The Accompanist

By Joe Miller

Another "Long Idea" in Accompanying
Fiddle Tunes

"Blackberry Blossom"

For any given chord progression, there are many possible bass lines, some more interesting than others. Generally speaking, the more *linear* a bass line is, the more interesting it will be.

The most obvious bass line for "Blackberry Blossom" would be G D C G, and so on. This approach, playing the root of each chord, is the old standby. After about the eighth time through, the audience may have a taste for something more adventurous.

Here is an alternate bass line, based on a "long idea":

G F# E D C B A D
G F# E D C B A G

Each line starts with the alphabet backwards from G to A. This, of course, is a simple scale passage. See Fig. 1 for how to play this bass line with chords.

You can easily figure out similar bass lines for other tunes. Here's how: Imagine an alphabet ladder (Fig. 2). In a sense, all music is based on this ladder. If a C chord is being played, this can be illustrated by writing the notes of the chord, C, E and G, in bold letters (Fig. 3).

Conceptually, the ladder goes up forever: A B C D E F G A B C D E F G as many times as you want. For our purposes, we'll add E F G at the bottom, because E is the lowest note on the guitar; and we'll make all the Fs sharp, because we're in the key of G (Fig. 4).

The musical idea of a chord change can be represented by two ladders next to each other, one for each chord (Fig. 5). A smooth, predictable line from one chord to the next would proceed through the scale by steps, not skips, using chord notes only. In Fig. 5 there are exactly three such possibilities: E to D, C to D, and C to B.

To visualize possible bass lines (or melodies) for any given chord progression, you can extend this idea by representing the notes of each chord on a grid, as in Fig. 6. The chord progression of the tune is written across the top; below each chord name are the notes of that chord. (Notes that are not in the chord are omitted from that column.)

There are as many possible bass lines for this tune as there are horizontal paths through the maze of Fig. 6. Simply select one letter from each column, and read your bass line horizontally. Suppose, for example, you wanted a bass line that used as few different notes as possible. Looking at the top of Figure 6, you could compose a bass line that goes G F# G G G G F# G F# G G G G F# G. Or you could look for a long diagonal line, such as G F# E D C B A D G F# E D C B A G (Fig. 7, same as Fig. 1). Or you could pick out a real zig zag line, such as the one in Fig. 8.

You can use this idea to find new, interesting bass lines for familiar chord progressions.

Fig. 1