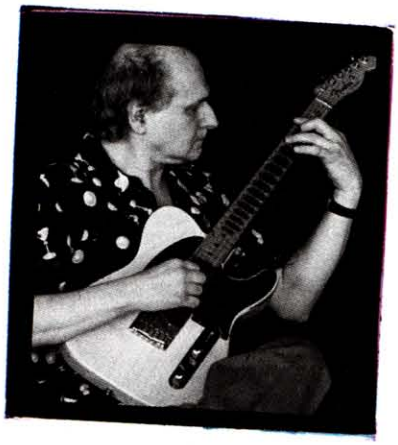
Chord Chemistry and Beyond

A Tribute to the Harmonic Genius of Ted Greene



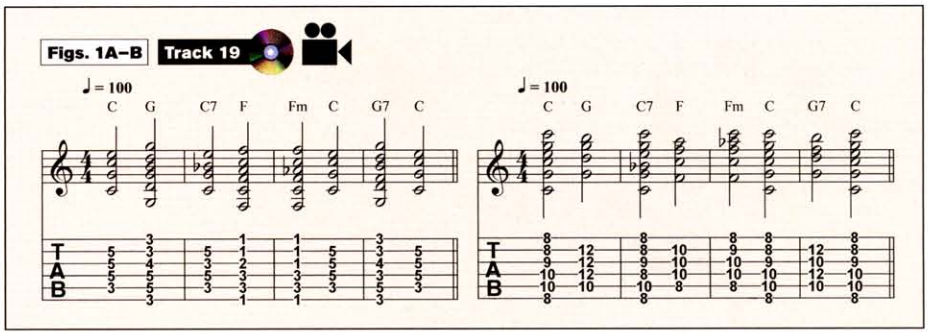
By Dale Turner

On July 25, 2005, the guitar community lost an elusive hero, Ted Greene. In a *Los Angeles Times* obituary, Greene was referred to as a "living encyclopedia of guitar," and this metaphor was echoed in numerous variations at Greene's August 14th memorial service. At this moving–and at times hilarious–tribute, one speaker even joked, "There's now an opening for 200 guitar teachers in Los Angeles." Another speaker mused that Greene had "forgotten more about guitar than most of us will ever know." One need only hear a single improvisation from the recently reissued *Solo Guitar* (Art of Life) to understand. Greene's genius is also preserved in his instructional books, *Chord Chemistry* and *Modern Chord Progressions*, which were first published 30 years ago. Let's honor his memory with a thorough chord lesson.

Transforming the Changes

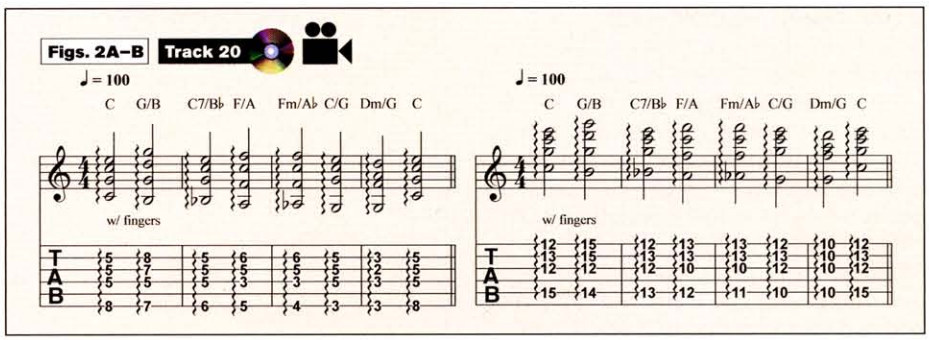
One of Greene's most amazing talents was his ability to render basic progressions in a variety of styles. He transformed mundane changes like those in **Figs. 1A–B** into Bach-style chorales; embellished them à la composers like Mozart, Chopin, and Debussy; and improvised through them in the styles of Scott Joplin and George Gershwin. In the next several figures, we'll expand on Figs. 1A–B using these approaches.

