

# Making the Switch to 7 Strings

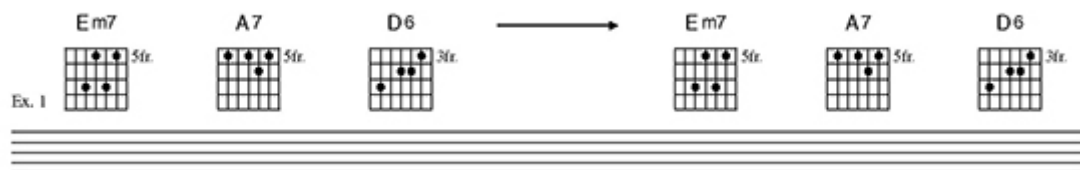
by Collin Bay

The switch from a 6-string guitar to a 7-string was born out of necessity. George Van Eps, founding pioneer of the modern 7-string jazz guitar, was unhappy with the ends of cadences. Often he would find himself comping cadences on guitar with correct voice leading that resolved to some form of a I chord, but with a fifth in the bass. In standard notation, a chord with the fifth in the bass is said to be in "second inversion" and is labeled I64 (six-four) if it is a triad, or I43 (four-three) if it is a seventh chord.

The problem with second inversion I chords is that they have a very weak resolution; they don't sound "settled" because the fifth in the bass feels as if it needs to go to a stronger chord tone, like the root or the third. In classical music, second inversion I chords were not even used as tonic chords but rather as predominant chords.

Van Eps' solution was to abandon correct voice leading in the bass after the dominant chord and resolve to a tonic with a root in the bass, or occasionally with a third in the bass. This is what the great classical composers did and is considered common practice among composers and arrangers. However, this practice often left Van Eps with having to play tonic chords with the lowest note on the fifth string and not as full a sound because of its narrower range of notes.

This solution is passable, but the resolution is still not very strong in the bass; a resolution up a fourth from the root of the dominant leaves the tonic chord sounding thinner than a resolution down a fifth from the root of the dominant, which forces the tonic to have a wider pitch spread. George Van Eps decided he needed a lower string in order to do cadences justice. Converting his 6-string to a 7-string, he tuned his additional string to a low A; this tuning has become standard for jazz 7-string players (See Example 1).



Adding the seventh string opens an entire world of new possibilities and advantages. Not only can chords have a wider spread, but you add the potential of extended range to everything you play. This in turn allows for more legitimate solo chord-melody work. The seventh string can also be used as a drone. In addition, at least an extra octave can be added to scales and arpeggios, augmenting your single-line playing as well. Not only will your lines expand in terms of range, but you will also benefit from new ideas provoked by playing in previously unavailable positions. You will also be able to play an expanded repertoire. For example, I play a lot of the Bach cello suites in their original register on the 7-string guitar [See Chris Buzzelli's "Classical Guitar" article in this issue]. I have also transcribed parts from different instruments, specifically piano and organ (i.e. Sam Yahel's part on Elastic Band's Jazz Crimes) and played them on 7-string guitar. You can also play runs with wider ranges and fewer shifts. Johnny Smith-like soaring lines have finally become accessible material for me because I can play many of them in one position now (see Example 2.)

Ex. 2

Finally, in many cases you can avoid retuning your guitar to, say- Drop-D or some other alternate tuning, because you now have access to those notes without retuning. This comes in handy for the live performer who used to have to bring multiple guitars to gigs, but who can now bring just one 7-string.

Of course, many people think they have their hands full with six strings and wouldn't be able to master the 7-string guitar. Luckily, they are mistaken; the switch is easier than it seems. The wider fretboard threw me off for about two to three weeks. After that, I felt as if I had made the switch successfully. It helps to not look at the neck during those first few weeks as seeing a seventh string in front of you can be confusing at first.

