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Jazz: The right scale at the right time

My shortened version on beginning the guitar, taken from my book, 'The Guitar, My Way', has been so well received I've decided to take a similar short passage from the jazz section. The whole book is available on disc, but this small explanation may be all you need to get you going.

There's a lot of rubbish written about jazz, and most of it written with the express intention of taking your money away from you. In my view, jazz, or extemporisation, is merely the playing of games with scales in a style appropriate to the song that is being played at the time.

Firstly let's look at the right scale at the right time.

There are two ways of looking at this, firstly you can assess it technically. The scale of G has one sharp, namely the F. So every F is sharpened in the scale of G major, or E minor. That scale sounds fine at that moment. You and the band are ticking away nicely around G and the scale fits, suddenly G7 turns up.

What to do?

Well, technically the 7th of G is an F natural, so for that chord of G7 you have taken that F# away and it is now an F natural. And a scale with no sharps or flats in the scale of C. So the scale for G7 is C.

The scale for a 7th chord is the scale of the chord that the 7th chord naturally resolves to. G7 goes to C. Try it, it's turned out easier than you thought.

Your job is to play lots, and get used to this sound in ALL keys.

You'll probably be thinking, "so every time I come across a 7th chord I've got to know the scale of the chord that that 7th chord resolves to". True, but on the guitar this is visibly obvious.

Let's go back to the chord of G.

Take the chord of G at the III fret (the E shape), now roll your left hand over to make the chord of C, that is the A shape at the III, and there it is. If you take any 7th chord and roll over to the A shape you have your answer. Just look down at your guitar and it will be plain as eggs, roll the E shape over to the A shape and there is the scale that you need. For example, the scale for Bb7 (E shape at VI) is Eb, Ab7 (E shape at IV) is Db; for F# (E shape at II) is B.

Is that it?

Ok, there is a bit more, all 7th chords can be preceded by a minor chord.

Fortunately for you, and me, you have probably played the chord moves lots of times but not thought about it, How many times have you played a G7 chord and almost all of the time a chord of C follows? Lots, I'm sure, but you may also remember that

sometimes you played Dm chord before the G7. And a lot of the times it was a Dm7, or if the song was a bit more advanced it could have been a Dm7-5.

In all instances, the scale of the resolve starts as soon as the modulation (a move to another key) begins.

Of course when a minor 7th flat 5 turns up is usually goes to a 7th flat 9, and that always SOUNDS like it should have a MINOR resolve. Of course, all of the rules in music are always broken. Very often, aspecially with the South American composers, Jobim, Bonfa etc, they set up a minor resolve and finish with a major chord. In these cases, the start of the modulation is still a minor scale, and then resolves to the major scale. Predicting these chord moves comes with lots of playing and experience.

Let's look at a real chord sequence to get a good idea of the level you should be aiming for, and also how simple this system is.

This is the chord sequence for the first few bars of the song 'All the things you are'. The key is Ab.

Ab.....C.....Eb.....

.....G.....

The correct scale are written on top, notice how the scale starts as the modulation begins.

So this piece of music, although in the key of Ab quickly moves through three other keys. Firstly C, then Eb, and finally the key of G, and all within the first 16 bars!

It's your job to negotiate these moves in harmony and not let it sound as if you are merely moving from one scale to the next, it takes lots of practice, and listening all the great jazz players, from Charlie Parker, Joe Pass, Oscar Peterson, Sonny Rollins, the list is endless.

But remember this, the basic scale is just ammunition for your solo work, how you phrase and how you play depends on what you listen to, and your approach to your own practice.

Have fun and listen to yourself very critically. If it sounds ok it usually is ok, but be careful not to over-analyse. Just have fun.