Figs. 1A–B Track 19



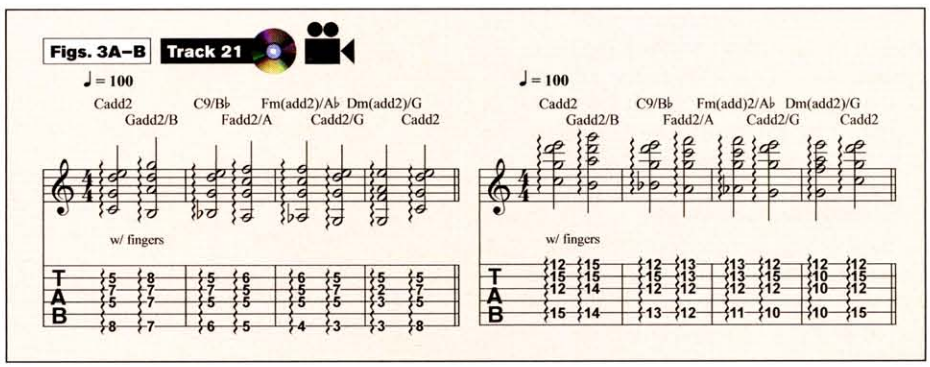
In **Figs. 2A–B**, our introductory shapes are played Baroque-style. Here, various inversions form a neat chromatic bass line, and smooth voice leading (where there is minimal distance between the notes of progressing chords) keeps everything sounding tight. Greene's use of piano-like voicings—with a wide interval between the two lowest notes of each chord—eliminates the comparatively muddy sound of five- and six-note guitar shapes. To play these figures with a pick, simply mute the 5th string by arching the finger that is fretting on the 6th string.

Figs. 2A–B Track 20



Figs. 3A–B dress up the progression by replacing upper-register roots with 2nds, yielding add2 voicings. For instance, in Fig. 3A, the note D (7th fret, 3rd string) replaces the earlier C chord's high C (5th fret, 3rd string), creating Cadd2; likewise, the note A replaces the G/B chord's G, giving you Gadd2/B. This is applied to the remaining chords (C7/B♭, F/A, Fm/A♭, etc.), producing C9/B♭, Fadd2/A, Fmadd2/A♭, and so on. While Greene usually used these colorful sounds in his solo and duo playing, they're useful in any ensemble context.

Figs. 3A–B Track 21



BOB BARRY

Fig. 4 adds melody (upstemmed notes) and an alternating bass line (downstemmed notes), creating Gershwin-like counterpoint. This was one of Greene's favorite approaches. In a solo guitar setting, or as an instrumental interlude between vocal parts, he would often improvise passages like these, playing them fingerstyle or with hybrid picking. This entire figure is based on the chord shapes of Fig. 2A. Throughout, use spare fret-hand fingers to grab non-chord-tone melody notes. Also, be sure to fingerpick the melody, so that it stands out against the bass line, and play everything with a strong swing feel.

