



# *Jazz* Guitar Harmony

*The Melodic Approach*



*"I know aspiring guitarists  
will love this book."  
- Jazz guitar master Larry Coryell*

*by Zvonimir Tot*

*Jamey Aebersold Jazz®*



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*The Melodic Approach*  
by *Zvonimir Tot*



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# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I owe a debt of gratitude to Jamey Aebersold for encouraging me to write this book. When I was just a beginner about 30 years ago, some of the first educational materials I was ever exposed to were the Aebersold playalongs. It is therefore a particular pleasure to be in a position to contribute to the publishing offerings of the man who so positively impacted my life and the lives of countless other musicians.

I gratefully acknowledge the invaluable assistance of master guitarist Frank Portolese in proofreading the text and offering numerous suggestions for improvement.

Recording information:

Zvonimir Tot - guitar  
Stewart Miller - bass  
Ernie Adams - drums

Recorded, mixed, and mastered by Dennis Tousana at Soundmine Studios, Chicago

## Foreword

I first met Zvonimir Tot in 2010 when he invited me to his college in Chicago to work with his jazz combo and give an improv clinic. I was impressed with his knowledge of jazz and the depth of thought he had given to the subject of teaching jazz to students of all levels.

After I heard him play I realized he was the real deal...someone who could play AND teach. I then heard his guitar session at the Jazz Education Network convention in Louisville and was blown away by his simple and concise explanation and demonstration of guitar chord voicings and how they move over the neck. I immediately asked him to write a book so others around the world could utilize his thoughts and make their guitar playing sound professional and musical.

It has taken several years but here it is...and with two CDs so you can HEAR what these beautiful voicings sound like.

Mr. Tot's harmonic knowledge goes deep and is evidenced by the ease with which he plays. I can hear the jazz masters in his playing and the admiration he has for all guitarists of stature that have come before him.

There have been many guitar books written in the past and each addresses particular skills that students need to learn. I do feel that this book will help point you on the path to beautiful sounds without having to first cross the 'valley of dead voicings' that often leads young guitarists into quitting long before their potential is reached.

I congratulate Mr. Tot for his determination in completing this project and am delighted to publish it so all future guitarists can taste the sound of FREEDOM and unleash their inner music.

*- Jamey Aebersold*

# Preface

Did you ever find yourself in a “chord-rut”, playing the same few chord voicings all the time? The aim of this book is to provide some musically creative, yet systematized solutions to this problem.

In order to fully take advantage of the concepts presented in the book, the reader should have the knowledge of major and minor scales, modes, circle of fifths, basic chord theory and Freddie Green-style chords on the guitar. Although all chord voicings are presented in both notation and chord diagrams, it is highly recommended that the reader should have at least basic music reading skills.

As guitarists, we are inevitably tied to chord “shapes.” This can quickly become an impediment: It’s easy to slip into using physically comfortable chord voicings, without much regard for their musical context. This book will explore in some detail the *melodic* possibilities that are inherent to good harmonic voice-leading. Harmony is more than just stacks of individual notes; these notes represent multiple melodies when used in the context of a harmonic progression. Particularly important is the top note of any chord, which represents the main melody.

At the minimum, each 7th chord should contain a 3rd and a 7th; each 6th chord should contain a 3rd and a 6th. Other chord notes are optional and dependent on the chord quality and melodic considerations. The above presumes that the root notes are being played by the bass; this is the most common playing context for most jazz guitarists.

There is more than one way to build chords: Tertian, quartal, pentatonic, intervallic cells etc. The focus of this book will be tertian harmony (chords are built by stacking up thirds), because it is the most relevant for playing jazz standards.

We will primarily explore 4-note chord voicings (4-note chord plus bass). These voicings tend to provide a good balance between movability and harmonic richness. The useful melodic range for most top chord notes is from the written B4 (open 2nd string) through approximately the written G6 (first string, 15th fret).

A note about picking: You can play with a pick, finger-pick, or play the bottom note with the pick and the rest of the chord with your fingers. Experiment and find out what works for you.

The only way to improvise well is to internally hear what we are going to play **before** we play it. This is true not only for single lines, but equally so for harmony. Also, we need to be aware of what the other musicians are playing as explicitly as possible. Learn ear training the best you can to accomplish this. Here’s one simple idea to get you started: **Play what you sing, sing what you play!** This works great for creating organic-sounding melodies. When playing chords, sing the top notes (the melody).

Have fun exploring jazz guitar harmony!

Best Wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Morrison Lot". The signature is written in dark ink on a light background.

