

Playing Leadsheets - Vol. 2

by Mark Hayes

In our first volume of "Playing Leadsheets", we explored how to play a traditional chorale-style hymn melody written in a leadsheet format. In this issue, I will show you how to improvise the accompaniment to a more flowing melody written in a leadsheet format. I've chosen a beautiful old folk tune, O WALY WALY, and paired it with the John Newton text to AMAZING GRACE.

Ex. 1 shows the melody with chord symbols.

Ex. 1

A - maz - ing grace! _____ how sweet the sound, that saved a
wretch, _____ a wretch like me! I once was lost _____ but now am
found. I once was blind, but now I see. _____

Chord symbols: G, C, G, Em, Am7, D7, D7/C, G/B, G7, Cmaj7, G/D, C/D, G

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The first thing to do is familiarize yourself with all of the chords and corresponding chord symbols. There are 8 different chords, some of which are written in inversions other than root position. Do you know all of the chords listed below and can you play them in root position and all the inversions?

Ex. 2

Chord symbols: G, G7, C, Cmaj7, Am7, D7, Em, C/D

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Use the following exercises to develop dexterity in playing chord inversions. Play each exercise multiple times with both hands separately.

Ex. 3 G7

Ex. 4 D7

Ex. 5 Am7

Ex. 6 Cmaj7

Adapt this exercise to play the other chords listed in Ex. 2.

We'll try playing the melody in two different stages. First of all, play Ex. 1 using a combination of single note melody and blocks chords with the RH only. Add block chords to the downbeats in each measure where the chord symbols appear. If you need help, see Ex. 7.

Ex. 7

A - maz - ing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch, a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found. I once was blind, but now I see.

Chord symbols: G, C, G, Em, Am7, D7, D7/C, G/B, G7, Cmaj7, G/D, C/D, G.

Now let's add a LH accompaniment pattern that will outline the notes in the chord symbols and provide a flowing rhythm. Notice that the LH part rarely spells the chord in close position. It's good to skip the third of the chord as you arpeggiate upwards. Playing the third right after the root in a lower register doesn't sound good. Play Ex. 8 and then try to make up something similar while looking at Ex. 1.

Ex. 8

A - maz - ing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch, a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found.

Chord symbols: G, C, G, Em, Am7, D7, D7/C, G/B, G7, Cmaj7.

13

G/D C/D G

I once was blind, but now I see.

In Ex. 8, notice how the LH uses arpeggiated chords and block chords for variety. Sometimes it doesn't make sense to arpeggiate the chord from the bottom up in the LH, because you will run out of room as you get closer to the RH. Notice that I have used some non-chord tones in the LH here and there. Often these are simply neighboring tones to the chord tones, which create a shape or melody to the accompaniment pattern. This can make your accompaniment less "textbook" sounding. In the RH in m. 3, 4, 12 and 14, I've written a "thinner" chord. That is to say, not all of the notes of the triad are included. It's not advisable to play every note of a triad in both hands simultaneously unless you are specifically wanting a thicker, dense sound. Feel free to leave out a note in the RH if it's being played in the LH.

Ex. 9 shows a more advanced way to improvise the melody in leadsheet form. Notice that I have written the melody in a higher register, which allows for a longer, extended arpeggiated LH pattern. In addition, I've thinned out the RH and used the interval of a sixth in many places. In m. 9-12 I augmented the melody by playing it in octaves. In m.12-13 I have not included the C note in the Cmaj7 chord as I arpeggiate upwards. When spelling major seventh chords, just include the root note one time as the bass note and then repeat the remaining three top notes of the chord as I've shown. It simply sounds better. Notice that in m. 8, 10 and 14, the arpeggiated pattern extends from the LH into the RH. Sometimes it's simpler to let the RH continue the pattern when it gets that high. You can also think of it as an "alto" voice to the "soprano" melody. As you can see, the possibilities for improvisation are endless! After you play this example, go back to Ex. 1 and try incorporating several of the devices from this lesson.

Ex. 9

G C G

A - maz - ing grace! how sweet the sound,

5

Em Am7

that saved a wretch, a wretch like me!

9

D7 D7/C G/B G7 Cmaj7

I once was lost but now am found.

13

G/D C/D G

I once was blind, but now I see.