

Piano/Guitar Comping

How to avoid conflicts

By
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One of the most important tasks when playing jazz in a small group is to avoid musical conflicts. In order to do that, each member has to understand what role he/she is playing in the group. Each role comes with different responsibilities and when all the players in the group understand this, all the energy and concentration can be focused on the music.

Jazz certainly provides the musicians with greater freedom, but along with that freedom comes greater responsibility. Often we don't have anybody to tell us what role we have or what notes to play. We must exercise good judgment in order to create a musical environment. With experience, a type of musical "common sense" can be developed in regard to some of the unwritten rules. However, in jazz we often have to make musical decisions on the spot and we base our decisions on what we hear by listening carefully what is going on around us. In other words, keep your ears open at all times and LISTEN!

What sometimes becomes problematic is that the piano and the guitar can play the same role in a band. We can comp, solo, supply rhythm and play melodic material. The potential conflict between piano and guitar is something that is often ignored by players as well as composers and arrangers. Often the piano part and the guitar part are the same without any indication of when or what to play. All the musical decisions are in these instances up to the guitarist and pianist. If each ignores the other, the support that is the function of the rhythm section is lost. Good communication between the guitarist and pianist adds tremendously to the sound of a band.

1 One of the most common styles of comping for guitar has been labeled the "Freddie Green style." Freddie Green played with the Count Basie Band and played a big part in defining the legendary group's sound. This style of comping is based on a quarter note pattern, which when played perfectly in time, creates a solid foundation in the rhythm section.

When the guitarist is using this approach it's often best if the pianist plays sparsely and rhythmically. The pianist can treat the comping as accents or he/she can use solid repeated rhythmic patterns. The piano takes on more of a percussive role because the guitarist is constantly supplying the harmonic material.

Guitar comps on Quarter notes

The image contains two systems of musical notation. The first system is for a 4/4 time signature. The guitar part consists of four measures of quarter notes, with chords C7, F7, C7, and C7 indicated above. The piano part consists of four measures, each with a quarter note followed by a quarter rest, labeled as the "Piano pattern". The second system is also in 4/4 time. The guitar part consists of four measures of quarter notes, with chords Dmin7, G7, C7, and G7 indicated above. The piano part consists of four measures, each with a quarter note followed by a quarter rest.

2 Perhaps the safest way to avoid conflicts in comping is for the guitar and the piano to switch off. This can be very effective because it creates an overall variety in the sound of the group. It is recommended that you continue comping for an entire solo before switching to create consistency in the sound. Switching off is particularly effective when moving from one soloist to another, as it helps to vary the sound and feel of the group. This approach is very useful when playing ballads. Keep in mind that the the guitar has an extremely dynamic range and by taking advantage of that range, you can create an even bigger variety in sound.

3 The “Freddie Green” style of comping sounds great on the guitar, but does not work as well with the piano. When a pianist sets up a comping pattern he never plays straight quarter notes. However, it’s very helpful if the pianist is clear and consistent with the comping patterns because it will help the guitar player to play around them. A good rule of thumb is to have one of the instruments be in charge and the other one adjust to him. When this concept is understood, listening and musical judgment becomes essential. It is possible to have both guitar and piano comping together if these guidelines are followed. Important: Makes sure both player agree on the same chord changes, including alterations that might be used.

Sample Guitar fills

The image displays two systems of musical notation for guitar and piano comping. The first system is titled "Sample Guitar fills" and shows four measures. The guitar part features four quarter notes, each with an accent (>) and a chord symbol above it: FMaj7, C7, FMaj7, and FMaj7. The piano part shows a consistent pattern of eighth notes with accents (^) and chord symbols: FMaj7, Gmin7, C7, FMaj7, and FMaj7. The second system shows four measures where the guitar part has quarter notes with accents and chord symbols: FMaj7, Bbmaj7, FMaj7, and FMaj7. The piano part continues with the same eighth-note pattern and chord symbols: FMaj7, Bbmaj7, FMaj7, and FMaj7.

4 When the guitarist and pianist have to read the same set of rhythms and chord changes the scene is set for conflicts. This happens frequently because often the arrangers give us the same part to read. To avoid a cluttered sound in the rhythm section, use these guidelines:

1. Make sure you both understand the written rhythm and the chords.
2. Find out where the important accents are in the chart.
3. Decide who is the primary comping instrument.
4. Avoid adding material because most often that will make it sound muddy.

When the piano is the primary comping instrument it sounds good if the guitar plays simple voicings or even a lead line over the important notes. It’s often enough if the guitar is playing the 3rd, 7th and whatever alteration the chord calls for. If the guitar player chooses to play a lead line, he must be careful that it doesn’t conflict with other melodies in the chart.

Have the guitar focus on a simpler approach, and concentrate on the articulation.

The first system shows the following chords: C⁶, E^b13, A^b13, D^b6, C⁶, B^b13, B13, C⁶, G7(#9). The second system shows: F#m7(b5), Fmin7, Emin7, E^bmin7, Dmin7, G7(b9), C⁶.

5 A wonderful sounding piano/guitar combination is when they play the same exact voicings. This will take some work so I highly recommend that you spend some time together working out voicings. It is a great way to add a new dimension to the sound of the group. Also, experiment with playing the same voicing an octave apart to create a thicker texture.

Remember: Guitar sounds an octave lower than written:

The guitar part shows chords: C⁶, A7(#9), Dmin7, G13(b9), Emin7, E^bmin7, Dmin7, G7(b9), C⁶. The piano part shows the same chords in standard voicing.

6 Free comping! It can be done. This is when you pull together all your musicality and open your ears. It forces you to divide your attention between the soloist and the other comping instrument. Don't forget that your role when comping is to support the soloist. It is not an opportunity for the pianist and the guitarist to have their own little comping convention in the corner. **USE YOUR EARS AND JUDGMENT.**

Good Luck

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