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# Chapter 1: Major chords (as tonic)

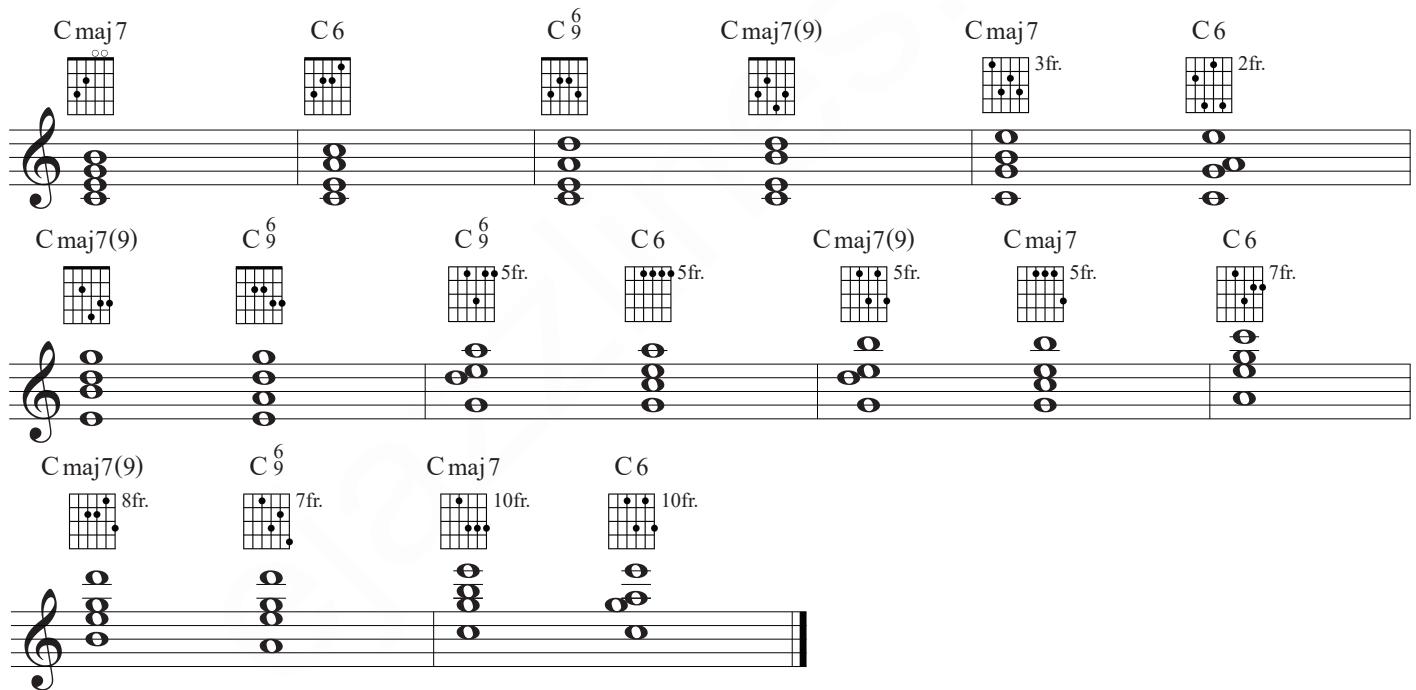
Any major chord contains the root, major 3rd, perfect 5th and major 7th (counted from the root). Using C major as an example, the basic chord notes are C, E, G, and B. Major 6th and major 7th are interchangeable, unless either conflicts with the melody. A 6th is called a 13th when both 7th and 6th are present within the chord. All scale degrees except the 4th can become chord notes. Presuming the key of C major, here are the possibilities:

Example 1: Scale degrees as chord tones (Cmaj)



Based on the above, we can use each one of the chord notes as the top note. This is important because the top notes represent the **melody**. All the chords used here were built as follows: Melody note, 3rd, 7th or 6th, one or two additional scale notes. There are more possibilities than the ones presented here. Learn these chords first, then experiment with additional voicings. For some top notes, two voicings are given: Learn both, but choose one as your default. Think of each chord as a chord quality with a certain chord note on top (as melody note). For example, the first chord in the next example is Cmaj7 with 7th on top.

Example 2: C major chords as tonic, all melodic possibilities



## Exercises:

### 1. Learn the chords

Learn each of the above chords. At first, practice very slowly and out of time; concentrate on articulation, balance and tone quality. A reminder: Make sure that each note rings clean. Dampen the unused strings with the left hand (angle your fingers accordingly) and/or with the palm of your right hand. Play the top note slightly louder than the rest; this makes the melody clearer.

Once you can play each of the voicings cleanly, start practicing chord connections. Practice connecting all neighboring chords, with emphasis on clear articulation and legato. True legato is physically impossible, but we can get fairly close. You can start out of time, then use the metronome and play even note values (whole notes, then half notes) in a moderate tempo.

## 2. Play chords as a scale, in time

CD1, track 1: C major chords from Example 3; guitar, bass and drums

CD1, track 2: C major chords from Example 3; bass and drums only

Play the C major chords as a scale, in half notes, as notated in Example 3. Start by playing along with CD1, track 1, matching the recorded guitar. Then, play with CD1, track 2; you are on your own with the rhythm section.

