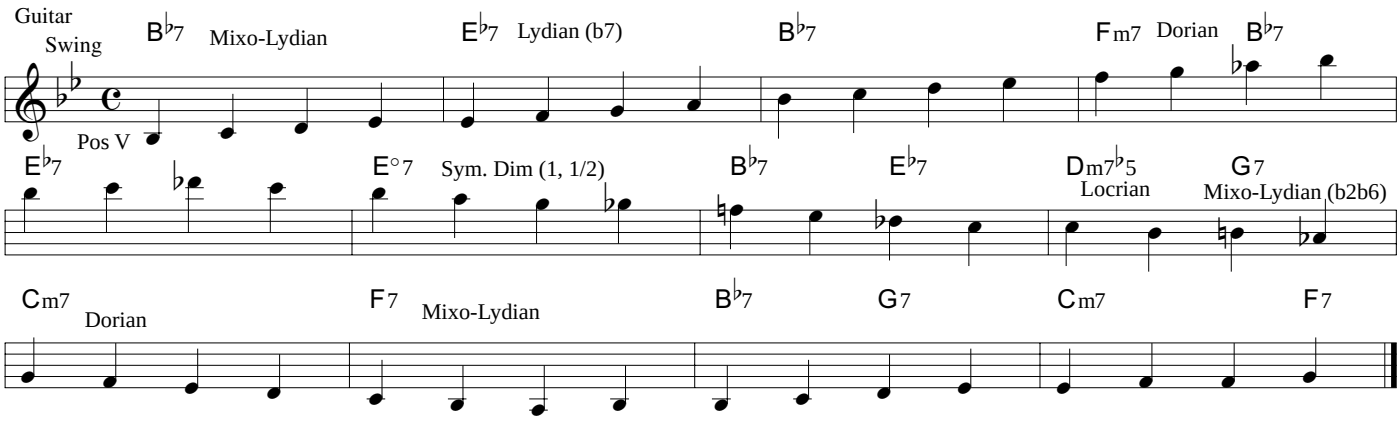
Just like our chord tone linking exercise but we'll use the entire chord-scale for each chord. We will simply run up and down each chord scale adjusting our notes to fit the chord-scale of the moment. This presumes, of course that you already know these chord-scales which may not yet be true.



Sounds a little vague doesn't it?

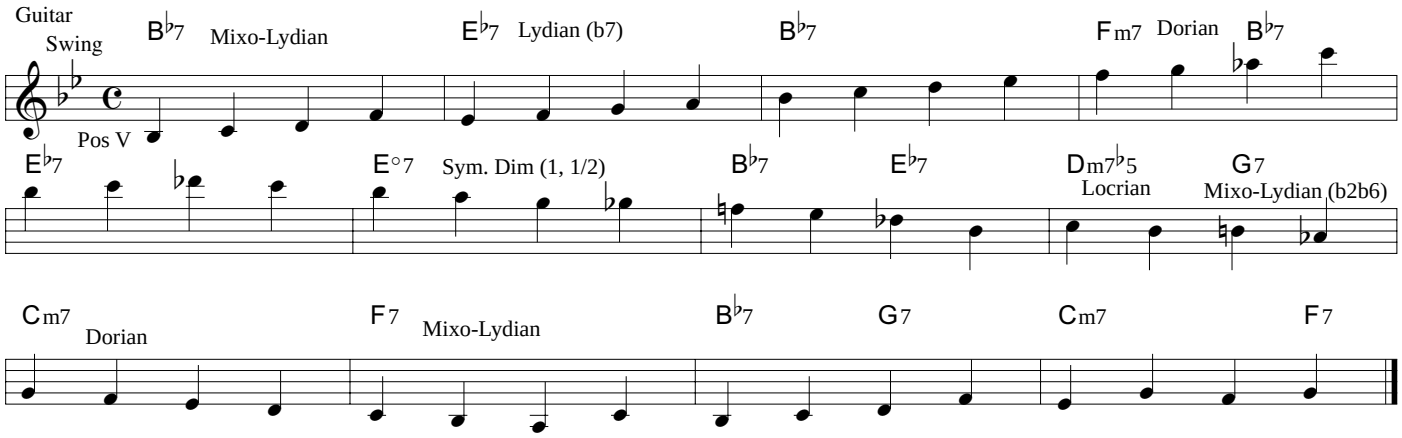
This is because too much emphasis has been given to non chord tones on strong beats and at the points of the chord changes.

This time at the point of a chord change, if a choice exists to have the first note of the new chord be a chord tone rather than a non chord tone then choose the chord tone even if it means a temporary change in direction. Also, place a chord tone at the point of a chord change even if it means repeating the previous note.



Still not as strong as it could be because of all of the repeating notes.

This time if we would normally need to repeat a note in order to get a chord tone on the down beat at a chord change we will leap 1 step past the target note on the beat just before the chord change.



Much better, isn't it? Please see Melodic Uses Of The Non Chord Tones for a detailed explanation of why this is so.

The next note would be A♭ on the B♭7 chord at the top of the form. Continue in the same manner.

Try the same exercise in various positions, on single strings and within a more or less restricted range.