



# Melodic Jazz Comping – Follow-Up

*Inspired by Ed Bickert, Joe Pass, Jim Hall, Lenny Breau, and the great melodic compers*

## 1. What Melodic Comping Really Means

Melodic comping is more than placing chords under a soloist — it is the art of creating **musical lines and phrases inside your comping**, just like a horn player or singer would.

The greats did this by:

- connecting chords with flowing voice-leading
- phrasing chord hits like musical sentences
- leaving space so the harmony can breathe
- creating *counter-melodies* within the voicing
- shaping the **top note** of each chord as the primary melodic voice
- responding to the soloist rather than playing over them

Once you begin hearing your comping as melody instead of blocks, your guitar becomes part of a conversation rather than a background texture.

## **2. Core Concepts from the Workshop**

### **A. Guide-Tone Voice Leading (3rds & 7ths)**

This is the foundation of melodic comping.

Practice slow, smooth movement:

- keep everything on two strings when possible
- aim for half-step motion
- avoid big jumps unless you want a dramatic effect

This approach was essential to Ed Bickert and Lenny Breau — elegance through simplicity.

### **B. Think in *Phrases*, Not Constant Chords**

Comp in musical sentences:

- a 2-bar idea
- a question-and-answer phrase
- a short idea, then space

Space is a major part of the style. Joe Pass often said that comping is “shaping time,” not filling every beat.

Your chords should feel like short melodic statements, not wallpaper.

## C. The Top Note Is Your Melody

Instead of hearing the chord from the bottom up, train yourself to:

**Hear the voicing from the top down.**

The highest note:

- defines the melodic contour
- determines how “singable” your comping is
- allows you to build counter-melodies

This is why Bickert’s comping sounds lyrical — he treats each top note as part of a line, not an isolated chord.

## D. Inner-Line Movement & Counter Melodies

Inside the chord, add:

- stepwise movement
- chromatic approaches
- little answering ideas
- moving the top voice while keeping the harmony underneath

Jim Hall and Gene Bertoncini excelled at this — their comping often sounded like two people playing.

This creates **counterpoint**, not just chord accompaniment.

## **E. Leaving Space**

Melodic comping is not constant sound.

Leave intentional space to:

- let the harmony settle
- support the soloist
- reset the phrase
- make the next idea more meaningful

Space is rhythm. Space is phrasing. Space is musical attention.

## **F. Melodic Fills (Joe Pass tradition)**

Between chord phrases, insert short ideas:

- two-note motives
- bluesy lines
- fragments of the tune
- rhythmic decoration

Joe Pass & Ella Fitzgerald's *Take Love Easy* is a masterclass in comping with fills — the guitar converses with the voice.

## **G. Solo Guitar Vocabulary (Lenny Breau & Joe Pass)**

For self-comping:

- broken chords
- bass + melody independence
- harmonic touches
- artificial harmonics (Lenny's "harp" moments)

Lenny Breau's *5 O'Clock Bells* shows how one guitarist can imply multiple instruments through phrasing and tone.

### **3. A Simple Daily Practice Plan**

#### **5 minutes — Guide-Tone Lines**

One tune, one position. Smooth, simple.

#### **5 minutes — Melodic Top Notes**

Treat the top voice of each voicing like a horn line.

#### **5 minutes — Counter-Melodies**

Keep the bass note steady while the top voice moves.

#### **5 minutes — Listening & Imitation**

Play along with Bickert, Pass, Hall, Breau, or Bertonecini — match the phrasing, not just the chords.

## 4. This Week's Assignment

Record **one chorus** of comping where you focus on:

- clear melodic top lines
- intentional phrasing
- leaving space
- one or two inner-line ideas
- relaxed time and tone

Your question: *Does my comping tell a story, or am I just playing shapes?*

## 5. Recommended Listening

- 🎧 **Ed Bickert** – *Live*
- 🎧 **Joe Pass & Ella Fitzgerald** – *Take Love Easy*
- 🎧 **Jim Hall** – *Live!*
- 🎧 **Lenny Breau** – *5 O'Clock Bells and Live at Bourbon Street*
- 🎧 **Gene Bertoncini & Michael Moore** – *Duo Recordings*
- 🎧 **Barney Kessel** – *Poll Winners*

Focus on how the comping **moves**, not just the chords they choose.

## 6. Final Thought

Melodic comping is one of the most subtle and beautiful skills in jazz guitar. It requires listening, patience, and a willingness to think like a singer rather than a guitarist.

When your comping begins to *sing*, you step into the lineage of Bickert, Pass, Hall, and Breau — the quiet masters who shaped the sound of modern jazz guitar.

Keep growing,

**Matt – The MW in MWG**