### Example 3: C major chords played as a scale, in time - CD1, tracks 1, 2

## 3. Play a notated chord melody

CD1, track 3: C major chords from Example 4; guitar, bass and drums

CD1, track 4: C major chords from Example 4; bass and drums only

It's time to start harmonizing melodies. Play Example 4 with CD1, track 3, matching the recorded guitar. Then, play the same example with CD1, track 4; you are on your own with the rhythm section. Note that the voicings were chosen in such a way that the inner voices also contain good melodies.

### Example 4: Play a notated chord melody (Cmaj) - CD1, tracks 3, 4

## Example 4 (continued)

Example 4 (continued) shows two rows of musical notation. The first row consists of eight measures, each with a guitar chord diagram above a single-line melodic line. The chords and their fret positions are: Cmaj9 (no fret), C6 (5fr.), Cmaj9 (5fr.), C6 (7fr.), Cmaj7 (10fr.), C6 (7fr.), Cmaj9 (8fr.), and Cmaj9 (5fr.). The second row consists of seven measures, each with a guitar chord diagram above a single-line melodic line. The chords and their fret positions are: C6 (7fr.), C6 (5fr.), Cmaj9 (no fret), Cmaj7 (3fr.), C<sup>6</sup>9 (no fret), Cmaj9 (no fret), and Cmaj7 (3fr.).

### 4. Figure out and play a chord melody from the notated single-line melody

🎵 CD1, track 5: C major chords from Example 5; guitar, bass and drums

🎵 CD1, track 4: C major chords from Example 5; bass and drums only

Let's harmonize a melody without given voicings. Suppose that we are playing over a tune with an extended Cmaj7 chord. We need to find good melodies using the C major scale (minus the note "F"), then apply the corresponding voicings. Play the following chords using Example 4 as a model. This time, only the top notes are given. Figure out the rest - each voicing is the first notated chord for each top note in Example 2. Practice this with both audio tracks provided: With track 5, match the recorded guitar; with track 4, you are on your own with the rhythm section.

### Example 5: Construct a chord melody from the notated single-line melody (Cmaj) - CD1, tracks 4, 5

Example 5 shows a single-line melody in C major across four staves. The melody consists of the following notes: C4 (open), C4 (open), E4 (2nd fret), G4 (3rd fret), A4 (4th fret), C5 (5th fret), E5 (7th fret), and G5 (9th fret). The melody is written in a 4/4 time signature with a common time signature 'C' at the beginning of the first staff.

### 5. Make your own chord melodies

🎵 CD1, track 4: C major; bass and drums only

I suggest that you don't start with actual chords; this can easily lead into playing only a few comfortable shapes that you've known before. Instead, start by playing a short **single-line melody** (2-4 notes) in C major (avoid the note "F"), ranging between the written B4 (open 2nd string) through approximately the written G6 (first string, 15th fret).



**Use your ears!** Another good way to do this is to first sing a short melody and figure out what the notes are. At first, don't over-think it: Just use a few notes that sound good. Down the road, begin by using neighboring notes (the melody will sound smoother), then incorporate some leaps. Have a good balance between steps and leaps. All steps = boring, all leaps = too jumpy, sounds nervous. Once you have a good short melody, harmonize it by using the voicings from Example 2. You can start by practicing the chord melodies out of time until you get somewhat fluent. Then, practice with track 4 or with a metronome. At first, you could play whole notes, then move to half notes and quarter notes as you become more proficient.

## 6. Add rhythm

Although the primary scope of this book is harmony, even the best harmony is meaningless without rhythm. We will explore this topic in more detail in chapters 14-16. For now, let's cover some basics.

Here are some common rhythmic patterns for jazz comping. Note that the double bar lines separate examples; some are one-measure patterns, others take two measures. Beats are indicated throughout for reading convenience. Play each pattern individually, at first by using a single chord voicing of your choice:

Example 6: Common rhythmic patterns for jazz comping

The image shows five staves of musical notation, each representing a different rhythmic pattern for jazz comping. Each staff is in 4/4 time and contains four measures of music, with beat numbers (1-4) written above the notes. The patterns are as follows:

- Staff 1:** Measure 1: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 2: quarter rest (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 3: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 4: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4).
- Staff 2:** Measure 1: quarter rest (1), quarter rest (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 2: quarter rest (1), quarter rest (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 3: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 4: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4).
- Staff 3:** Measure 1: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 2: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 3: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 4: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4).
- Staff 4:** Measure 1: quarter rest (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 2: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 3: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 4: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4).
- Staff 5:** Measure 1: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 2: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 3: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4). Measure 4: quarter note (1), quarter note (2), quarter note (3), quarter note (4).

## 7. Apply jazz rhythms to the chord melody from Example 4

🎵 CD1, track 6: Harmonize the notated melody; guitar, bass and drums

🎵 CD1, track 4: Harmonize the notated melody; bass and drums only

The following chord melody is taken from Example 4, with the addition of the rhythms based on Example 6. Again, the specific voicings are deliberately not given, only the top melody; figure out the voicings based on Examples 2 and 3. Each voicing is the first notated chord for each top note in Example 2. Practice with both audio examples above, with and without the recorded guitar.