

“Fitting In”—Defining a Role for the Guitarist in the Developing School Jazz Ensemble

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In a school big band or jazz ensemble, students are working together to learn the language of jazz and discover how the sound of their instruments fit into the overall concept of ensemble playing. Most learn quickly, either via scores or through instruction, the roles of each section and how their own individual instruments function in various contexts.

It is a common experience for the guitarist in a school ensemble (big band or otherwise) to struggle to find their place, to discover their role . . . to fit in.

Challenges to Overcome

Musical Background—Guitarists tend to come to jazz via rock or blues. While this is an excellent musical bridge, especially for improvisation, there is often a lack of notation reading mastery, in which their counterparts (particularly winds coming from a classical background) have more experience.

Limited Chord Voicing Knowledge—Young players, even very advanced ones, tend to have a chord voicing vocabulary that is ill-equipped to blend with a jazz band. Even if students know ‘jazz’ voicings with 7th and/or extensions, the voicings are usually 5 or 6 string structures that are too cumbersome to navigate through, especially with a piano in the band as well.

Poorly Notated Guitar Parts—Often parts

for guitarists are confusing, vague, or sometimes non-existent. It is hard for a guitarist to feel like they fit in when they receive the same part as the piano or bass or they get a part with just chord symbols and slash marks without voicing suggestions or rhythms to play.

Lack Of Guidance From Directors—The guitar is an instrument the average school jazz band director knows the least about, and therefore it gets the least attention. Over the years I have spoken with countless young players who struggled in their high school or college big bands because the director’s coaching only consisted of “just strum every quarter note, you know, four on the floor, Freddie Green style” or simply “turn down.” While the former is an important tradition and building block of jazz guitar and the latter is usually a valid suggestion for most young players who tend to blast their amps, neither is very helpful, nor do they inspire the guitarist to work hard and blend with the ensemble.

In this article I hope to offer a few precise tips for band directors to get their guitarists to play with the band, navigate vague or

confusing parts, leave room for the piano, and rhythmically connect with the bass and drums. In essence, this article will help student players learn more about the jazz guitar vocabulary and to ‘fit in’ with the band.

Rhythm

The guitar in a jazz ensemble, especially a big band, should lock in with the pulse and groove of the piece, offering subtle syncopation while not clashing with the piano or the drum fills. That is a very tall order for any student player looking at a chart with just four slash marks in every bar. What the guitarist needs are rhythmic patterns that will help them lock in with the rest of the section but also provide them with some room to experiment as they advance.

2-Bar Comping Patterns—Figure 1 shows several 2-bar variations on the two most common comping patterns in jazz, the “four on the floor” and “Charleston” patterns. By combining elements of both into a 2-bar pattern, it gives the student some variation and syncopation yet keeps them connected to the pulse and bass line. There is space in these patterns so the student

Figure 1. Jazz comping: 2-bar patterns.

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Figure 2 shows two staves of guitar voicings. The top staff is labeled 'Jazz Guitar - A String Voicings' and the bottom staff is 'Jazz Guitar - D String Voicings'. Above each staff are four chord diagrams: Cmaj7, C7, Cm7, and Cm7(b5) for the A string; and Fmaj7, F7, Fm7, and Fm7(b5) for the D string. The notes are written on a treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat.

Figure 2. Jazz guitar voicings.

Figure 3 shows two staves of three-note voicings. The top staff is labeled '3rd and b7 - 3 note voicings' and shows three pairs of notes (3rd and b7th) for C7, F7, and G7. Above each pair are two chord diagrams: one for the 3rd and b7th notes and one for the root and 5th notes. The bottom staff is labeled 'root and 5th - 3 note voicings' and shows three pairs of notes (root and 5th) for C, F, and G. Above each pair are two chord diagrams: one for the root and 5th notes and one for the 3rd and b7th notes. The notes are written on a treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat.

Figure 3. Three-note voicings.

Figure 4 shows two staves of B-flat blues changes. The top staff is labeled '2 Bar Patterns with 3 Note Voicings' and shows two 2-bar patterns. The first pattern starts with a Bb7 chord and the second with an F7 chord. The bottom staff shows two 2-bar patterns. The first pattern starts with a Bb7 chord and the second with an F7 chord. The notes are written on a treble clef staff with a key signature of two flats.

Figure 4. B-flat blues changes.

has time to move from chord to chord and execute them more correctly. Depending on the piano part, the guitarist and director can pick a pattern to use during certain sections of the piece so they do not clash. Don't forget, good comping sometimes means 'laying out.' It is okay for the guitarist to take time off from comping during a particularly busy section—a sax section soli for example. Likewise, the pianist can lay out for a chorus or two along the way and just leave the guitar to comp. This change of

texture is perfect during solo sections. (See Fig. 1, previous page.)