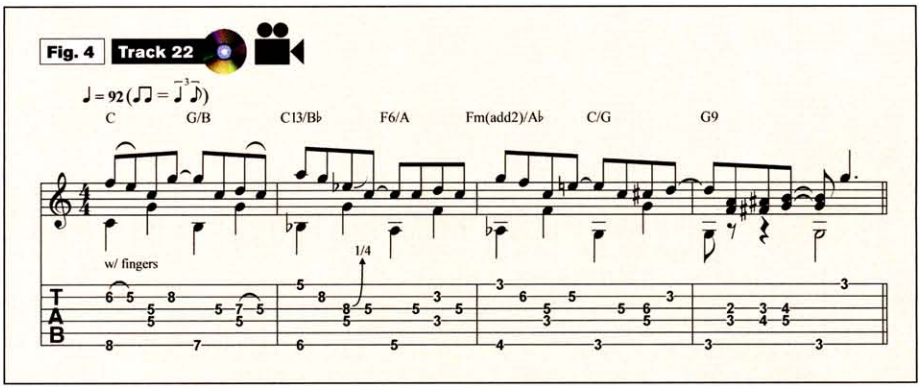
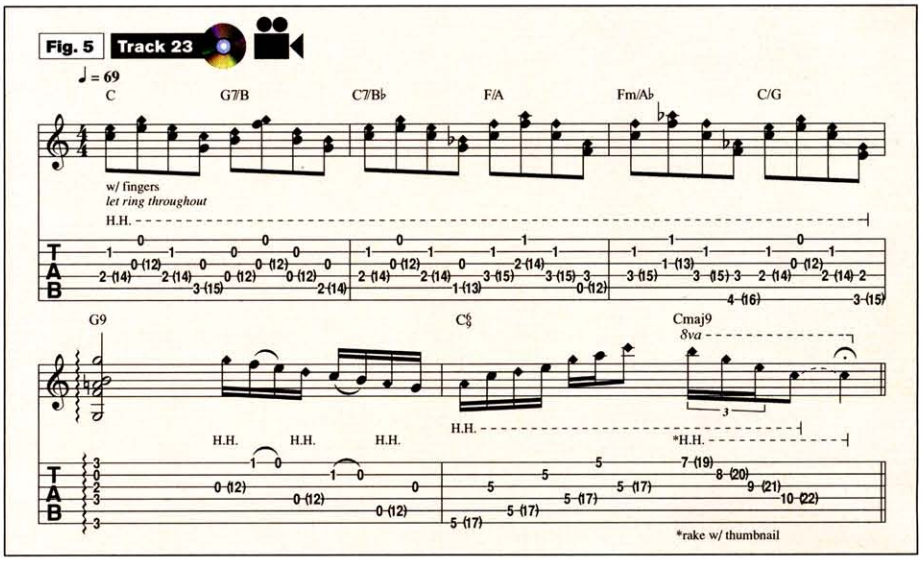
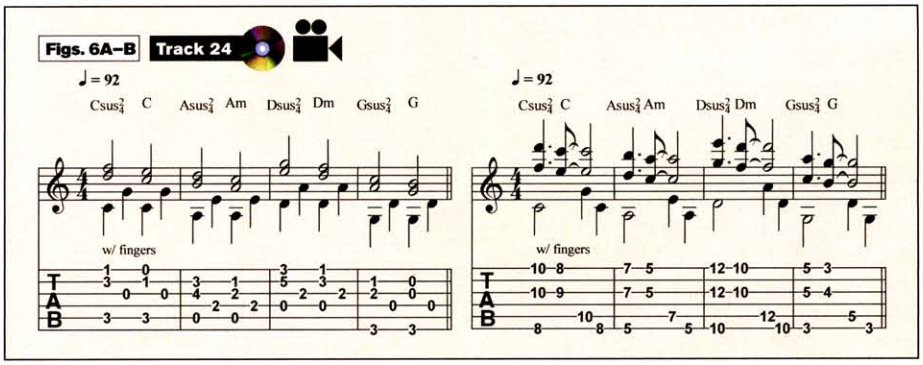


Fig. 5 features Greene-style *harp harmonics*—a technique also favored by guitarists like Chet Atkins, Lenny Breau, and Russell Malone. Getting these chime-like sounds involves (1) fretting a note; (2) touching its string with the pick hand's index finger, 12 frets higher (shown parenthetically in tab); and (3) picking that string (usually with thumb) behind the index finger's point of contact, to produce an octave overtone that sounds similar to a natural, or open-string, harmonic. In bars 1–3 and 5, keep your fret hand anchored on each chord for two beats while your pick hand forms the harp harmonics. Meanwhile, look out for the fret-hand pull-offs in bar 4. Also, note that many of the harp harmonics here are played simultaneously with fretted notes on higher strings, which creates a pleasing, complex texture.

