

INSTRUCTION

Paul Asbell

The blues, jazz, and Americana guitarist talks about negotiating tough chord progressions and the advantages of good voice leading. **With video and tab.**

By Doug Young

Versatile guitarist Paul Asbell brings a surprisingly broad range of experience and influences to his music. In the late 1960s, he cut his teeth on the Chicago blues scene, performing and recording with the likes of Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and Howlin' Wolf. After leaving the urban Chicago environment for rural Vermont, searching for what he calls a "spiritual battery recharge," Asbell began to move in a more jazz-oriented direction, performing with people like Jon Hendricks, Bobby McFerrin, and his own jazz-fusion band, Kilimanjaro (which recently released the critically-acclaimed



Homecoming). However, Asbell's musical personality comes out most fully when playing his own brand of American roots music, as heard on his two solo albums, *Steel String Americana* and *Roots and Branches*. In live performances, Asbell reveals a deep appreciation of the history behind each tune, even while giving them a fresh, updated touch. Although he continues to perform frequently, Asbell is also an experienced and enthusiastic instructor, with private students and regular teaching gigs at Middlebury College and the University of Vermont as well as workshops at the Healdsburg and Newport guitar festivals, the Swannanoa Gathering, and many more.

I spoke to Asbell before a house concert in San Francisco, California, about his style and some of the characteristics of American music. Much of the discussion focused on techniques he uses on one of his own tunes, "**Chunky Monkey Gumbo**" (from *Roots and Branches*), which he wrote for his neighbors and longtime friends Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield (Ben and Jerry, of ice-cream renown), as a theme song for tours of their factory.



Your performances cover a lot of ground—blues, jazz, pop. How would you characterize your style?

ASBELL The name of my first CD is my manifesto, *Steel String Americana*. When I came up with that, it was, "Yeah, that's what I call this stuff." The aesthetic of the steel-string guitar is a big part of what ties this music together—it gets played by an instrument that has a rich American legacy. When I think about American music that I like, one of the common denominators is that these styles all have roots in the South. The spirit that manifests itself is a very powerful thing, even when it eclipses the pure tone quality of the instrument. There's an idea of putting harmonically unrelated "noise" into the sound, and that's where the "soul" comes from—it's a peculiarly African notion, and it's become an American notion; like putting a distortion box on an electric guitar.

“Chunky Monkey Gumbo” seems to incorporate the essential elements of your style. It has a very fast-moving chord progression!

ASBELL It’s basically a standard progression in E; there’s a I, IV, and V, like a blues, but then I add some secondary dominants. There’s an F#7 that goes to the B7. And what would precede the F#? Well, C#7 is the V of F#, so you have the V of the V of the V. Those kinds of motions [Example 1] are time-honored traditions from ragtime, and there’s a lot of that here.

One thing that jazz guys tend to do is take that progression and say, “Look, C#7 and G7 are very similar chords”—the thirds and sevenths of these two dominant chords are the same notes, so you could go C#7 to G7, and then F#7 to C7, and then to B7 [Example 2]. There’s a lot of that in this tune.



Ex. 1	E	C#7	F#7	B7	E				
Ex. 2	E	D7	C#7	G7	F#7	C7	B7	F7	E



LICK OF THE MONTH

Paul Asbell points out that the first two chords of “Chunky Monkey Gumbo” are essentially the same, an E and an E7 inversion. In this example, he connects E7 inversions on the middle strings with a moving bass line from the bebop scale in the key of E (essentially an E-major scale with both a flatted seventh and a major seventh).

Doug Young is a contributing editor for Acoustic Guitar. He enjoys composing and arranging for solo guitar, home recording, as well as performing in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Photo credit, top, Al Pacer

PAUL ASBELL'S GUITARS AND GEAR

- **ACOUSTIC GUITAR:** Julius Borges OM with Brazilian rosewood back and sides and an Adirondack spruce top. National Estralita resonator.
- **STRINGS:** John Pearse phosphor bronze or 80/20 light gauge, with medium trebles.
- **PICKS:** Fred Kelly thumbpicks.
- **AMPLIFICATION:** K&K Sound Quantum Trinity (K&K Pure Mini/mic/Quantum Blender).

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