This 2-bar pattern concept isn't just for swing. The director and guitarist can work up 2-bar patterns for all styles of jazz pieces—Bossa Nova, Latin, Jazz-Rock Fusion etc. As long as the pattern is built off of a traditional rhythmic vocabulary element (clave for Latin Jazz piece, back beat for Rock piece, etc.), the guitar pattern will fit.

Voicings

The structure of chords on the guitar can be tricky; most student players will know their 7th chords in bar chord shapes. These are big 5 or 6 string structures that will often get in the way of the piano and even sometimes the bass. The guitarist's goal is to play warm, smaller-voiced chords that blend with the bass and don't clash with the piano.

Two simple rules will help guitarists blend their chords into a band. First, use only 3 or 4 string voicings and second, never use the low E string. The small voicings, usually in the middle register will either blend with the piano or avoid its range entirely, especially if the piano is comping up an octave from middle C. The avoidance of the low E string keeps the guitar chords from getting too "muddy" and out of the bass range.

4-Note Voicings—Fig. 2 presents two of the most common, effective 4-string voicings for jazz chords. One starts from the A string; the other (my favorite choice) starts on the D string. I have listed Major 7, Minor 7, Dominant 7, and Minor 7 b5. (Fig. 2.)

3-Note Voicings—A great alternative to full Dominant 7th bar chords, especially on a more up-tempo piece with lots of 7th chords (the blues for example), is to play a 3-note voicing using only the 3rd and b7th of the chord. These are simple voicings for guitarists to grab, but they add punch and dissonance when needed. In addition, over a I-IV-V type blues form, as seen in the examples in Figure 3, these fingerings stay the same shape and just shift up or down by one fret when moving between chords. Excellent voicing leading is built into the chord shape, which helps the guitar to blend smoothly with the band. (Fig. 3.)

2-Note Voicings—Another option is a 2-note voicing of the root or 5th in octaves. This voicing is open and bright and is especially effective when playing along with the ensemble tutti shout chorus when full bar chords would muddy up the ensemble sound. Great guitarists throughout jazz history like Wes Montgomery and Jim Hall used simple voicings, such as the examples in Fig. 3.

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Combined with the rhythmic patterns these smaller voicings pack an authentic jazz vocabulary punch that will transform the sound of the guitar in the rhythm section. (See Fig. 4.)

Jazz is a community-based art form and only works if everyone is contributing and speaking the same language. No longer does a part with only chord symbols or slash marks have to confuse the player or make them feel left out. With a few new voicings and comping pattern variations, a student guitarist can approach a piece with confidence and creativity, and “fit in.”

Key points:

- Experiment with 2-bar comping patterns instead of “four on the floor.”
- Change comping patterns to fit each section. Make sure the patterns work with what is happening with the bass and piano.
- Consider laying out for certain sections as a textural contrast, or trade off comping with piano, especially in solo sections.
- Use smaller (A string and D string) 4-note voicings to blend with the ensemble.
- Avoid using the low E string, staying out of the range of the bass line.
- Use 3-note (3rd and 7th) or octave (2-note) voicings for the blues, up-tempo pieces, or dense ensemble sections (shout choruses, sax soli etc).
- It is ok to deviate from the guitar chart, especially if the part duplicates piano or bass part or is slash notation and chord symbols.

Suggested Resources

Chord Chemistry—Ted Greene

Modern Chord Progressions: Jazz and Classical Voicings for Guitar—Ted Greene. For advanced students.

Guitar Tool Kit—App for iPad or iPhone, excellent collection of scales, chord fingerings, plus a great metronome.

iRealb—App for iPad or iPhone, includes an excellent playalong function.

Eric Hofbauer is jazz musician, bandleader, organizer, and educator. He has performed and recorded alongside with Han Bennink, Roy Campbell Jr., John Tchicai, Cecil McBee, and Matt Wilson. Hofbauer is most known for his solo guitar work, specifically a CD trilogy, culminating with the release of

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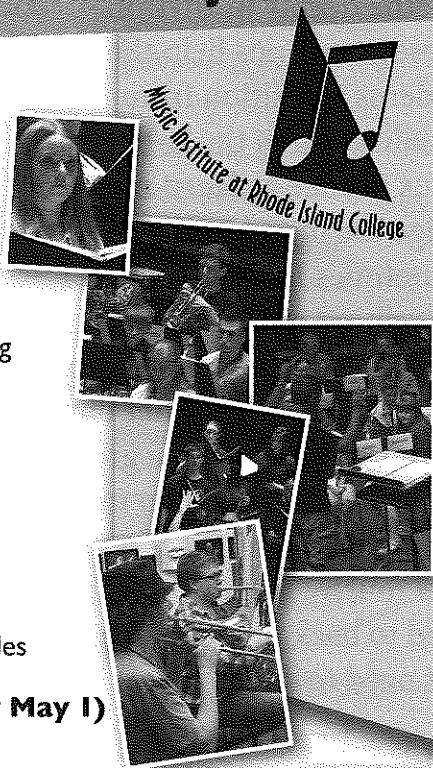
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