Ex. 3

Adding drones to pieces you already know is a good way to begin incorporating the seventh string. Songs in A, E, and D (major and minor) and F major work well for this approach. You can also simply drop the bass an octave in chords you already know that previously had the root or the third on the fifth string, or the fifth on the sixth string (See Example 3.) It also helps to simply experiment and come up with chord shapes you like based on the seventh string. You can then invert these forms diatonically to find other chords you might like (See Example 4.) You could also invert these in the same way you would invert any other chord form on the 6-string guitar.

Ex. 4

In order to master playing single-note lines on the 7-string, there are a few vital exercises. First, connect the scale patterns you are familiar with from the 6-string guitar to the 7th string. It is good to find at least one scale form that connects well to the scales that used to begin on the sixth string, and another form that connects well to the scales that used to begin on the fifth string. (See Examples 5A and 5B.)

Ex. 5a

1	1					
1	1	1	1			
1	1	1	1	1		
3	3	3	3			
4	4	4	4			

7fr.

Ex. 5b

1	1	1	1	1		
2				2		
3	3	3	3			
2	4	4	4			
4						

4fr.

Connecting to the fourth string usually involves the use of a scale form already based on the sixth or fifth string, so in a sense, that work is already done. Eventually you should be able to fluidly play on the seventh string just as you would on any other string. Connecting arpeggios in the same way as we have the scales will also help. Lastly, try taking solos you already know and (just for practice) dropping them down an octave.

Playing bass lines, as well as doing a Joe Pass-type chord-and-walking-bass is pretty easy on the 7-string. To get off the ground, try playing bass lines on the sixth and seventh strings only. You can add chords accordingly (no pun intended). As you grow more familiar with the seventh string, bass lines, bass and chord comping, as well as bossa nova and other stylized bass and chord comping should come more easily.

There are a few miscellaneous things to watch out for in adapting to the 7-string guitar. First of all, it is easy for chord shapes to get muddy, especially when playing electrically. To avoid this, you can change your tone, change your attack, try to use crystal clear technique, or simply use your ear to avoid chord shapes that sound muddy. As a rule of thumb, I tend to avoid playing notes on the seventh and sixth string at the same time; that can sound muddy in certain circumstances. Of course, there are exceptions. Sometimes it sounds nice to play a power chord on the low strings, or improvise over a drone on the low strings.

The seventh string can be tricky when playing with a bass player. If the guitar and bass are doubling a figure of some sort, then there usually won't be a problem, but if the bass player is walking, the guitar should do something else. If you play low, the bass player should stay out of your way; if he gets into your register, then you should stay out of his way.

These problems are not unique to the 7-string guitar. Everyone should use musical discretion, especially when playing with a group. Piano players, for example, have always had to deal with these issues. There are valuable lessons to be learned about group interaction from listening to pianists in ensembles. They have been dealing

with the bass register for centuries. When I play in ensembles, especially with bass players or another instrument covering a bass role (like a B3 organ) I rarely use the seventh string except for a few notes in a single note line and the occasional chord. This is because I simply don't want to risk clashing with another instrument in a register that can easily sound crowded.

On the other hand, at times I will cover the bass part, which frees up the B3 player by allowing him to concentrate more on chords and improvisation and not having to worry about a bass part. In that case, he tries to avoid the bass register. This situation adds a new dynamic to groups without bass players, and really makes organists happy.

The last issue I'll address is intonation. The low string has a tendency to sound out of tune. I like to use a string with a gauge in the mid-60s, with a higher action on my seventh string than on the rest of my guitar. This works well for me. Another solution that is often used (by Bucky Pizzarelli and others) is to simply use a much heavier gauge string for the 7th, in the 80s or even 90s, and not fiddle so much with the action. I prefer the lighter gauge because it feels more natural and in sync with the rest of my strings; it is also faster.

The 7-string archtop guitar has come a long way since its inception in the 40s and can no longer be considered a novelty. Like anything, it does take some time and dedication to master, but is unusually easy to switch to. There are many great players to listen to and even more are making the switch. In the next ten years we will see an explosion in the seven string guitar as more and more talent makes the switch.