

Improvisation and Solo Guitar playing -

An essay of thoughts to get you started



Improvisation, in any musical genre, is one of the most challenging steps to learn for a budding musician. Ideally, we've reached a point in your lessons where you're familiar with pattern practice with some primary scales, how to identify the tonal centers of a song, and how to apply some of the patterns and base scales to a solo.

Your scale palette should include (at the very least):

- Major and Minor root scales - be very familiar with the roots and 5ths
- Major and Minor pentatonics - know how to bend and add flavor. Use your ear
- Modes - at least Dorian, Mixolydian. Always keep working at expanding these.

At this point you should also be comfortable with your understanding of the various chord forms. This actually becomes more and more important as you hone your skills in building solos. With some of the technical challenges of finding and playing scales aside, and an increased awareness of the chords and progressions, you should be able to start concentrating on building up your own solos with an inner critical ear.

At this point you will also be less likely to be impressed with mere technical facility of a player. Start listening for melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic sophistication, but, do not let this analysis of the theory interfere with your reaction on a gut level. At the heart of your technical abilities is the song you are singing with your instrument. This is closer to the pure art you strove for when you first picked up your guitar. This is you sharing your soul.

Listen, listen, listen. There is not a successful musician, now or in the past, that hasn't built their own skills by listening and learning from the greats. You can listen to the early Blues trios or B.B. King and see examples of interplay within a rhythm section, and try to develop ears as big as theirs. You can listen to Hendrix or Page and analyze the way they used dissonance and syncopation, and see if you can achieve the same effects. You can listen to the emotional outbursts of Duane Allman, Steve Howe, or John McLaughlin and expand your concept of how directly you can express yourself. You can listen to pragmatic almost constructed approach Clapton or Robert Fripp take to applying their wide experience to a solo. Listen, listen, and then listen.

You should experiment as much as you can to find new ways of voicing yourself. The harmony, scale, and chord rules only form a framework, but a good solo breaks outside of that framework. This also reaches a point where you start to define your own style. Soloing and breaking out of the rules of harmony is just the beginning of individuality. Remember that your heart does not beat in four-four time.

Rob Little - 3/2009