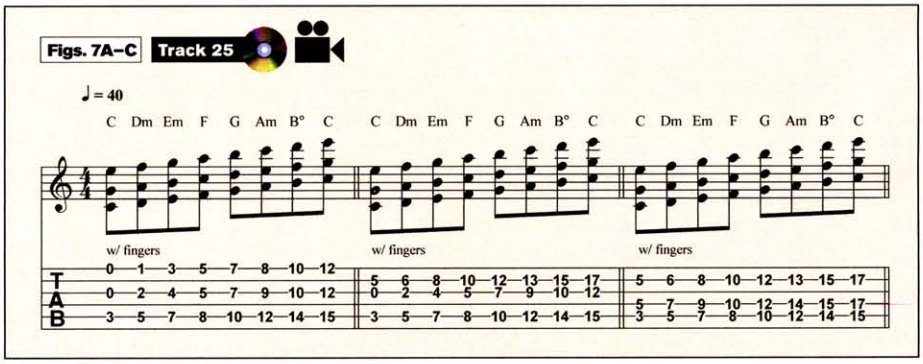


Triadic Voicings and Decorations

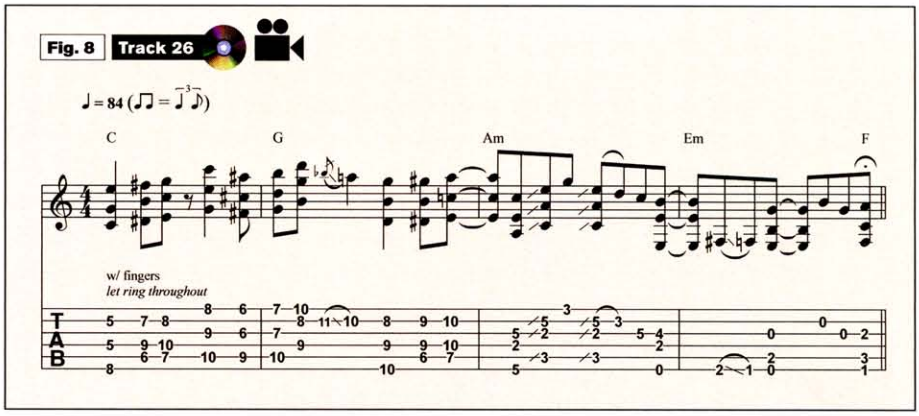
In **Figs. 6A–B**, some triads (C, Am, Dm, and G) are embellished with what Greene referred to as *double suspensions* (where the root and 3rd are replaced with a 2nd and 4th, respectively). The double suspensions are then resolved to the closest triad notes. For example, in the first measure, an open C chord's highest root (1st fret, 2nd string) and 3rd (high E string) are replaced with D (3rd fret, 2nd string) and F (1st fret, 1st string) before resolving to the notes of a C triad.



More of Greene's pianistic voicings are shown in **Figs. 7A–C**, where triad tones are spread out over a wide range, to create a hip, open sound. In Fig. 7A, each chord's root can be found on the 5th string; its 5th, on the 3rd string; and its 3rd, on the 1st string. As such, the outer notes are a 10th apart (an octave plus a 3rd). These same voicings are placed on strings 2, 3, and 5, and strings 2, 4, and 5, in Figs. 7B and 7C, respectively. You might also try transposing all these shapes to various other keys.

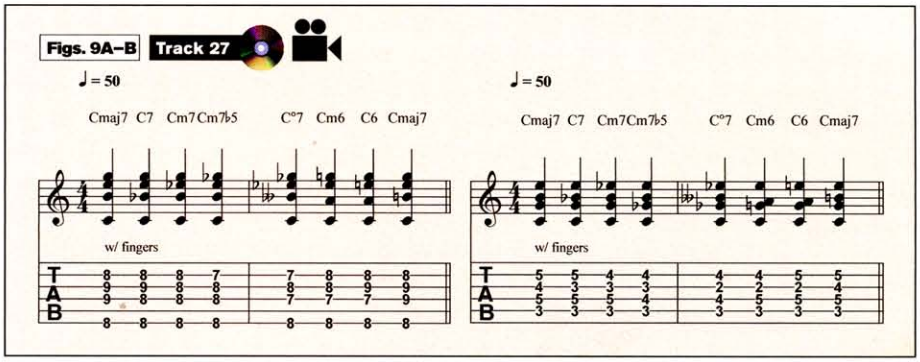


Greene often made sweet music from simple, raw materials. He encouraged his students to do the same—to make music immediately, regardless of how little information they had at hand, and not to wait for some magic ingredient. With that in mind, **Fig. 8** takes the previous triad fingerings (with inversions, and played on different string sets) and sets them in motion over a familiar classical progression. Note that chromatic melody notes result when selected chords are approached from a half step below. Try using this fingerpicking approach to add melodies to some of this lesson's other chord progressions.

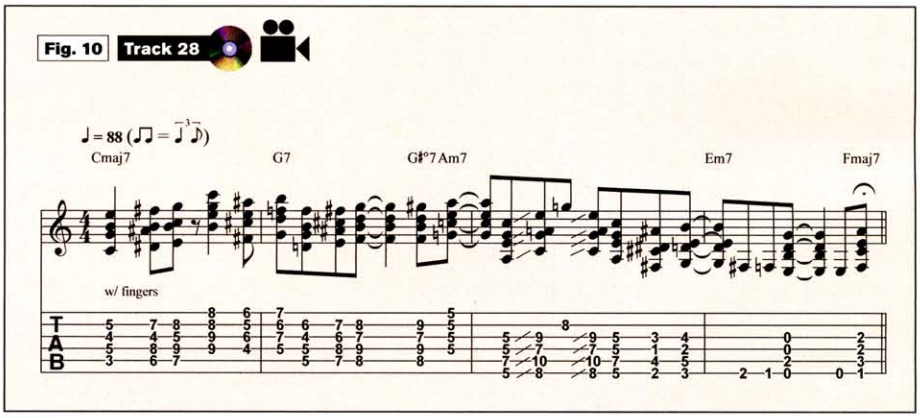


The Big Seven

Though he was often labeled a "jazz" guitarist, Greene was different from most modern improvisers in that he rarely made jarring or outside sounds. Rather, he played purely *beautiful* music, with a minimum of altered chords. Much of this stems from his mastery of what he called the "Big Seven"—the seven four-note chords (in the history of Western harmony) above the triad level, illustrated in **Figs. 9A–B**. Learn these voicings in all 12 keys.



In **Fig. 10**, many of the previous 7th chords, as well as their inversions on different string sets, are featured in a fingerstyle improvisation over a I–V–vi–iii (Cmaj7–G7–Am7–Em7) progression. Take this one slowly at first, so that you can visualize each chord before you form it. Again, notice that, as in Fig. 8, chromatic effects result when certain chords are approached from a half step below. This sort of motion is cool in that it can make even the most basic harmonic progression sound jazzy. Try inserting some half-step-approach chords into some of your own favorite progressions.



Rubato Fills and Endings

Greene was fond of using overlapping harmonic 6ths—note pairs found within a particular scale, spaced six degrees apart. In **Fig. 11**, each neighboring pair of 6ths—for instance, the F–D and E–C double stops on beat 1—are allowed to ring together, creating the sound of a cluster chord. These 6ths are particularly effective when used as a fill between vocal phrases, or as an ending in a ballad.

We'll close out this tribute with a tasty ending suitable for any jazz tune in C. (To transpose the ending to other keys, simply relocate it to higher or lower frets.) **Fig. 12** features *contrary chromatic motion*—that is, the outer voices of each chord move in opposite directions, in successive half steps. As Greene himself would say, "Horny for more?" Then get *Solo Guitar, Chord Chemistry*, and *Modern Chord Progressions*—immediately.